BEYOND NATIONAL BORDERS: RESHAPING THE SUPERHERO FIGURE AFTER THE GLOBAL TURN

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Abstract My paper aims to investigate the relation between comic books superheroes and their renditions on the big screen. The focus of my analysis will be Marvel Comics, with its counterpart cinematic universe, the so-called MCU, and DC Comics, altogether with the recently developed DCEU, the cinematic extended universe of DC Comics. My ambition is to draw attention on how the superhero figure has function as an interface for our views of the other, while building upon the impact that globalism has had on the representations of aliens, mutants, and enhanced people in the last decade. The methodological framework used here employs World Literature and World Cinema, transnational and global studies, and metamodernist studies.
Keywords Comic Book, Superhero, Translation, Cinema, Otherness.

> *"My chin felt like it was scraping the pavement. My spirits were even lower. I must have walked for hours. Then, for no particular reason, I stopped. The big moments are sometimes quiet. No lightning, no thunder, no howling wind – the mist on my face wasn't even cold. Nothing spectacular at all. Just a quiet moment that changed everything. I realized that the system wasn't working. The system wasn't working. That meant my life wasn't working. I'd have to go outside the law" – James Gordon, "Batman: Gordon of Gotham", volume 1, issue #2, July 2 1998*

Superhero comic books like Marvel and DC Comics emerged as a genre dedicated to children and to young adults, and, moreover, a genre speaking to and for a specific

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nation, the American nation. In a recent editorial project devoted to this particular genre's evolution, author Anthony R. Mills speaks about an *American Monomyth*[1] regarding what we call "the golden age"[2] of superhero comics in America, from a quite innovative perspective. Mills' thesis revolves around the idea of an "intimate historical relationship between the now disparate fields of comic book/superhero film creation, on the one hand, and Christian theology, on the other, in the United States. An understanding of the early connections, Mills continues, between theology and American conceptions of heroism helps to further make sense of their contemporary parallels, wherein superhero stories and theology are not strictly separate phenomena but have shared origins and concerns.[3]" A somehow similar take on the national character of the comic book genre is to be found in Paul Lopes's *Demanding Respect*, where the author points out that the early beginnings of American comic books production were "a period of ingenuity, creativity, and risk-taking. And the period produced, more than anything, a cultural legacy.[4]" These assumptions can easily explain why we rarely spoke until recently about these characters in different terms than those of patriotic icons or fantasy tales. The comic book imaginary was understood by the large public in the 20th century almost exclusively in terms of heroism, super strength and fantastic abilities, making superheroes such as Superman, Batman, Captain America or Thor merely symbols of supernatural abilities and unquestionable moral fibre. This however does not mean that superhero comic book stories were lacking a political dimension, even in their early days (the use, for instance, of Wonder Woman's character as a feminist symbol or the patriotic dimension of Captain America and other characters as well[5]), on the contrary, they were symbols of American values (mostly DC) or even highly critical of social issues in the post-war era (predominantly Marvel). The fact that these iconic figures have known very little controversy when it comes to whether if they are entirely good or not, due to their images as symbols of truth and justice, has established a rather clean cultural discourse and general understanding on the matter of comics over the years, especially on non-American lands, that only had fragmentary access to various elements of the superhero comics' imaginary and lacked the possibility of constant interaction with the complex network that those

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[1] See Anthony R. Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema. The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[2] The Golden Age of American comic books traditionally defines the comic book production in the United States between late 1930s and late 1950s.

[3] Mills, *American Theology*, 3.

[4] Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect. The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadephia: Temple University Press, 2009), 13.

[5] Such analyses are brilliantly performed by Matthew J. Costello in his book, which I highly recommend for further study on the subject, *Secret Identity Crisis. Comic Books & The Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

fictional universes were building. The discourses surrounding comic book production points to the fact that the superhuman figures have always been seen more as saviours of our planet and people, than as enemies or as a weird *otherness* that we should be afraid of or wary at the very least, by a public that couldn't read them in a synchronized pace with the political war and post-war reality. In terms of emancipation, Marvel Comics were always one or two steps ahead of DC Comics, redirecting the international tensions of the society in their story arcs, transforming a real problematic political context in a very complex background for characters that have created an alternative history that never remained without impact in the one their readers had been living in. From Captain America, who fought the Nazis and won the second World War for the United States, to Black Panther, a character created by Stan Lee in 1966 as a bold statement and a much needed response to the lack of black characters in the comic book stories, Marvel had grown to address the very problems of society at this symbolical level, to the point that they have created, in 2016, a very different superhero tale, entitled *Madaya Mom*, a refugee, a Syrian mother's story who fights every day for hers and her children's survival in the contemporary difficult political background.[6]

