

THE FRANCHISE DEVOURING ITSELF: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE'S REFLEXIVE TURN

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that a “reflexive turn,” which is particularly visible in some of the MCU’s new streaming series, has taken place with the beginning of the franchise’s Phase Four, the first phase of the new Multiverse Saga. Taking the first seasons of *She-Hulk*, *What If...?*, *WandaVision* and *Loki* as illustrations, my analytic focus falls on the reflexive devices and the narrative structures of these four series, which together seem to have established the grounds for a recurring metafictional allegory whereby the diegetic multiverse is made analogous to the franchise’s own “multiverse” of complexly interrelated narratives. Thus seen, my interpretation of each of the series pays special attention to how reflexivity has allowed the MCU to speak about itself in this transitional moment, in a way that ambivalently reflects not only about the franchise’s continuing dominance within the contemporary culture industry, but also about fears and concerns that the franchise’s power may not last very long if it loses its narrative coherence along the way. It is in this sense that the Marvel Cinematic Universe seems to have started devouring itself, turning into a kind of “narcissistic” and “autophagic” narrative precisely at the time when it is beginning to generate a sense of exhaustion and saturation among its fans and followers. Although the reflexive elements of these four series acknowledge this sentiment in ways that approximate self-parody and self-critique, in the end they all arrive at the cynical and/or conformist conclusion that, for better or for worse, there is no alternative to the franchise’s planned continuation.

Keywords: Marvel Cinematic Universe, reflexivity, metafictional allegory, TV series, superhero, superheroine, streaming platform.

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Like the mythical Ouroboros—which now lends its name to a character in the new season of the *Loki* series—, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is beginning to look like an all-encompassing, supradimensional being that cannot help but to eat itself moving forward. The size and significance of this mega-franchise need not be argued: the record-breaking box-office earnings of its individual instalments and the attempted development of similar franchise projects by other producers like DC speak for themselves. What perhaps makes it more interesting is that, given such commercial and popular success, the MCU has offered a paradigm whereby Hollywood has continued to reassert its global

hegemony by “rebooting” itself in a manner that, somewhat ironically, everything is turned into an interconnected series of reboots, remakes and rewrites (see Archer 2019). Indeed, the franchise stands as an ever more complex transmedia narrative which, at this point, increasingly relies on a web of intertextual references and reflexive devices so as to maintain a semblance of continuity and cohesion across its different productions (see Taylor for an approach to the MCU’s “intertextual aesthetic”). Thus, partly because of its design, I here propose that the MCU has recently taken a “reflexive turn,” becoming a somewhat “narcissistic narrative,” to borrow Linda Hutcheon’s (1980) phrase; that is, it has become a narrative which is increasingly preoccupied with itself and its power, its tropes and its structures, its past and future instalments, in an increasingly harder—and perhaps futile—effort to knit a thread that can hold together the totality. On one level, the increasing narrative reflexivity of the MCU may be taken as a reified symptom of broader dynamics inherited from the century-old logics of a culture industry (see Adorno and Horkheimer 2016), of certain superhero comics series (see Klock 2002, 122–52, and Coogan 2006, 214–18), and of convergence culture (see Jenkins 2006). However, on another level, this same reflexivity—which often approximates a self-conscious self-critique—also opens a space for understanding today’s culture industry from within the giant snake’s entrails, exemplifying mass culture’s dialectical nature as both commodity and critique, reification and utopia (see Jameson 1979).

Thus seen, the MCU would not solely be interesting as the most popular and influential instance of superhero storytelling today, but also as an increasingly reflexive narrative that ambivalently reflects upon its own narrative structure and its powerful position as the hegemonic franchise of the early-twenty-first-century culture industry—sometimes more playfully, and sometimes more critically; sometimes more literally, and sometimes more allegorically. Probing into this phenomenon, this article specifically proposes that the reflexive turn taken by the MCU’s narratives has become most evident with the beginning of the franchise’s Phase Four—and specifically, even more evident in the new Disney+ series, as this is a format that offers more space for narrative complexity than feature films, to the extent of predisposing a certain degree of narrative self-consciousness (see Mittel 2015, 41). After the conclusion of the Infinity Saga, which encompassed the first three Phases from 2008 to 2019, the current Phase Four has inaugurated a new saga—the Multiverse Saga—that is scheduled to reach a Phase Six, to be concluded sometime before the end of the 2020s. In this way, the reflexive turn happens at a transitional moment in the MCU, a time in which production is not only expanding but also pivoting towards streaming series, which—relative to their role and number within the first saga—are now both more numerous and more central to the new Multiverse Saga.

This moment of expanding and intensifying production, however, also seems to be a moment of crisis, which certain MCU series seem to acknowledge indirectly, in the sense that it is not yet clear whether the Multiverse Saga will truly hold together the

fictional multiverse that it promises to deliver, or whether it will end up by splintering the earlier universe's apparent cohesion, therefore failing to maintain the popular and commercial success of the Infinity Saga. Indeed, recent headlines across different magazines and newspapers have foretold—perhaps prematurely—“the death of the MCU,” and even the academic journal *Science Fiction Film and Television* has launched a call for papers meditating upon the MCU's presumed demise (see Canavan 2023). In this regard, the MCU's reflexive turn is here seen as a response to—and a symptom of—this moment, in which the franchise seems forced to renegotiate its relationship with its viewers so as to prevent alienating them. In providing illustrations of this phenomenon, this article privileges two recent series—*WandaVision* (2021) and the first season of *Loki* (2021)—as the most allegorically sophisticated and ideologically ambivalent instances of the franchise's reflexive turn, even though there are others that exemplify the franchise's reflexivity in simpler ways, such as *What If...?* (2021) or *She-Hulk* (2022), to which I refer first as illustrations of two basic kinds of reflexivity. Overall, my main argument is that the MCU's intensified reflexivity seems to betray a certain sense of saturation with the franchise, a certain nostalgia for its finished first saga, and even an oppressive sense of entrapment within its still-unfolding structure. In other words, these series' different kinds of reflexivity are here taken as emblems of an ambivalent type of attachment toward the franchise during a moment when the coherence and sustainability of the whole seems to be at stake, although—at least for the time being—the MCU relentlessly slouches over our contemporary cultural landscape with the massive inertia of a capitalist hyperobject—to borrow Timothy Morton's (2013) term.

