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Vertigo outside Vertigo

Nicolas Labarre

DC's Vertigo imprint was created in 1993, under the helm of Editor Karen Berger, as an institutional umbrella for a number of preexisting titles whose tone, generic mix and intended readership set apart from the rest the publisher's line, but also for a host of new series and mini-series sharing these characteristics. After a long period of commercial decline and several unsuccessful relaunch attempts, it finally came to an end in 2019. Vertigo has generated a significant amount of fan and scholarly interest, with a specific focus on the imprint's first decade and on the series that led to its inception. This sustained engagement and the critical prominence of series such as *Sandman*, *Preacher* and *Transmetropolitan*, has resulted in Vertigo serving as a shorthand for the emergence of a variety of writing and publishing practices in the North American comics world. Among other things, the name of the label has come to designate the articulation of serial publication and trade collections, an engagement with popular genres from a literary and political prism, as well as the coexistence of creator-owned and publisher-controlled series (Lopes 2009; Round 2010; 2014; Dony 2014; Licari-Guillaume 2017; Ecke 2019, 198-205).

However, the common practice of using Vertigo itself and notable Vertigo series as exemplars for these practices has also served to obscure the role played by other labels, studios and publishing institutions that shared a comparable publishing agenda during the 1990s. Because scholarship builds upon existing research—both to construct incremental knowledge and to demonstrate one's inscription in a discursive community—the works deemed the most interesting by early scholars serve as privileged objects for later studies. As demonstrated by Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo, this process leads to a concentration of publication on a few notable authors—including Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman, respectively a key influence on Vertigo and the imprint's prominent author (Beaty and Woo 2016, 6-9)—and therefore tends to favor the exception over the norm. This paper does not seek to challenge the legitimacy of these choices or to argue against the importance of Vertigo, but it attempts to locate the label diachronically and synchronically, so as to take a more precise measure of its innovations.

To do so, this paper examines a number of the institutions that developed alongside Vertigo or in response to the label's success, in particular Dark Horse's creator-owned imprints, but also DC's own WildStorm studio (which left Image Comics in 1999). Through a focus on the circulation of individuals and aesthetic strategies between these institutions, it argues that Vertigo is best understood as the means by which a number of narrative and publishing

innovations reached a critical mass, in a privileged environment, rather than as a radical breakthrough.