During the last decade, we have witnessed the emergence of a new cinematic wave, consisting in the reinterpretation of some of the most famous superhero characters and story arcs that Marvel Comics and DC Comics has produced over the years. Film studios and producers have translated into a cinematic, blockbuster language stories of humans, mutants, *inhumans* (coined by Marvel Comics), *metahumans* (coined by DC Comics) and aliens that come together and learn how to communicate and share a world that is constantly transforming, becoming strange and sometimes even unintelligible for both parties. The earnings of such adaptations are related to the global permeability of this universal language of Hollywood cinema and TV shows which transfer a niche literature into a more reachable and accessible cultural object to a rather diverse audience. By means of a discipline that emerged in the 70s and regained popularity after 2000s, namely adaptation studies, many scholars have already delved into this complicated task of analysing the transgression. In a very recent study, Liam Burke employs Andrew Dudley's taxonomy (Dudley 1984) – the *borrowings*, the *intersections*, and the

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[6] The present paper does not attempt to analyze this dimension of the American comic books investigated here. However, these problems have received a fair treatment in some other papers, that I highly recommend for furthers study, such as Nickie Phillips, Staci Strobl (Eds.), *Comic Book Crime: Truth Justice and the American Way* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001); and Cord Scott, "Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11", *The Journal of Popular Culture* (07 march/2007), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00381.x.

transformations – in order to analyse the Hollywood adaptations of American crime comics. Burke addresses some issues of the traditional assumptions on film adaptations, like the tendency – when discussing adaptations – to celebrate the literature, and not the cinematic experience. The present paper aims to depart as well from this position, building on the significant role that superhero blockbuster has in the current cultural context.

Transnational phenomena have generated shifts that the new cinematic waves have struggled to meet. This paper's objective is to analyse, in the light of these assumptions and by means of media studies and world cinema studies, the constantly updating functions of the superhero characters, as effects of globalization. Bringing to the table this alternative literature and its cinematic translations by creating a dialogue about the fundamental position of the superhero figure in our contemporary imaginary about otherness in the field of cultural studies and theory is the main ambition of the present paper.

Gods and God-complexes: A Literature of Myths, a Literature of Science

Both Marvel's and DC Comics' alternative universes or multiverses, in their long run, have engaged two major types of superheroes (and their respective supervillains): the god/the alien and the scientist/ nerd self-made superhero. For instance, if we focus on the most famous trio of DC Comics – the Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman trinity – we will have to acknowledge the fact that their origin stories are pretty much caught in these two categories. Superman, or Kal-El, is an alien from the fictional planet Krypton and Wonder Woman, or Diana Prince, is a demigoddess and a warrior amazon, finding her symbolic roots in the Greek mythology. On the other hand, Batman, or Bruce Wayne, is a very smart and very rich man who turned himself into a superhero, triggered by the murder of his parents when he was only eight years old. Against Superman's and Wonder Woman's superhuman strength, flying ability and other extraordinary superpowers, a self-trained man should stand no chance, but surprisingly, he does. In fact, the darkness of this character has gained over the years more popularity among fans than the rather solar and patriotic figures of Superman and Wonder Woman.

In the Marvel multiverse, things are very much the same. Together with famous mythical characters like Thor or Valkyrie, or alien *symbiotes* (e.g. Venom) and mutants with incredible abilities (e.g. X-men), Marvel develops an entire science-based group of characters that, over the years, became the most popular cultural symbols for our children and general audience of comic books or comic books related movies and TV shows. Spider-Man, Fantastic Four, The Hulk and Iron Man are excellent products that never ceased to dominate the superhero landscape. If we go back to their origin stories, they are more often than not either self-made or accidental superheroes. Peter Parker (Spider-Man) is bitten by a radioactive spider,

Bruce Banner (The Hulk) is exposed to gamma radiation during the explosion of an experimental bomb and Tony Stark (Iron Man) uses his skills to build a super suit in order to save his life. Maybe the success of these self-made characters consists in the fact that they are more relatable to kids and the general public, because they are humans, not *aliens*.

It is certainly not an accident either that these characters tend to have a more complex story and personality than their alien counterparts. The writers themselves seem to know how to better handle *human*, rather than *alien* characters and how to create a more complex network of feelings. While the *stranger* is, in the first place, here to save us, like an outer space agent or a god sent to us from a different realm, the human playing god is something touchable, a transposition of a characteristic human desire for power. The 'friendly neighbour' (Spider-Man), the nerd or the 'genius millionaire playboy' (Iron Man) are just modern reiterations of the old tales of kings and warriors that have crossed lines to obtain power or became stronger by accidents of fate. So, where the human turned superhuman is just another mechanism of dealing with the social, cultural and political environment constantly changing and facing new problems to solve, the alien is merely just that, an alien. Spider-Man's (or his uncle Ben's, to be completely accurate) credo that "with great power comes great responsibility" is by far the most popular and quoted comic book line in social media and the superhero related imaginary. This kind of thoughtfulness could only come from a human who was not born with superpowers, but who gained them and is at times overwhelmed or even scared of what he can do. Choosing the right path to use superhero powers has only one cultural or metafictional purpose: translating a feeling of hope in humanity. However, accepting to befriend and trust with your life to a host of aliens that could easily tear apart entire cities is also a symbol of strength, tolerance and faith in the greater good and the good part of the people.

