Ghosts of our Lives:
a Hauntological Reading of Multiverse Fiction
in Contemporary Verbo-Visual Media

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Abstract

This article explores the multiverse as a recurring narrative and symbolic configuration in contemporary verbo-visual media. It interprets it as the articulation of a hauntological condition, shaped by the erosion of ontological certainties regarding the present and the past, along with the collapse of future possibilities. Tracing the concept's trajectory from philosophical speculation and theoretical physics to a comparative analysis of comics, television, and contemporary cinema, the article asserts that multiverse fiction serves as both a consequence and a narrative response to the crisis of temporality, identity, and futurability in late capitalism. Drawing on the idea of hauntology, we investigate how multiverse fiction has transformed from a speculative trope into a complex framework for navigating cultural anxieties associated with the instability of truth, media fragmentation, and ecological crisis. The article asserts that multiverse fiction facilitates narrative negotiations of unrealised presents and foreclosed futures, serving both as a product and a critique of post-postmodern temporal dislocation. Rather than providing resolution, it thus functions as a compromise formation mediating between escapism and critical engagement, creating speculative spaces for mourning, reimagining, and symbolically rehearsing alternative realities.

Keywords: Multiverse; Hauntology; Imaginary; Comics; Audiovisual Media.

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1   Introduction

This article moves from the hypothesis that the multiversal configuration is no longer deployed solely as a thematic motif in contemporary narratives across various verbo-visual media (both audio-visual, such as films and TV series, and texto-visual, like comics). Instead, it has evolved into a structural and aesthetic framework through which more profound cultural anxieties are articulated. Karin Kukkonen calls it a "mental model" (2010: 54), and it can undoubtedly be read as an instantiation of what Bakhtin calls *chronotope* (1981): historically situated, ideologically charged forms that result in specific configurations of space-time, discursively reflecting the way reality is structured and conceptualised at a given time. While its proliferation within and beyond the realm of science fiction can be partly explained by marketing logics – particularly those stemming from superhero comics, aimed at revitalising franchises and capitalising on character familiarity – the multiverse operates as a far more complex cultural form.

Specifically, we will interpret the multiverse as a discursive, ambivalent matrix for the unfolding of the hauntological condition, offering narrative mechanisms to both represent and escape from a present haunted by unrealised presents and futures. Hauntology has been theorised by Mark Fisher (2012, 2014) in his reworking of Derrida's *hantologie* (1993). For Derrida – who coined the term in reference to Marxism after the fall of the Berlin Wall (a turn implying, according to Fukuyama's well-known formula, the "end of history") – hauntology describes the persistence of the past within the present, a sense of spectrality where unfulfilled futures continue to exert influence on the present (1993). In the early 2000s, Mark Fisher reframed the notion as part of a critique of late capitalism, where culture finds itself immobilised, incapable of imagining futures beyond the established, claustrophobic paths already traced.[1] Yet the spectre is not merely the emblem of such an impasse; it also serves as the trace of a deferred promise, a residual future once envisaged that returns to haunt the present and demand redress (Fisher 2014: 37-38; see again Derrida 1993: 30-31). Thus, the spectre signifies not only loss, but the endurance of a yet unrealised future, embodying the mark of its latent potential and the possibility of its reactivation.

While this formulation lends itself to a twofold interpretation of the multiverse – as the nostalgic trace of unfulfilled presents, but also as the phantasmal injunction to engage with our reality – the premises that underpinned both Derrida and Fisher's theories seem to have shifted. Although much of the Western, North-Atlantic cultural sphere appears to have moved beyond the aesthetic inertia described by Fisher, it now faces a more profound and more systemic crisis, rooted in the ecological, economic, and technological upheavals of the late Anthropocene (Haraway 2016). These anxieties have revived the notion of hauntology, strengthening its connection to environmental grief (or solastalgia), frustration with techno-capitalism, and a sense of loss of meaning, agency, and the very possibility of a viable future. This implies a cultural shift towards a more radical stance than the nostalgia-driven posture of the 2010s, which filtered the past through the lens of unresolved contemporary desires (Becker and Trigg 2024).

This article explores the tensions at play in multiverse fiction within contemporary media, which serves as both a critique of our haunted present and a narrative space where a viable, albeit spectral, future can still be imagined. Our objective is to identify a transformation that we assert is currently taking place in the collective imaginary,[2] where, as traditional narratives falter, the present is increasingly reimagined through its unrealised past choices and foreclosed futures.

2   The Multiversal Imaginary between Physics, Society, and Media Ecology

The idea of a plurality of worlds originates in Epicurean philosophy, which posited an infinite cosmos populated by infinite worlds. The notion was developed by Lucretius and radicalised by Giordano Bruno, who famously rejected the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic geocentric model in favour of an infinitely extended universe populated by innumerable worlds. In modernity, Leibniz further developed the theory, inaugurating a speculative approach that prefigured the concept of multiple universes, although in abstract and metaphysical terms.

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1. For an extensive discussion and an application of the concept to comics, see Dal Canto (2025).

2. Following Morin (1963), we understand "imaginary" as the interplay through which media narratives activate processes of mythmaking and identification, fostering the spectators' perception, imagination, and cultural expression.

However, it was not until the advent of theoretical physics that the term acquired popularity in the scientific field, beginning with Hugh Everett III's many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics (1957), followed by Andrei Linde's cosmological model of eternal inflation (1986). These contributions marked a disciplinary leap, displacing the concept from its philosophical-cosmological roots to its formalisation within theoretical physics. While these models remain contested within scientific discourse, they have nonetheless increasingly permeated popular culture throughout the twenty-first century (Cosmelli 2016; Paura 2021; Bucelli 2023).