Around Vertigo

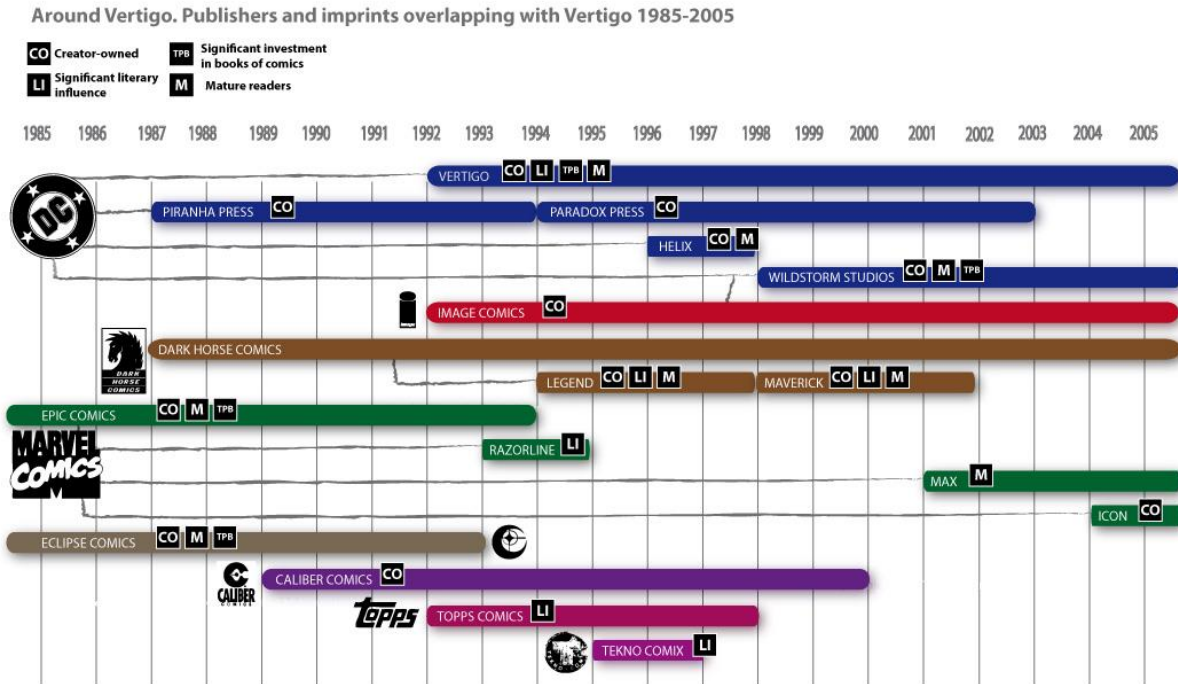


Fig.1 – Chronology of publishing institutions sharing visible traits with Vertigo (creator-owned series, literary influence, investment in comics in book form, focus on mature readers).

Much has been written about the genesis of Vertigo—by journalists, scholars, and by the main actors in the process—and the way DC Comics chose to organize a series of loosely connected titles into an imprint, under the supervision of Karen Berger, thus affirming a shared identity through the creation of an official architext (Genette 1992). This process results from internal dynamics within DC Comics, but it must also be understood in the broader context of comic book publishing in the US.

Figure 1 presents a chronology of various publishers and imprints whose productions significantly overlap with Vertigo’s, in terms of themes or creators, but also in that they straddled the border between the mainstream and the alternative.¹ This is of course a partial

¹ The distinction between mainstream and alternative is to a large extent historically contingent, reflecting a terminology in use in the Direct Market in the early 1980s to distinguish between legacy publisher-owned material, centered on fantasy and superheroes, and author-driven work published by newer companies, working in different genres (*The Comics Journal* 1978; Hatfield 2005; Dony et al. 2014; Singen 2014).

selection, since a number of other institutional actors could have been included—in particular, First Comics (1983-1991), Avatar Press (1996-) and Oni Press (1997-)—and since superhero-centric publishers such as Valiant (1989-1994 in its original form) on the one hand, and alternative publishers such as Fantagraphics on the other, also contributed to shaping the publishing environment in which Vertigo appeared and developed.² This chart immediately suggests that while Vertigo offered an unusual array of features, all of these features also existed elsewhere in the field, in a constellation of other publishing institutions. As a point of method: figure 1 suggests that these other institutions were somehow “incomplete” versions of Vertigo and lacked some of the label’s attributes, but this is merely an artifact of the chart’s construction. If the same chart had been built using Dark Horse comics as a point of reference, it would have taken into account the existence of media tie-ins—a Dark Horse specialty after 1989 (*Aliens*, *Terminator*, etc.)—among other publishers, and Vertigo would have appeared lacking in that respect. In other words, this chart demonstrates the difficulty in reconciling an exceptionalist view of Vertigo, which acknowledges its specificity, with a broader view of the field against which this exceptionalism was defined.

The first observation suggested by figure 1, beyond the striking fragmentation of the field of comic book publishing in the early 1990s, is the presence of creator-owned labels not only at DC Comics, but also at Marvel since 1982 and, after 1993, at relative newcomer Dark Horse (whose creator-owned titles predated the appearance of a specific imprint, and continued likewise after 2002). This indicates that the dynamic which led to the creation of the label at DC was articulated to concerns which also applied to these two publishers; furthermore, the discussions to start the Legend imprint at Dark Horse began in late 1992 (Powers 1993, 19), the same year Vertigo was conceived. The most important of these concerns appear to have been the need to carve a distinct space for creator-owned comics. I shall not rehash here the history of comics publishing, except to recall that a change in the distribution system in the mid-to-late 1970s, combined with the demonstrable success of underground comics in the first half of the decade led to the rapid and successful development of alternative and independent publishers at the turn of the 1980s (Gabilliet 2010, chap. 8; Hatfield 2005, 25-31; Duncan and Smith 2015, 56-61). These publishers allowed authors to retain the rights over their creation and offered them royalties as opposed to a flat payment, which substantially improved the page rate for the creators of successful series. While underground comix had provided a radically different experience than the mainstream comic books of the time, these independent publishers shared a retail space with Marvel and DC—the comic stores of the “direct market”—they often trafficked in similar genres, and they not infrequently engaged in an intertextual dialogue with these publishers.