Gods and aliens remain rather silent in intimate matters of power. Their origin stories focus more on the realms and planets they come from and the journey they made until establishing themselves on Earth and fighting for justice and concentrates far lesser on how they present their powers to strangers and how they relate to the role they have as protectors of humans. Those stories also tend to ignore the aftermath of such story arcs and battles when, for instance Superman destroys half Metropolis fighting some random villain. The discourse about alien power seemed, for a great deal of time, at least for forty years (the 1940s are the dawn of superhero stories and the 1980s as the begging of a shift of paradigm in how we tell our superhero tales), covered in clichés concerning the greatness of the things our fellows for another planets and times could do. Besides the fact that the public looked at those creatures as fictional embodiments of help and power that could come from a different space than the one we live in, writers did not really help when it comes to a better understanding of the condition of being an alien, a type of

otherness, because they did not give those superheroes a real voice. They were defined almost exclusively by what they could physically do and what they meant as a cultural object. "It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superman!" is both a cry of hope and an avowal of faith in the man who can save people from basically any possible threat, but it also objectifies *the boy scout* (another trait that capitalizes on the character's inherent optimism). In Superman related issues and animated series, even in the contemporary 2000's *Justice League animated series* (2001-2004) for instance, Superman is recurrently seen defusing bombs, meeting with the president, speaking in front of the ecstatic people, casually saving people from car, train, or plane unfortunate accidents, always having a nice word for those in need. He is a solar character, seeming to be nothing more than a living commercial of himself that says "Superman is here to save you". After a Metropolis battle, after parks are devastated, cars are destroyed and buildings collapsed, the only thing that the boy-scout has to say is "Don't worry, Superman is here to save the day".

The fact that the golden age of superheroes saw its gods, demigods and alien characters as merely 'weapons' of the 'Greater Good' can be read as a barometer of how society has viewed its saviours. The mid-20th century was still dominated by a rather mystical or symbolic understanding of the world, not so much in the sense of faith and religiosity, but in the sense of an inherited habit of placing an aura on the powerful things we have a hard time apprehending. The national projects and the patriotic discourses have strengthened the way people believed in what was beyond them, in the symbolic infrastructure of a new dawn in history, one that will surpass the tragedies of the war. So, as Captain America was the embodiment of the American super soldier that had defeated the Nazis, the flying cape of the alien or god waved from the skies to people as a reassurance that the odds are now in their favour.

What is Regained in Translation. The Hollywood Way

While DC Comics had a weaker political substructure than Marvel series and emancipating the way we see otherness did not seem a top priority for the writers, or they simply failed to deliver it, the later, post 2000s, screening (the so-called DC Extended Universe, or DCEU) and reinterpretations (DC's *Rebirth* series for instance) of the DC characters, although the films were not very well received by the critics, somehow managed to update the superhero figure so they can not only blend in the contemporary cinematic imaginary, but stand alone as spokesmen for a very troubled current political context. In a way, the superhero comic book genre has behaved in cinematic adaptations with the outcomes of what we call *World Literature*. By losing, altering or simplifying story arcs and characters, they have

gained in translation[7]. The global turn in the humanities[8] produced, alongside this new methodological and theoretical framework of *World Literature*[9] its counterpart discipline of *World Cinema*[10]. As Toby Miller, one of the editors and contributors of the ambitious editorial project *Tradition in World Cinema*, states, "perhaps the most important thing to do when thinking about 'world cinema' is to destabilise the term, to question the logic of each word. Clearly, the concept is designed to go beyond two central rubrics for film followers, critics and historians: national cinema and Hollywood"[11]As understood by Miller's statement, *World Cinema* has fairly been associated with Hollywood. In a certain way, Hollywood adaptations, blockbusters, represent something like a global label. It therefore seems that a story 'recycled' by Hollywood producers and turned into a box-office success equate with a globally accessible translation, having its transnational circulation somehow guaranteed. While we are less focused on the aesthetic dimension of the adaptation aimed to discussing, we shall bring light to the value of these films, by means of global studies approaches.