Indeed, the concept of the multiverse has long been a recurrent motif in fantasy and science fiction, even before it became part of the scientific discourse. As we will discuss in the following sections, the idea of the multiverse has become a fully functioning narrative engine in the world of serialised superhero comics, particularly in the DC and Marvel franchises.[3] Here, the multiverse has allowed complex conceptual models to be translated into accessible storytelling forms. However, over time this narrative mechanism has taken on a broader symbolic role, reflecting a significant shift in the cultural imaginary. As we moved into a cultural landscape defined by fragmentation, uncertainty, and the simultaneous validity of multiple perspectives, the multiverse became a powerful metaphor for the epistemological condition of late modernity. It provided a narrative framework for processing the erosion of ontological certainty and for expressing the multiplicity of truths, realities, and subjectivities that define the postmodern condition (see Lyotard 1994).

Yet, we argue that the symbolical function of the multiverse has further evolved in the contemporary, post-postmodern (Gumenyuk et al. 2021) or rather, metamodern (Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen, 2017) condition. Firstly, the multiverse functions as a potent media metaphor that may reveal key dynamics in the contemporary social imaginaries. Viewed through a medium-ecological lens (Strate 2017), the current media landscape appears as a constellation of environments that fragment experiences and multiply the ways in which subjectivities are formed and communication occurs. The multitude of worlds that make up the multiverse thus metaphorically corresponds not only to the proliferation of digital identities but also to the coexistence of distinct media environments. The rise of social media platforms has led to the creation of information bubbles (Bruns 2017), generating *parallel universes* that provide different infrastructures for meaning-making, sharing experiences, and negotiating cultural identity (Robinson 2022). As a result, the same news items take on entirely different meanings depending on the context in which they are consumed. Consequently, our perception of truth is increasingly influenced by algorithms, platforms, and narratives tailored to specific audiences.

Hence, the multiverse metaphor foregrounds the increasingly porous boundary between reality and fiction. In fact, whereas modernity was shaped by dominant and relatively stable frameworks (such as ideologies, religions, and shared myths), contemporary culture is characterised by the fragmentation and reassembling of meaning around new, often unstable poles, blurring the lines between the imaginary and the material (Vagni 2013). In this context, symbolic figures and narrative structures proliferate and stratify, often in contradictory ways and without systemic coherence, and traditional distinctions – between fiction and reality, the public and the private, representation and fact – are persistently destabilised and renegotiated. The multiverse thus serves as a key framework for representing the simultaneity of different perspectives and the hybrid coexistence of competing versions of reality.

Furthermore, in the hyper-contemporaneity, multiverse fiction functions as a cultural device through which societies reinterpret the past amid mounting uncertainty about the future. Climate change, political volatility, technological disruption, and economic precarity generate a pervasive global insecurity (significantly percolating from the preceding years: see Beck 1992). This condition is reflected in the narratives we consume: whereas science fiction and popular culture once imagined the future as progress and innovation (Jameson 2005), the contemporary imaginary increasingly favours dystopian scenarios, fragmented temporalities, and a nostalgic return to familiar narrative models (Becker and Trigg 2024). Within this context, the multiverse provides a narrative architecture that can both offer a possible escape from reality and serve as a model for questioning and rethinking the present.

Notably, not only the future is seen as unstable; the past, too, becomes an open archive, subject to ongoing

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3. This article will barely discuss prose fiction, an extremely vast subject that deserves a separate analysis (see Gomel 2014). Nonetheless, a particularly prescient (and peculiar, in terms of narrative genre) instance is Jorge Luis Borges' short story The Garden of Forking Paths (1941), which anticipates the logic of diverging timelines and coexisting possibilities.

processes of rewriting and reinterpretation (Assmann 2008). Indeed, contemporary culture is marked by a deep-seated tension between preserving collective memory and reworking past narratives (see Lorusso 2025) – a dynamic that is immediately visible in fiction through phenomena like reboots, remakes, and retcons. These processes allow contemporary media franchises to rewrite or recontextualise established storylines to match shifting audience tastes and prevailing sociocultural discourses (Proctor 2023; Goldberg and Gavaler 2024). Moreover, the past as a whole no longer appears as a stable, unchanging entity, but rather a site of contention, constantly being reconfigured through practices of reinterpretation, remediation, and strategic forgetting to meet the needs of the present (Ricœur 2000; White 2014). This observation is particularly pronounced when examining the intersection between postmodernist fiction and historiography, a concept famously referred to by Hutcheon as "historiographic metafiction" (1988: 105-140). The contemporary popularity of alternate histories, such as *The Man in the High Castle* (Prime Video, 2015-19) or *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019), thus exemplifies a continuity in this tendency to rewrite history through speculative means. Similarly, the widespread phenomenon of retroactive 'corrections' to older texts, such as digital alterations to films or the revision of historical content to accommodate contemporary political and ethical standards, attests to the malleability of the past.

Building on these premises, the multiverse functions as a mechanism that can both sidestep and challenge the fixity of the past and the anxiety towards the future, providing a potentially infinite array of narrative and interpretative configurations. These possibilities exert a spectral pull on the cultural imaginary, evoking what might have been and what may yet be. This dual function – as both an effect of temporal fragmentation and a strategy to navigate it – explains the multiverse's salience within contemporary culture, simultaneously being a symptom of unstable temporalities and a symbolic framework for negotiating their disorienting effects. Rather than attempting to resolve this contradiction, multiverse fiction inhabits its space, transmuting paradox into generative narrative potential.