1. REFLEXIVITY IN THE MULTIVERSE: THE SELF-CONSCIOUS AND THE SELF-REFERENTIAL

Before delving into the series themselves, it is first necessary to disentangle a potential conceptual confusion about the “reflexive” turn to be studied here, as there is an alphabet soup of formal concepts which broadly seem synonymous but should be distinguished for a more rigorous use. Besides the “reflexive,” it is just as common to speak of “self-reflexive” narratives, “metafiction” or any other term that recombines either or both of the “self” and “meta” prefixes, but here I shall use a specific terminological framework that will be useful in distinguishing between degrees.¹ In this regard, following Pedro Javier Pardo's works (2011, 2015), I take *reflexivity* to be the umbrella term which conceptualizes any artwork that refers to its medium generally or to itself specifically, and then,

¹ Many of the pioneering studies in this area favoured the term “metafiction” (see Scholes 1979, Waughn 1984, or Imhof 1986), others used “self-conscious” (such as Alter), some later studies turned to using “reflexivity” (see Stam), and some more recent theorizations (such as Wolf) even speak of a “metareferential turn” in contemporary culture, which may be found to correlate, on a macro-scale, to the reflexive turn here examined.

accordingly, I shall distinguish between two kinds of reflexivity: *self-referentiality* and *self-consciousness*. From this framework, the former—self-referentiality—would name any narrative that refers to its medium, genre or platform generally speaking, whereas the later—self-consciousness—would refer to any narrative that refers to itself individually, bringing attention to its own fictional status. Evidently, self-referentiality is the most common of the two, as the first degree of reflexivity, and then self-consciousness would often be a kind of “self-referentiality squared” in which the reference to the medium is redoubled, turned into a reflection upon itself as an individual artwork (Pardo 2015, 51). This distinction by degrees seems essential insofar as not everything that is popularly called “meta”—not every reflexive narrative, that is—would automatically entail the estranging effect of the Brechtian theatre or of certain postmodern novels. Whereas self-referentiality need not disrupt the illusion whatsoever, self-consciousness—as expressed in devices such as the fourth wall break or the metalepsis—would entail an estranging effect, a temporary and/or relative distancing between the reader/viewer and the narrative, which momentarily flaunts the narrative’s fictional and mediated nature—or, in this specific case, flaunts its position within a certain transmedia franchise.

If we carry this distinction into the context of the MCU, self-consciousness and self-referentiality both seem rare, although there are two series that stand out. First, the only textbook example of overt self-consciousness would be one Phase Four series, *She-Hulk*. Here, the titular character and narrator systematically speaks to the camera and addresses the spectators to discuss the series itself, with generally comedic comments. Furthermore, by the season finale—entitled “Whose Show Is This?”—, She-Hulk herself impossibly jumps out of her slot in the streaming platform (Fig. 1), and finds her way into Marvel Studios to discuss and demand a change in her still ongoing story, in a paradigmatic example of what Gérard Genette (1980) defined as a “metalepsis” (236). This is a self-conscious device that may be traced as far back as to Miguel de Unamuno’s *Niebla* (see Pardo 2011, 155), a novel in which a character met the author, but in this case the tone and intent of the confrontation is radically different, more comic than tragic. Looking for one “Kevin” that seems to be in charge—a reference to the MCU’s own Kevin Feige—, She-Hulk gets to the building’s leading room—an empty room wallpapered with screens that are displaying MCU films—, and, suddenly, a surveillance-camera-like robot emerges from an overhead hatch (Fig. 2). A disembodied voice introduces itself as K.E.V.I.N.—which stands for “Knowledge Enhanced Visual Interconnectivity Nexus”—, and asks her:

Were you expecting a man?

SHE-HULK: Yeah, why would I expect a giant AI brain and not a man? Wait, so you’re the one making all the decisions here?

K.E.V.I.N.: I will answer your questions, but you must first transform back to Jennifer.

S-H: Why?

K: You are very expensive.

S-H: Oh, sure.

K: But wait until the camera is off you. The visual effects team has moved on to another project. ...

K: Thank you. And to answer your question... Yes, I make the decisions. I possess the most advanced entertainment algorithm in the world, and it produces near-perfect products.

S-H: Near perfect?

K: Some are better than others, but I leave that debate up to the Internet. (19'55"–20'43")

The scene then continues with She-Hulk's demand that she must have a better ending befitting a comedy like hers, rather than live through the unfolding tragedy, and K.E.V.I.N. reluctantly accepts. However, the robot gets more defensive and inflexible when She-Hulk changes the topic and begins to mock the MCU's apparent obsession with "daddy issues," alluding to the origin stories of male superheroes such as Iron Man, Captain America, *et al.*, as most of these rely on a conflict with a paternal figure—a timeless cliché repeated *ad nauseam* in the MCU and beyond. In this regard, She-Hulk may be seen as the paradigmatically self-conscious MCU superhero, as her defining conflict is neither with a parent nor with any (super)villainous character, but rather with the most clichéd (and, in this case, also most patriarchal) tropes of the genre and franchise to which she herself belongs.

