

De cómics, narrativas y multiversos transmediáticos: re-conceptualizando al hombre araña en Spider-Man: Un Nuevo Universo

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Resumen

Palabras clave

“Animación”; “Cómic”; “Cultura-popular”;
“Narrativa”; “Spider-Man”; “Transmedia”.

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Este artículo examina la nueva versión animada de la franquicia Spider-Man en términos de las elecciones narrativas y artísticas de sus creadores, para ofrecer una respuesta potencial acerca del éxito de la película más aclamada por la crítica sobre el personaje arácnido. Teniendo en cuenta la complejidad que caracteriza a esta producción, especialmente con respecto a su historia, su densidad técnica y su proyección transmedia, se emplea un enfoque multidisciplinario para estudiar las múltiples dimensiones de esta película. Este artículo ofrece primero una contextualización del personaje del superhéroe y las diferentes historias que inspiraron la creación de esta, para luego presentar un análisis de su estilo

artístico y la naturaleza transmedia de la misma. En particular, este artículo argumenta que la animación en formato cómic de esta película, combinada con la identidad transmedia de su narrativa, son las opciones más idóneas para la re-conceptualización de este personaje, ya que recuperan la esencia del género de superhéroes, a la vez que apelan a la dimensión social de su audiencia actual, de manera más efectiva que sus predecesores.

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On comics, narratives and transmedia multiverses: re-envisioning the wall-crawler in Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse

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Abstract

Keywords

“Animation”; “Comic”; “Narrative”; “Popular-culture”;
“Spider-Man”; “Transmedia”.

Summary

1. Introduction.
2. Contextualizing the Spider-Verse within the superhero franchise.
3. Turn back the page: return to the comic style.
 - 3.1. Comic Book Texture.
 - 3.2. Comic Lexicon.
4. A web of multiple dimensions: The Spider-Verse as a Transmedia-Verse.
5. Conclusion.
6. Reference List.

This article examines the newest animated version of the Spider-Man franchise in terms of its narrative and artistic choices, to offer a potential answer on the success of the most critically acclaimed film of the spider character. Considering the complexity that characterizes this production, regarding its storyline, its technical density and its transmedial projection, a multidisciplinary approach is used to study the intricate dimensions of this feature. This article offers first a contextualization of the superhero character and the different stories that inspired the creation of this film, to later present an

analysis of its artistic style and transmedial nature. In particular, this article argues that the comic style animation of this film, combined with the transmedial identity of its narrative, are the only suitable options for the re-conceptualization of this character, since they recover the essence of the superhero genre, targeting the social dimension of its modern audience in a more effective way than its predecessors.

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1. Introducción

Worldwide, spectators wait in their seats for the “after credit” scene of the latest superhero production, to be shown a meme turned into an animated transmedia piece. The outcome of this scenario was the highest rating film in the history of the Marvel company, and all thanks to a different version of the webslinger produced by Sony Pictures Entertainment. Since the Marvel Cinematic Universe started its Phase 1 back in 2008 (Acu, 2016), it seems like audiences cannot get enough of superheroes, with more productions being launched every year for cinema, TV and streaming services. However, despite the popular reverence over these productions, the academy still resists to grant one of its most valuable awards to these fantasy-founded narratives. At least this was the case until last year, in which the animated version of one of Stan Lee’s favorite heroes, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Persichetti, Ramsey & Rothman, 2018), won the best picture award in its category becoming the first film of this type to acquire that particular golden statue. This led to a collective excitement, with its consequent manifestation on social media, but also to a wide myriad of questions about the success of the film on the cinematic and academic fields of study.

The alter ego of Peter Parker had already appeared in thousands of comic book issues, adapted into six feature films, almost a dozen TV shows and around 35 videogames, generating diverse opinions and big differences in the reception of these productions, but nevertheless resulting in one of the most popular and likeable characters of the Marvel universe. Therefore, a new adaptation never really seemed like a groundbreaking event until Persichetti, Ramsey and Rothman presented their animated version, which combined a very peculiar comic-like animation and a particular narrative style. In doing so this new film managed to recover, in a way, the stylistic foundations that witnessed the birth of this teenage superhero, and to reinforce the timeless nature of the arachnid character, facilitating a re-connection with the new generations of spectators that are becoming interested in this fantastic genre.

The difficulty to encompass the *Spider-Verse* film under one artistic category, genre or style, reminds us of the powerful nature of narratives these days. This film presents a very accurate example of what Daniel Ferreras calls the imaginary parallel dimensions (2017) that are the object of study of literary, cinema and popular-culture academic studies. It creates a polysemic, multi-media universe that cannot fit into one single field of research, but rather belongs to the three of them as it supposes “the exploration of the relationship between the imaginary multiverse and our reality.” (2017: 131). The aim of this research would be to identify and interpret the elements within the imaginary parallel dimension of this film that interact with our perception, to establish narrative authority by “establishing a dialectical relationship” (2017: 259) between its semiotic sphere and ours.

Within the complexity of this film there are differentiable aspects, potentially observable from the previously mentioned academic perspectives, that seem to function as core pieces of the positive reception of this film. The puzzle-like network of stories that conform the narrative exhibited in this film could be considered the first one of these, on the construction of this elaborated piece of work. The artistic and stylistic choices made for this film, advocating for a comic inspiration, could account for the second core aspect. Finally, the transmedial identity ascribed to this narrative should be taken into account, in considering the elements that bestowed the success of this production. Following a systematic analysis of these three particular aspects, this essay will attempt to establish a coherent conclusion on the nature of the success of this animated version of *Spider-Man*.