Indeed, as Edgar Morin (1963: 75–76) posits, the imaginary constitutes not merely a reflection of reality, but rather a complementary and, at times, antagonistic dimension thereof—a parallel world through which desires, aspirations, and fears are articulated. Following the expansion of the imaginary in multiple directions, the multiverse offers a narrative framework wherein divergent possibilities coexist without necessitating resolution or hierarchy. While this applies to the circumstances of Western societies since the aftermath of World War II, the global, hypermediated, digitally driven contemporary society has increasingly blurred the distinction between what is real and what is perceived as real, as McIntyre (2018) has noted. Consequently, audiences gravitate towards narratives that align most closely with their emotional investments, ideological positions, cultural matrices, and personal desires. Literary theory has long posited this shift as a consequence of the postmodern condition (Lyotard 1994). However, contemporary, media studies further stress, particularly through the notion of post-truth, the paroxysmal filter established by the contemporary mediascape when attempting to access reasonably objective accounts of events. In this light, the multiverse signals a shift from an epistemology grounded in presumed objectivity to one unequivocally defined by interpretive communities, where truth always emerges as contingent, situated, and performative.

Amid the fragmentation of truths, the negotiability of the past, and growing uncertainties about the future, the multiverse thus emerges as a contingent, polysemic configuration through which the contemporary imaginary represents and denounces its own condition.

3   Branched Paths, Alternate Storylines, and Ontological Hierarchies: the Multiverse in Fiction

Notwithstanding their enduring conceptual allure, the concepts of multiple worlds, parallel universes, or the multiverse[4] lose clarity during their transition from scientific discourse, as developed in the fields of physics and sociology, to fiction, as analysed through the lens of narratology. As it migrates across various epistemic regimes, the idea continues to captivate; however, it runs the risk of diminishing its analytical precision, thereby generating semantic and structural ambiguities that complicate comprehension.

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4.   For the sake of this article, when discussing literary theory we will use the terms "world" and "universe" as interchangeable.

At the outset, it is essential to distinguish the notion of possible worlds – widely debated in narratological and semiotic literature (see Eco 1984; Pavel 1986; Bell and Ryan 2019) – from the configuration of the multiverse. While "possible worlds" theory concerns the construction and reconfiguration of textual worlds *during* the act of reading, its relevance to multiverse fiction remains limited.

We define instead "multiverse fiction" as a narrative configuration in which two or more distinct universes coexist on the same ontological plane. This structure may unfold beyond a single instalment, extending across a network of interconnected narratives—such as serials, franchises, or other forms of chained storytelling. If no more than two universes are involved – even when only one is diegetically present, as in most *what if* scenarios or alternate histories, which we will address shortly – we propose to refer to this as an *implicit multiverse*. When three or more universes coexist, we define it as an *explicit multiverse*. The diegetic coexistence does not imply the necessity of an interaction or a crossover between universes.

In proposing this definition, we diverge from established categorisations of multiverse fiction. In a recent contribution, Cabrera Torrecilla (2024) postulates three foundational principles for defining it: (1) "two or more distinct universes must come into contact", although this contact may consist solely in an implicit "suggestion of their existence within the text" (2014: 16); (2) the universes must be completely different from one another (2024: 16); and (3) these universes "can be physical or metaphysical as long as their realities have an objective impact on [the default] universe, altering its course" (2014: 16). She further identifies five levels describing the possible hierarchies (conceptual, ontological, and spatial) organising these universes: infinite space, other dimensions, forking paths, simulations, and nested worlds (2024: 17-18). While this taxonomy proves helpful in describing the specific examples she discusses, we argue that including nested worlds and simulations arguably conflict with the ontological premises of the multiverse, as we will discuss further on.

In contrast, Marie-Laure Ryan (2006) emphasises that multiverse fiction must entail the entanglement of parallel branches that possess equal ontological status, and feature a character who is aware of the transitions between these parallel worlds (2006: 655-656).[5] Ryan identifies three dominant tropes in fantasy and science fiction that intersect with multiverse fiction: (wormhole or) transworld explorations, alternate (or counterfactual) histories, and time travel narratives.[6] In her taxonomy, transworld narratives consist of portals between universes that are opened by entities endowed with special powers, allowing for transportation into an alternate reality (2006: 657). Alternate histories are characterised by worlds in which pivotal historical events diverge from our conventional understanding of history, suggesting that "the real world always serves as an implicit background" (2006: 657). Time-travel narratives are defined as those that "present a two-way movement along one of the branches of the tree of historical possibilities" (2006: 658). Yet, Ryan contends, multiverse fiction cannot be reduced to any of these types, because these stories allow both one-world and many-worlds versions (2006: 656), and only in the second case – that is, when multiple coexisting worlds possess the same ontological status – they properly belong to multiverse fiction.

To some extent, Ryan's article is a long negative taxonomy, whose postulates have the chief purpose of circumscribing multiverse fiction. In doing so, she rejects oft-cited examples, such as Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962). Indeed, the novel only presents partial glimpses into a reality in which Germany and Japan lost the Second World War, which never achieves the same ontological status as the main diegetic (alternate) world. A similar logic underlies her exclusion of the *Harry Potter* franchise, which she disqualifies on the grounds that it lacks the principle of "counterparthood" – the presence of recognisably distinct versions of the same characters across multiple realities (Ryan 2006: 659).[7] Ryan ends her essay by further excluding six articulations from the category of multiverse narratives: "mentalism", where alternate worlds are framed as

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5. This is the principle according to which Ryan discards Emmanuel Carrère's *La moustache* (1989, also a 2005 movie by the same author) from multiverse fiction. Yet one may argue that the story features a man who finds himself, abruptly, in a universe whose events – particularly those related to him – unfolded differently from the one he is familiar with. A similar mechanism – although more explicit – is used in the 2019 film *Yesterday*, where the protagonist is the only person aware of the existence (and songs) of The Beatles.