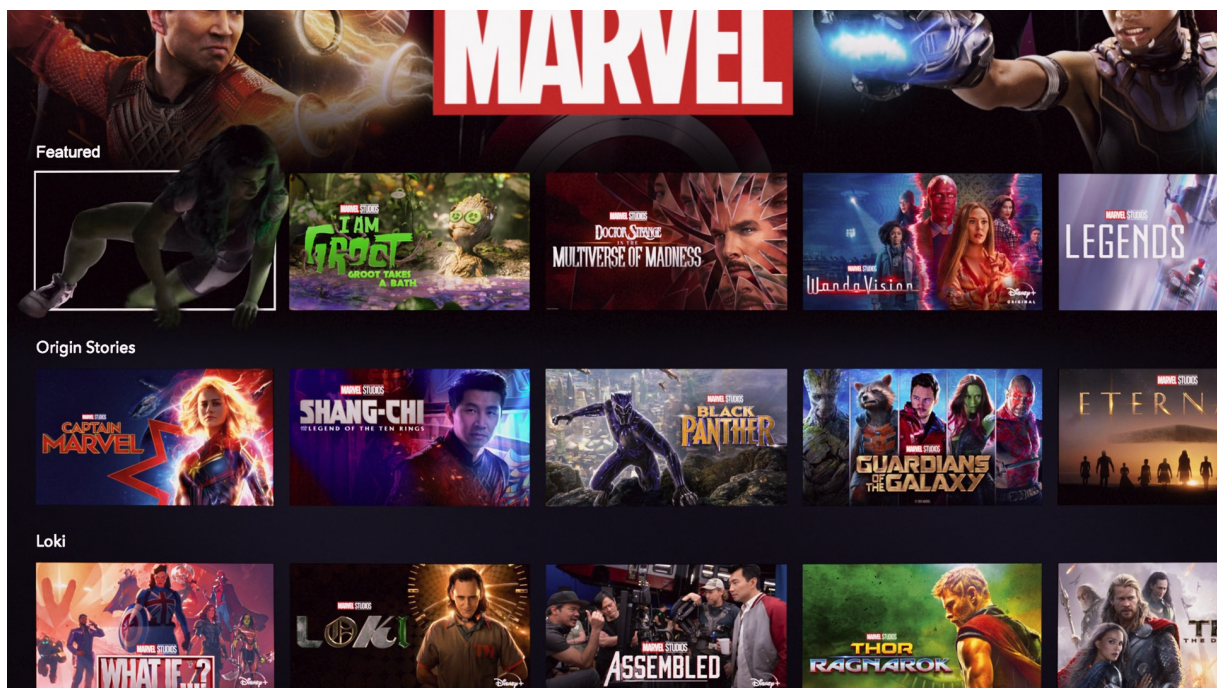


Fig. 1. Screen capture from Coiro, Kat, dir. 2022. *She-Hulk: Attorney-at-Law*. Season 1, episode 9, “Whose Show Is This?” Released October 13, 2022 on Disney+.



Fig. 2. Screen capture from *She-Hulk: Attorney-at-Law* © Disney, 2022.

In this climactic scene that I have taken as illustration, *She-Hulk* uses its self-consciousness to engage in self-deprecating humor, which partly explains why a rather recalcitrant sector of the fandom rejected the series, as though they were offended by its mildly self-critical commentary—or, perhaps, discontent with the fact that a supposedly second-rate superheroine is openly laughing at the MCU’s big men.² However, other than She-Hulk’s complaints about the low budget of her show, and some comments that—in a very generous interpretation—could be said to satirize the patriarchal tropes of superhero narratives, *She-Hulk*’s self-conscious comments are, in the end, part of a playful sitcom with no interest in any profound (self-)critique of the MCU—as this critical kind of reflexivity is to be found elsewhere. Still, *She-Hulk*’s science-fictional way of representing the authority of the MCU as K.E.V.I.N. is rather revealing, especially as it has echoes in other Phase Four series that pursue similar analogies with more depth. In this self-conscious characterization of the franchise, *She-Hulk* appears to imagine the MCU as a hidden structure of power; not entirely human but still a humanized, human-made (and thus perhaps fallible) machine; not easily graspable in its technical functioning yet on the whole operating by very common-sense (and perhaps banal) logics; and not very rational despite overestimating its rational (but perhaps too calculating) capabilities. With this,

² *She-Hulk* is an exceptional series within the MCU in the sense that it is a series created, directed and written mostly by women. This perhaps explains the underlying misogyny of frequent complaints that the series is “superficial,” “vain,” and “not funny,” with a common grievance being its supposedly “unfair” treatment of men (see *She-Hulk*’s IMDb reviews for a sample of suchlike opinions).

She-Hulk seems to be, in its own way, acknowledging a certain feeling of exhaustion with the franchise, a sentiment that is circumvented, rather than criticized, with self-conscious humor. Within *She-Hulk*, of course, this self-deprecating characterization is confined to a single scene, but we shall find that, in series like *WandaVision* and *Loki*, this ambivalently self-critical way of imagining the MCU grows in narrative importance and shifts to a tragic register, even approximating a dystopian (self-)denunciation in *Loki*.

Nevertheless, before turning to those cases, it is worth examining another Phase Four series in which reflexivity is also relatively playful and simple, though more illustrative of the self-referential than of the self-conscious: the anthology series *What If...?* As a kind of introduction to the possibilities of the multiverse, this series is composed of short, animated stories that follow the consequences of a certain divergence from the main MCU storyline. In this manner, the show is from the outset self-referential vis-à-vis speculative fiction, insofar as it asks the genre's paradigmatic "what if" (something happened differently) to certain parts of a story that is already premised on the MCU's larger "what if" (superheroes existed in contemporary Earth). The first episode, for instance, takes us into a world without a Captain America, and a Captain Carter instead (Fig. 3). For the faithful MCU spectators, this entails an implicit game of comparisons that occasionally slips through conversations, especially insofar as the characters often talk about the reversal in gender roles that their situation entails, even though they themselves are unaware—unlike the self-conscious *She-Hulk*—of their own fictionality. With this specular structure whereby each episode's narrative mirrors the franchise's, and with an omniscient narrator—a supradimensional deity called the Watcher (Fig. 4)—who explicitly reflects upon these stories *as stories*, *What If...?* is only self-conscious in an implicit way, especially because any potential self-consciousness is naturalized as a characteristic of this narrator's god-like position over the multiverse, which prevents his comments from having the fourth-wall breaking effect of *She-Hulk*'s. Indeed, the Watcher's routine is to conclude each episode by saying, as he does in the first, that "these are my stories. I observe all that transpires here, but I do not, cannot, will not interfere. For I am... the Watcher" (28'46"—29'06")—however, the fact that this becomes his signature goodbye prevents any estrangement that could be triggered by the analogy. Furthermore, even though, as in *She-Hulk*, the season finale also contains a metalepsis—another break of diegetic levels that is *potentially* estranging and self-conscious, insofar as the Watcher *descends* into the diegetic world—, in *What If...?* this happens for reasons that are also justified and naturalized by the Watcher's divine role within the fictional multiverse, leaving any self-conscious connotations implicit. Besides, The Watcher does not irrupt into the narrative to criticize it *à la* *She-Hulk*, but to summon all the main characters from each of the episode's universes, so that they unite against a threat against the multiverse—an alternate version of a known villain, Ultron, who had been defeated in the MCU's First Saga. Nevertheless, the fact that the self-consciousness of the Watcher's

character and role is re-contained within the narrative's own terms does not mean that we cannot interpret it as having self-conscious connotations, even if implicitly and allegorically.