Elaborating first on the origin of the superhero as it is conceived by contemporary audiences, focusing on the character of Peter Parker, to give a glimpse of the collage of narratives that were combined to create the *Into the Spider-Verse* narrative, this essay will attempt to contextualize this story and set a comprehensible framework for the rest of the analysis. Secondly, the artistic features of the film will be reviewed from a technical and linguistic perspective, taking into account the nature of the comic genre. In the final section of this paper the narrative and artistic content previously mentioned will be related and evaluated from a transmedia perspective, to show how the narrative tension is maintained through the web of connections between these mechanisms.

2. Contextualizing the Spider-Verse within the superhero franchise

Long before the invention of language, image was the chosen format to narrate stories. From rock cave paintings to hieroglyphs, wall engravings etc. humans have consistently resort to images to illustrate their narrations, as we still do today in the form of comic books, graphic novels and specially animation. The history of this narrative format can be charted centuries ago, but in terms of superheroes, which is our genre of interest, there is no need to look that far back. Dime novels, adventure stories and, especially, American pulp magazines set the basis for the creation of the superhero genre thanks to their loose standards and out-of-the-ordinary topics (Gavaler, 2018; Coogan, 2013; Rhoades, 2008). Titles such as Flash Gordon, The Phantom Detective or The Shadow started to display distinctive features that pointed at a completely new literary genre which had been under construction for a long time. Elements as essential as the cape, the secret identity or the moral responsibility were already present in these stories from the first half of the twentieth century, and were later complemented by other particular traits of superheroes such as lonely lifestyles, family dramas and especially a wide arrange of extraordinary powers (Reynolds, 2013; Martin, 2015).

Taking modern superheroes as reference, the story of the superhero comic genre is usually divided in four or five periods, depending on the anthology. The Golden Age of comics would refer to the first popular productions that called the attention of the public back in the 30s, when The Man of Steel in *Action Comics* number one (Siegel & Shuster, 1938) was published, being usually considered the original modern superhero comic (Rhoades, 2008: 258). The adventures of Clark Kent were followed by dozens of titles from several publishing houses which benefited from the influence of WWII over the American society. The Silver Age of comics meant the creation of most of Marvel's present super-stars, such as Spider-Man, Hulk, Thor, Dr. Strange etc., and a distancing between the narratives of the two most prominent comic publishing houses, with the subsequent revival of the genre. The Bronze age was characterized by the inclusion of multiracial and female characters as well as by experimentation with the narratives, leading to the Modern day age in which superheroes are finally dispersed throughout multiple media and platforms (Rhoades, 2008).

Focusing on our subject of interest, during the Silver Age of superhero comics writer-editor Stan-Lee and writer-artist Steve Ditko published through Marvel Comics their first story having Spider-Man as the lead hero, appearing in the *Amazing Fantasy* anthology (1962) after the struggle of Lee to find a new superhero that would connect with a younger audience (Garcia, 2014). Surprisingly, this character became one of the most iconic and beloved ones, evolving throughout the years up until our days. Peter Parker started as a young teenager from Queens struggling to keep the balance between his secret identity and his personal life, but the audience has witnessed the evolution of this young superhero through different timelines, universes and

even deaths, which luckily can all be explored through the official Marvel webpage (2020). The world of Spider-Man has consequently seen too many alternative versions to that first origin story to explain them all in a limited space, specially taking into account the fact that the story has evolved in different ways depending on the medium it was displayed on. In this film in particular there are seven different Spider-People interacting within one universe, each coming from a completely different narrative. Therefore, for the purpose of this essay, only the crucial references to the development of the concept for the animated Spider-Verse story will be mentioned, independently of their medium, in order to contextualize this revisited version of the webslinger.

To set a comprehensible frame for this story, four productions have to be mainly taken into account regarding the Spider-Man Universe: the original Spider-Man comic book story on Earth 616 from 1962, also known as *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the *Shattered Dimensions* videogame from 2010, the *Ultimate Comics: Fallout* series from 2012 and the Spider-Verse event in 2014. These different productions contributed to the conceptualization of the 2018 *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* film, each providing particular elements that progressively were assembled into a well-founded basis that would allow the audience to understand the narrative of the film.

Starting from the beginning, the original Spider-Man story is set in the universe of Earth-616 (Fandom, 2020), and it presents the orphan from Queens, Peter Benjamin Parker, as he discovers his accidentally acquired superpowers and tries to save the world following his uncle's advice, "with great power comes great responsibility". This primal story set the basic framework for the rest of the alternative versions of the superhero that have appeared afterwards, as well as most of the elements that the audience associates to Parker's story. This character appears in the film as the second, and less enthusiastic, mentor of Miles Morales.

