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"In Which a Wake is Held"—the Life and Death of Vertigo

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Introduction

When discussing Vertigo's influence on the comics field, critics and researchers often focus on the early days of the imprint, starting with its creation in 1993 when it was most closely associated with star writers such as Neil Gaiman and Grant Morrison. Paradoxically, much of Vertigo's fame is rooted in the pre-Vertigo days, the four- or five-year period during which Karen Berger developed the roster of titles whose collective success provided the initial impetus for the formation of the imprint. Celebrated series such as *Hellblazer* (1988-2013) or *Sandman* (1989-1996) were well under way when the imprint itself appeared, and yet even today they epitomise Vertigo's trademark interest in the weirdness and horrors of daily life.

Of course, Vertigo continued to yield major titles in the years that followed, notably *Preacher* (1995-2000), *Y: The Last Man* (2002-2008), and *Fables* (2002-2015), to name only the best-selling series. Yet the imprint never quite managed to reproduce the enthusiasm of its early years, positioning itself as a space of experimentation and creative freedom within DC Comics but failing to reproduce the commercial successes of titles such as *Sandman*, which had once managed to compete with DC's bestselling superhero titles (Baker 28). Over time, Vertigo retained its focus on adult themes, using the "mature readers" tag to indulge increasingly in the transgressive pleasures of strong language, violence and (ultimately mild) sexual content. Yet it also solidified around different generic paradigms, moving beyond fantasy and horror to explore, and often subvert, popular genres such as the western, noir realism, science-fiction, and fairy tales.

In this introductory essay, I seek to provide historical context for the discussions contained in this volume, while also taking stock of Vertigo's history, only a few months after its demise was officially announced. In particular, I will examine the later years of the imprint, which often remain under-analysed in scholarly discussions. Conversely, I will not take into account the pre-Vertigo years of the British Invasion, whose story has been abundantly documented (Carpenter; Ecke).

I suggest that Vertigo's history be divided into three periods. The first starts with the birth of the imprint in 1993 and ends roughly a decade later, with 2002 marking the conclusion of Warren Ellis's *Transmetropolitan*, arguably the last of the great "British Invasion" series. The second period, from 2003 to 2012, brought a number of changes, as Vertigo's style was widely

copied by the comics industry, while the imprint had to deal with contractual changes imposed from above. Finally, Karen Berger's departure in 2013 was a major turning point, and during this third period the imprint struggled to reconnect with its past, through reboots and miniseries that seldom found their audience. Thus, although many fans mourned the imprint's imminent death in 2019, the news did not come as a surprise.

1993-2002: Preludes and Nocturnes

The imprint's official birth date is easy to locate: Vertigo's black-and-white logo, which was created by Berger's husband Richard Bruning, appeared for the first time on the covers of six ongoing series cover-dated March 1993 (available for sale in January 1993): *Animal Man* #57, *Doom Patrol* #64, *Hellblazer* #63, *Shade, The Changing Man* #33, *Sandman* #47, *Swamp Thing* #129. In addition to the cosmetic change of its main titles, Vertigo also launched a handful of miniseries, notably the much-awaited *Death: The High Cost of Living*, a spin-off of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman,* and *Enigma*, scripted by Peter Milligan, the writer behind *Shade*. The birth of the imprint had been announced in the editorial columns over the previous months; for example, issue #29 of *Shade, the Changing Man* (Nov. 1992) contained an ad for the upcoming imprint, with the slogan "Vertigo: Get Anxious." At the end of the year 1992, DC also published *Vertigo Preview* #1, which collected various excerpts from the books to come.

These series were strongly associated with the so-called British Invasion, which had begun at DC in the mid-1980s. All the aforementioned series had been associated with star British writers, although some were later passed on to different teams—for example, *Doom Patrol* #64 was Rachel Pollack's debut issue, while *Swamp Thing* by 1993 was under the care of Nancy Collins. The "British Invasion" narrative played a crucial role in the emergence of Vertigo, in the sense that it reinforced the readers' impression of continuity between the various series. For example, in the letter columns of the period, many readers addressed the similarity between series such as *Swamp Thing*, *Hellblazer*, and *Sandman*, attributing it not only to their atmosphere and themes, but also frequently to the Britishness of their writers. This impression was reinforced by the intradiegetic links that existed between the various series, in the form of cameos and crossovers, for example with Constantine (a character initially created in *Swamp Thing*, and given his own title in *Hellblazer*) appearing in the pages of *Sandman* #3.