Fig. 3. Screen capture from Andrews, Bryan, dir. 2021. *What If...?* Season 1, episode 1, “What If... Captain Carter Were the First Avenger?” Released August 11, 2021 on Disney+.



Fig. 4. Screen capture from *What If...?* © Disney, 2021.

On a surface level, *What If...?* would be, first and foremost, a clear-cut case of the MCU's use of the multiverse as a convenient vehicle whereby it can reboot its past stories. In this case, the assembly of a team of superheroes who are fated to confront an apocalyptic threat—which was already the plot of the Infinity Saga—is here restaged on the multiverse, with some minor tweaks that make it sufficiently faithful for the more nostalgic spectators, and sufficiently original and playful for the more saturated followers. Furthermore, and most importantly for this article's concern with reflexivity, the specular narrative structure of *What If...?* is one simple illustration of a recurring, reflexive analogy that is implicitly established between the parallel timelines of the multiverse, and the parallel storytelling of the MCU's different films and series—an analogy that is also present in a series like *Loki*. In this case, if we interpret the Watcher as an allegorical MCU showrunner—not literal like K.E.V.I.N., but readable as such by way of its powerful position above the multiverse—, *What If...?* seems to suggest several things about the MCU's current situation. First and foremost, the series may be taken to say that, if the franchise wants to redress a potential splintering of narrative cohesion, the new Multiverse Saga shall need something like the Watcher's intervention into the fictional multiverse—an authoritative intervention which, as is usually the case with superhero narratives in the neoliberal age, ultimately defends the *status quo* both literally and ideologically.³ For the Watcher, the multiverse must be defended to remain as it has always been, and the new superheroes must try to change as little as possible so as to avoid paradoxes in the fabric of space-time; for the MCU, the whole franchise must be able to reboot anew, but still change as little as possible so as to remain a coherent and recognizable narrative which is therefore marketable and controllable as a unified brand. Thus, as a supradimensional kind of neoliberal autocrat, the Watcher seems to be chanting a “there is no alternative” (to the universe's and the franchise's order), a very (anti)political statement that gains a semblance of divine ineffability because of the character's totalizing, cosmic scope. The extent to which *What If...?* can be said to suggest this, however, is no more than as a symptom, likely unintentional, although the recurrence of this analogy can make us suspect otherwise.

³ In a wide-ranging study of twenty-first-century American cinema's superheroes, Dan Hassler-Forest (2012) reached a conclusion that still seems relevant when thinking of the MCU's tropes and dynamics. As he argued, ambivalent exceptions notwithstanding, “the overwhelming majority of narratives and characters ... points toward a more disturbing worldview in which the nostalgic desire for an earlier form of modern capitalism is accompanied by patriarchal forms of authority. These figures display an attitude towards other cultures and ethnicities that is usually patronizing at best, and openly racist at worst. And although these franchises certainly provide the individual subject with a site where the contradictions of postmodernity can be negotiated metaphorically from within the safety of an unrealistic, allegorical context, it does so in a way that is entirely dictated by the text's status as a branded commercial commodity” (mobi file location 3454–3459).

Within the bigger picture of Phase Four, similar analogies have, in fact, appeared in other series, often with more depth of connotations, developed into complex allegories. In this first section, we have observed that *She-Hulk* and to an extent *What If...?* are—although with varying degrees of overtness—the series with the most unambiguously self-conscious devices, such as fourth-wall breaks, metalepses, and specular narrative structures, making them clear cases of a formally playful use of such devices. However, the exceptionally overt nature of their reflexivity does not preclude that other series can be interpreted to have similar connotations that may—in subtler ways—bring spectators and critics back into thinking upon the franchise itself in ways that go deeper than playfulness. In this regard, my basic proposition in the next sections is that much of the world-building of shows such as *WandaVision* or *Loki* is readable as what Pardo terms “metafictional allegories” (2011, 168): narratives where self-consciousness emerges from a web of analogies between roles and dynamics within the diegetic world, and roles and dynamics within the MCU franchise as such. Thus understood, these diegetic other-worlds still bring audiences back to reflecting upon the franchise and/or the narrative in question, although more indirectly, by way of speculative fiction’s more allegorical kind of estrangement (see Suvin and Miéville for estrangement-focused definitions of the genre). As opposed to both *She-Hulk* and *What If...?*, the two series that we now examine are characterized by a self-consciousness vis-à-vis the franchise that is *markedly more allegorical* but also *much more central* for the plot and themes, going beyond the narratively anecdotal and/or peripheral figurations of the MCU’s power that we found in K.E.V.I.N. or the Watcher. In crafting their respective diegetic worlds, Phase Four series like *WandaVision* and *Loki* seem to be indirectly imagining their franchise as a multiverse, weaving complex metafictional allegories in which the MCU is, more or less indirectly, speaking about itself.

2. THE TV-WITHIN-THE-TV IN *WANDA VISION*: A METAFICTIONAL ALLEGORY OF AFFECTS

Within the landscape of the MCU’s reflexive turn, *WandaVision* is perhaps the one that puts the heart into its reflexivity, deeply entangling narrative form and affect. First and foremost, this series is a clear showcase of specifically televisual self-referentiality: a TV series about TV, with a nested or specular structure that features a TV-show-within-the-TV-show. Indeed, *WandaVision* is not only a show about the life of the superhero marriage formed by Wanda and Vision, but also a show about a televisual broadcast that is produced by Wanda’s powers—hence the title’s pun. This self-referentiality, however, is not directly turned back upon the franchise in an overtly self-conscious way, as it is justified by the series’ own internal logics: it is Wanda’s powers, her feelings and her imagination which are responsible for the creation of a TV-within-the-TV. Grief-stricken by Vision’s murder at the hands of arch-villain Thanos—back in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), one of the last films of the first saga—, Wanda constructs her own televisual reality

in denial of his demise, trying to simulate their lost future together. Thus, Wanda reimagines and reanimates her beloved Vision, now alive and with her, and together they experience the suburban, marital “utopia” of the American sitcoms that used to fascinate and comfort her as a child.