The take that Zack Snyder has proposed in the post 2010s DCEU franchise was very harshly criticized by critics, fans of DC Comics, and the large audience altogether, stating that it had a great amount of unwarranted drama and a very dark manner of telling Superman's and Batman's stories. Further, we should analyse these movies from the view point that interests us: how has the DCEU interpreted the alien and how have they understood the otherness?

Man of Steel, (Zack Snyder) the first movie of the franchise, aired in 2013 and it was formulated as the origin story of Superman, based on *The Man of Steel* 1986's comic book series. Elements of other reiterations of Superman were combined, like the *New52* version of Superman or small depictions from the *Death of Superman* issues. The mix that the film writers proposed was already in the post-

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[7] See David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature? (*Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003)

[8] My assumptions are based on works such as Paul Jay's *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), Eve Darian-Smith, Philip C. McCarty's (Eds.) *The Global Turn. Theories, Research Designs, and Methods for Global Studies* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), Amy J. Elias, Christian Moraru's (Eds.) *The Planetary Turn* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2015), Christian Moraru's *Reading for the Planet: Toward a Geomethodology* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

[9] See David Damrosch, *What is World Literature*, Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature", *New Left Review* 1 (2000), Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents. American Literature Across Deep Time*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[10] See Aristide Gazetas, *An Introduction to World Cinema*, McFarland &Company, Inc. Publishers, 2008, Lúcia Nagib, Chris Perriam, Rajinder Dudrah (Eds.), *Theorizing World Cinema*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2012, Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer, Steven Jay Schneider (Eds.), *Traditions in World Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

[11] Linda Badley, Barton R. Palmer, Steven Jay Schneider (Eds.), *Traditions in World Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

crisis series imaginary of DC Comics, and featured from the beginning a rather complex Superman character than the pre-crisis one. Whether the dark tone that Snyder chose for the movie was inspired in terms of cinematography or not, it sure mattered at a subtler level: it made Superman less of a saviour alien, by blurring the solar image that the audience has been used to in what concerns him, and thus more of a 'far-from-home-stranger' that struggles to fit in on earth after finding out he's an alien and also the last survivor of his planet. By stating this, we are not saying that Snyder was a pioneer. What are we trying to say is that his take on the DCEU franchise was as much a symptomatic choice for our contemporary shift in cultural imaginary and translating the reality in the arts, as it was a very important contribution for the general cultural imaginary about the otherness. It's true that Snyder's contribution comes after the death of Superman (DCEU will reload themselves the death of Superman in the following movie), but that isn't so much a matter of how he chose to play his superhero card, but how he *could*, really, play it, after America "killed its icon and then mourned its dead"[12]. A dark, dramatic take on Superman was maybe the only available tone that could compete with the heroic, solar and patriotic one that writers and interprets of Superman related comic book issues have established, the only one that could balance for the large audience the cliché image of their beloved hero, the only one that could briefly alter our horizon of expectation.

DCEU took a step further in the following movie of the franchise, the 2016's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder), in what concerns the image of the otherness they chose to deliver. The opening scenes of the movie present the post-apocalyptic image of Metropolis after the battle between Superman and Zod, his main villain from *Man of Steel*. Bruce Wayne is introduced as a brave citizen that saves a little girl from being crashed, while Superman destroys the city's buildings fighting Zod. What the large audience sees for the first time in Snyder's movie is the '*real* reality' of a battle, something often ignored, never really showed, visually, in comic books from a citizen's point of view. And so it starts the feud between Batman and Superman, but there's also something more to the matter: so it enhances the demystification of the saviour. In these later representations of battles, Superman does not return back to the ground and states that he has saved the day, and that's because he doesn't, at least not for everyone. That is because the cultural shift in the contemporary imaginary made us consider the one that did not previously have a voice and how the actions and events of the powerful people impact those lives. In our case, those without a voice in the golden era of comics were both Superman and the ordinary citizen. The first was an icon, the last was a phantasy – both generic shapes of the American citizen. Their 'true' voices didn't quite matter. In this later

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[12] Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 16.

scenario however, Superman gets a different treatment. Batman is the protector of people, the human fighting the alien, or even human *vs* god, as the movie plot builds it. Batman is, in a sense, the hero of the masses, who mistrusts the alien. The mistrusting of the alien is far from being a completely new take in what concerns the relationship between Superman and Batman, multiple Batman related comic book issues and later animated series (even *Superman: the animated series* from 1996-2000) having developed this exact same plot. But the humanizing touch of the DCEU's *Dawn of Justice* is to be found quite in that grave, serious tone that condemned the movie to a rather negative response from the viewers. The scene where Batman acknowledges that the alien deserves at least a chance to be listen, the much hated or mocked 'Martha Scene', is merely an attempt to bring together by maybe not such a fortunate cinematic trick two *othernesses*: the alien superhero and the human self-made superhero, and make them both if not relatable to the audience, closer to a better understanding of their positions. Batman doesn't come to his senses by seeing what Superman can do, as the comic book issues and animated series have put it, but by seeing Superman's feelings and most important, its vulnerability, the relatable pain of losing someone you love.