² Thanks to Bart Beaty for suggesting a number of additions to the original list of publishers and labels.

With adjustments to their compensation model—in particular the introduction of royalties in 1981 and 1982 respectively—DC and Marvel retained their ability to attract major talents (Wright 2001, 262). For instance, Howard Chaykin, one of the breakthrough creators of the independent movement with *American Flagg!* came back to DC to produce distinctive but corporate-owned comics in the late 1980s, with two mini-series focusing on *The Shadow* (1986) and on *Blackhawk* (1988) (Costello 2017). Nevertheless, the creation of distinct imprints made it possible to retain the loyalty of established or emerging creators, without compromising the core identity and business model of the publisher. In that respect, it is worth noting that after 1986, Marvel’s Epic Comics gradually moved away from being a creator-owned label as sales declined (Thompson and Miller 1985, 68), and integrated a growing number of idiosyncratic licensed comics. This lack of an outlet for creator-owned work was certainly a contributing factor to the crisis that led several star artists to break away from the company and form Image Comics in 1991-1992, shortly before the creation of Vertigo.³

The changing status of comics creators is thus a crucial factor in understanding the proliferation of publishing institutions depicted in figure 1. While Vertigo was an important outlet for many creators, it was clearly seen as one option among many. Not before the late 1990s did DC/Vertigo routinely offer exclusive contracts to its creators (Garth Ennis in 1998, Mike Carey in 2001), and these typically ran for only a few years. Neil Gaiman, for instance, wrote stories for early Image Comics, but also for Dark Horse, Epic Comics, Eclipse Comics, Tekno Comix, Topps and Caliber, all between 1989 and 1996, even though most of his output during that period was published by DC, before and after the creation of Vertigo. Three of these cases, Eclipse’s *Miracleman* #17 to #22 (1990-1991), *Signal to Noise*, pre-published in the UK but published as a trade-paperback by Dark Horse in the US in 1992, and a story for Epic Comics’ *Hellraiser* in 1993, even have Gaiman paired with Dave McKean, his most emblematic creative partner at DC. While not all the central Vertigo creators were as mobile as Gaiman, a bibliographical study of their production shows that with the exception of Bill Willingham, the writer of *Fables* (who did work with publishers not mentioned on the chart, such as Fantagraphics), all of the major Vertigo contributors also published work for at least one of the other companies and imprints represented in figure 1.⁴

³ In a 1996 interview, Mike Mignola mentioned the end of the Epic label as one of the reasons why he went on to create *Hellboy* at Dark Horse (Brayshaw and Mignola 1996, 67).

⁴ Beyond the core contributors, such a list reflects a certain amount of subjectivity when assessing the importance of contributions that cannot easily be compared. I tried to take into account the amount of work produced for Vertigo but also the critical prominence of the works and their creators. As a result, I surveyed the careers of the following creators, in chronological order of their first Vertigo or proto-Vertigo works: Neil Gaiman (writer), Jamie Delano (writer), Grant Morrison (writer), Dave McKean (artist), Mark Buckingham (artist), Steve Dillon (artist), Peter Milligan (writer), Charles Vess (artist), Sean Phillips (artist), Duncan Fegredo (artist), Garth Ennis (writer), Jill Thompson (artist), J.M. DeMatteis (writer/artist), Peter Gross (writer/artist), Ed Brubaker (writer), Warren Ellis (writer),

This bibliographical study further points to the importance of Eclipse comics as a source for Vertigo's talents, notably through the publication of *Miracleman*, from 1985 to 1993. Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Marc Buckingham, Steve Dillon and Darick Robertson all published works for Eclipse along or prior to their first works at DC on Vertigo and proto-Vertigo titles.⁵ By contrast, Dark Horse did not provide new authors to the imprint, nor did it serve as an enviable destination: while numerous Vertigo creators did produce work for that publisher, they mostly lent their names to short stories in anthologies or to stand-alone tie-in comics. Strikingly, none of them participated in either Legend or Maverick, the two successive creator-owned labels at Dark Horse.⁶ This reflects the fact that Legend was conceived partly as a closed circle (Powers 1993, 19), but also suggests that financial conditions must have been roughly equivalent at the two imprints, and that neither had arguments to lure creators away from the other.⁷