6. Similarly, see Hellekson (2001).

7. Ryan probably chooses this principle rather than leveraging the different ontological status the magical worlds have in respect to the "real" ones (those with a minimal departure from our reality) to prevent the objection that the former are simply parallel universes governed by variants of the natural laws we are used to.

dreams, hallucinations, imagination or symptoms of mental conditions; "virtualisation", where a single world is shown and the others are only "nonactualized possibilities"; allegory and metaphor, whose purpose "is to illustrate an idea rather than to represent objectively happening courses of events"; "meta-textualism", in which characters' parallel existences are but "different drafts of a novel in progress"; magic, when the fictional world suddenly unveils its hidden (magical) rules "through an unexplainable metamorphosis"; and do-it-yourself, deliberately presenting contradictory or fragmented passages as raw material for the reader to assemble into a personalised narrative (2006: 669-671).[8] What is left is what she considers to be proper multiverse fiction.

Building upon Ryan's framework, D'Amato and Diani propose five principles to define multiverse fiction: (1) the infinity of parallel worlds must be explicitly stated; (2) such worlds must be in a horizontal, ontologically equal relationship; (3) the connection between universes must allow for tangible interferences; (4) the representation of these worlds is shaped by focalisation; and (5) several textual and visual strategies guide both characters and audiences through the plurality of worlds (2024: 596–600).[9] D'Amato and Diani further identify three dominants[10] structuring multiverse fiction: an intertextual axis, a cultural one, and a transmedial one (2024: 604–608).

In light of this brief literature review, and while recognising that the proliferation of theoretical positions diminishes conceptual clarity, we wish to adopt a pragmatic stance and embrace the minimal, most frequently cited ordering principle discussed here: namely, that multiverse fiction is predicated on the juxtaposition, rather than the entanglement, of parallel universes possessing equal ontological status. One or more of these world may be left implicit, which happens more frequently when the text is only an instalment in a series or franchise (Ryan is mostly thinking about self-standing narratives) and the default diegetic reality doesn't need to be stated to constitute a counterpart. While maintaining a relatively open, broad definition of multiverse fiction, we thus exclude the narratives centred on ontological metalepses (Thon 2016: 66) – that is, vertical movements between narrative levels – and those in which worlds occupy a parasitic position towards the primary reality: subordinate or overlying, oneiric or symbolic, simulated or magical, reconfiguring or expanding the real world by hiding in its folds. Significantly, this means we exclude from the category of multiverse fiction most fantasy, where a reality resembling our own merely serves as a premise to a displacement into an enchanted realm, and horror, deploying the trope of ghostly intrusion into the real. This despite the latter are closely connected to the theme of this special issue and have proven remarkably productive in recent serial television, as exemplified by series such as *Stranger Things* (2016–), *Lovecraft Country* (2020), *Them* (2021), *Archive 81* (2022), and the third season of *Twin Peaks* (2017).

Instead, we aim to focus on the multiverse as a framework for engaging with the contemporary crisis of narratability, a theme we will explore in depth in the final section of this article. To develop this argument, though, we must first trace the articulations of the multiverse throughout the contemporary mediascape, focusing on audiovisual and graphic narratives.

4   The Trajectory of Superhero Comics Franchises: Narrative Possibilities and Incongruities

Comics are characterized by a distinctive formal and narrative plasticity, enabling them to absorb, hybridise, and rework aesthetic codes, narrative models, and cultural motifs from different media environments. While this transformative capacity is not exclusive to comics, the medium's unique positioning at the intersection of textuality and visuality – coupled with its serial logic, low production costs, and circulation across both mainstream and niche markets – has rendered it an exceptional site for narrative experimentation. As Lorenzo Di Paola (2019) observes, comics have long operated as a creative laboratory for the broader media system.

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8.   Interestingly, an opposite taxonomy is forwarded by Alain Boillat, who instead defines what he considers the ontological structure of multiverse fiction as an arrangement of at least two worlds (2022: 130), where the other one(s) belong(s) to seven possible types: distant, artificial, supernatural, mental, alternate, parallel, and virtual (2022: 117-173), all but two explicitly excluded by Ryan from multiverse fiction.

9.   Incidentally, (4) and (5) are orientation principles, rather than compositional ones.

10.   In the sense given to the term by Roman Jakobson (see Newton 1997).

Their hybrid structure allows them to function as a media sponge, flexibly modulating their form according to evolving cultural and narrative demands. Comics can be understood as a "myth machine" (Frezza 1995), wherein knowledge, symbols and narratives are continually stratified and transformed.

Due to their serial structure, canonical malleability, and inherent transmedia proclivity, comics have become a privileged site for constructing and maintaining expansive narrative universes, capable of adapting to the transformations of the collective imaginary. A crucial aspect of this dynamic lies in their transmedia expansions: as Mario Tirino (2019) points out, comics pioneered cross-platform narrative experimentation well before the emergence of contemporary transmedia universes. Central to this development was the logic of copyright, which enabled the commercial exploitation of comics characters through licensing and franchising. As early as the 1930s, comics anticipated the principles of transmedia storytelling, crafting storyworlds designed for multi-platform circulation and immersive engagement.

