

TIFFANY HONG

Love Persevering: Televisual Homage, Americana, and Interstitial Grief in WANDAVISION

WANDAVISION (US 2021, Creator: Jac Schaeffer), a 2021 nine-episode weekly¹ television miniseries for Disney+, not only initiated Phase 4 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) but furthermore inaugurated a new kind of rhetoric for transmedia storytelling. Both diegetically and through its own press, the show enthusiastically engages fan ambiguity toward spoilers, only to retroactively dismantle its *own* marketing as a metatextual reading of exegetical strategies particular to this moment of hypertextuality, simultaneity, and participatory culture, not to mention a baroque intertextuality and narratology particular to comics.

WANDAVISION embodies, then implodes, a survey of televisual eras with their attendant filmic technologies, opening credit audiovisuals, genre tropes, and most crucially, historicized articulations of the happy American family and the possibilities of audience interaction. As such, the first and second episodes were filmed before a live studio audience and relied on old-fashioned wirework in place of now-standard CGI. Wanda's psychic control of the town of Westview is quite literally and multidimensionally mediated; her grief and abilities externalize her from the diegesis of the miniseries (initially) as simply another actor. The innovation of the show is its performativity regarding the baroque nature of expansive, hypertextual, and self-referential fan culture. Its braiding of a multiple external positionality into an archive of American sitcoms proudly presents what is ultimately a nuanced examination of linear grieving, escapism, and a fixation on macro-narratives over interiority, the domestic, and the mundane. Or, ultimately, Wanda's impossible desire: what she (and we) *have no time for* within the blockbuster filmic MCU.

Saige Walton characterizes the baroque as “an investment in the infinite through movement, deferral, and the serialized drawing out of formation, often visualized as the spatialization of time. Like the baroque, genre too, shares little interest in the narrative telos of fulfilment” (90–91). The baroque likewise concludes Thomas Schatz's evolutionary model of genres (classic—parody—contestation—critique), where “Saturation leads us into the final

1 Apart from the first week, which saw two episodes simultaneously released.

phase of a genre—its baroque stage—where conventions are parodied or subverted and ‘we no longer look through the form ... rather we look at the form itself’” (Walton 94–95). Superhero comics, the ultimate genre monstrosity, are reliant in their seriality on the infinite deferment of the teleological. However, many have argued against a developmental mapping of the superhero genre, contending that reinvention, hypertextuality, and recursion inhere within this serial, plurivocal medium where fans are invited to participate, annotate, and rewrite, rendering it difficult to isolate a so-called postmodern period for such a moving target.

Moreover, the MCU—whose success hinges on streamlining both this baroque, messy, protean seriality and the cumulative knowledge of comics fandom into a multipronged but *linear* and authoritative transmedia franchise—foregrounds what Christophe Gelly terms the “fetishism of the adaptation.” That is, “a playfulness that will lead the reader [or viewer in this case] to go back to the work and hunt down all the clues placed by the artist but whose true import had eluded us,” migrating comics’ recursive reading strategy onto what was fundamentally a far more passive, singular, teleological cinematic experience (93). We are now compelled to rewatch, pause, rewind, freeze-frame, zoom in, slow playback speed, and reference Wikipedia in order to catch clues intended to subconsciously stream past upon a first viewing.

The Vision, a 2016 limited comics series by Tom King and Gabriel Hernandez Walta on which the TV series is partially based, references this baroque quality of the Vision and the Scarlet Witch’s contradictory, rebooted, and retconned romance across series, writers, and now, media. In *The Vision: Director’s Cut*, the trade paperback re-release, writer Tom King references the “insanely baroque [...] twists in continuity and time all bent into a straight line of narrative that it kind of becomes one of the most poetic moments ever written. [...] It’s the essence of comics in a few panels” (5). Eagle-eyed or repeat comic reader-cum-viewers are treated to several Easter eggs in the animated opening credits of Episode: 2 DON’T TOUCH THAT DIAL (US 2021, Director: Matt Shakman), which pan quickly over decontextualized images of dog bones and the Grim Reaper’s helmet, the stylized two-dimensional cartoons contrasting ominously with the comic Vision’s literalized attempts at burying violent repudiations of his ‘perfect family’ layers beneath their idyllic suburban home. Wanda’s hesitation to bring (the identically named) Sparky back to life in Episode 5: ON A VERY SPECIAL EPISODE ... (US 2021, Director: Matt Shakman), would appear to inject some live-action realism, or at least a conceptual damper, on the comic Scarlett Witch’s (near-omnipotent) chaos magic. Vision’s doctoring of a deceased but fully organic dog in the