In *New Mutants. Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, Ramzi Fawaz points out the fact that superheroes "evolved from a rigid representation of law and order to a dynamic figure of flux negotiating multiple identities and affiliations in the postwar period.[13]" He stresses the fact that the shift from object or icon to a complex and relatable otherness in what concerns the superhuman figure was determined by the rupture between the war generation of comics and the post-war or the cold war generation. Fawaz's observation is more than right, but in the economy of his demonstration, he ignores to consider 1) the cultural space factor where the comics are read and 2) the inner differences between the two main imaginary universes superheroes were built in. I aim to analyse that shift from a slightly different point of view. DC's and Marvel's comics tonalities are very different from at least one point of view that interest us.[14] The first ones have built not only American icons, but rather universal stories, accessing the Greek mythology as well as creating completely fictional spaces and planets,

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[13] Fawaz, *New Mutants*, 23.

[14] The trenchant difference between how Marvel and DC Comics have built their characters is visible in a rather innocent commentary of Joseph J. Darowski's Introduction to *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor. Race and Gender in the Comic Books* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), xiii: "The need for a superhero implies something is broken in the system. With Superman it's that there are threats too large for the system to handle. With Batman it's that there is too much crime for the system to handle. With the X-Men, it's that there is prejudice and hatred in the world because people are different". Thus, while DC Comics have created characters that function as saviours, Marvel has chosen to address different, more sensible issues, like racism, discrimination and marginalization.

and, by doing so, they made those spaces equally understandable by the American and non-American citizen. DC Comics created a rather universal language. Superman, Hawkman and Martian Man Hunter were from alien planets, Wonder Woman and Aquaman were merely a reinterpretation of globally known mythological figures and Batman was an orphan from an anachronistic dark fictional city, characters that could easily be pulled out of their national horizon and delivered as universal symbols.

Marvel, on the other hand, has been working with national and inside views. They focused less on fictional places and metaphorical scenarios and more on the matters of science and politics.[15] They created lesser aliens and gods, and more mutants and inhumans that have often played the role of the outcast, the marginal, the exclude. They were the superheroes that humans feared and isolated and the very concept of genetic mutation has been nothing else but a response of the real-world threats and nuclear events. From Captain America to Bruce Banner or the X-men, Marvel writers have tested the limits of what science can do to the human body, but unlike DC Comics, they haven't focused on how the genetic mutation is instrumentalized for helping the innocent and defenceless human, but on the response that those humans have had to the superhuman/inhuman/mutated power. While American children and youth have gained this identity prosthesis and could relate to this fictional outcast that suddenly made isolation and exclusion easier to deal with, the imaginary reservoir of Marvel comics remained rather strange for the non-Americans. Even if peripheral countries as Romania or Poland for instance had access to some of its elements (Spider-Man is a good example), the Marvel comic book universe was simply far too complex for young people around the globe to truly benefit from its emancipatory positions, by only getting a small part translated from it. Romania has had access to the Marvel universe, after the falling of its totalitarian regime, almost exclusively to animated translations of the comic book stories and characters. The 90's animated series like *X-Men* (1992-1997), *Fantastic Four* (1994-1996), *Spider-Man* (1994-1998), *Iron-Man* (1994-1996) and *The Incredible Hulk* (1996-1997) were the most popular reiterations of these famous characters and, for that time being, the exclusive way of knowing the Marvel Universe, complete comic book series and volumes being almost impossible to find, let along their translations, at that time. It's noticeable how this animated series were proposing to a completely illiterate public in matters of superhero imaginary only accidents of science, unlike their counterparts DC Comics, that in the 90's and even early 2000's still delivered a very heroic and kid-friendly bunch of stories, like

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[15] In this regard, as in everything that Marvel has accomplished to deliver in the post-war era, Ramzi Fawaz's *New Mutants* has to be seen for a more exhaustive demonstration. Due to the fact that he has already discussed in his book about the great emancipation factor of Marvel's post-war comic books, we shall no longer insist here on the subject.

Superman: The animated series (1996-2000) or *Justice League: The animated series* (2001-2004). Suddenly, the monsters were outshined by the gods and the heroes, the *true* heroes. And so, DC has preserved an explicable monopoly in the cultural superhero imaginary that begin to emerge in peripheral countries.