Unsurprisingly, the other two main outlets for the Vertigo creators proved to be among the most durable of the institutions in figure 1: Image Comics, and WildStorm, once it became distinct from Image. Both functioned as subsequent publishing options, with creators producing significant work for Vertigo before moving to either of these two structures.⁸ Furthermore, it is only at WildStorm, which joined DC in January 1999 (Spurgeon 1998), that a number of these creators produced significant bodies of work, in the form of continuing series (such as Warren Ellis's *The Authority* and *Planetary*).

Thus, Vertigo creators did make use of these alternative outlets, and were in some cases actively courted by them (Epic's *Hellraiser* proudly announced Gaiman and McKean's story years before its actual publication, while Tekno Comics had a dedicated Neil Gaiman line). Conversely, with the exception of Eclipse before 1993 and WildStorm in the 2000s, these outlets failed to attract major contributions from Vertigo writers: they were mostly used for isolated or atypical projects, which often amounted to publicity stunts for the publishers in

Darick Robertson (artist), Brian Azzarello (writer), Bill Willingham (writer), Mike Carey (writer), Brian K. Vaughan (writer) and Brian Wood (writer).

The complete study can be found as a spreadsheet at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3744856>

⁵ It should be noted that before working for Eclipse, a number of these creators had been published in *2000AD* in Great-Britain. Eclipse provided a stepping stone for them in the US, but not their first publishing opportunity.

⁶ While he was in no way among the prominent early Vertigo creators, Mike Allred did produce some works for the DC imprint—for *Sandman*, *The Geek* and *Vertigo Jam*—before taking *Madman* to Dark Horse. He also made some Mike Allred also made significant contributions to Vertigo in the 2010's, notably with *iZombie* and *Art Ops*.

⁷ *Hellboy: Seeds of Destruction* (Dark Horse) and the early issues of *Preacher* (DC/Vertigo) sold about the same number of copies—about 15,000—through Capital City in 1994, 1995. Though the percentage of comics sold through that specific distributor for these two publishers is not documented, this suggests that the books existed on a comparable level of success.

⁸ Warren Ellis is a borderline case, since he started working simultaneously for WildStorm (in its pre-DC incarnation) and DC's Helix, later folded into Vertigo.

question.⁹ Figure 1 and its accompanying bibliographical survey simultaneously highlight Vertigo's inscription in a broader ecosystem and emphasize that it served as a center of gravity within that ecosystem, at least until the early 2000s.

Early trades

One of the key characteristics of Vertigo, as acknowledged by scholars and fans alike, is the imprint's reliance on book sales in addition to periodicals, as individual issues were collected into trade-paperbacks (see notably Round 2010), sporadically at first, then more consistently, starting in the late 1990s. Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, in particular, was collected systematically and early in its run, with forewords by acclaimed authors, locating the work in an intertextual network of ambitious popular culture writing; with *The Kindly Ones* story arc (#57-69), Gaiman even started tailoring his stories to the collected format (Foutch 2013). However, *Sandman* consistently sold nearly 100,000 copies per issue (Licari-Guillaume 2017, 154-55), even in the midst of the crash of the comic book market of the mid-1990s, and its profitability was not dependent on these collections, which only started appearing in late 1991, two years and a half after the beginning of the series, *after* its sales had begun to grow.¹⁰ Furthermore, most Vertigo and pre-Vertigo titles were not collected in this way—the Vertigo-era issues of *Animal Man* and *Swamp Thing* have not been reprinted to this day, for instance, and neither has *Shade, the Changing Man*, beyond its first narrative arc—and *Sandman* remained in a way *sui generis* in that regard as in many others. Isabelle Licari-Guillaume, in her doctoral thesis, quotes approvingly from Paul Levitz, who mentions Vertigo's role in developing the book format, then identifies Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson's *Transmetropolitan* as the first series whose financial balance hinged on the sales of trade-paperbacks, starting in 1999 (Levitz 2017; Licari-Guillaume 2017, 167).