comic into a synthezoid canine pet speaks to the *The Vision's* themes of imitative and aspirational humanity. Its status as a largely stand-alone limited series, however, buffers its diegetic contents from accountability to the larger Marvel comics canon. WANDAVISION, on the other hand, weighted down by the imperative of introducing, at the very least, the filmic sequel DOCTOR STRANGE AND THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS (US 2022, Director: Sam Raimi) and Phase 4 more generally, maneuvers the original Frankensteinian concerns of the comic into a perhaps too-real interrogation of mundane, irreversible grief, a humanity for which viewers and producers have little time within the MCU proper.

It is thus interesting that WANDAVISION was (though not originally²) the first Disney+ series, an experimental expansion into a 'lesser' medium. What is more, the current retro insistence on a weekly format (rather than the industry streaming standard) reconstitutes the formerly superheroic cinematic—a finite, sensorily overwhelming *communal* experience of the multiplex—within a temporality predicated on the *partial*, the intimate, the domestic. It is a migration from the inaccessible pantheon and fanfare of the big screen to a disquieting mirroring back at us from TV screens in our living rooms—during a pandemic, no less. For a generation privileged with the default of bingeing, the weekly release schedule (minus a bonus first-and-second episode combo) was initially met with frustration, a complete disconnect from the source material's formatting. This expectation of immediacy even reverberates back to comics, where creative teams now write in typically 5-issue arcs in *anticipation* of the trade paperback releases, and readers prefer to wait on a finite collected edition rather than parcel out enjoyment and storyline over months. One thinks of reviewers hate-bombing THE BOYS (US 2019–, Creator: Eric Kripke) on Amazon Prime because of this same commitment to segmented viewing. Spoiled audiences indeed.

WANDAVISION is unique within the stable of Disney+ MCU offerings thus far in its conscious adaptation of its medium, television, not as cinema's impoverished alternative but as a *historical* mirror of the idealized American nuclear family. That is, a conscious reorientation within a temporality that metatextually critiques our (American, mostly) relationship to media, positing a TV-show-within-a-TV-show that is perhaps an inevitable but by no means conclusive reinvention of the superhero genre's (overdetermined, paradoxical, infinite, illogical, impossible) narrative malleability, which deconstructs

2 This was initially reserved for the far more traditional action/buddy comedy THE FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER (US 2021, Creator: Malcolm Spellman).

(overlapping, competing, rewound, rewritten) time-space, both imaginary and experiential.

Spoiler culture is formative to the MCU and to its particularly playful embodiment of baroque deferral and the spacialization of time: 1) As the Vision says (disingenuously) in Episode 9: THE SERIES FINALE (US 2021, Director: Matt Shakman), “I do not have one single ounce of original material”; the MCU is, after all, sustained through adaptation (however creative), with countless IPs and storylines awaiting Kevin Feige to induct them into three-dimensionality. Typically, spoiler warnings have an expiration date, but since the MCU’s success (relative to even its own past attempts at mainstreaming its content) is predicated on a two-pronged approach of a) paying tribute to long-time comics readers with Easter eggs, and b) drawing in neophytes who *need not* read the source material, the former population is cautioned against spoiling decades-old storylines even while they are rewarded for their encyclopedic knowledge. This often occurs iconographically, i.e., through visual cues that hold no meaning for a first-time encounter, like Captain Marvel’s octogram appearing on Nick Fury’s pager in the AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR (US 2018, Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo) post-credits scene. 2) This fan awareness of the canon (constantly updating and rewriting itself in real-time) is native to superhero comics and more specifically, Dick Tomasovic claims, to the “complicit writing of Stan Lee, which set Marvel apart from its competitors in the 1960s” (166).