Early on Vertigo was based on many of the features that, in fan discourses, were associated with the British Invasion, such as the critical rewriting of pre-existing genres and narratives, a taste for the bizarre or the occult, and a willingness to engage with contemporary social issues (Licari-Guillaume; Ecke; Dony). In particular, Vertigo creators addressed the plight of people

living on the margins of society; in a realistic mode of writing, this meant focusing on rough sleepers (Neil Gaiman's "Hold Me" in *Hellblazer* #27), hippies (in *Hellblazer* and *Swamp Thing*) or queer people (Wanda, Fox and Hazel in *Sandman*, Katy and Lenny in *Shade*), while in fantasy narratives it involved characters who often failed to live up to their heroic expectations by being too inefficient (*Animal Man*), too sensitive (*Shade*) or simply too bizarre (*Doom Patrol*). The series consistently displayed environmental and feminist concerns, and repeatedly challenged conservatism and bigotry.

The imprint's title, "Vertigo," was somehow programmatic. First of all, it signalled Berger's efforts to question the conventions of the medium. As she explained in an interview: "I wanted a name that sort of connoted a sense of upheaval [...] and Vertigo did just that" (Daniels 255). Of course, the word "Vertigo" also resonates with the Alfred Hitchcock film of the same title (1958) whose guiding themes are love, crime and mental illness, quite in keeping with the preoccupations of Berger's comics. In her introduction to *Vertigo Preview* #1, she explains the rationale behind the title:

> We've been called horror, mature, sophisticated, dark fantasy, cutting edge and just plain weird. Tired of misnomers, and not even having a collective name, we decided to define ourselves.
>
> It couldn't be anything that sounded safe. It had to be a word that evoked the sense of danger and edginess that you get from reading our titles. And it had to sound cool.
>
> Believe me, this was a lot easier said than done. After months of strange lists that ranged from Third Eye to Threshold to Nightside to Screaming Room, we finally fell upon the name that represented our level-headed editorial outlook the best. So, naturally, we chose a dizzying psychological disorder that's associated with fear of heights. (Berger 1)

This explicitly self-defining text underlines several crucial points regarding the newly-founded imprint: its adult readership (and the thematic concerns that come with it), the importance of genre narratives (horror, fantasy, crime) and the desire to stand out from the comics crowd (with Vertigo alternatively labelled as "cutting-edge" and "weird"). Implicitly, Berger's self-derisive tone at the end of the extract also clarifies the role played by (dark) humour within the imprint.

Therefore, vertigo is used as a metaphor for the subversion of the reader's horizon of expectation. It is an artistic vertigo insofar as Berger claims she is pushing the limits of what can be printed in the field of mainstream comics, both in terms of writing and of graphic quality. Visually, the imprint in its early years employed creators with nonconformist and easily recognizable styles—such as Dave McKean, Duncan Fegredo, Paul Johnson, Brian Bolland or Brendan McCarthy. Later, they were joined by the likes of Frank Quitely and Glenn Fabry. All of them are from the UK, which speaks to the idea that the British Invasion was not merely led by writers, but also, and equally importantly, by artists. McKean in particular was famous for his mixed media work, which in a pre-digital age brought together collage, painting,

found objects, tri-dimensional sculptures, etc. After an acclaimed run as the cover artist for *Hellblazer*, he went on to work on the designs of *Sandman*'s iconic front covers.

Berger's vertigo also evokes moral hesitation, in the sense that the imprint was famous for its "adult" tone, a vague term that is synonymous with elaborate and mature narratives, but also (and perhaps predominantly) with transgressive themes and images. This transgression might have seemed mild by today's standards, but we should remember that in the early 1990s, the constraints of the Comic Code were still a force to be reckoned with. *Swamp Thing* had bypassed the Comics Code's approval in 1984 (with issue #29), setting the tone for Berger's willingness to push certain boundaries. This continued under the Vertigo imprint, with censorship gradually easing over time—for example, the word "fuck" was finally allowed in 1994 in the pages of *Sandman* #64 and *The Invisibles* #1.