Having made these observations, I shall admit that the post 2000s Hollywood superhero trend was not only a long awaited experience for comic book fans, but a much needed universal reinterpretation of a bunch of characters and origin stories that, in peripheral spaces have 1) either failed to be understood due to the rather hermetic insertions of cultural and political references that not every public had access to, in Marvel's case, 2) either maintained a cliché image of the superhero that was seen as a cultural item, symbol or icon, rather than a more realistic hypostasis of an otherness. The highly praised MCU has made quite an impression on a very large scale[16]. Marvel studios have not only translated in a very successful cinematic logic the Avengers related story arcs and characters, but brilliantly managed to address real issues of the contemporary world systems. From the *Iron-Man* trilogy (Jon Favreau), debuted in 2008, the highly politicized *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018), to the most recent and very ambitious project *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo Brothers, 2019), Marvel has known a great evolution in matters of political perspectives. Unlike DCEU, that had a rough start because of its underrated darker take, MCU has chosen a more audience friendly language, while still constantly loading their plots with political statements: they are funny, sarcastic, and fashionably dealing with apocalyptic scenarios, but they also engage the most urgent problems that the humanity faces: racial discrimination, the ethics of power, war and weapons, the troubled international politics, the limits of science and the human body, the cyber threats etc. Their characters are not the caped heroes or agents of law and order, they are, individually, problematic, unfitting, outcasts, rebels, they have differences and frustrations and, more importantly, they are exposed making mistakes: Tony's hubris creates Ultron and puts everyone in great danger, Scarlet Witch's inability to control her powers kills hundreds of people, Bruce Banner's unforeseeable reactions once turned into the Hulk condemns him to a life of constant fear and isolation, Thor's good nature makes him trust his evil brother with great risks and Cap's old fashioned opinions on political matters may turn his good intentions into dangerous choices. Creating the 'Sokovia accords'[17]

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[16] For a more detailed discussion on the matter, Liam Burke's *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2015) is to be seen.

[17] The *Sokovia Accords* are a set of legal documents designed to regulate the activities of enhanced individuals, specifically those who work for either government agencies such as S.H.I.E.L.D. or for private organizations such as the Avengers: "The Sokovia Accords. Approved by 117 countries, it states that the Avengers shall no longer be a private organization. Instead, they'll operate under the supervision of a United Nations panel, only when and if that panel

storyline and screening the *Civil War* story arcs was not only a very and inspired choice for how the Avenger's team tensions were to be resolved after the first two phases of the MCU[18], but another symptomatic choice that was meant to respond to the ethics of power. Mostly scared by alien, strange and magic powers like Thor's, Hulk's or Scarlet Witch's, the governments chose to control and regulate the uncontrollable. Unlike the relations of DC's Superman with the American government, or Diana Prince's role as an international diplomacy agent, exposed in a rather glossy and patriotic way, in Marvel's case, American and international government have had a history of mistrust in what concerns the aliens, mutants and inhumans. From the persecuting of the Charles Xavier's house of mutants portrayed massively in the *X-Men* and *Wolverine* related comic book issues, animated series and Sony's 2000s *X-Men* franchise (Lauren Shuler Donner), the J. J. Jameson's reiterations blaming the Spider-Man for the disastrous situations that the city encounters, to the MCU's aforementioned Sokovia Accords story arc, Marvel has developed a real challenging dialogue about how the humanity and the human political power reacts when facing even the friendliest alien power. Further, Marvel has created on their long run rather controversial characters, like Venom, Deadpool, Wolverine, The Punisher, Blade, Morbius, or Ghost Rider, that 'failed' as villains, and 'failed' as canonical superheroes too. Funny enough, these 'interstitial' characters have not only gained popularity amid superhero comic book fans, but were very early imported on the big screen and had an overwhelming response from the audience. Nicholas Cage's *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson) from 2007 was a huge public success, *The Punisher* (Jonathan Hensleigh, 2004) wasn't far behind, and the *Wolverine* franchise, culminating with *Logan* (2017), has had a very positive reaction worldwide. Later, *Deadpool* (Tim Miller, 2016), *Deadpool 2* (David Leitch, 2018) *Venom* (Ruben Fleischer, 2018) were huge box-office successes, and a Morbius related movie is to be released in the following year. The fact that Marvel's intensively politicized universe has come to be known by the masses in terms of cinematography and TV shows (we find the mentioning of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (2013-2019), the ABC's TV show, quite necessary here) has had a frequently ignored advantage: the updating of this otherness to the contemporary "structures of feelings"[19], to borrow a term from Van Den Akker's recent volume on

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deems it necessary", from the 7th scene of *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), Thaddeus Thunderbolt Ross to the Avengers.

[18] The MCU was divided by Phases, the developing franchise currently being in what they called The Third Phase, that has debuted with *Captain America: Civil War* in 2019. The First Phase began with the first *Iron Man* movie in 2008 and lasted until the 2012's *The Avengers*. In 2013, the *Iron Man 3* marked the begging of Phase Two, that ended with *Ant-Man* in 2015.