Here, the fact that Wanda herself is positioned as the show-within-the-show’s show-runner, with other people as either her characters or her spectators, paves the way for a metafictional allegory where the MCU implicitly reflects upon itself in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Infinity Saga. Seen through this lens, Wanda’s grief can be interpreted as an echo of the MCU’s fans and followers’ own grief and nostalgia over the end of the first saga. Life without Vision now seems meaningless to her, and this feeling seems analogous with the potential sensation of meaninglessness that can emerge during the beginning of a new MCU saga in which the old referents are being discarded and/or replaced, the past seems forgotten, and the future appears, at the very least, confusing, if not also hopeless. Against these feelings, Wanda’s response here is to deny any changes and to enforce order—to use her own power to herd characters and spectators into a corral fenced by well-known narrative structures that give her a sense of safety in a moment of uncertainty and fear. Nonetheless, Wanda’s attempt at control is doomed to fail from the outset, and *WandaVision*’s whole story takes viewers through the widening gaps in her control, and ultimately towards the collapse of her bubble reality—a collapse that is full of self-conscious connotations, as an echo of the franchise’s own foretold death.

If we first look more closely at *WandaVision*’s show-within-the-show, most of it is a compendium of sitcom styles across the decades, with each succeeding episode imitating a different format in its style, changing everything from color and sound quality to set and costume designs (Fig. 5). In fact, as per the creators’ acknowledgment (see Baruh 2021), the first six episodes—out of a total of nine in the whole series—imitate and pay homage to the style of, respectively, *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961), *Bewitched* (1964), *The Brady Bunch* (1969), *Family Ties* (1982), *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000), and *Modern Family* (2009) (see Sánchez-Asenjo 2023 for a closer analysis of this dimension of the series). At first, however, before any shifts in format, the intradiegetic series seems indistinguishable from the series as such, mirroring and reinforcing the characters’ (and viewers’) initial entrapment within the bubble reality, since Wanda’s sitcom is not revealed to be an intradiegetic broadcast up until the closing scene of the first episode. Here, in a paradigmatic example of a visual *mise-en-abyme*—another typically reflexive device—, the image changes to a contemporary aspect ratio and color just as Wanda’s show’s end credits roll, and a digital zoom out reveals that this show is in fact being watched by someone else, who is taking notes in some high-tech facility, presumably as confounded as a first-time viewer of *WandaVision* who is still unaware of the series’ specular structure (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. Screen capture from Shakman, Matt, dir. 2021. *WandaVision* Season 1, episode 1, “Filmed Before a Live Studio Audience.” Released January 15, 2021 on Disney+.



Fig. 6. Screen capture from *WandaVision* © Disney, 2021.

Only after this first episode—and gradually—do viewers find out that a military research and surveillance team from S.W.O.R.D.—a fictitious U.S. counterterrorism agency—is monitoring Wanda and her sitcom because she has trapped the entire village of Westview

within an impassable magical forcefield created by her powers, which have been unexpectedly amplified by her intense grief. Furthermore, as the S.W.O.R.D. team eventually discovers, Wanda is exerting absolute control within Westview, modifying physical reality at will, and mind-controlling everyone to play their role within the sitcom-like suburban “utopia” that she has invoked for herself and Vision. In this way, at first, everything that the S.W.O.R.D. team can do is to tune in to Wanda’s show, as this is the only way of knowing what goes on inside, even if partially. More generally speaking, then, the whole situation presented by *WandaVision*’s first episodes is one where the painful reality of Vision’s death—and the First Saga’s end—has been repressed and replaced by a sophisticated “bubble reality” invoked by Wanda’s imagination, an imagination which to some extent resembles those of the most nostalgic and conservative fans in her attachments and impulses. Indeed, this is an imagination which tries to deny the death of a character and the end of a whole storyline—that of the First Saga—, while constructing a future based on an idealized dream of a non-existent past—be that the American dream of old sitcoms, Wanda’s dreamed life with Vision, or the viewers’ own dreams for the MCU. *WandaVision* therefore meditates upon how, just when reality (or fiction) seems to change the most, impulses to stop and even reverse change inevitably appear—nostalgic and conservative impulses which not only try to keep the old referents alive, but also seek to impose some structure—the structure of genre clichés and televisual formats, in this case—upon a life that otherwise feels lacking and pointless.

Although Wanda’s show-within-the-show initially takes the spotlight, the remainder of the series gradually opens its narrative perspective from the inside to the outside of Westview—from the intradiegetic show to the main diegetic world, that is—, in a focal shift that allows viewers to distance themselves from Wanda’s all-American sitcom “utopia.” Indeed, Wanda’s Westview is very soon revealed to be nothing but the ultimate dystopia: first, it is a painful mind-prison for all of its human hostages, who long to be freed from their roles in the sitcom but are helpless to even express this feeling. Furthermore, and more tragically for Wanda herself, her dream turns out to be unsustainable, doomed to implode as soon as Vision discovers that he is but Wanda’s imagined version of himself—and that his true self is irremediably dead. Thus, as episodes advance, the initial loop of tightly codified episodes-within-the-episodes breaks apart, not only because Wanda begins to lose her sense of control as she is questioned by Vision—i.e., by her own creation—, but also because other people within Westview begin to be able resist Wanda’s mind control, and the S.W.O.R.D. team outside begins to discover ways of breaking into the village. In this down-spiral toward the collapse of the bubble reality—which parallels the deterioration of Wanda and Vision’s relationship—, the two titular characters’ most self-conscious moment coincides with the time when the series mimics the style of *Modern Family*, the last sitcom to be imitated by Wanda’s Westview broadcast in all kinds of details, even the opening credits’ font (Fig. 7). In the manner of

mockumentary-styled sitcoms like *The Office*—another potential reference—, *Modern Family* is known for featuring confessional asides to the camera by the characters and these asides, in Wanda and Vision’s case, become overtly anti-illusionist, especially because it is here when Vision fully awakens to the nature of the whole simulation—in an episode that is obnoxiously entitled “Breaking the Fourth Wall.” With the illusion broken, in the last episodes of *WandaVision*, the broadcast ends, but the magical prison remains. Therefore, all that remains is the much less reflexive story of Wanda’s struggle to retain control as she is besieged by enemies within and without her bubble reality, until, ultimately, she is part forced and part convinced to relinquish control, just as she finally comes to terms with Vision’s passing. With Westview’s liberation and Wanda’s escape, the series ends, having provided an interestingly ambivalent backstory for Wanda’s subsequent turn from superhero to supervillain.⁴



Fig. 7. Screen capture from Shakman, Matt, dir. 2021. *WandaVision*. Season 1, episode 7, “Breaking the Fourth Wall.” Released February 19, 2021 on Disney+.