By claiming an adult readership, Vertigo progressively developed a more assertive voice, and that is why it is often presented as an important step in the perceived maturation of the American mainstream comic book—whether this is true or not (or indeed whether it is desirable to promote such a teleological reading of comics history) is beyond the scope of this article.

Indeed, Vertigo is usually defined first and foremost through its readership (adults) and its position in the field (cutting-edge, subversive). Beyond these elements, it is actually difficult to find a common point between series that were begun as individual unrelated titles. In fact, it seems that Karen Berger's own tastes served as the main guideline in deciding whether a title fitted within the Vertigo imprint, to the point that many fans use the word "Bergerverse" (Levitz), or Berger Universe, to refer to the imprint. Tellingly, Karen Berger's current line at Dark Horse is simply called "Berger Books," another former nickname of the Vertigo line, which attests to the visibility of her name and persona in the industry. Neil Gaiman's claim that Vertigo's editorial line can be summed up as "the stuff Karen likes" (Groth 80) might be a sweeping one; but it does shed light on the impact of Berger's taste and personality. Her fondness for horror comics and her role as a woman in a predominantly male industry (especially in the late 1980s) make her a maverick figure, in keeping with the imprint she mothered.

In an interview with comics scholar Julia Round, Berger claimed:

> The Vertigo titles, or the books that became Vertigo, they were led by the ideas, by the writers really wanting to do something different in comic books, really wanting to shake up the status quo, really wanting to take the form and, you know, again, stretch it, stretch the boundaries of what you could do. (Round)

Berger underlines the importance of the writing process: in her view, what really sets Vertigo apart is its stories, not its art style. More specifically, art is a means to put forward the vision that is attributed to the scriptwriter. This can seem surprising insofar as Vertigo employed a number of talented and innovative artists, whose contribution was undoubtedly vital to the success and impact of the imprint. However, it is true that Berger's decision to emphasize the role of the writers constituted a rupture in a context where artists had often carried much of the burden of visual storytelling—the stereotypical example would be the Marvel artists of the Silver Age, who worked from a minimal plot description, as per the demands of the Marvel Method.

Berger's belief in the importance of supporting writers and artists also had tangible repercussions in the realm of creators' contracts. While the initial roster of series had all been developed as "work-made-for-hire" (meaning that DC, not the creative team, owned the copyright to the series), Vertigo very soon started offering creator-owned deals—an early example being the aforementioned *Enigma*, whose copyright belongs to Milligan and Fegredo. This move was by no means a first among the industry's mainstream publishers (Marvel's Epic imprint had been publishing creator-owned material since the early 1980s). However, it helped solidify Vertigo's reputation as a creator-friendly space and, crucially, to attract and retain talented creators. Again, this may seem like a natural evolution in hindsight, but it is worth remembering that only a few years prior, in 1987, Alan Moore had ceased all collaboration with DC over, among other things, the very poor contractual treatment he and Dave Gibbons had received on *Watchmen*. In just six years, Berger managed to shift DC's views on the importance of creators. And indeed, the decision to invest in talented creators proved a valid strategy for Vertigo, as the most successful ongoing titles of its first decade, such as Garth Ennis's and Steve Dillon's *Preacher*, Warren Ellis's and Darick Robertson's *Transmetropolitan*, and Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles*, were all creator-owned projects.

2003-2013: *Fables*, and reflections

The second decade of the imprint's existence was marked by aesthetic changes and policy shifts that dented its prestige. To an extent, it was also the victim of its own success as other publishers offered more attractive contracts to creators who produced Vertigo-type material (examples would include Garth Ennis's *The Boys* at Dynamite, or Brian K. Vaughan's *Saga* at Image, to name only two).