Tomasovic gives the meta example of Agent Coulson collecting Captain America trading cards in THE AVENGERS (US 2012, Director: Joss Whedon): “The film multiplies disguised references and allusions to create a sense of collusion with fans, enhancing the feeling of community to the point of momentarily breaking the logic of the story” (166). Coulson as audience proxy is thus satisfying to the extent that audiences substitute (passive, objective) suspension of disbelief with the pleasure of vicarious self-insertion or recognition/mirroring. Coulson is a nerd, one of us; we even have a character named The Collector. Coulson performs fan *jouissance* or *moe*—briefly, affect or intense emotion toward a fictional character—within the storyworld itself, as a character fangirling over another character who until recently did not ‘exist’ within the same reality (read: temporality) as him. This example also fascinatingly demonstrates the baroque spatialization of time. Captain America *should not* exist within the same chronotope as Coulson, but through convoluted comic-book narrative, we have an overlapping of his truncated temporality (cryopreservation) over the real-time continuity of the film or cinematic real ‘history.’ Ever since AVENGERS: ENDGAME (US 2019, Director: Anthony Russo

and Joe Russo), which broke the viewer contract in three words with “5 Years Later,” the stakes have shifted. Through time travel reified as an occupation of *past cinematic space* (the actors walking onto the digitally recreated ‘sets’ of past MCU films), the Snap was reversed, but a certain finality reverberated through the film to our reality, into Disney+ and even other studios, like Sony Pictures’ SPIDER-MAN: FAR FROM HOME (US 2019, Director: Jon Watts). Fans needed actors Robert Downey Jr. and Chris Evans’s confirmations that their contracts were officially ended to accept that their characters were truly dead. The temporality of the MCU, already overwrought and unsustainable, must now reckon with that disconnect in Phase 4.

Spoiler culture is a response to a temporal flattening, a ubiquitous information dump, which demeans the experience of the here and now. One either seeks a leaping forward with privileged (teleological) knowledge, or the accelerated experience of viewing *in time for* a larger, inescapable cultural discussion. This is exacerbated by the MCU’s mastery of transmedia storytelling, deferring closure and telescoping narrative anticipation of media events years into the future through staggered end credit scenes and Phase-specific announcements. WANDA VISION acknowledges its inherited burden of overdetermination as (merely) a suturing product between films and Phases, and trolls its audience and fandom accordingly. For comics fans, the futurity that propels a serial medium (“Find out next issue!”) and stimulates the pleasure of adaptation (fantasy casting, speculation over potential storylines) renders content less susceptible to traditional spoiling; instead, spoiling for a plot-aware community hinges on the revelation of *fan service*, its original Japanese term defined by its *superfluity* to the plot. The plot of SPIDER-MAN: FAR FROM HOME is irrelevant—and not particularly remarkable—but its spoiler warnings center on pure fan service, such as Andrew Garfield and Tobey Maguire completing the famous Spider-Men meme in an instance of peak self-referentiality (fig. 1). I say “pure” because, through *diegetic* retconning, the multiversal collision of the film was rendered meaningless for all but us and (MCU) Peter Parker, who—after satisfying fans of all three franchises—has earned our goodwill to support him in an ingeniously avaricious *tabula rasa* franchise. What better than an *in-universe* reboot to ensure no shortage of stories to sell?

Likewise, the deflection of WANDA VISION spoilers was fixated on fan service. Weekly social media responses hyped the appearances of every tangential comics character, from Mephisto to Emma Frost to Magneto, responding, in fairness, to the deliberate placement of Easter eggs calibrated to maximize canonical fan knowledge. To contextualize the red herrings: they all spring



Fig. 1: The famous Spider-Man meme recreated with three incarnations of Spider-Man

from a refusal of compartmentalization in media that the show itself deconstructs as gradually falling out of fashion since the 1950s; fan speculation arose out of the (trained) disbelief that this could *only* be a TV show. Potential guest appearances and cameos were teased; WANDA VISION required the ‘backing’ of larger-than-life figures like Dr. Strange, Captain Marvel, and Reed Richards (not even cast at the time of broadcast) to grant legitimacy and to cement an authoritative teleology: what is the next tie-in? This is a holdover from comics culture that—how soon one forgets—while lucrative, is and was viewed suspiciously as a desperate ploy to stave off the cancellation of a less popular character. Believe it or not, postmodern poster-boy Deadpool was once in this position.