Similarly, the emergence of the multiverse trope within superhero comics can be traced to the editorial challenges American publishers face in the post-war media landscape. Following its zenith during the 1930s and 1940s – the so-called Golden Age – the superhero genre entered a phase of decline after the Second World War. Several converging factors contributed to this downturn: the rise of television as the dominant medium altered audience consumption patterns, while the patriotic rhetoric that had underpinned wartime superhero narratives quickly lost relevance. As readers gravitated towards horror, crime, and science fiction – epitomised by the commercial success of EC Comics under William Gaines – the superhero paradigm faltered. This crisis was compounded by the moral panic instigated by psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, whose *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) prompted widespread concern over the supposed dangers of comic books, culminating in the creation of the Comics Code Authority and the industry's self-imposition of a strict censorship. In response, major publishers of superhero comics – most notably DC Comics – sought innovative strategies to revitalise their iconic characters and re-establish the genre's appeal.

The multiverse first emerged as a strategic response to this industrial and narrative crisis, enabling the co-existence of multiple iterations of the same characters, thereby re-integrating Golden Age heroes into new continuities and updated premises without generating contradiction. Between 1956 and 1959, DC Comics revamped several key characters (notably the Flash and Green Lantern), endowing them with novel backstories. However, this editorial move raised criticism among long-time readers, who were attached to their earlier incarnations. To address this, the seminal issue *The Flash of Two Worlds* (*Flash* 123, 1961) introduced the concept of parallel Earths (Earth-1, Earth-2, Earth-3, and beyond), thereby legitimising the coexistence of distinct versions of the same hero and laying the foundation for the subsequent expansion of the DC multiverse (de Adana 2024a, 2024b). This mechanism foregrounds the interplay between different media logics, respectively leveraging the collective affect towards treasured narrative objects and the appeal of innovation. Faced with the dual demand of its audience – for novelty and continuity –, DC Comics responded by rendering its canon flexible and open to future rewrites.

By contrast, the Marvel universe, launched in 1961 with *Fantastic Four* 1 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, initially faced no such continuity dilemmas. During that period, television was becoming the centre of the media landscape, compelling the entire cultural industry to reorganise itself. Lee's comics adapted to the new rhythms and demands of the audience, drawing inspiration from the structure and continuity mechanisms exhibited by televisual formats. Each storyline became part of a broader narrative network, fostering an unprecedented level of internal cohesion. Marvel pioneered the use of crossovers, in which characters from separate series appeared within one another's narratives, thus constructing shared storylines that rewarded multi-title readership to fully appreciate their narrative development. This occured for the first time in *Fantastic Four* 12 (1963), where the team meets the Hulk. In September of that same year, the debut of the Avengers consolidated this logic, positioning narrative expansion and interconnection as a central tenet of the Marvel model.

In 1977, Marvel undertook a more consistent exploration of the multiverse structure through the *What If...?* series, which presented alternative narrative trajectories that did not affect the canonical continuity. Each hypothetical storyline was mapped onto a distinctly numbered universe. In the 1980s, the *Captain Britain* series, created by Chris Claremont and Herb Trimpe and subsequently developed by Alan Moore, introduced the now-canonical designation of Earth-616 as the reference (one is tempted to call it "our") universe. This taxonomy enabled the systematic expansion of divergent narrative paths. A pivotal moment came with the

Days of Future Past arc (*Uncanny X-Men* 141-142, 1981), exploring the idea that the consequence of time travel would only result in the opening of alternative timelines that further expanded the Marvel multiverse.

During the same period, DC encountered growing challenges in managing the proliferation of parallel Earths – a solution that, while initially allowing various versions of the same characters, ultimately undermined narrative coherence. As Kukkonen (2010) notes, the existence of multiple Earths eventually led to significant inconsistencies: duplicate characters with conflicting storylines, major events (including deaths and resurrections) lacking narrative consequences, and the constant need to contextualise new storylines. Unlike Marvel's more linear approach, DC's multiverse became convoluted, hindering narrative development and the audience's attachment to characters' arcs. In response, DC launched *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985), a twelve-issue maxiseries written by Marv Wolfman and illustrated by George Pérez, aiming to streamline the multiverse into a single, unified timeline. Past events and character histories were rewritten through this editorial reset, and a new continuity was established to restore narrative clarity.

In contrast, Marvel chose to manage the plurality and interconnection engendered by its multiverse, systematising it through a set of principles codified by Mark Gruenwald (1992).[11] This editorial divergence not only signals differing approaches to world-building but also reveals distinct strategies for engaging readerships and adapting to the evolving logics of the comics industry. DC's multiplication of alternative versions of iconic heroes generated accessibility issues, especially for new readers in the 1980s, who were confronted with competing origin stories and narrative arcs. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* can thus be understood as a corrective operation aimed at narrative simplification by consolidating a single narrative universe. Yet, it sacrificed much of the imaginative richness afforded by the multiplicity of worlds. On the contrary, Marvel could capitalise on the modularity of the networked, expandable narrative threads forming its multiverse (more recent and designed to accommodate multiplicity), thus laying the groundwork for constructing the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).

Indeed, these opposing editorial strategies also shaped the evolving relationship the two studios established with transmedia adaptations. DC's decision to eliminate its multiverse and unify all storyworlds under a single post-Crisis timeline imposed structural rigidity and necessitated significant character rewrites. Yet this approach eventually prompted new inconsistencies and corrections: *Crisis on Infinite Earths* left some problems open, and even caused new ones. *Zero Hour: Crisis in Time* (1994) was a further attempt to resolve the internal inconsistencies, but a few years later *Infinite Crisis* (2005) and *Final Crisis* (2008) reintroduced the multiverse and tried to reconstitute continuity through several retcon operations. *The New 52* (2011) tried obliterating these whole storylines and pursuing a complete reboot, but, in doing so, it alienated most of the audience, eventually leading to a further reboot reinstating several storylines, but reorganising them systematically through the birth of the DC Omniverse (2021). Marvel, meanwhile, could easily preserve its core continuity (Earth-616) while selectively opening narrative spaces for alternate universes – an approach that facilitated the cinematic and televisual adaptation of its mythos, enabling ongoing experimentation. In fact, especially while developing its transmedia narrative universe, its model fostered a deeply networked mode of engagement, consolidating fan loyalty and turning the multiverse into a productive cultural matrix for serial and transmedia storytelling – one that enables the coexistence of multiple, temporally and stylistically distinct iterations of the same characters within a unified narrative continuum (Kukkonen 2010).[12]