What does this story say if we conclude by re-reading it as a metafictional allegory? If we now consider its entire narrative trajectory, *WandaVision* does not stop at simply echoing fans and followers’ grief over the First Saga’s end, but it also reflects upon alternative responses to such a transition, ultimately suggesting which is the better response. In this

⁴ Wanda would become the main villain of a later MCU film, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). Here, however, in comparison to *WandaVision*, the character’s nuances are radically simplified and one might say squandered, since her grief and her longing to be a mother is rather problematically — if not misogynistically— treated as cause of a multiverse-wrecking “madness.”

regard, Wanda's authoritarian reaction is presented as undesirable and tragically self-defeating, whereas S.W.O.R.D.'s damage control operation ultimately emerges as the lesser evil, the best way of preserving the *status quo* moving forward. Still, ambivalences abound in this *a priori* clear-cut equation. For starters, Wanda's attachment to what is irremediably gone makes her profoundly understandable in the eyes of fans and followers with a strong attachment to the finished Infinity Saga, who may therefore empathize with her desire for returning to an idealized past, and rewriting it to fit her desires, almost in the manner of a fanfiction. At the same time, the fact that Wanda is positioned as certain fans' representative and hero—the showrunner to enforce their desires—is what paves the way for a more effective chastisement, which first recognizes an “inconvenient” sentiment but then dictates a more “proper” solution. Ultimately, the impersonal apparatus of S.W.O.R.D.—a military institution that is made even more impersonal by the fact that sympathetic, relatable characters within it are shown as the exception—takes control of the situation and saves the day, in what could be readable as a somewhat cynical or simply conformist acceptance of established power. Allegorically, then, it could seem that *WandaVision* conveys a fear of losing control—of Marvel Studios losing control of its product over to the impulses and desires of its more dedicated fans and followers, or losing control over to the more autonomous, directorial showrunner that is evoked by Wanda. If the franchise were to surrender itself to these, it would collapse in on itself, as this story suggests, so it follows that the MCU is better off by entrusting itself to the anonymous, technocratic control of a corporation's calculations—whether those are S.W.O.R.D.'s or, allegorically, Marvel Studios'. Thus, in an implicit interpellation to the MCU fans, *WandaVision* could even seem to surreptitiously say something like “yes, we know that you feel like you could do better if you—or someone *who cares*, like Wanda—were in control, and that you fear that we're about to destroy the object of your love, but in the end you must trust us: the devil you know...” And indeed, Wanda's story again brings home the neoliberal conclusion: that there is no alternative... to corporate-controlled franchise culture. Any attempt to redo culture around anything other than the continuation of business as usual shall fail... and if you put your heart and your ideals into it, like Wanda does, it shall be nothing but helpless self-sabotage.

3. THE MCU AS DYSTOPIA IN *LOKI*: A METAFICTIONAL ALLEGORY OF POWER

If *WandaVision* takes Wanda as a scapegoat of any impulses to stop or reverse the franchise's relentless advance, and then has an impersonal institution emerging as the safer solution; *Loki* interestingly reverses the terms, framing a bureaucracy as the dystopia. In another version of the same metafictional allegory, *Loki* takes its viewers deep inside a supradimensional apparatus of power which oversees the whole multiverse—an institution whose mission is to prevent reality from ever splintering into multiple bubble realities, or “branching timelines,” as they are called. This is the Time Variance Authority, or

TVA, a secret institution with headquarters in a realm outside of space-time itself, and above the standard laws of physics, which absolutely dwarfs the power of any individual superhero. In the very beginning of the series, the titular character—the *a priori* almighty Loki—is detained with surprising ease by the TVA’s police, and taken to their HQ to be trialed for disrupting the so-called “sacred timeline”—i.e., for taking a decision that diverged with what the character of Loki already did in the MCU’s First Saga. As Loki is informed after a rigged mock-trial, the TVA’s own method for securing multiversal order is by “pruning” any divergent branches—a cute gardening euphemism for erasing any variant individuals from the face of the universe, exiling them from existence with a ridiculously normalized but still brutal procedure (Fig. 8). However, on condition of collaborating with the TVA, Loki cannily saves himself from pruning, and with him, viewers shall get to know the inside of the TVA in its day-to-day operations. Throughout the majority of the series, then, viewers shall find themselves trapped inside a parodically Kafkaesque and retro-futuristic version of a repressive bureaucracy which—despite its quasi-divine position—is still ridiculed for its alienating impersonality, its procedural pomposity, and its absurd rigidity, something that is hilariously captured by an admissions security that at times caricaturizes an airport’s. Indeed, the TVA—which is not satirized and exposed in the manner of a classic dystopia, but rather *mocked* benignly and playfully—has all the worst features of any other bureaucratic institution, and Loki shall discover all of this alongside his assigned supervisor, a funnily easy-mannered, workaholic bureaucrat called Mobius who has apparently known no life other than the TVA.



Fig. 8. Screen capture from Herron, Kate, dir. 2021. *Loki*. Season 1, episode 1, “Glorious Purpose.” Released June 9, 2021 on Disney+.