Fans even linked franchises, as Emma Caulfield’s Dottie was theorized—and she herself falsely claimed—to be a central figure, given her prominence in the Whedonverse. The extrinsic clout that an actor—often one specializing in sci-fi or genre media—brings to fans is something I term “palimpsestic iconography” elsewhere (“Transformed”). Caulfield’s inhabiting of another fan favourite—Anya from *BUFFY* (US 1997–2003, Creator: Joss Whedon)—imbues her with a pleasurable recognizability to merged fandoms. Paul Bettany even teased the casting of “an actor that I’ve always wanted to work with, and we have fireworks together.” Fans ran wild with free association: Mephisto—the Devil—*THE DEVIL’S ADVOCATE* (US 1997, Director: Taylor Hackford)—Al Pacino! But the interview was a feint to distract from the appearance of White Vision, also played by none other than Paul Bettany. WANDA VISION confronts its overdetermined nature by trolling fans seeking to place it within a larger picture. The show, after all, is about the *hermetic* (the anomaly, the contained

TV set, the American nuclear family home, the small town) and the interstices between films, between action sequences, and between the broadcast and the reception.

Another way the show—affectionately, after all—trolls its fan base is by centering an audience proxy in an unprecedented manner. Unlike Coulson, whose fridging ironically sublimated his mediocre humanity in catalyzing literal gods to act, our human proxies in WANDAVISION anticipate, embody, then deflect and debunk *real-time* fan speculation throughout the show. Coulson is a collector of memorabilia. FBI agent Jimmy Woo and astrophysicist Darcy Lewis, however, watch, annotate, and analyze the contained WandaVision (hereafter underlined to distinguish it from the Disney+ show WANDAVISION), voicing questions already emerging on social media in real time. Their interpretive template is reified in Woo’s conspiracy board. Darcy’s heterodiegetic terminology conflates our experience with her contained one as a viewer: “she’s got a speaking part now”; “Wanda is using jump cuts”; “Twins—what a twist. What? I’m invested.” She even calls a Westview resident a “character,” with Woo correcting her with “real person.”

In their initial investigation into the WandaVision broadcast, Woo identifies “a reference to our reality” when Ultron is name-dropped. Director Hayward asks, “Is this authentic? Is it happening in real-time, recorded, fabricated?” eroding our categorization of reality, Marvel anchor reality, and homodiegetic meta sitcom reality in a neat tribute to what Umberto Eco dismisses as the “oneiric climate” of the superhero story; that is, what mainstream culture demeans as ‘bad comic-book writing.’ Geoff Klock clarifies: “Superhero literature already primes its avid readers to accept these kinds of contradictions and impossible situations because they have already assented to the contradictory continuity of many given superheroes. [...] suggesting that the reader is completely compromised from the beginning” (110). The show’s excess of content—a new decade, theme song, title sequence, aesthetic, and cast with every episode—confuses our careful fan curation of multiple realities, and hyperbolizes this same suspension of disbelief or conscious gullibility. In its most egregious or ingenious feint, WANDAVISION even teases the extradiegetic migration of the parallel but distinct X-MEN franchise through the uncanny ‘recasting’ of Evan Peters as Quicksilver. The miniseries concludes with a gesture to *a* multiverse, just not one that had merged (yet) with the recently acquired 21st Century Fox.

In a further thinning of multiversal boundaries, WANDAVISION’s metatext moreover confronts and consolidates *extrinsic* criticisms regarding diegetic and performative inconsistencies within the franchise. Agatha and Pietro

mock Wanda's (or, one supposes, actress Elizabeth Olsen's) erratic Sokovian accent; the show rewrites this as Wanda's performative ethnic covering in her media-inflected idealization of American life. Fan dissatisfaction with the retconning of Wanda's powers as the simplified telepathy and telekinesis tie-in to the Mind Stone is rescripted as Wanda's latent Scarlet Witch chaos and reality-altering magic, which *predate* her encounter with an Infinity Stone. Andrew J. Friedenthal identifies this "shift from a culture of information reliant upon footnotes to one reliant upon hyperlinks [...] it points to an acceptance of the mutability of that information" (154). *Zeitgeist* aside, comic fandom and the MCU, in particular, are uniquely attuned to 'real-time rewrites' that the contained WandaVision show stages but ultimately fails to institute.

What is fandom (including Wanda's own), after all, if not love persevering? Vision says goodbye to Wanda by defining his evolution as "a voice with no body, a body but not human, and now a memory made real." Not only is this Paul Bettany's trajectory from Jarvis's voice actor to the corporeal embodiment of Vision—an evolutionary reification of Tony Stark's original AI—but moreover a tribute to fans who have loved this character for decades. He is a voice with no body who, Angela Ndaliansis asserts, "live[s] in the memory and experiences of their readers," bringing that historicity to bear on the Vision's three-dimensional, if still fictional, realization (282).