In recent years, these processes have converged with a broader surge of nostalgia, manifesting in strategies such as reboots, retcons, and the revival of earlier versions of iconic characters to meet the audience's demands. Contemporary media have been especially active in reframing the past through the lens of present-day anxieties and desires (Becker and Trigg 2024). Across cultural industries, the past is not simply remembered but strategically reconfigured to offer emotional reassurance and identity continuity in an age marked by rapid transformation and epistemic instability. Nostalgia has thus emerged as a mechanism of engagement that fos-

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11. According to these rules, the Marvel Universe is part of a multiverse in which timelines diverge at critical moments. Time travels in particular generate two realities: the one in which the traveller appears and another in which they don't (see https://bleedingcool.com/comics/jim-shooter-files-rules-time-travel-marvel-comics/).

12. It must be stressed that, while most associated with superhero comics (Kukkonen 2010: 54), the multiverse trope is by no means confined to it. A notable example of multiversal speculation is the *auteur* long-running comics saga *Les cités obscures*, by François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters (1983-2023).

ters affective investment, cultivates collective identification, and sustains consumer attachment. Superhero comics and their associated transmedia franchises have effectively exploited this dynamic, positioning the multiverse as a platform through which individual and collective memories are reactivated, re-signified, and narratively reprocessed. The proliferation of alternative character versions has encouraged a layered, intertextual mode of consumption, wherein readers and viewers are invited to navigate a dense matrix of references, ramifications, and connections (Kukkonen 2010).

5   The Multiverse and the Mediascape: Parallel Universes in Contemporary Media

Furthermore, the modularity of the multiverse has facilitated the migration of narratives across platforms. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), launched in 2008, has been pivotal in introducing the multiverse trope to mainstream audiences, gradually constructing a cohesive continuity culminating in the *Multiverse Saga*.[13] Its pre-planned expansion is currently in phases 4 to 6, with a clear focus on navigating parallel realities. Keeping together a complex transmedia ecosystem, the saga explores the multiverse as a force that both orders and disrupts, largely through the character of the Time Variance Authority (TVA). This fictional organisation operates outside of space and time, protecting the so-called "Sacred Timeline" – that is, the events as they are supposed to unfold.

Films such as *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), and *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024), alongside series like *Legion* (2017), *Loki* (2021–2023), and *What If...?* (2021–2024), have positioned the multiverse as a narrative pillar of the MCU's evolving configuration. Interestingly, while the initial phases of the saga foregrounded the exploration of unexpected possibilities and unfulfilled desires, recent instalments appear to privilege a more reflexive stance, interrogating the ontological fragility of phantasmal realities and underscoring the need to re-engage with the lived present as a site of political and social agency.

However, despite their key role in its mainstream success, comics and superheroes are not the exclusive custodians of the multiversal imaginary in verbo-visual media. On the contrary, the conceptual and narrative potential of the multiverse has long been explored within science fiction, particularly on TV. Two paradigmatic franchises, *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*, stand out in this regard: both long-running and extremely popular, they have consistently mobilised multiverse logic to navigate paradoxes of time, identity and causality, while engaging with broader questions of metaphysics, ethics, and the limits of knowledge.

Doctor Who, the longest-running science fiction television series in British broadcasting history, chronicles the adventures of the Doctor – a shape-shifting being who travels through time and space through the TARDIS, a vessel resembling a mid-twentieth-century police box. Since its debut in 1963, the franchise has undergone multiple iterations: the *Classic Series* (1963-1989); a stand-alone television film (*Doctor Who*, 1996); and the *Revived Series* (2005-present). It has also generated several spin-offs, including *Torchwood* (2006–2011), *The Sarah Jane Adventures* (2007–2011), and *Class* (2016), each expanding the narrative universe while targeting distinct audience segments.

The *Star Trek* franchise stages tales of interstellar diplomacy and technological optimism, tracing the space journeys of Starfleet crews across an imagined future where humanity participates in a federated interstellar cooperation. Far more expansive in both scope and structure, the *Star Trek* canon comprises multiple broadcast instalments – the *Original Series* (1966-1969), the *Animated Series* (1973-1974), *The Next Generation* (1987-1994), *Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999), *Voyager* (1995-2001), *Enterprise* (2001–2005), and *Discovery* (2017-2024), as well as a range of recent streaming projects. These include anthological and animated formats (*Short Treks*, 2018-2020; *Lower Decks*, 2020-2024; *Prodigy*, 2021–), along with spin-offs such as *Picard* (2020–2023) and *Strange New Worlds* (2022–). The franchise also spans a considerable cinematic corpus, including the *Original Series* films (*Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, 1979; *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, 1982;

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13. Conversely, when DC Comics attempted to replicate the operation with the DC Extended Universe (DCEU), the lack of a coherent vision has undermined the consolidation of continuity between films and comics – an issue still unresolved.

Star Trek III : The Search for Spock, 1984; *Star Trek IV : The Voyage Home*, 1986; *Star Trek V: The Final Fron-*
tier, 1989; *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, 1991), the *Next Generation* films (*Generations*, 1994; *First*
Contact, 1996; *Insurrection*, 1998; and *Nemesis*, 2002); the rebooted trilogy (*Star Trek*, 2009; *Into Darkness*,
2013; *Beyond*, 2016); and the TV film *Section 31* (2025).