Loki's metafictional allegory, then, is less about a showrunner's and/or a fan's relationship to the franchise, and much more about the corporation's supposedly godlike power over its cinematic universe, which seems logical given that this series is not set in a bubble world within the main diegesis—like *WandaVision* was—, but rather in a world *above* the main diegesis, establishing an inversely symmetrical allegory that has, accordingly, other implications. If we assume that Marvel Studios is being allegorically reimaged as the TVA by way of their position as managers of a multiverse, it would seem that the MCU is parodying itself as a ridiculously dystopian apparatus of power: a purely repressive institution that—rather than creating or even recreating anything—devotes itself to the destruction of “dangerous” alternatives to its pre-established plans. The tone with which Miss Minutes—the TVA's AI mascot—explains this mission to newcomers like Loki is perhaps what best condenses the TVA's characterization—and indirectly, the MCU's self-characterization—as a force that is just as sublime as it is ridiculous:

Welcome to the Time Variance Authority. I'm Miss Minutes, and it's my job to catch you up before you stand trial for your crimes. ...

Long ago, there was a vast Multiversal war. Countless unique timelines battled each other for supremacy, nearly resulting in the total destruction of... well, everything. But then, the all-knowing Timekeepers emerged, bringing peace by re-organizing the Multiverse into a single timeline, the Sacred Timeline. Now, the Timekeepers protect and preserve the proper flow of time for everyone and everything. But sometimes, people like you veer off the path the Timekeepers created. We call those variants. Maybe you started an uprising, or were just late for work; whatever it was, stepping off your path created a Nexus event, which, left unchecked, could branch off into madness, leading to another Multiversal war! But don't worry, to make sure that doesn't happen, the Timekeepers created the TVA and all its incredible workers! The TVA has stepped in to fix your mistake, and set time back on its predetermined path. Now that your actions have left you without a place on the timeline, you must stand trial for your offenses. So sit tight and we'll get you in front of a judge in no time! ...

TVA - For all time, always! (09'23”–11'12”)

For greater narrative irony, Miss Minutes' explanations are illustrated by a cartoon that the proud Loki dismisses as “bunkum”: in it, the Timekeepers are featured as three alien-looking deities who heroically hold the universe's thread (Fig. 9), and the emergence of a chaotic multiverse is posed as the ultimate, apocalyptic danger that would set off all alarms (Fig. 10). Thus, again we find an echo of the fear that the multiverse's could pose a threat for the franchise's coherence and continuation, though in a new allegorical shape. Here, in a manner that indirectly speaks of the franchise's—and by extension, the culture industry's—drive to monopolize and absorb all of fiction and art's divergent possibilities into a single, commodified brand, the TVA seems to caricature much of what Marvel Studios already does to secure control of its multiverse—i.e., of its transmedia franchise. Indeed, like the TVA, Marvel Studios also employs a whole army of workers who together enforce the continuation of a timeline's planned development, in what is perhaps as much a collective creative process as it is a process of top-down supervision

of production—not to mention the company’s strategies to prune both online pirates (the real-life variants) and the competition’s franchises (the real-life branching timelines). The TVA’s timekeepers, then, would be but a cartoonish reflection of the company’s gate-keeping role in contemporary Hollywood—and even an echo of Marvel Studios’s three main producers at the time: Kevin Feige, Louis D’Esposito and Victoria Alonso.



Fig. 9. Screen capture from Herron, Kate, dir. 2021. *Loki*. Season 1, episode 1, “Glorious Purpose.” Released June 9, 2021 on Disney+.

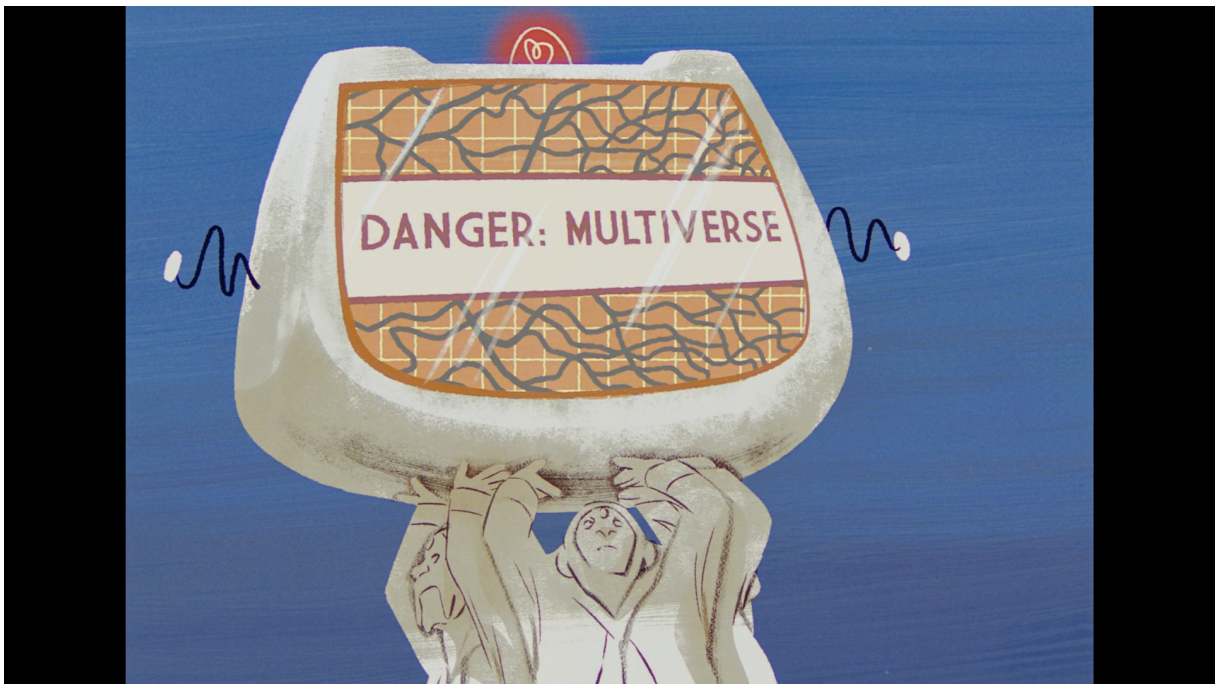


Fig. 10. Screen capture from *Loki* © Disney, 2021.