Another fascinating evolution from the comics are the weekly WANDAVISION "spoilers without context" memes, which play on multimodal media's ambiguous, open link between signifier and signified (**fig. 2a-c**). Like the two-pronged Marvel approach to its old/new fanbases, the meme format—itsself reliant on comical dissonance between the palimpsestic layering of the image's now doubled meaning—makes use of the same iconography without *singular* meaning that renders its Easter eggs significant to one fan base and simultaneously harmless to another.

WANDAVISION ultimately offers a gentle, perhaps too subtle metacritique of our own relationship to media, and to the MCU in particular. We as viewers and fans *do not allow* for the types of narratives that Wanda is seeking to escape to and through anymore. Instead, we prioritize relentless futurity, the macro- and multi-cosmic, that leave no time (story or narrative) for grief, processing, nostalgia, historicity, or the self-contained story, all attempted through Wanda's embedded show. It is significant that her WandaVision is cancelled after seven episodes, segueing us into Episode 9: THE SERIES FINALE, where we are reconstituted within the familiar futurity and contextual meaning-making of the MCU. Wanda's backwards-oriented grief (not even resolved yet!) is eclipsed by the anticipatory excitement surrounding the

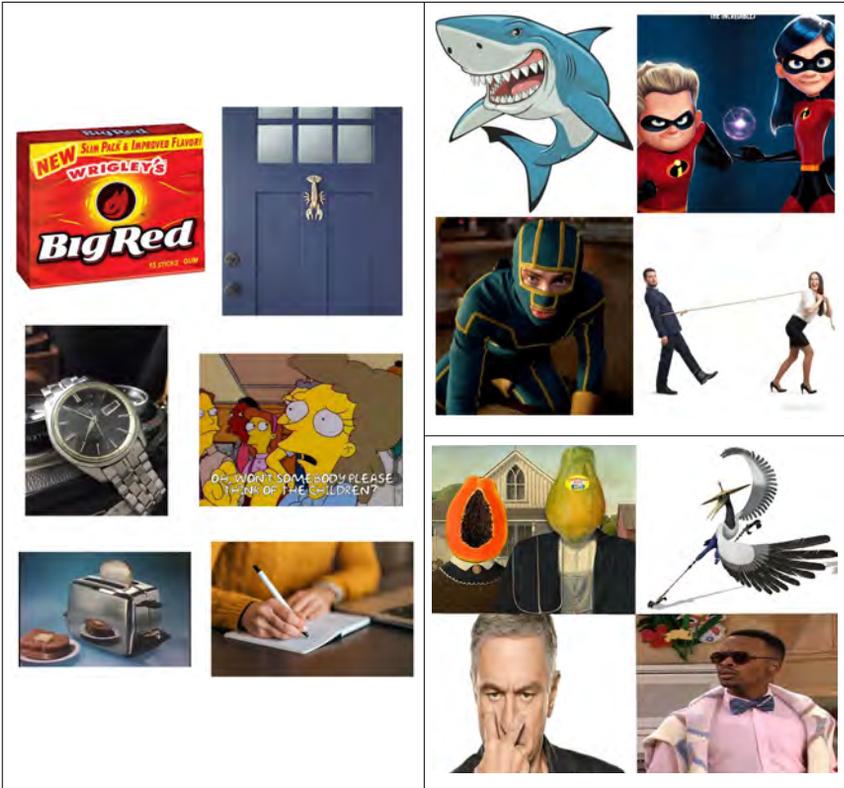


Fig. 2a-c: Three sets of WANDA VISION spoilers without context

debut of *Photon*, *THE MARVELS* (US 2023, Director: Nia DaCosta), *AGATHA ALL ALONG* (US 2025, Creator: Jac Schaeffer), and *DOCTOR STRANGE AND THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS*. Television in Wanda's world is serial, to be sure, but it is also episodic.