[19] See the Introduction of Robin Van Den Akker in Robin Van Den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

Metamodernism. Marvel's immensely important reservoir of imagining and translating the superhuman alterity has transcended its national barriers, both culturally and 'physically', mostly in the Hollywood, blockbuster logic. Film studios have sold maybe more than they even imagined or wanted in the first place: a universal grammar for a better or at least an alternative way to understand the concept of superhuman. It is quite a fundamental contribution – to complete with images and words and characters an imaginary reservoir that have always seek to exhibit realms beyond our time and place, beyond earth and the human history. Comic books offered a new artistic vocabulary to one of the main preoccupations of the human mind – interrogating the unintelligible, but cinematic and live actions adaptations have updated this vocabulary and turned it into a universal language. It is, in a way, the same vulgarization act that priests or doctors do when they explain mystical or scientific phenomena to an untutored man, in order to help him understand what he can't by his own. Putting aside the artistic value of the superhero still emerging and growing cinematic trend, its essential win is this. Having lost some battles (failures, bad adaptations), they have already won this war.

From Saviours to Refugees: Latest DC Comics TV Adaptations as *Metamodernist* Translations of the *Otherness*

In *Gotham*'s (Fox, 2014-2019) fourth season, episode nine (from 3':36'' to 3':48''), Harvey Bullock and Jim Gordon have a conversation at the GCPD station, in the aftermath of the devastating actions of the season's one of the main villains Pyg. Blaming Gordon for not killing the Penguin (who is considered responsible for all the chaos) when he had the chance, Harvey ends by telling Jim: "You still don't understand how this city works, Jim. You want to be a hero, and Gotham doesn't need heroes. It needs people who will do what's necessary". Jim's response is symptomatic for his entire career as a cop in Gotham City. He says: "You're wrong. You show 'em the way, and the people will follow" – a line that synthesize Gordon's boundless faith in a – quite literally – mad city. The Batman related TV show *Gotham* could therefore be read as a *metamodernist* one, if we were to use Van Den Akker's term, mainly because it contains the contemporary *structure of feeeling* that is defined in Akker's volume as a combination and cooperation of both scepticism and naïveté as a way to percieve the existence[20]. In Kai Hanno Schwind's and Gry C. Rustad's "The Joke That Wasn't Funny Anymore: Reflections on the Metamodern Sitcom" study for instance, the definition of the metamodernist attitude is: "'this is all going to hell, but at least we tried' (...) there are no really good people, just flawed ones who do their best.[21]" Jim Gordon's attitude towards Gotham is nothing

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[20] Akker, *Metamodernism*, 7.
[21] Ibid.*,* 238.

but this position in a nutshell. He knows the city can't be saved, he has been told so countless times, but he still tries unceasingly. He is no flawless either, he's quite the definition of a flawed person who does his best. Fox's choice to build a pre-Batman universe, making the city of Gotham and officer Jim Gordon the main characters, was not only refreshingly inspired after all the canonical translations of the Batman, but an up to date choice of adaptation. Bringing to the table a dark tale of how troubled people become their villainous personas is more than a villain origin story, is a network of grey areas that have their leftovers, their own voice, that always leave something for further discussions. Mapping Gotham city by the resorts and moments that makes one a villain and other a hero is nonetheless a much needed construction which can function as a backdoor to knowing the other, and those findings articulate around the realization that there are no true heroes in Gotham, only vulnerable and damaged people who chose, even by turn, the good or the dark side. The dark humour and general tonality of *Gotham* is not a disengaged or a detached one. On the contrary, it works as a language that can 1) translate and verbalize the chaos, 2) help the good parties deal with it, but also 3) expose the mechanism of transgression: when it comes to good people gone bad, like Barbara Kein (Gotham siren), Ivy Pepper (Poison Ivy) or Edward Nygma (The Riddler), those are the discursive constructions that can expose the resorts of their madness. Thus, the dark humour of the show may be perceived as a counterbalance of the cold, postmodernist irony[22], giving the entire storytelling a rather novel breath, one that the audience can finally synchronize and adjust to their personal attitude towards chaos, corruption, and the slips out of sanity.

    Gotham is, by any means, a very updated translation of the Batman related universe and I think it's safe to say that Fox's show is not just a brilliant approach of the comic book characters, but also one of the best fiction and crime TV shows that aired post 2010, proving once again the fact that the comic book related cinematic and media translations are a constantly growing genre that can stand as its own. This kind of TV shows are undoubtedly a delight filled of Easter eggs and comic book culture references for every geek or Batman fan, but the fact that they have come, in the last decade, to emerge as a media object that is no longer in a necessary kind of coordination with the comic book is the very proof that the superhero/villain figures as American comics created them are now universal cultural products that have transgressed their national boundaries.