The second production in this list, the *Shattered Dimensions* videogame, was launched in 2010 by Activision (Beenox, 2010) and it offered players the chance of playing with four different versions of the spider hero from four different dimensions. These Spider-Men are *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1962), *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2000), *Spider-Man Noir* (2009) and *Spider-Man 2099* (1992), all of them previously seen in their respective comic book versions. From this videogame the idea of multiple parallel universes started to become familiar to the fans of the comic. These four Spider-Men appear in the Spider-Verse film as main or referential characters: The Amazing Spider-Man is Peter B. Parker, who ends up mentoring Miles Morales on his journey to become Spider-Man; Ultimate Spider-Man is the blond and younger version of Peter Parker that shares Miles' universe, who appears at the beginning of the film; Spider-Man Noir is clearly recognizable as one of the alternative version that travels to Miles' universe; Finally, Spider-Man 2099, who is not a main character, appears in the after credits scene turned into an animated meme. This is one of the many entertaining references to the multitude of Spider-Man stories that the directors of the film introduced.

The *Ultimate Comics: Fallout* series number four (Bendis & Bagley, 2011), part of the Ultimate Marvel reboot from the same authors in 2000 (Bendis & Bagley, 2000), presented a version of the story in which the audience could see the aftermaths of the death of Spider-Man, leaving an open path for the rise of a new version of the hero in the form of Miles Morales. The story of the teenager dealing with unexpected superpowers was developed in the *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* series from 2011 (Bendis & Pichelli, 2011) and was then rebooted for the film. The origin story that appears in the animated film differs greatly from the one in the comic

books, as it has been commonly done with the film adaptations of the Spider-Man adventures, displaying a big shift in the family drama which lead to a more positive audience reception than the comic book version.

Finally, the Spider-Verse event published in 2014 (Slott & Coipel) focused on the convergence of the different spider Multiverses and the various Spider-Men and Spider-Women from across those, all of them uniting to combat a common threat as they explored their different realities. This event was groundbreaking for diehard fans and people in the know of Spider-Man comics, but it was not that significant in terms of mainstream production (aka. The MCU), since it needed to expand beyond that smaller sphere. This finally happened with the release of the animated film which is our subject of study.

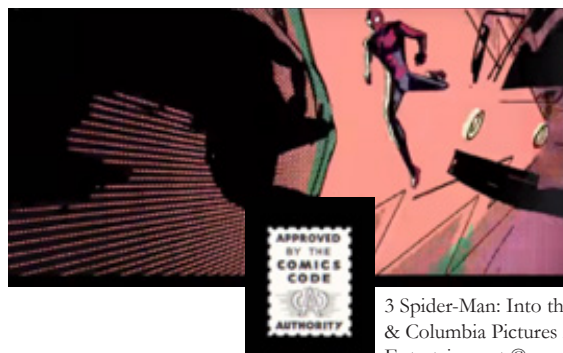
The conceptualization of *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* involved a complex process of synthesis and evaluation of the many alternative versions and details about the Spider Multiverse known by the audience. This meant selecting, from a massive repository of information, the key concepts that could work homogeneously in favor of a story that would call the attention of fans and non-fans of the Marvel webslinger. Having done this, the creators of the film still had to consider with the remaining aspects of the production that would be assembled into the final version of the film. In the next section of this paper we will analyze the next core aspect that dotted this animated feature with a unique identity, its artistic aesthetics.

3. Turn back the page: return to the comic style

From the moment the opening credits start, the spectator of this film can understand that it is different from all the previous superhero productions seen on the big screen. The first thing that calls the attention are the alternative comic-like versions of the Columbia Pictures logo, as well as the dotted lines of the images and transitions between frames, which start to show comic art.



The progression of logos is continuously interrupted by glitches showing their signs reimagined in different artistic styles, until the *Seal of Approval* of the Comics Code Authority (Kiste Nyberg, 2020) is shown on screen acknowledging that this production might not just be a film. It is essential to consider that although the renaissance of the superhero genre into film style has been going on for over a decade, *Spider-Man into the Spider-verse* is the first animated feature not linked to the Lego brand. It is therefore not surprising the amount of creativity and work invested in the design and production of this film, which involved a team of over 165 animators (Zahed, 2018).



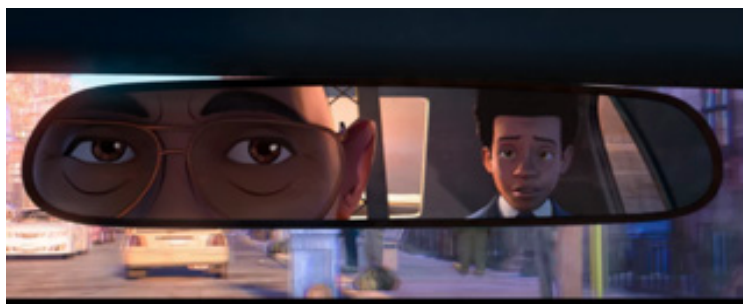
3 Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse (2018). SPE & Columbia Pictures in association with Marvel Entertainment ©.

The combination of CGI animation and handwork art on top led to the creation of a complex and elaborated piece of art which can be analyzed from many different perspectives, such as color palate, line-work, photography and many more. Ultimately, the aim of the animators was to adapt the comic styling to the screen production, and in order to do so they took artistic and technical aspects of comic book design and turned them into cinematic language. A big example of this are the pop-comic panels that appear whenever a screen frame is frozen, as production designer Justin K. Thompson explains “ideally, we want to be able to stop every frame of the film and have it look like an illustration [...] like you are living inside a comic book.” (Zahed, 2018: 13). Besides, this film successfully managed to combine different styles of animation within this CGI frame, as it is the case with the characters of Spider-Ham coming from the cartoon style, Penny Parker coming from the Anime style, and Spider-Man Noir, who had already approached the concept of bringing back the essence and style of the comic books that saw the birth of the superhero genre (Garcia, 2014).