In another metatextual enactment, it is Wanda—and, tellingly, not the viewer—who suffers from event fatigue, and yet, she must wearily be subsumed to narrative at the close of this televisual experiment. Even the deeply personal, bodily, intimate experience of motherhood is coopted by the corporation, which has diegetically tricked Wanda into literal production of the next generation of Young Avengers. Even though *WANDA VISION* is able to demonstrate the beauty and originality in this kind of retro small-scale storytelling, the spoiler frenzy surrounding the show proves that the MCU fandom is not ready for, or has moved on from, the show Wanda herself produced, with its curated nostalgia for Americana and a particularly American

worldview that ultimately fails her as vicarious escapism. She enters Westview as a grieving, unstable, Sokovian refugee as Wanda Maximoff, but must ‘catch up to’ her prophesied incarnation (itself a retcon) as the Scarlet Witch, the living weapon. Disney and Marvel also continue to neglect to comment on the American militarism that birthed the Avengers: see the irrefutable popularity of Iron Man, whose Stark Industries features so prominently in Wanda’s traumatic past.

WANDA VISION, and all the Disney+ series to date, center on trauma: the interstices and the aftermath of the ekphrastic, glorified violence of the films. The convergent temporalities in the show—the calendrical; graduating through the decades; Tommy and Billy’s accelerated growth; Wanda and Agatha triptychally ‘walking through’ the sets of older MCU films; Monica re-manifesting post-Blip—are rendered comically insufficient when Vision reminds us in Episode 7: BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL (US 2021, Director: Matt Shakman) that for Wanda, the events of *our* past few years are “for her ... mere weeks ago.” On the one hand, the complex, postmodern formatting of WANDA VISION deflates weekly spoilers through misdirection and continual rewriting that diminishes the transformatively multiversal to the bathetic—the self-reflexive juvenility of Ralph Bohner. But more importantly, it compels the viewer to literally shift aspect ratios to the small screen, to a *historicized* MCU where grief must be processed in real time, where a refugee and heavily-accented immigrant woman curates and paces her own narrative, one which walks the audience through a metatextual examination of our own relationship to media itself.

Filmography

- AGATHA ALL ALONG. Creator: Jac Schaeffer. US 2025.
THE AVENGERS. Director: Joss Whedon. US 2012.
AVENGERS: ENDGAME. Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. US 2018.
AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR. Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. US 2018.
BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER. Creator: Joss Whedon. US 1997–2003.
THE BOYS. Creator: Eric Kripke. US 2019– .
THE DEVIL’S ADVOCATE. Director: Taylor Hackford. US 1997.
DOCTOR STRANGE AND THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS. Director: Sam Raimi. US 2022.
THE FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER. Creator: Malcolm Spellman. US 2021.
THE MARVELS. Director: Nia DaCosta. US 2023.
SPIDER-MAN: FAR FROM HOME. Director: Jon Watts. US 2019.
WANDA VISION. Creator: Jac Schaeffer. US 2021.

- WANDAVISION S01E02: DON'T TOUCH THAT DIAL. Director: Matt Shakman. US 2021.
- WANDAVISION S01E05: ON A VERY SPECIAL EPISODE Director: Matt Shakman. US 2021.
- WANDAVISION S01E07: BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL. Director: Matt Shakman. US 2021.
- WANDAVISION S01E09: THE SERIES FINALE. Director: Matt Shakman. US 2021.

Works Cited

- Friedenthal, Andrew J. *Retroactive Continuity and the Hyperlinking of America*. UP of Mississippi, 2017.
- Gelly, Christophe. "Nestor Burma, from Léo Malet to Jacques Tardi, via Jacques-Daniel Norma: *120, rue de la Gare and Its Adaptations*." *Comics and Adaptation*, edited by Benoît Mitaine et al., translated by Aarnoud Rommens and David Roche, UP of Mississippi, 2015, pp. 84–97.
- Hong, Tiffany. "Transformed by Comics: The Murakamiverse, Palimpsestic Iconography, and Cumulative Meaning in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki." *Image [e] Narrative*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2016, pp. 57–67.
- King, Tom. *The Vision: Director's Cut*. Marvel Enterprises, 2018.
- . *The Vision: The Complete Collection*. Marvel Enterprises, 2019.
- Klock, Geoff. *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*. Continuum, 2006.
- Stein, Daniel. *Authorizing Superhero Comics: On the Evolution of a Popular Serial Genre*. The Ohio State UP, 2021.
- Walton, Saige. "Baroque Mutants in the 21st Century?: Rethinking Genre Through the Superhero." *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, edited by Angela Ndaliansis, Routledge, 2009, pp. 86–106