    In an alternate media universe, the CW TV network has created a successful series of DC characters related shows amid youngsters, geeks and comic book fans. The *multiverse*, as they put it, debuted in October 10, back in 2012 with the first episode of *Arrow* (2012-2020). Telling the origin story and later arcs of the Green Arrow, a rather non-canonical DC superhero character, the show has rapidly become

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[22] Ibid., 87-102.

an international phenomenon, even though it lacked the aesthetic value of *Gotham*. Along with the later shows that have been directly build in (*The Flash*, *Legends of Tomorrow*) or later enclosed (*Supergirl*) in the same universe, the CW's DC superhero multiverse has had a rather slow start in matters of innovative translations of the alien otherness. Let's take *Supergirl* (2015-ongoing) for instance. The first season of the show (2015-2016) presents a solar and kind Kara Danvers struggling to hide her alien powers and lead a normal life in Central City. The entire plot is built as her journey towards being the hero her cousin (Superman) is. Supergirl is, at least in the first two, maybe even three, seasons of the show, a clean, iconic superhero, seen by a few as a feminist one, that fights really big alien or metahuman threats and saves the day. The fourth season on the other way brings to the table a whole new version of Supergirl's main villain: the haters. The shift that this particular season's writers are proposing is nonetheless a symptomatic choice of translating the alien otherness: out of a sudden, the alien that used to be a saviour is now a *refugee*. The main antagonist is an alien-hate group named *Children of Liberty*, led by Ben Lockwood (Agent Liberty), a history professor whose life has been strongly affected by the aliens that have sought asylum on earth after their planets were destroyed or conquered by enemy powers. Both parties – the human citizen and the alien – have gained in translation more than an alternative visual of the otherness, a *metamodernist*, updated and anchored in the political and social realities approach of the individual. The alien is no longer a weapon. The refugees from this season's show are hiding behind a so-called 'image inducer' that can change their alien features and make them look human. The persecution of the alien refugee coagulates out of fear of the superhuman power, on the one hand, fear of the destruction it can cause, but on the other hand – and this is the main focus of the season – fear of how the superhuman power can be an undefeatable competitor on the work market. The steel *versus* the Nth Metal metaphor works as leitmotif of the season, encapsulating the battle between two forces and showing how the later, the alien, better and stronger product is replacing the other by surpassing its limitations. Ben Lockwood's series of activist anti-alien demarches are triggered by the shutting down of his father's steel factory due to the unbeatable competition represented by the alien material. The main focus of Lockwood's story is on the impact that the overflow of alien refugees and the government call of tolerance and attempts to embrace the refugees and make them part of the community has upon the human society as we know it, the economy, industry, politics, culture, means of making a living and the very safety of the human life. Lockwood is almost caricatured in its ways of transgressing from the tolerant guy, who constantly disagrees with his more traditional father on the matter of aliens and stresses himself to teach his son a more open-minded way of seeing the otherness, to the radical activist that violently turns into a punisher, a leader of scared groups and communities with the single goal of banishing the alien from America. *Supergirl* has its own faults regarding

the incondite way the show tells its stories, tending to oscillate between dark and light areas, rather than between the shades of grey like *Gotham* does, but it's still a contemporary anchored oscillation, a breach in a formerly suffocated discourse by cliché images of power, humanity and the superhuman figure, a transgression from what was clot to a what is fluid.

Conclusions

The present paper aimed to investigate the circulation of some plots and characters from Marvel and DC Comics to Hollywood blockbusters, as well as the latest TV productions dedicated to the genre. The global or the planetary turn has inflicted a lot of changes on how we perceive the *other*. I attempted to show how the new cinematic wave that relies on famous comic book story arcs and superheroes can prove this very statement. The comic book superhero has evolved, by means of new media adaptations, from patriotic icons to ambivalent figures that can render visible the struggles of the marginal, as well as the polyphonic responses of the so-called privileged ones. The latest humanities approaches and theories are, at the very moment, attempting to map, examine, and label all these new phenomena that emerged in the 21th century, in order to generate the right methodological instruments, capable of analysing the latest artistic objects and how they respond to the contemporary structures of feelings. The superhero contemporary reiteration responds to political urges like marginalization, wars, refugees, corruption in the political and violence in the public domain, online and offline. The gradual deconstruction of the solar figures like Superman, for instance, in the DCEU, translates into an effort of updating our heroes to the new cultural, political, and artistic challenges. The mixing of traditional plots as well as character features and powers with current global problems, the darker tone of the images, the settings, scenery, and images sell like a universal grammar. The process of de-nationalization of the comic book superhero has begun in the final decades of the 20th century, but only in the past decade has it reached its truly potential as a planetary discourse, as a cinematic idiom that can finally speak to audiences all around the globe.