The story of Miles Morales and the Spider-verses comes, as it has been mentioned before, from many different media and productions and therefore many different artistic styles. When these type of stories are being assembled and adapted for a cinematic medium it is common to expect an excess of unnecessary stylistic information and detail on the screen, as Martínez Fabre (2017) mentions, in an attempt to transport all the complexity of the story experienced through the comic book series, videogame etc. This, however, does not happen with the *Into the Spider-verse* film, since every piece of artwork and styling seems to have been planned and purposefully planted following a specific function, that works as a whole to create a spectacular visual experience. There are many elements throughout the film that illustrate this adaptation effort undergone by the animators, and in order to give a glimpse of this innovative artwork we are going to discuss two of the characteristics that were more impressively introduced in this project.

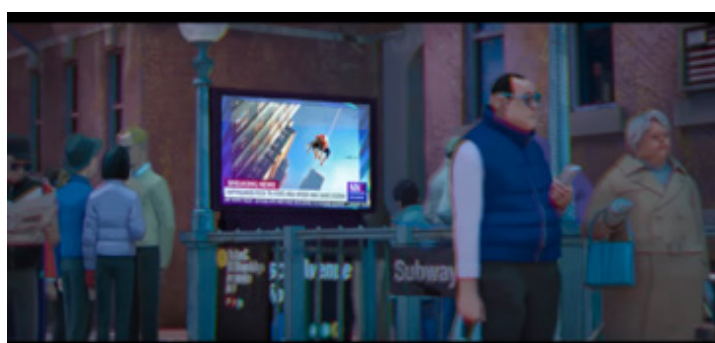
3.1 Comic Book Texture

The first artistic device that stands out in the imagery of this film is the comic book texture that it has been given through the previously mentioned handwork drawing over CGI animation. This was done at many different levels and through a wide variety of techniques that can be easily identified by the audience in the line and dot pattern used in most of the surfaces and characters. From a more technical perspective, the animators had to imitate specific cinematic features such as motion blurs, the depth of field focus or the rack focus, and create their own version of these based on graphic printing techniques (Zahed, 2018).



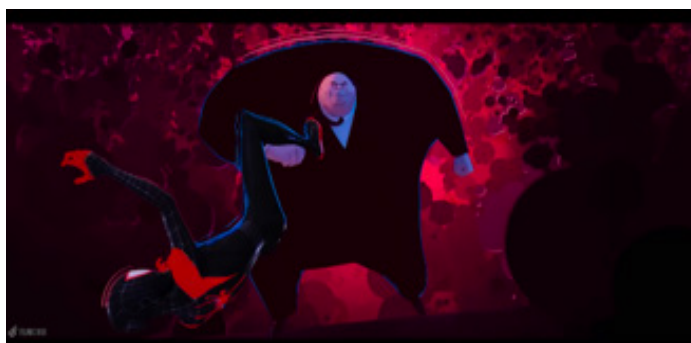
5 Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse (2018). SPE & Columbia Pictures in association with Marvel Entertainment ©.

To create the illusion of these camera focuses, Ben-Day dots and color separation were used to abstract the background scenes and characters in close-up screenshots, and also to simulate



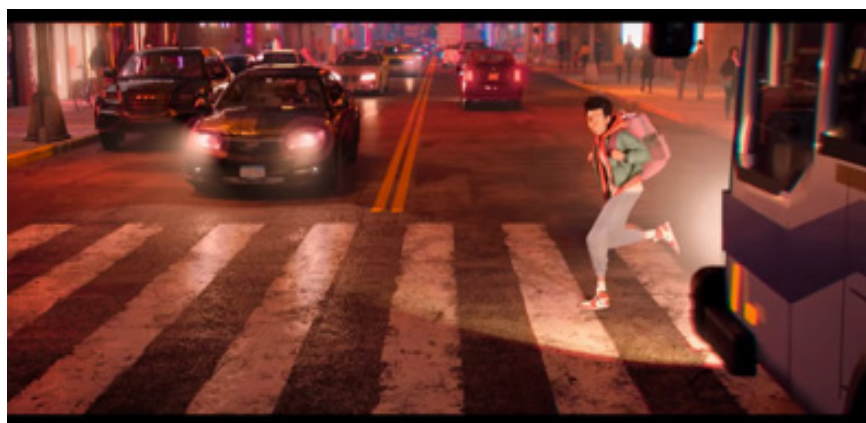
the misprinting that often characterized old comic books. These techniques can be seen for example in the scene when Miles is on the back of his father's police car, in which there is a fake background blur behind the two of them on the rear-view mirror. During that same scene the misprinting imitation can be observed when the camera focus is on the subway entrance, on the lining work of the people walking on the street.

Another technique used to imitate the comic texture was the Kirby Krackle, used to create the feeling of a negative space behind the characters. This effect is used in most of the *collider* scenes, but it can particularly be observed during the final fight scene between Miles and Mr. Fisk, in which also the color palate works to create an atmosphere of tension, contrasting the blackness of Fisk's character with the red elements of Miles' spider suit.



Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse (2018). SPE & Columbia Pictures in association with Marvel Entertainment ©.