These two historical moments warrant closer attention. It should be emphasized first that DC and Vertigo did not pioneer the trade-paperback format. Partly inspired by French albums, and sometimes directly translating them, various publishers experimented with the idea of combining serial publication with collected editions in the late 1970s, which was initially met with puzzlement (Labarre 2017, 110-12; Williams 2020). In the early 1980s, as mainstream publishers grappled with the idea of comics in book form, or “graphic novels,” the dominant model entailed publishing self-contained original content in what amounted to a luxury

⁹ While artists can typically produce about one comic book a month, most writers appear able to write several series at once. This means that artists committed to an ongoing series at Vertigo simply had no opportunity to explore alternatives. This being said, all of the artists under study contributed to more than one of the publishing outlets present in fig.1, between 1985 and 2005.

¹⁰ One of the key effects of these collections may have been the expansion of *Sandman*'s readership beyond the patrons of specialized comics stores, in particular female readers.

format. The publication of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* as single volumes in 1986 and 1987, following their respective serialized publications, is often described as a key moment in the shift towards a model favoring the compilation of current existing material (as opposed to the practice of curated collections, which was by then well-established, following the model of newspaper strips).¹¹ This transition was probably eased by the fact that both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* were self-contained stories rather than open-ended publications.

While other publishers than DC had experimented with the idea of reprinting ongoing comic book series before 1986—Marvel had printed collections of its comics version of the A-Team (*A-Team Storybook Comics Illustrated*, 1983), as well as G.I. Joe (*GI Joe The Trojan Gambit*, 1983), Iron-Man (*Power of Iron Man*, 1984) or *Six from Sirius* (1984), while First Publishing sold an oversized collection of the first two issues of *American Flagg!* in 1985—these efforts were scattered and unsystematic. For instance, *Power of Iron Man* collects the notable “Demon in a bottle” storyline, published in *Iron Man* #120-128 five years before, with no other volume available to cover the rest of the title’s continuity. Similarly, when Eclipse, which had published some of the earliest graphic novels in the late 1970s, started putting out collections of the then-ongoing *Miracleman* after 1988, they did so with little to no apparent consideration for creating a unified line. The various covers each use a different design, from the color scheme to the typeface, even though the comic books themselves possessed a well-defined and consistent visual identity. The same observations apply to DC’s own collections of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* written by Alan Moore, whose two volumes, published in 1987 and 1990 in the wake of *Watchmen*, use entirely dissimilar cover designs.

While not entirely consistent, the early volumes of *Sandman*, starting in 1991, and those of the early collected Vertigo series, such as *Preacher* (from 1996 onward) display a much more consistent styling from volume to volume but also across the publishing line, closely mirroring the design of the comic books themselves.¹² Vertigo did not invent trade paperbacks, but the imprint’s main series played a key role in the institutionalization of the format *as a way to reprint continuous runs of contemporary comic books without specific curation*. This long description should not obscure the fact that this mode of publication is precisely what trade paperbacks have been associated with for nearly two decades now.

¹¹ Jean-Paul Gabilliet notes that this transition was so abrupt it created a mini-crisis in the industry in 1988, caused by an overabundance of new titles (Gabilliet 2010, 148).

¹² This consistency certainly owes a lot to Dave McKean pioneering cover design, which provided *Sandman* and by extension Vertigo with a stable visual identity through striking multi-media collages, even as the interior art varied from issue to issue. Vertigo collections throughout the 1990s either reference McKean’s work or use painted covers with a presumably similar artistic intent. Brian Bolland also played a similar unifying role for otherwise graphically unstable series, such as *The Invisibles*.