Vertigo's entry into the twenty-first century saw a clear decline of the British Invasion: before that date, British writers scripted at least 40% of all long-running series (see fig. 1, which lists

Vertigo series lasting more than 12 issues: British writers appear in blue in the chart). The percentage fell in 2001-2002, and even more clearly in 2006-2012, with an all-time low of 15% in 2008. Few new British creators entered the market, while the original invaders progressively left the imprint: Moore founded a line entitled America's Best Comics for Image in 1999;[1] Gaiman dropped out to pursue his career as a novelist, and Morrison refocused his efforts on mainstream comics, working for DC on *Justice League of America*, then on *All-Star Superman* from 2005. Although he sporadically wrote for Vertigo (*The Filth* in 2002-2003, and the miniseries *We3*, *Seaguy* and *Vimanarama* in 2004, followed by *Joe the Barbarian* in 2010-2011), his most important work with the imprint was behind him. Ellis went on to create his *magna opera* for DC's Wildstorm imprint, *The Authority* and *Planetary,* along with various superhero titles. Meanwhile, Ennis took his new hit series *The Boys* to Dynamite Entertainment, after only a couple of issues with DC made it clear that the title was too offensive for the venerable company's editorial line.

From an aesthetic point of view, a new tendency developed in parallel to that which was most readily associated with the British Invasion, and whose prototype was *Sandman*. Where early British titles had emphasised verbose narratives, slow-paced action and contemplative passages, Vertigo in the 2000s shed most of its narrative captions, and turned to more action-packed plotlines, with a return to more traditional hero and antihero figures (from Izzie Cordova in *100 Bullets* to Bigby Wolf in *Fables*).

Between 2003 and 2013, only three British scriptwriters worked on long-running titles: the first was Mike Carey, whose *Sandman* spinoff *Lucifer* (with Peter Gross) ended in 2006, the same year as Andy Diggle's *The Losers*. Like so many British writers before him, Diggle got his U.S. headstart on *Hellblazer* ("I had done an issue of *Hellblazer*, but that was purely, Will Dennis said to me, to give me some kind of profile in the States", [Sunu]), once again confirming that nationality played a central role in determining which series were entrusted to newcomers. Unlike *Lucifer*, *The Losers* has little in common with the comics of earlier British writers; it depicts former soldiers embarked on a perilous mission, and although it might recall the war stories that were once popular in British comics, its realistic atmosphere, Hollywood-action cast, and the rough, angular style of its Scottish artist Jock rather bring to mind Vertigo's American strand, best exemplified by *100 Bullets* and *DMZ*. Despite low sales, Berger allowed the series to reach its natural end (Sunu). Finally, the last newcomer of the period was Simon Oliver, whose series *The Exterminators* (with Tony Moore, of *The Walking Dead* fame) has a

[1] Ironically, ABC immediately returned to the fold as Wildstorm, the division of Image to which it belonged, was sold to DC by publisher Jim Lee in 1999. This happened to Moore's dismay, as he had sworn he'd never work for DC again, and certainly would not have set up his imprint at Wildstorm if it had been part of DC from the outset.

bizarre premise that taps Vertigo's predilection for the weird—it follows a former convict-turned-exterminator on his mission to control killer roaches created by a reincarnated Pharaoh. The series is a blend of violence, horror, the supernatural, and dark humour, but somehow lacks the consistency and strong characterization that made the success of *Preacher*. It was cancelled after 30 issues.

In other words, only one long-running British series stood out in the Vertigo landscape, *The Unwritten*. Unlike *Lucifer*, *The Unwritten* was creator-owned; yet it too owed a lot to Gaiman's texts, and Gaiman himself is mentioned in the diegesis (*Unwritten* #13 p. 13), as Carey and Gross channel the initial resemblance between their own narrative and other "boy magician" stories such as Gaiman's *Books of Magic* or, outside the comics sphere, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*. Yet the connection to *Sandman* runs deeper than mere name-dropping, as the series explores the boundary between reality and fiction, following Tom Taylor, the son of a famous author who wrote the adventures of Tommy Taylor, a young wizard. Over the course of the series, Tom discovers that, like his fictional namesake, he is able to use magic and even to move between fictional universes. Thus, *The Unwritten* was interpreted as a return to Vertigo's core interest in myth and imagination, as attested by this 2015 interview between Comics Alliance and the *Unwritten* creators:

> COMICS ALLIANCE: When *The Unwritten* was first announced and launched six years ago, it seemed almost like the platonic ideal of a Vertigo book: the creators of *Lucifer* and *Books Of Magic* telling a story about stories in the tradition of *Sandman* and *Fables* [...]. Were you worried about that initial impression? [...]
>
> PETER GROSS: When you asked the question, I pictured us putting all the Vertigo cliches on pieces of paper and pulling them out one at a time—which might not be a bad idea, actually. (Reed)

The claim that *The Unwritten* represents "the platonic ideal of a Vertigo book" is striking: at the end of the 2000s, when Gross and Carey's series debuted, Vertigo was publishing very diverse titles, many of them grim urban fantasies with a realistic slant, such as *DMZ* (2005-2012) or *Scalped* (2007-2012). However, as the interview makes clear, for Reed, Gross and Carey as well as for countless readers, Vertigo was still synonymous with *Sandman*, and the "Vertigo clichés" had not lost their contemporary relevance.

In this regard, *The Unwritten* was an attempt to reclaim the past, not seek innovation. The series was well received critically; it ran for 54 issues, was reprinted as nine trade paperbacks, and was even given a crossover with Vertigo's flagship title, *Fables*, before being rebooted for 12 more titles (*The Unwritten: Apocalypse*). The crossover in particular is interesting, as this age-old promotional strategy had been virtually absent from Vertigo titles since the early days of *Sandman* and *Hellblazer*. It attests to the desire to promote *The Unwritten*, while suggesting that the two universes of *The Unwritten* and *Fables* are uniquely compatible.

Fables, doubtlessly Vertigo's strongest property over the entire decade, was the brainchild of U.S. writer Bill Willingham. It proved remarkably stable between 2003 and 2007, with approximately 24,000 copies sold per month. Over the period, its only rival at Vertigo was Brian K. Vaughan's *Y: The Last Man*, which sold between 22,000 and 28,000 copies a month (according to the figures available on the website *Comichron*). In Reed's interview, *Fables* is said to be "a story about stories"; indeed, Willingham's characters are all borrowed from fairy tales or traditional popular narratives, and transposed to a contemporary American context. This premise endows the narrative with obvious metanarrative depth; but unlike *The Sandman* or *The Unwritten*, *Fables* is hardly interested in discussing the power of stories, and channels instead a carefully crafted plot, full of action, mystery, beautiful women and proactive heroes. In fact, the series could be read as the anti-*Sandman*, a story where mythological references were explored in detail, which delighted in intricate story-within-a-story structures, and where storytelling often had precedence over action. The diametrically opposed directions of *Fables* and *Sandman* epitomize the difference between Vertigo's first and second decades.

With the end of *Y: The Last Man* in 2007, *Fables* became Vertigo's most precious property, and it was exploited accordingly: various spin-off series grew out of the main storyline, with *Fairest* (2012-2015), *Jack of Fables* (2006-2011), and the two *Cinderella* titles (2009-2011). This proliferation of books is very similar to what happened during and after the publication of *Sandman* in the nineties, with the two *Death* miniseries, the *Sandman Presents* collection, and of course Carey and Gross's own *Lucifer*. This shows how the use of spinoffs (a very mainstream strategy) sustained Vertigo's sales throughout its existence, allowing it to take risks with less successful books. As with the aforementioned crossover, we can see how Vertigo imported commercial strategies from the mainstream and applied it to creator-owned material.

Between 2007 and 2010, the number of ongoing series (by which I mean titles over 12 issues, which corresponds to one year of continuous publication) skyrocketed, reaching 16 then 20 titles a month, while in Vertigo's first decade that figure peaked at 12, with an average of about 10 (see Fig. 1). This rise in the number of published books is correlated with the fall of the percentage of British scriptwriters. Conversely, when the number of ongoing series started dropping again in 2012-2013, British writers became proportionally more numerous, which suggests that the publisher's strategy shifted again, returning to the core values and creators of the imprint.