The final example to illustrate the comic texture imbedded in the animation of this film is the shift from 2D to 3D images that is used in some scenes when a character is suddenly flashed by a light, as it happens in several scenes when Miles is running through the city at night. As Persichetti mentions, most of the animation was created using twos and not ones, as it is common in CG animation, and resorting to many lighting and color tricks to push the limits of animation and approach the comic style they were aiming at (Zahed, 2018). These artistic techniques, and the choice of actively implementing them, are what eventually provides the necessary visual effects to transform this film into an immersive experience for the audience, so they can feel transported into this virtual comic book medium.



3.2 Comic Lexicon

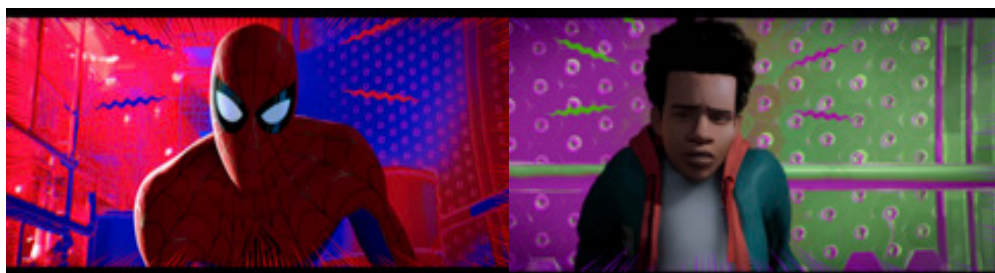
The second artistic device imported from the comic book style is the comic lexicon, which in this case makes reference to all the linguistic and paralinguistic expressions in the film that complement the animation. Within these two categories a wide variety of elements can be distinguished, depending on how directly they express their semiotic relationship with the narrative. Therefore, we are going to consider on the one hand the elements that express a direct relation between the form and the message, such as motion lines, onomatopoeias and all the different nonverbal iconography or cartooning phenomena described in *The Lexicon of Comicana* by Mort Walker (Edgell, Pilcher & Brooks, 2001), and on the other hand, the elements that express key concepts of the narration in a subtle or more structural way.



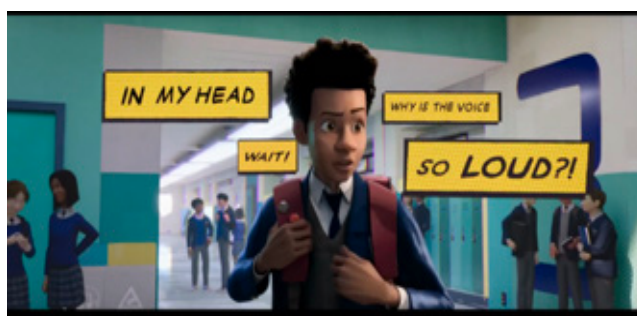
9 & 10 Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse (2018). SPE & Columbia Pictures in association with Marvel Entertainment ©.

One of the examples of this first symbolic language can be seen in the scenes when the different Spider-people meet and their spider sense tells them they are somehow similar. This intuition is represented as emanata or lines coming out of their heads in a vibrating motion, and it is also used when the spider sense warns Miles about some kind of danger. A similar kind of lining

is commonly used in the comic books to show the spider sense characteristic of Peter Parker,



although in the film it is also accompanied by a shift in the color of the character's background simulating a parallelism between them.

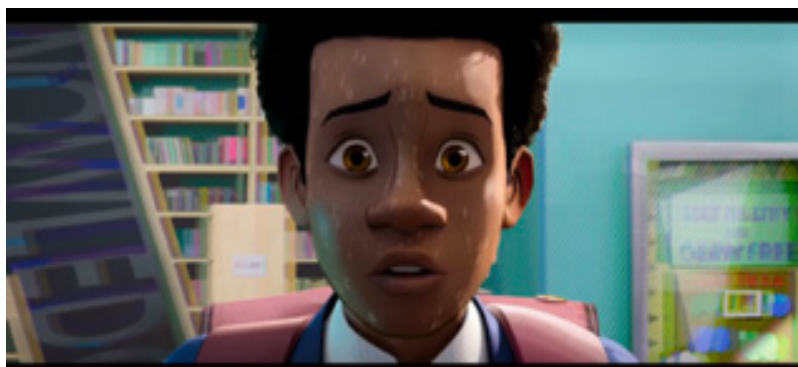


13 Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse (2018). SPE & Columbia Pictures in association with Marvel Entertainment ©.

The use of this device, already familiar to the audience of the Spider-Man comic books, functions, as Will Eisner states in *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), as a reciprocal influence between the two productions, comic and film. The animator's main function is to evoke images that are already stored in the mind of both animator and audience, and it is the recognition of the meaning of these images what determines the success or failure of the communication between the them.