The second key date in the history of Vertigo's role in the development of the comic book collection, the late 1990s with the publication of the first *Transmetropolitan* collections, is also worth examining in detail. The first collection, published in October 1998, is actually an unusual object, as it merely collects the first three issues of the series into a slim, 72-page volume (the first printing of that volume is the only one to mention the short-lived science-fiction Helix imprint, under which *Transmetropolitan* was briefly published before moving to Vertigo). It was then followed in January 1999 by a no-less unusual second volume, collecting issues #4-12, for a total of 208 pages, and it is only with the third volume (Sept. 1999) that the series settled into the now-standard pattern of collecting 6 issues per book, a format that was maintained for the rest of the series' publication history. This lingering inconsistency also affected other Helix/Vertigo titles, as the 12 issues of *Michael Moorcock's Multiverse* were published in one volume in October 1999, while most of the series published within the imprint simply went uncollected. By contrast, when DC/Vertigo reprinted *Transmetropolitan* in 2009, the first two collections were reorganized, to conform to the 6-issue standard.

The fourth volume of the original series of *Transmetropolitan* TPBs only appeared in August 2000, as the collected volumes had caught up with the serial publication. By that time, however, DC Comics had actually published no less than five other Warren Ellis collections, using or approximating the 6-issue format.¹³ None of these series were published by Vertigo, and crucially, three of the collections reprinted issues from *Stormwatch*, an ambitious and referential superhero series, which had sold so poorly that it was relaunched in 1997, then ignominiously canceled in 1998.¹⁴ Though sales figures for these collected editions lack precision around these years, *Stormwatch Vol. 2 Lightning Strikes* outsold all the available volumes of *Transmetropolitan* in 2000 (Miller n.d.). Crucially, this is the first year in which TPBs in the 6-issue format appeared among the top-selling graphic novels: all of them were published by DC, all of them contained Warren Ellis's works but only half of them under the Vertigo imprint, while the others were published under the WildStorm banner. Only a year later, in 2001, the format was adopted by Marvel for its Ultimate line—which was also systematically collected—before coming in use for the rest of the publisher's output.

In other words, while Vertigo played a crucial role in institutionalizing trade-paperbacks to collect ongoing series, the label does not appear to have been at the heart of the next shift: the collection of even mediocre-selling books, in a nearly standardized format, which was soon

¹³ *The Authority: Relentless* contains 8 issues, reflecting the fact that *The Authority*, as written by Ellis, functioned in 4-issue narrative arcs.

¹⁴ "Ignominiously," because most of the series' characters were dispatched off-panel and out of their own titles, in the Ellis-penned *Wildcats/Aliens* crossover (Image/Dark Horse).

embraced by the entire industry.¹⁵ That force appears to have been the Warren Ellis brand – at a time when the author was simultaneously writing three acclaimed and influential series, *The Authority*, *Planetary* and *Transmetropolitan* in addition to having an early online presence – which DC sought to capitalize upon. While *Stormwatch* predated the acquisition of WildStorm studio by DC, the studio soon developed into a valuable destination for Vertigo creators beyond Warren Ellis and became an early privileged site for the standardization of a trend Vertigo had helped usher in.

Rampant intertextuality

Another key Vertigo characteristic, its reliance on wide-ranging intertextuality, referencing popular genres and works as well as ostensibly legitimate literary sources, is also best understood in the context of a wider publishing environment. This characteristic approach did not originate at Vertigo, and was also present in combination in contemporary publishing outlets, though usually in slightly different configurations.

However, while it would be easy to identify isolated examples, or simply to point to the fact that Alan Moore, the role-model for the Vertigo authors (Murray 2010, 39; Licari-Guillaume 2017, 153; Ecke 2019, 200-201) and a creator whose work made extensive use of intertextuality, was actively collaborating with a variety of publishers at the same time, this would in no way disprove the consensual assessment of Vertigo as a singular locus for this approach. Nor would a more statistical approach be conclusive, for even a measure of the proportion of ostensibly metafictional narratives in Vertigo would tell us very little about the relative visibility and cultural impact of these series. There is, to put it differently, no convincing method to prove or disprove Vertigo's *singularity* in that regard. What we can do instead is provide a detailed survey of the use of intertextuality in parallel publishing institutions.

