

Introduction: Vertigo Comics

Isabelle Licari-Guillaume

This special issue is the result of a collective effort that began in late 2018 with “Twenty-five Years of Vertigo”, a symposium that I co-organised with Siegfried Würtz at Université Bourgogne Franche-Comté. Little did we know that Vertigo was in fact living its final moments, and that the imprint would publish its last issues in late 2019, with only a couple of surviving titles being moved over to DC Black Label. Many of the presentations given that day were tinged with nostalgia for the old days of the imprint and the monumentally successful string of series that it produced throughout the nineties and early noughties – *that* Vertigo, of course, was already gone. However, many of the scholars present were also determined to explore the whole twenty-five years of Vertigo’s existence, refusing to limit the last decade of its existence to a mere footnote in the study of brighter days.

As argued by Ben Woo and Bart Beaty in *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time*, the authors most readily associated with Vertigo, notably Grant Morrison, Neil Gaiman and (although his work was only retrospectively assimilated into the imprint) Alan Moore “stand at the apex of the canon as defined by participants in traditional comics fandom” (Beaty and Woo 60). Their success stems from their peculiar position in the field as texts that are both sophisticated and popular—that is to say, texts that bridge the divide between mainstream and alternative comics. Beaty and Woo ascribe this position to the entire imprint, arguing that “[t]hroughout the 1990s and 2000s, DC’s Vertigo imprint was the leading publisher of ‘ground-level’ work in American comics” (55-56). Interestingly, in a footnote, the two scholars once again position Vertigo as a ghost imprint whose importance faded in the late 2000s: “the end date here partially marks the departure of Vertigo’s most prominent writers, followed by Karen Berger’s own exit in 2013, but more importantly the sense that other publishers—notably Image Comics’ creator-owned titles and the comics imprints of major trade presses—have caught up” (56).

Interest in Vertigo is not new in fan and academic circles, and important articles have been written on the subject over the last ten years: comics scholar Julia Round stressed the ambiguous cultural status of the line (Round, ‘Is This a Book?’) and the processes of Gothic revision that shape its poetics (Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels*), while Chris Murray and Ben Little provided complementary explorations of the cultural history of the Invasion (Murray; Little). They have since been joined notably by Jochen Ecke, who recently contributed an important monography on the British Invasion and its roots in British comics (Ecke), and Christophe Dony, to whom we owe, among other things the concept of Vertigo’s

“rewriting ethos” (Dony). To this, we must add a number of studies which are not academic works but nonetheless constitute important source material for the study of Vertigo, such as the many books produced by Sequart Organisation, notably Carpenter’s *The British Invasion!* (Carpenter), and countless other works of often invaluable insight. Despite all this, there is still a need for more material focused on Vertigo as an imprint, rather than on one or several of the individual authors associated with its success. Remarkably, no monographic study on the imprint yet exists, which is perhaps the most glaring sign that comics scholars do still have work to do regarding Vertigo.

This special issue constitutes an entry point for new scholars interested in Vertigo studies, allowing them to become acquainted with the array of methodologies and approaches that can be applied to analyse the imprint. However, it also provides readers with an opportunity to explore some of the lesser-known areas of Vertigo studies: the essays assembled here tend to question the accepted narrative of Vertigo as a unique, ground-breaking imprint which produced its most prominent work in the 1990s, and single-handedly shook up the comics status quo before going gently into the dark night of the twenty-first century.

In the opening article, I provide an overview of the development of the imprint that seeks to shed light on its editorial history, beyond the success of the first decade which has been amply discussed by fans and scholars alike. I delve into the later years of the imprint, how it dealt with its own legacy, while struggling with new corporate constraints and with competition from other publishers.

Amadeo Gandolfo expands on those issues, discussing Vertigo’s paradoxical attempt at continuing comics series that are closely associated with the star writers of the late eighties and early nineties. He examines the imprint’s later versions of *The Dreaming* (a *Sandman* spinoff) and *Doom Patrol*, analysing the contradictory politics of distinction and homage, and the way contemporary writers and artists negotiate past influences.

Jean-Paul Gabilliet takes the reader back to Vertigo’s foundation, seeking to go beyond the conventional narrative of daring authors and editors by focusing on reception, a rarely adopted angle. He uncovers the early critical reception of the imprint through the two leading comics criticism magazines of the 1990s, *The Comics Journal* and *Wizard*.

Nicolas Labarre gleefully eviscerates the myth of Vertigo’s exceptionalism by demonstrating “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.” He shows that none of the traits usually held up to demonstrate Vertigo’s unique editorial practices were in fact specific to that imprint.

Fanny Geuzaine expands on this iconoclastic streak, questioning Neil Gaiman's role as one of the main figures of the Vertigo line. She argues that this is not merely due to the commercial success of *Sandman*, and examines instead the aesthetic similarities between Gaiman's work and Vertigo as a whole. She also analyses their posture, showing that writer and imprint both deploy carefully constructed attitudes that shape the perception of their work.

Kate Polak remarks that there might in fact exist a similar echo between Karen Berger's ambiguous position as a woman in a male-dominated industry, and the feminist concerns of Vertigo titles. She looks at *Lucifer* in particular, arguing that the presence of women at Vertigo's top posts created a favourable context for the (admittedly often male) writers and artists of the imprint to explore issues of systemic disadvantage.

Thomas J. Brown's article adds to the examination of Vertigo's socially aware strand, by demonstrating that John Constantine (arguably one of Vertigo's most emblematic characters, and, at any rate, its most long-lived creation) was used in *Hellblazer* to address contemporary issues and explore the ills of present-day America.

As a counterpoint, Christophe Dony's work explores the postmodernist poetics of the Vertigo line, looking at *Jack of Fables* as an example of second-degree rewriting that replicates—and complexifies—the “rewriting ethos” that was already at the heart of *Fables*. In so doing, he takes stock of the current theoretical framework used to address Vertigo's poetics, while also offering proof that scholarly interest in the imprint should not be limited to its first decade.

Together, these contributions pave the way for future scholars of DC Comics and the Vertigo imprint. With the benefit of hindsight, they may well come to see Vertigo not just as one of the most noticeable comics brands of the nineties, but as an editorial venture which questioned issues of representation and authorship, of memory and of fiction, until the very end of its run.

Works Cited

Beaty, Bart, and Benjamin Woo. *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time: Symbolic Capital and the Field of American Comic Books*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Carpenter, Greg. *The British Invasion: Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison, and the Invention of the Modern Comics Book Writer*. Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2016.

Dony, Christophe. “The Rewriting Ethos of the Vertigo Imprint: Critical Perspectives on Memory-Making and Canon Formation in the American Comics Field.” *Comicalités*, Apr. 2014, <http://comicalites.revues.org/1918>.

- Ecke, Jochen. *The British Comic Book Invasion: Alan Moore, Warren Ellis, Grant Morrison and the Evolution of the American Style*. McFarland, 2019.
- Little, Ben. "2000AD: Understanding the 'British Invasion' of American Comics." *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives*, edited by Mark Berninger et al., McFarland, 2010.
- Murray, Chris. "Signals from Airstrip One: The British Invasion of Mainstream American Comics." *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts*, edited by Paul Williams and James Lyons, UP of Mississippi, 2010, pp. 31–44.
- Round, Julia. *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach*. McFarland, 2014.
- . "‘Is This a Book?’ DC Vertigo and the Redefinition of Comics in the 1990s." *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts*, edited by Paul Williams and James Lyons, UP of Mississippi, 2010, pp. 14–30.