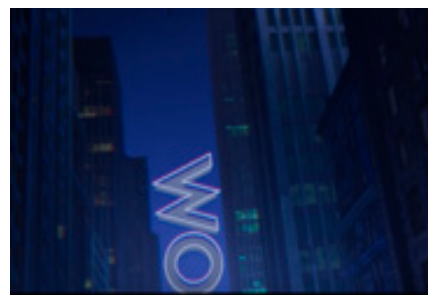
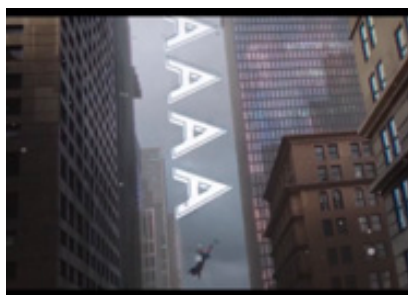
Another very interesting moment in which many of these elements can be observed is the school scene after Miles has been bitten by the spider. The first thing that calls the attention are the thought bubbles that start to come out of his mind, since these do not appear in the film until after he has been bitten. This is one of the most characteristic features of comic book language (Eisner, 1985), and in this film it is combined with a loud voicing of those thoughts by Miles with an echo effect as a way to represent his own internal self-reflection.

During this same scene another nonverbal icon is the use of *pleuds*, or drops of sweat due to stress, that can be observed when Miles is nervously talking to Gwen attributing his excessive sweating to puberty. The fact that most of this elements appear after he has been bitten strengthens the collaborative tension between the story of Miles and the original comic book story.



14 Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse (2018). SPE & Columbia Pictures in association with Marvel Entertainment ©.

One last linguistic element that is highlighted in the film are the onomatopoeias, crucial in comic action scenes. In the case of the Spider-verse these can be mainly seen in the fight between the first Spider-Man and the Green Goblin, and also in the Spider-Man Noir action scenes. However, there are two particular moments in the film in which onomatopoeias function as a complement to the storyline and not just as sound representation. There is a parallelism between the scene of Miles falling down from a skyscraper when he is first trying his new powers, and the scene of Miles finally becoming Spider-Man and throwing himself up a skyscraper screaming.



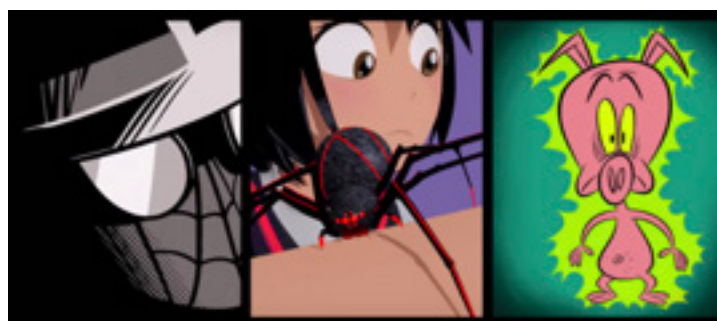
In the first one he fails because he does not have a mentor to teach him, and so as he falls from a building the onomatopoeia goes from the top to the bottom of the screen following his path. While in the second one, Miles finally finds the strength to become Spider-Man and the onomatopoeia is projected from the bottom to the top of the screen, like his spider-webs, with a more glowy and luminous color palate than the previous one. In this opposed scenes the onomatopoeias function as a time development device, supporting the failure and later achievement of Miles' potential, which leads to the second type of comic lexicon found in the film.

As mentioned above, apart from these directly referential linguistic icons there are elements in the comic book lexicon and art that express concepts of the narration in a subtle or more structural way. The treatment of time in comic books, essential for the narration of the story although unnecessary in an animated film, is one of these elements and has been imitated in several scenes of this feature.



17 & 18 Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse (2018). SPE & Columbia Pictures in association with Marvel Entertainment ©.

As Eisner explains (1985: 30), the partition of the image into separate comic panels is a fundamental tool to transmit the pass of time in comic strips, as it acts as a form of segmentation of the action. The use of this technique can be seen in some of the fight scenes, and during the narrations of the origin stories of the different Spider-people to indicate time progression or simultaneity.



In the case of origin stories, there is a bigger fragmentation of the scene since a higher number of comic panels is needed to compress a longer amount of time, as it can be seen in the narration of Peter B. Parker's twenty years as Spider-Man in his universe.

Although this is an animated film, the complexity of its storyline makes it impossible to present all the background stories, details and material in general about the different characters and their particular universes. For this reason, the treatment of time from a comic book perspective fits perfectly with the nature of the narration. The creators of the film have understood how to use these techniques to show the audience the pieces of information they needed to recognize the

events encapsulated in each of this fragmented panel scenes, just like a sequential artist would “see” for the spectator (Eisner, 1985: 40).

The comic book styling of *Spider-Man Into the Spider-verse* is certainly one of its main attractives, being at the same a very risky and a very original choice for a mainstream superhero film. The decision of bringing back the aesthetics that witnessed the birth of the genre was decisive for the success and acclaimed reception of the film, although not the only one. The narrative perspective under the art, most essentially how the creators of this narrative decided to expose it, is another core piece of the machinery behind the imaginary of this film, which will be analyzed through the next section.

4. A web of multiple dimensions: the Spider-Verse as a Transmedia-Verse

When *Spider-Man Into the Spider-verse* actually begins, a comic book with the title *True Life-Tales of Spider-Man* appears on screen to tell the story of the spider hero “one last time”, comically alluding to the many re-versions of the spider-hero the audience has seen along the years. This kind of character introduction is going to be recurrent during the film to present the different Spider-people that appear in it, making reference to each of their origin stories. The presentation of the first Spider-Man that appears on screen, Peter Parker from earth-1610, is not only going to introduce the backstory of this Peter Parker, but also a series of intertextual references that are complementary, although not essential, to understand and enter the spider-universe (Davidson, 2008). This Spider-Man narrates in first person several events of his life, most of them familiar to the cinematographic audience since they make reference to specific scenes from previous films. Amusingly, after this he starts listing different merchandising products that have been created about him, such as a comic book, a cereal, a Christmas album and even a popsicle which appears in the form of a real life picture. This self-recognition of Spider-man as the character that the audience knows can be considered the first access into the transmedial identity of the narrative of this story, following the idea that Kinder (1991) and Jenkins (2006) conceived of a transmedia production.