From an economic standpoint, in its second decade Vertigo became a low-profit branch that DC was willing to maintain as a place of experiment and innovation. One notable exception in this context was *Fables*, a steady seller in an imprint where, on the whole, ongoing titles were considered viable if they sold 10,000 copies in 2009 (Wood). This is a low figure by the

standards of the mainstream DC Universe, and it might seem even lower if compared with other publishers such as Marvel or Image.

However, Vertigo lived up to its reputation in the field of trade paperbacks ("graphic novels"). The imprint had been instrumental in the development of this format, which proved more suited to the type of readers attracted by Vertigo, and also proved the strength of its back catalogue. Yet here again, Vertigo is by no means stronger than the big names of the DC Universe. For example, looking at the top 500 graphic novel sales from 2015 (as established by comics distributor Diamond), we notice that *Fables* vol. 22, the last paperback in the series, ranks an honourable 15th, still lagging behind *Batman: Court of Owls* (ranked 12th) and, ironically, behind the newest edition of *The Killing Joke* (ranked 5th), DC's bestselling book of the year, which reprinted material first published in 1988… Several Vertigo TPBs from the 1990s also feature in the list, notably *Sandman*, a perennial seller at rank 39 ("Top 500 Graphic Novels").

The permanence of older titles in a best-selling list attests to Vertigo's specific business model, which relies as much on medium- and long-term benefits as it does on monthly returns. As an article from the *New York Times* attested in 2003, trade paperbacks have always been the centre of attention for Vertigo editors: "Vertigo titles like 'Sandman,' 'Preacher' and 'Transmetropolitan' [sic] are doing better as backlist graphic novels than they ever did as monthlies, and that is the direction Ms. Berger wants to pursue" (Jennings).

A first turning point in Vertigo's fate was, arguably, Paul Levitz's departure from the company over which he had presided between 2002 and 2009. This occurred in the midst of a structural overhaul whereby DC Comics became a subsidiary of DC Entertainment, effectively reinforcing the connection between comics and other sectors of the entertainment business controlled by Warner Bros. Levitz was replaced by Diane Nelson, the former head of Warner Premiere, who became President of DC Entertainment. Levitz had been Kahn's and Berger's partner-in-crime in the defence of ambitious comics and creators' rights, and his removal was certainly a prelude to the eventual demise of Vertigo ten years later.

In 2010, DC declared that all the characters that had originated in the DC Universe but had subsequently been used at Vertigo (such as the Swamp Thing, Constantine, and most of the characters from the pre-Vertigo years) were now likely to appear again in the DC Universe. In a sense, this served to reframe Vertigo's identity in strictly contractual terms: creator-owned titles belonged at Vertigo, while all DC properties returned to the DCU. This goes against the more common claim that Vertigo is associated first and foremost with specific artistic content; a mood, style, or set of genres. More broadly speaking, it underlines DC's corporate approach to Vertigo, which again contrasts with the first decade of the imprint. In a personal interview,

Berger did state that the creative freedom she had enjoyed during Vertigo's first years had withered under DC's more "corporate", "top-down perspective" (Licari-Guillaume 632).

2010 also brought a number of deep-seated contractual changes for creator-owned material across the DC Universe. As Rich Johnston from *Bleeding Cool* explains:

> The most recent model saw creators working on a relatively lower page rate than work for hire (though the highest page rate in creator owned circles) and it was treated as an advance against monthly royalties—even if those royalties never paid out.
> But previously the trade paperback and monthly comics payment dividends were separate—you were paid royalties on the collections from day one, no matter how the monthly series performed. […] Now, if your book doesn't make enough money as a monthly, [they] won't pay trade paperback royalties until it's made enough money for the publisher. (Johnston)

This new measure was sure to hit Vertigo titles hardest, since as we've seen, many series had very low monthly sales and depended mostly on the profits made in collection form. Johnston confirms this when he writes: "The trade paperback clawback will kick in if monthly sales don't reach 50,000—which Vertigo books haven't really seen since the *Sandman* days." As can be expected, these changes did nothing to help the imprint. And indeed, in 2013, DC co-publisher Dan DiDio made it clear that Vertigo did not meet profitability standards and that it was no longer a priority for the publisher, stating: "[it would be] myopic [to believe] that servicing a very small slice of our audience is the way to go ahead" (Itzkoff).