Dark Horse's imprint, Legend, provides abundant examples of such practices. Like most of the publishing institutions listed in figure 1, it is not only posterior to the founding proto-Vertigo works, but also to Vertigo itself. Within the imprint, Dark Horse notably published stories by John Byrne and Paul Chadwick, which make abundant use of intertextual clues from high and popular culture, but arguably do not make a feature of them.¹⁶ However, the imprint also included the first arc of Frank Miller's *Sin City*, *The Big Fat Kill*, as well as Mike Allred's

¹⁵ By contrast, the *Sandman* collections published between 1993 and 1997 reprinted a variable number of issues. Some of them (including the final one, "The Wake") did include six issues, but others reprinted only four ("Dream Country") or up to nine ("Brief Lives").

¹⁶ The first issue of John Byrne's *Babe* is entitled "A Dark and Stormy Night", while its cover is a pastiche of Botticelli, for a story which combines noir pastiche, superheroes and extraterrestrial invasion from creatures which look like *Mars Attacks!* Aliens. For good measure, the series include a *Spawn* joke in #3, along with numerous quotes and quips and an extended visual joke on Disney's version of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* in #4.

Madman and the first four volumes of Mike Mignola's *Hellboy*. These three series foreground their intertextuality respectively in the form of an overt exacerbation of *noir*, as a madcap collage of pop-culture references not entirely unlike Vertigo's *Shade, the Changing Man*, and as a horror-inflected engagement with sources ranging from Shakespeare to H.P. Lovecraft. While *Hellboy* has sometimes been described as a frustrated Marvel series, due to the graphic influence of Jack Kirby on Mignola's style, it also shares many traits with the prevalent use of intertextuality in the proto-Vertigo and early Vertigo titles. Upon joining Legend, Mignola described his series as akin to *Sandman* (Powers 1993, 20), and in a later interview for *The Comics Journal*, he famously quipped:

... what I'm reading right now is probably a lot of the same stuff that Neil Gaiman's got on his bookshelf. I've got the same books, I can make the same references. So I'm taking the same subject matter but treating it in a more Kirby kind of way. There are things that Neil did in *Sandman* where I said, "This needs a sledge-hammer fight!" (Brayshaw and Mignola 1996, 86).

Scholarly writing on Mignola confirms this self-analysis, and emphasizes the distinctive blend of general erudition and genre embrace at work in *Hellboy* and in the author's work more generally (O'Connor 2010; Bukatman 2016). Like Gaiman, Mignola uses a horror framing tinged with superhero elements—both books start with explicit superhero elements, from a shared fictional universe, and both books shed them quickly to establish their own mythology—as a framing device in which a variety of preexisting genres, narratives and intertextual references can be incorporated. While *Hellboy* differs from the main early Vertigo titles in its lack of what Beaty and Woo describe as a "British accent" (64), an ostensible distance from American popular culture which shaped the texts as well as their readers' response, and in the fact that Mignola initially worked as both artist and writer,¹⁷ it does display numerous traits that have been associated with the DC label, including an embrace of the monstrous (Round 2009), a taste for gruesome violence, and again, an omnipresent intertextual network. In fact, in the aforementioned *Comics Journal* interview, Christopher Brayshaw suggests that Mignola's work in the mid 1990s had more in common with *Sandman* than most of the Vertigo output (which he dismissively refers to as "the Vertigo stuff").

While *Hellboy* serves as a prime example of a book resembling Vertigo's, this observation can be applied to several other publishing institutions from figure 1. Numerous series published by WildStorm in the early 2000s, in particular, engage in a variety of highly self-aware and intensely referential narrative strategies, while playing on the margins of the superhero genre.

¹⁷ The first *Hellboy* arc was co-scripted by John Byrne, because Mignola was not confident in his writing abilities, but all the narrative arcs published under the Legend then Maverick imprints were written and drawn by Mignola himself. There are few occurrences of writers illustrating their own books at Vertigo, though Peter Gross worked for 25 issues in this dual role on the ongoing *Books of Magic* series (#51 to #75, 1998-2000). Later examples include Rick Veitch for *Army@Love* (2007-08).