Alluding to Marie-Laure Ryan’s studies on transmedia (2016), this film would be an example of what she calls the second model of transmedia narrative, since the story Miles Morales and these Spider-people in this animated film is able to support itself, but in order to obtain a wider and more substantial concept of the story the audience would have to do some research on their different individual narratives. Nevertheless, even without having all the information about these characters, the casual spectator can still enjoy the whole experience visually and narratively. The story of Spider-Man, as it was conceived by Stan Lee, might have not been a transmedia project from the beginning, although it certainly became one as the character reached a certain level of popularity, which seems clear not only through the different storylines and productions that have been created since then, but also through the massive participation of the fans of the franchise in the creation of spider-content. Besides, the transmedial projection of the character was made evident from the moment the current Marvel company anticipated the different phases of their Marvel Cinematic Universe (Acu, 2016). From its beginning, the MCU caught the attention of several academic fields, especially narrative and communication studies, in terms of the choices made by the producers when transporting and expanding these comic book stories into the different platforms they have been displayed on. The Avengers and all the characters that surround them have been the object of study of a myriad of researches, that have looked into the transmedia features or elements that characterize these productions. These

go from general revisions of the different versions of a superhero or heroes throughout the years, such as García's study about the transmedial identity of Spider-man Noir (2014) or Baile-López et al's work on the MCU's hypertextuality (2015), to studies about the impact that active audiences and their creations have in the evolution of a particular story or character.

Focusing on the *Into the Spider-Verse* narrative, it would be necessary to define in what way this project accords with the elements that characterize a transmedia narrative. Corona Rodríguez (2016) synthesizes some of the most relevant categorizations that different scholars have developed on what could be considered the essential features of a transmedia narrative, although, since we are dealing with a field of study that functions in many different areas and scopes, there is still a semantic negotiation going on and not a definite description for this. However, Henry Jenkins and Carlos Scolari are two of the most renowned scholars presently dealing with this issue, and there are certain features that coincide in both of their discourses which can be useful to acknowledge this question. To synthesize the extensive work of these two authors into a functional piece of theory for this analysis, there are two essential ideas to take into account to be able to consider any narrative a transmedia one. First, the different fragments of a narrative have to be told through two or more different media channels, each dealing with their corresponding part of the story in the most suitable way for a unified final experience. Second, the audience or prosumers have to be able to take an active role and intervene or modify part of the contents of the narrative, which have to be left open for their participation (Jenkins, 2007; Scolari, 2013).

In the *Into the Spider-verse film* there are multiple Spider-people from different genres, as it is the case again with Spider-Man Noir coming from the hard-boiled detective genre, Penny Parker from the anime genre, and Peter Porker from the cartoon genre, with their corresponding narrative features. This particularity of the narrative accounts, on the one hand, for the first feature of a transmedia project just mentioned, as through this convergence of characters and genres the film provides different entryways to the same narrative universe. The Spider-Man story has been told through different media, as is the case with comic books, videogames, films, TV shows etc., and each of these has been selected for a reason. The storyline of the Spider-Verses colliding and showing the different Spider-People from a thousand dimensions, has been told on comic format because it would have been unachievable to show the complexity of this storyline through film production. In the same way, the animation format seems to have been chosen to tell the story of Miles Morales and the other Spider-people in this film because in no other format would it have been possible to combine cartoon, manga style and black-and-white drawing. This is evident not only in the format and art choice, but on the characters' narrative identities.

We are seeing therefore what Donoso and Peñafiel called a transductional or transfictional work (2017) within a transmedia universe, in which there is a relationship between different stories coming from a common primal narrative, all connected within a universe but at the same time all fragmenting the continuity of that narrative. This might seem like a contradiction, but in the world of the Marvel Multiverse it works. What is more, this transmedia feature is accompanied by a metatextuality of a very particular nature, since we are dealing with the product of a multitude of narratives adapted into cinematic language with an emphasis on the comic style, in which the main characters are actively aware that they are a fiction character. The only previous production in the MCU that has used this self-referencing as a characteristic trait of its narrative is *Deadpool* (2016). This is again a cinematic production adapted from a comic

book, but in this case one with a very peculiar particularity: *Deadpool* continuously breaking the fourth wall to interact with the spectator. There is a conversation going on between the character and the audience, as well as with himself and with the universe he inhabits, due to his self-awareness. Both films, therefore, share this hybrid narratives (Davidson, 2008) offering the audience a different way to experience the story, that goes beyond a multitude of access points and references.