Apart from this long franchises, in recent years, television series such as *Fringe* (2008-2013), *Counterpart* (2017-
2019), *Dark* (2017-2020), *Dark Matter* (2024) and the last two seasons of *The Umbrella Academy* (2019−2024,
based on a comic series written by Gerard Way and illustrated by Gabriel Bá: 2007-2009; 2018-2021) have
constructed intricately layered architectures, drawing on the multiverse as a narrative device to explore ques-
tions of agency, guilt, and moral conflict. The animated sci-fi series *Rick and Morty* (2013−) offers a distinctive
combination of metatextual irony and speculative absurdity, traversing an endless array of variant realities. Its
leading creator, Dan Harmon, had already developed *Community* (2009-2014), a genre-defying sitcom suf-
fused with meta-humour and pop culture references that quickly acquired cult status. Here, the notion of the
"darkest timeline" first emerged, subsequently becoming a widely-circulated meme[14] that emblematises the
multiverse's growing hold on the contemporary imaginary.

In recent years, the growing popularity of the multiverse configuration within pop culture has expanded be-
yond pure science fiction. Over time, it has permeated diverse narrative forms, generating heterogeneous
works in tone and intent. For example, the Spanish series *Si no t'hagués conegut* (*If I Hadn't Met You*, 2018)
reframes the multiverse trope within the romantic drama genre, using alternate timelines to meditate on grief
and loss. Likewise, the Italian comedy series *Sono Lillo* (2023-2024) devotes its second season to explor-
ing parallel realities through a surreal, genre-blending stance, further testifying to the elasticity of multiversal
storytelling.

In cinema, the multiverse has increasingly emerged as a conceptual framework through which philosophical
and affective concerns can be articulated. Widely acclaimed and multi-awarded, *Everything Everywhere All*
at Once (2022) stands as a paradigmatic case in point, weaving together chaos theory, intergenerational trauma,
and absurdist humour within a kaleidoscopic architecture of intersecting dimensions. Yet the philosophical
resonances of the multiverse had already been explored in earlier cinematic works, amongst which one can
cite *Donnie Darko* (2001), *The One* (2001), *Primer* (2004), *Mr. Nobody* (2009), *Another Earth* (2011), *Coherence*
(2013), *The Gateway* (2017), *Parallel* (2018), and *The Cloverfield Paradox* (2018). Peculiar cases are *Sliding*
Doors (1998), which, although arguably not about multiverse fiction *stricto sensu*, applies the idea of parallel
universes to the otherwise far-away genre of romantic comedy, and *Lola Runs* (*Lola rennt*, 1998), a thriller
unfolding three possible outcomes of the same premises, which foregrounds the parallels between possible
paths in the multiverse and the mechanism of modern video games (see Abe 2024).

6   The Worst of All Possible Worlds? The Multiversal Imaginary and Hauntology

Given the widespread rise of multiverse narratives across popular culture, one wonders why this conceptual
structure has become so resonant at this historical juncture. One possible answer lies in the crisis of our collec-
tive capacity to imagine and construct alternative futures – a condition Berardi has termed "futurability" (2017).
In this light, the multiverse operates as a symbolic reservoir of unrealised possibilities and diverging trajecto-
ries, sustaining the idea that better worlds *could have* existed (and may still be imaginable), thus reactivating
the imperative to envision and pursue alternatives.

Yet the reparative dimension of the multiverse remains profoundly ambivalent. As noted above, it is not merely
a response to the fragmentation of contemporary experience, but also a product of it. In many cases, it func-
tions as a narrative device shaped by market logics, repackaging cultural exhaustion into speculative detours
that simulate novelty without structural rupture. Moreover, while inviting reflection on what might have been
and what might still be, multiverses often envisage unreachable futures, suspended in fictional *elsewheres* that
displace, rather than resolve, the crisis of futurability. The gestures toward alternatives are frequently accom-
panied by a pervasive sense of belatedness: a cultural "too late" thinly veiled by the illusion of boundless

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14.   For a detailed reconstruction of the online parable of the concept, see https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-darkest-timeline.

possibility, that only offers its escapist potential. Indeed, Ryan argues that the multiverse is essentially a way to negotiate our regrets about our past choices via *what-if* scenarios (2024: 172).

This unresolved tension resonates with the idea of hauntology, first theorised by Jacques Derrida (1993) and later rearticulated by Mark Fisher (2012, 2014). Building on Derrida's formulation, hauntology (*hantologie*) is positioned in direct opposition to ontology: whereas ontology concerns being and presence, hauntology destabilises such binaries by foregrounding temporal disjunction. The spectral, the haunting element, is neither entirely present nor wholly absent; it hovers in a liminal space, tethered to what has been and what is yet to come, producing what Derrida (quoting Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) famously described as a time "out of joint" (1994: 20). This idea accentuates the latent dimension of the past – the "latent ontology" (Kleinberg 2017: 137) that shapes the present through its silences, absences, and unrealised potentialities.

In Fisher's reappraisal of the concept, hauntology more radically designates a "failure of the future" (2012: 16), a sense of cultural impasse in which aesthetic and political imagination no longer appear capable of envisioning radically different modes of existence. As he puts it, artistic production lost "the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live" (Fisher 2012: 16). The result is a stagnating present, saturated by the haunting nostalgia for lost futures – the imagined alternatives that never materialised, yet whose absence continues to impact and structure contemporary affect (Fisher 2014: 45).