The series' story is, in the first season, driven forward by Loki and Mobius's search for an especially troublesome variant of Loki himself called Sylvie—up until they find her, and Loki escapes from the TVA with her, forming an *a priori* reluctant partnership that evolves into an oddly pseudo-narcissistic “situationship.” After spending her whole life as a variant on the run, Sylvie's purpose is to destroy the TVA, and Loki is easily recruited for this. However, when they eventually get to the Timekeepers themselves, it turns out that these supposed deities were insentient automatons: fronts for an unknown someone else who controls the TVA from the shadows. This is, of course, an almost clichéd plot-twist in the fictions of financialized capitalism, where control is almost always abstracted from the apparent figureheads—and something that seems to apply to Marvel too, considering the doubtful reasons behind the ousting of former executive-producer Victoria Alonso.⁵ In *Loki*, the revelation that the timekeepers are a façade of the real power comes as a shock to some TVA insiders as well, but authorities decide to keep it as a convenient illusion—and prune those unwilling to collaborate, including Loki and Sylvie. Unexpectedly, however, their pruning does not entail death, but rather exile to a realm “at the end of time.” And it is here that, quite conveniently, Sylvie and Loki finally find the TVA's puppet master in hiding.

This mysterious man—as he calmly explains to his visitors—first created the TVA so as to avoid an all-out war with variants of himself that would be—not unlike him—driven to controlling the multiverse. For this reason, this man goes by the pretentious epithet of “He Who Remains”—at the end of time, after the war, and above everything. Making a rather cynical case for his system—again, better the devil you know than the variants you do not—and offering Loki and Sylvie to take on his role, He Who Remains makes Loki doubt, but—after some struggle between the co-protagonists—Sylvie kills him trying to end the TVA, as she planned. At this point in the season finale, however, everything falls apart in such a way that any sense of victory for Sylvie is radically undermined. Indeed, from a window behind He Who Remains's dead body, the camera slowly takes us towards an omniscient view of the sacred timeline, now splintering at an uncontrollable speed into a growing number of branches (Fig. 11). Furthermore, back in the TVA, Loki finds himself surrounded by people who cannot remember him and—worse—confronted by a giant statue of He Who Remains, in what is presumably the sign of a takeover by an evil version of the man (Fig. 12). With such an image closing the season, it seems that another attempt to break the *status quo* has again backfired and worsened everything—again bringing home the nefarious neoliberal conclusion. Here, the MCU might have—in a very indirect and allegorical manner—acknowledged that it behaves like a dystopia which

⁵ Although it remains unclear why she was fired, there is speculation that it had to do with either or both her involvement in the production of *Argentina 1985*, or with certain political comments that involved Disney (see Kit 2023).

entraps even those who are apparently powerful, but ultimately it returns to the idea that there is no alternative. And is there, indeed, any alternative to the MCU's overwhelming dominance, in today's Hollywood? *Loki*, at least, appears to say that the only alternative is the multiverse's implosion.



Fig. 11. Screen capture from Herron, Kate, dir. 2021. *Loki*. Season 1, episode 6, "For All Time. Always." Released July 14, 2021 on Disney+.



Fig. 12. Screen capture from *Loki* © Disney, 2021.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Demonstrating the existence of a reflexive turn in the MCU's Phase Four, and illustrating the different manifestations of this phenomenon across four streaming series, this article has provided the bases for a critical analysis of this aspect of the MCU's production. In so doing, I have focused on how narrative reflexivity relates back to the present state of franchise, ambivalently reflecting both upon the MCU's continuing power and upon certain concerns in this moment of apparent crisis and exhaustion. *She-Hulk* and *What If...?*, first, were taken as two illustrative cases of the formal possibilities and modes of reflexivity, considering that they are the most overt and formally playful in this regard. The ideological depth of their reflexivity, however, remained superficial for such playfulness, making them cases in which, simply put, the MCU mocks itself rather benignly and anecdotally. *WandaVision* and *Loki*, on the other hand, were privileged as two examples in which reflexivity is more indirect—present in the form of metafictional allegories—but also more profound and wide-ranging in ideological implications, making them ambivalently (self-)critical towards aspects of the franchise and its management. In this regard, *WandaVision* seemed to focus on fans and followers' nostalgia over the end of the Infinity Saga, which seemed to be refracted through Wanda's grief, whereas *Loki* shifted the scope upwards, towards the MCU's power as figured through the TVA, which allegorically paints Marvel Studios as a repressive apparatus of power that very ineffectively and even ridiculously tries to rule over an entire multiverse. In various ways, then, these Phase Four series seem to betray a concern with—and perhaps also a cynicism toward—the MCU's apparent crisis and potential collapse, allegorically reimagining certain of the franchise's dynamics and inertias as if it too behaved in the way of a splintering, troubled multiverse.

For reasons of length and scope, this approach might deserve a deeper development beyond this article, in order to encompass the franchise's reflexive narratives beyond Phase Four, both in its past and—perhaps especially—in its future instalments, where the MCU might continue to use its narratives as a means to indirectly process and project its own problems. Furthermore, future studies of the franchise might also wish to consider how the reflexivity of the MCU's productions ties back to the well-established presence of reflexivity in superhero comics, something that Lucía Bausela Bucciante (2023) has recently done from the same theoretical framework (see also the earlier observations of Klock 2002, 122–52, and Coogan 2006, 214–18). Finally, a key question is left impending in this essay, because it is a question that can only be answered by the franchise itself: will reflexivity establish itself as a formal feature of the MCU after this apparent turn, or will Phase Four be, perhaps, only a reflexive moment rather than a turn, a passing phenomenon that has emerged in this transitional moment in between phases? One might, in this regard, expect that the Multiverse Saga will continue to use its titular image as the cornerstone of more metafictional allegories. Or, perhaps, if the doomsayers are proven

right anytime soon, this reflexivity might retrospectively become readable as a symptom of the franchise's impending decline and death—and it would not be a surprise to see that self-consciousness is once again a response to exhaustion, as in John Barth. Nevertheless, whatever our expectations be, it still seems that the MCU shall keep on churning out more products, clogging the market, and influencing audiovisual production generally, so if we are to understand the superhero genre today and—more broadly—the culture industry, we must keep an eye on the franchise, and particularly on what it says about itself, sometimes despite itself.

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