On the other hand, regarding the collaboration of the audience, one of the most enjoyable and “delayed” examples in the film is the animated meme of Spider-Man 2099 that appears during the after credits. This scene seems to have been taken from the thousands of fan art creations that Spider-Man has inspired throughout the years, as a tribute to the prosumers contributions, since as Suzanne Scott mentions “the MCU might be cited as prime evidence that we have reached peak fan-centric transmedia planning” (2017: 1045). This second transmedia feature is especially evident in the amount of popular culture references or intertextual elements (Kinder, 1991) introduced in the film for the public to find and interpret. These Easter Eggs have been placed in most of the latest superhero films, in order to keep their fans’ connected to the expansive storyline that links all the different films to each other and to their written format versions. As Jenkins claims (2007), the fandoms that this fantastic genre attracts are always interested in the search of further narrative elements in different platforms, as some kind of personal challenge to achieve the maximum experience from a particular story, but also as a way of seeing how far they can take the story through these hidden pieces of information. This has been exploited in many other transmedia productions, as it has been explored by Harvey (2015) in the cases of The Hobbit saga, the Star Wars saga and, in particular, the latest productions of the House of Ideas and its MCU. In the third chapter of his book, Harvey mentions a very interesting example of how fans have an active role in the MCU narratives, both in and out of the screen, as it happens with the character of Agent Coulson, also analyzed by Scott (2017). This character died in the MCU but was brought back to life through audience activism, and has now become one of the main links between the series and the films of the Marvel franchise, including the *Ultimate Spider-Man* series. The previously mentioned authors have observed how Coulson acts as an allegory of both a transmedia producer and a prosumer, showing the attention that the MCU transmedia franchise pays to the audience’s participation and production.

This transmedia collaboration of the prosumers in the development of the *Spider-Man Into the Spider-Verse* film can also be identified in some of the story’s variations from the comic version, which again appeared to be a planned attempt to acknowledge the fans contributions and desires. For example, this can be observed in the relevance assigned to female characters in the film, since one of the plot twists that the fans disliked the most from the Miles Morales’ comic book story was the death of his mother, which was negatively considered as an example of *fridging* (Vulture, 2018). In the Spider-Verse animated version the producers made several decisions that could counterbalance this perception, such as the portrayal of one of the most famous antagonists of Spider-Man as a woman with Dr. Olivia Octavius, or the superior maturity and superhero features assigned to the character of Gwen Stacy in contrast with the other two main male versions of Spider-Man, Miles and Peter B. Parker. Moreover, and also in relation to Spider-Gwen’s character, the film leaves an open ending for the continuation of the story, with a final scene in which Miles is laying on his bed and the voice of Gwen can be heard calling him from what can be seen as a different dimension. This accounts for one of the purposeful transmedia gaps that the producers leave in order to allow the prosumers to imagine their own version of how this relationship between Miles and Gwen will develop, recognizing one more

time the significance of the fan's contributions.

5. Conclusion

What could be called the *renaissance* of the superhero genre into movie style had been going on for a decade until the first superhero animated feature saw the light. *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* has supposed a revolutionary technical and narrative investment for the superhero mainstream market, thanks to the challenges that its creators have been willing to face in these two fields. The audience has received an unprecedented work of art that could set a new path for superhero cinematic stories, and which offers at the same time a complex product for pop-culture, literary and cinema academic studies.

This film has managed to capture the attention of the spectator in the same way that the original Spider-Man did with the comic book audience, offering a story anyone could identify with. Miles, a young boy from a multiracial family, with an ordinary childhood experience and fond of music, street-art and sport, connects with the reality of today's spectator in a more accurate way than its coetaneous big heroes of the cinematic sphere. Like Peter Parker before him, with Miles this film distances itself from the archetype of a perfect hero, what could be seen as one of the main reasons for its relatability and success. It is therefore not only through the technical and special effects that the audience can bond with superhero films, but through a story that appeals to their moral and emotional sense.

It seems as if the latest superhero franchise's attempt to approach reality from the technical development aspect, with incredibly realistic visual effects, is being transferred to its narrative with a potentially detrimental effect. The outbreak of technology and CGI seems to have denatured the superhero genre, focusing on achieving a mechanical astonishment and expectation from the audience rather than a meaningful connection. Science-fiction in general, and superhero films in particular, try to fool our perception by imitating reality in such a close way that it ceases being special. From the moment they were created, superheroes have represented the ideal of being above human limits in terms of physical and moral capabilities. Therefore, attempting to bring the superhero closer to our reality necessarily has to convey attributing this figure our own negative facets.

Some superhero films and TV shows have started to glimpse this idea of very human superheroes, showing the negative consequences that having super abilities would imply. Either in a serious or in a parodic way, money, power, a lack of moral ethic and merchandising seem to be the characteristics that the audience could expect from real life superheroes, leaving a rather negative feeling about them. For this reason, in this globally technified society, animation seems to be the best format to portray the superhero ideal, since this artistic genre was created to reach the unimaginable and alienate us from our anesthetizing reality.

The superhero genre was somehow invented to allow the audience to dream about their better self. Trying to equate it with our own reality cannot work, because that would imply that either we would have already reached our best potential self, or, from a more pessimistic view, there would not be greater deeds or challenges to seek. This genre was born in paper form to give the audience the opportunity to fill the gaps of the stories that the authors left, and to be able to write the end of the stories and consider the possibilities that they offer. Animation recovers this opportunity, which seems the most natural approach for superheroes, allowing the audience to stop rationalizing these fantastic stories and going back to playing and dreaming, as Miles says, about wearing a cape.

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