Although many facets of contemporary culture appear to have moved beyond the aesthetic paralysis and nostalgic stasis described by Fisher, this evolution has not translated into a restoration of futurability. Instead, it has engendered a more acute awareness that the future may be structurally foreclosed – ecologically, economically, and technologically (Haraway 2016). The stagnation Fisher identified has thus transformed into a different kind of impasse: less defined by repetition and more by a pervasive sense of irreversible degradation and existential urgency. Within this climate, imaginative horizons remain constrained, yet the affective tone has shifted from melancholic resignation to a form of low-intensity, diffuse anxiety. This recalibrates the hauntological condition in a new register, one inflected by what Glenn Albrecht (2010) terms *solastalgia* – the distress produced by environmental transformation of one's surrounding environment – and by the anguish towards what Varoufakis (2024) describes as *techno-capitalism*; this combination leads to a sense of lack of agency and meaning in our present or future. In such a context, the past no longer functions as a stable or reassuring temporal anchor – not because nostalgia has vanished, but because the past itself has become unstable, subject to (inherited) guilt, trauma inscription, and incessant reframing (we could call this a *crisis of pastness* that mirrors the one pointing towards the future). Its symbolic coherence as a repository of meaning and object of desire is compromised, even if its emotional resonance persists.

Within this volatile affective landscape, alternate universes acquire new significance, offering a narrative laboratory for exploring fragmented presents and haunting counterfactuals. In this sense, the rise and popularity of multiverse fiction across media can be read as symptomatic of a hauntological condition of the present: the multiverse allows for narratives that foreground unrealised presents and foreclosed futures, opening to alternative temporalities that depart from reality yet remain affectively tethered to it, and read the effects of the past not as irrevocable but contingent, branching, plural. The multiverse thus emerges as a narrative device that allows cultural production to simultaneously grieve and displace the impasse of futurability and address past trauma and guilt, without necessarily resolving it. In doing so, it functions as a compromise formation – a psychoanalytic concept denoting the symbolic coexistence (and imperfect resolution) of conflicting drives – mediating between realist resignation (a direct emanation of what Fisher called "capitalist realism", the idea that "there is no alternative": 2009) and escapist *jouissance*.

Although the discourse of hauntology, solastalgia and the multiverse emerge from distinct intellectual traditions, their convergence in contemporary cultural production is striking. In a conjuncture defined by ecological crisis, political instability, and technological saturation, multiverse fiction offers a discursive framework for interrogating the limits of both the present and the narratable, while gesturing towards alternative configurations of reality. In this sense, the percolation of the concept into popular discourse further indicates its function as a cultural metaphor. This is evident in memes about living in the darkest timeline (as said, referencing *Community*: see Butler Garrett 2024) or the widespread fascination with the so-called Mandela Effect, wherein collective false memories are read as evidence of parallel realities (see French 2018).

Here, the multiverse fully encapsulates this hauntological charge, articulating a pervasive cultural anxiety and a deepening crisis of past and futurability. The rise of multiverse fiction may thus be interpreted as symptomatic of a more radical "end of temporality" than that posited by Jameson (2003). In a moment when the very possibility of imagining a future that is not desolately compromised and a present that is untouched by our mistakes appears radically foreclosed, the multiverse functions as a final narrative resource – a space where viable futures can still be rehearsed, albeit within speculative, often paradoxical frameworks. This is why this declination of hauntology springs from the imaginary of today's Western society: because it arises from the consequences of centuries of colonialist, capitalist, and extractivist practices, and the sensation that it is now too late to make amends. Faced with the impending doom of the present, the multiverse offers a narrative strategy to resist despair, countering the encroaching bleakness of catastrophic futures with the spectral reactivation of non-actualised potentialities.

Nonetheless, the growing darkness of some multiversal fiction (e.g., the last season of the already mentioned *Umbrella Academy*) further underscores a more profound ambivalence. Alternate realities no longer promise liberation alone; instead, they increasingly mirror (if not exacerbate) the anxieties, contradictions, and failures of the world they diverge from. In this case, the multiverse is not a utopian site but a manifold of possible worlds, which may remain tethered to, and haunted by, the dystopic saturation of the one we inhabit. The very imagined, lateral worlds may thus become the phantasmal legacies of the paths we never took, potentially untouched by the wrong choices denying us a future, or be themselves the results of further mistakes resulting in even more uncanny simulacra of our reality. Imagining them may evoke consolatory possibilities, provoke critical insight, or lead to the claustrophobic awareness that there may not even be a speculative escape from the bleakness of things as they are.

7   Conclusion

The contemporary prominence of multiverse fiction signifies a substantial shift in our collective epistemology. Spanning various media forms – from superhero comics and blockbuster franchises to speculative television and cinema – the multiverse has emerged as a critical device for articulating the lingering persistence of lost possibilities, a central concerns within hauntological thought.

As this article has argued, multiverse fiction thus operates as a symbolic response (both in the sense of 'consequence' and 'opposition') to the erosion of futurability, the weight of the Western past, and the increasing understanding of ontological precarity. Framed through the lens of hauntology, the multiverse becomes a space wherein spectral presents – those lives, histories, and futures that never came to be – can be staged and explored. In doing so, it functions as a grammar of cultural mourning and imaginative reconfiguration, which can nonetheless manifest the fears of realities even bleaker than the one we live in.

Given these premises, the multiverse in contemporary, Western verbo-visual narratives mediates an unresolved dialectic, or an ongoing negotiation, between the impulse to escape and the compulsion to confront. It serves as a reminder that storytelling remains one of the last symbolic realms where alternative presents and futures can be envisioned, albeit in fictional form. Rather than providing closure or resolution, multiverse fiction opens narrative wormholes through the spectral architecture of the present, inviting us to engage with its unrealised potentials, confront the plural dimension of the real, negotiate them in novel ways.

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