2013-2019: The Wake

In 2013, Karen Berger announced that she would be stepping down from her historical position as executive editor. So close was the association between Berger and her line that many fans in 2013 thought Vertigo would not survive the departure of its figurehead.

Although the imprint soldiered on for six more years, Berger's departure undeniably marked the end of an era. The news struck like lightning yet came as a confirmation of Vertigo's progressive loss of traction over the years and of the reduced powers that Berger personally had—some responsibilities had been taken away from her during the 2010 DC overhaul, such as her former position as editor-in-chief (Johnston). This was one more sign that the company now cared more about its own intellectual property and potential multimedia adaptations than it did about increasingly unprofitable creator-owned titles, which were the heart and soul of Vertigo. Coincidentally, January 2013 also saw the publication of the last issue of *Hellblazer*. At 300 issues, *Hellblazer* was Vertigo's longest-running title, and something of an emblem. Its

protagonist John Constantine was immediately repatriated to the main DC line under the title *Constantine*, which featured a rejuvenated character and a Bowdlerised lexicon.

Berger's departure triggered a period of internal turmoil, characterised by frequent changes in the editorial team, line-wide reboots, and uneasy attempts to reconnect with the roots of the imprint by focusing on household titles. When she initially stepped down, Berger left the imprint in the hands of Shelly Bond and two other former colleagues, Will Dennis (who had started out as Bond's assistant and edited hit titles such as *Scalped*, *The Losers*, *DMZ*, and *100 Bullets*), and Mark Doyle (who since his arrival in 2006 had worked on *American Vampire, Sweet Tooth* and the *Before Watchmen* miniseries).

Under Bond's stewardship, the imprint tried to reconnect with its roots. It published *Sandman: Overture*, the prequel to Gaiman's celebrated series, from 2013 to 2015, reprinted older comics by Grant Morrison, with the *Kill your Boyfriend/Vimanarama* omnibus (2016), and published a new miniseries by Vertigo veteran Peter Milligan (*New Romancer*, also in 2016). More pointedly, the comics' paratext in that period included explicit attempts to capitalize on Vertigo's prestigious archive. For example, in #6 of the series *Red Thorn*, by David Baillie and Meghan Hetrick, editor Jamie S. Rich suggests pairings between new and old titles, in the hope of attracting new readers to these classics: "our 2015 series debuts will be getting their first collected volumes. So what better way to celebrate these fresh main courses than with a complementary title from our renowned back catalog." In late 2015, Bond and her team launched a new roster of titles, the most notable of which were *Clean Room* by Gail Simone (18 issues), *Unfollow* by Rob Williams (18 issues), and a reboot of *Lucifer* by Holly Black (17 issues). Yet only three years into her tenure, in 2016, Bond too was ushered out, as an overhaul of the company structure meant that her current job no longer existed. From then on, Vertigo editors, under senior editor Jamie S. Rich, reported directly to DC co-publishers Jim Lee and Dan DiDio. Mark Doyle subsequently took the reins of Vertigo as Executive Editor in 2017, but the imprint's loss of independence was now effective.

With Berger gone, it had become increasingly clear that the future of Vertigo lay in transmedia adaptations of its successful properties. Although some Vertigo series had made it to the big screen before (*Constantine* in 2005 or *The Losers* in 2010), the second half of the 2010s was marked by a deluge of TV series: *Constantine* (2014-2015, NBC), *Preacher* (2016-2019, AMC), *Lucifer* (2016-2019, Fox/Netflix), and *Doom Patrol* (2019, Warner Bros.). This trend shows no sign of abating, with the announcement in late 2019 of a much-expected *Sandman* TV show. This adaptation rush is tightly linked to the contractual changes undergone by Vertigo at the end of the 2000s; in particular, DC insisted on keeping control over the adaptation rights of creator-owned series, whether as transmedia adaptations or as licensed products. In a context where sales figures industry-wide looked increasingly grim, adaptation into more popular

media stood out as a considerable source of revenue, especially as the ties between DC Comics and the other companies of the Time Warner group grew tighter. 2013 yielded new evidence of this change as Diane Nelson announced that DC offices would be transferred from their historic location in New York City to the Burbank, California headquarters of Warner Bros. ("Warner's DC Comic-Book Unit Leaving Gotham").