Warren Ellis, John Cassaday and Laura Martin's oft commented *Planetary* serves as an obvious and possibly over-studied example of this mode of writing, notably including a tongue-in-cheek episode which appears to position WildStorm as a new and improved iteration of early Vertigo (Klock 2002; Kukkonen 2010; Labarre, Perna, and Rivera 2015; Licari-Guillaume 2017; Singer 2018). However, Joe Casey and Ashley Wood's *Automatic Kafka* (2002-03), the visually striking story of an android's mid-life crisis, is no less convincing an example. In its expressionistic visual style and its narrative, it echoes *Shade, the Changing Man*, and its willingness to engage with American national narratives and symbols, as well as with classical literary figures; though as with most WildStorm books, it embraces superhero tropes more directly than its predecessor does.¹⁸

While Dark Horse's Legend imprint and the WildStorm books under consideration are all posterior to Vertigo, a substantial number of the books and series published by Eclipse and Marvel's Epic label also display evidence of this overarching intertextuality. To take but one example, Rick Veitch's "Abraxas and the Earthman," originally published in Marvel's *Epic Illustrated* (1982-83), is a baroque and psychedelic retelling of *Moby Dick* at the intersection between body horror and science fiction; Rick Veitch is of course also a frequent Alan Moore collaborator, for a variety of publishers.

More broadly, comic books have invested in often complex intertextual references since their inception, for a wide variety of purposes. From the 1980s to the 2010s, adaptations, sequels and parodies abound, even as the most mundane serial superhero offerings contain nods and allusions to shared narratives and specific intertexts, including respected literary works, as long as readers could be expected to identify them. Vertigo occupies a special place in that broad spectrum, and offers not an absolute exception, but a difference of degree both in the frequency of these references and in their centrality in the most visible series of the imprint. "Abraxas and the Earthman" is no less ambitious narratively than most Vertigo series, but it was so marginal for Marvel and Epic that it was only collected and reprinted in 2006.

There is no ground to deny that rampant intertextuality and an overt longing for established literature—though often a superficial one (Dony 2014; Licari-Guillaume 2017, 221-22)—were part of Vertigo's identity. Once again, however, these strategies represent an intensification of trends that existed in other contemporary publishing institutions, and they were also adopted and adapted by later publishers and imprints.

¹⁸ This proximity with the superhero genre, which is frequent but not systematic in WildStorm titles—Global Frequency comes to mind—can be explained by the fact that WildStorm relied on a loose fictional universe in its Image era, by DC's likely intent to maintain a distinction between the two imprints, but also by a historical change since the early 1990s, as the superhero genre appeared in dire need of a reinvention in the early 2000s, following the crash of the direct-market in the middle of the decade.

Similar observations could be made about other distinct Vertigo traits, from the label's frequent political overtones (Dark Horse's *Concrete*, First's *American Flagg* and many others contained explicit political engagement) to its use of British artists (Eclipse published *Miracleman*, Epic had *Marshal Law*), to its focus on mature readers (a label which had been embraced by the "ground-level" publications of the late 1970s and by the independents in the 1980s).

Conclusion

To assign a distinct identity to Vertigo, even in the first ten years of its existence, is to map the perfect boundaries of a commercial structure onto a more fluid field of constrained artistic productions driven by personal aspirations and opportunities, and by constant personal and aesthetic exchanges. To use a central example, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean were a key creative partnership at Vertigo (and before that), but they also plied their trade for multiple other publishers in the 1990s, individually or together, and in these other endeavors they did not seek to create distinct creative personas. The number of opportunities offered to leading creators in the field of comics in the direct market era strongly reduced the power of publishers to impose any form of exclusivity on these creators. Vertigo benefitted from this fluidity, attracting established talents which had previously worked for other publishers, and reaching a critical mass which allowed it to become an exemplar for certain trends within the industry: notably the shift to collected edition and metatextuality with a literary bent. However, the aforementioned fluidity also meant that Vertigo never had an exclusive hold on these trends. The strength of the label's name, which is also predicated on the early decision to leverage the *Sandman* brand, and the convenience for critics of working on a bounded corpus with absolute borders has nevertheless helped turn Vertigo into a paradigmatic example of all of these trends. This may be accurate to a large extent, but this choice obscures the broader context and complex interactions, which produced and sustained these trends beyond the Vertigo moment, and into the larger comics industry.

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