Although the exact nature of contractual arrangements can be difficult to frame in an industry that does not usually disclose such documents, creators are a precious source of information. For example, in an interview with CBR.com, comic book writer Chris Robertson, who had worked with Vertigo for his series *iZombie* (2010-2012, with Mike Allred) provides a detailed picture of what the Vertigo contracts were at the beginning of the 2010s. As he explains:

> The copyright is owned entirely by the creators; there's a fair division of money that comes in, both from sales of the book and from any exploitation in different media, television, film, things like that. But the way it's constructed, DC has the right of negotiation to sell those things. (Campbell)

This means that although creators will derive revenue from transmedia exploitation, DC still has the ability to prevent companies outside Time Warner from optioning the rights on any title that they themselves might be interested in at some point. In other words, creators may miss out on beneficial adaptation deals because they do not have a say in the negotiations.

This situation, coupled with the rise of other publishers willing to offer better contracts to their creators and the diffusion of the Vertigo aesthetics in the comics world at large, meant that many projects which might once have seemed natural fits for Vertigo now went straight to other publishers, notably Image and Dark Horse. A striking example in this regard is Brian K. Vaughan, the co-creator of *Y: The Last Man* (2002-2008) with Pia Guerra for Vertigo. After *Y*, Vaughan took his next big project to Image, Vertigo's direct rival. The project was *Saga*, with Fiona Staples, and has been an industry best-seller since its incipience in 2012—for example, Diamond's chart of best-selling graphic novels for 2018 shows that three of the top four slots were occupied by *Saga* trade paperbacks ("Diamond Comics Reveals Top-Selling Comics"). Of course, in many ways, *Saga* is a direct heir of the Vertigo mindset of the late 90s; it is a resolutely adult, often sexy comic book, whose liberal amount of violence comes hand in hand with a critical discourse on the consequences of such behaviour. It champions female representation, sexual and ethnic diversity, and gleefully subverts the boundary between high and mass culture by relocating *Romeo and Juliet* in the context of a space opera.

In 2018, a more symbolic change took place: "Vertigo" was rebranded as "DC Vertigo". This was all the more striking as Vertigo's independence from the main line had been one of Berger's decisive conquests in 1993: when she founded the imprint, Berger convinced her superiors that

the comics she published should not bear the DC logo, thus emphasizing the specificities of an imprint that only marginally dealt with superheroes, and addressed a different readership. In this regard, the insertion of the DC bullet within Vertigo's trademark black and white stood as a clear sign that the Berger days were over. Under Mark Doyle as Executive Editor, DC Vertigo announced a relaunch, mainly organised around the new "Sandman Universe" line, which included four titles derived from Gaiman's series: *House of Whispers*, the only new title, as well as reboots of *Books of Magic*, *The Dreaming*, and of course *Lucifer*, buoyed by the TV show adaptation. With heavy backing from Neil Gaiman, now a celebrity well beyond the comics world, the series performed reasonably well.

Besides the "Sandman Universe", seven other titles were announced as part of the relaunch. Half of them were cancelled or moved to other publishers, not because of low sales but because of concerns regarding the sexual content of one book (Tina Horn's *Safe Sex*), the depiction of religious figures of another (Mark Russel's *Second Coming*), which was targeted by an online campaign but for which DC had been requesting substantial changes anyway (Kuruvilla), and, in the last case, allegations of sexual misconduct against Carlos Esquivel, who was writing *Border Town*. The four surviving series, as well as the creators chosen, clearly paint a portrait of Vertigo as an imprint that cares about representation and inclusivity. Ben Blacker's *Hex Wives* and Zoe Quinn's *Goddess Mode* both address themes of female oppression and resistance, while *Border Town* and Bryan Hill's *American Carnage* deal with race relations and inequality. However, unlike Berger's Vertigo, which had carefully ignored morality complaints against *The Sandman*, DC Vertigo seems to go to great lengths to protect its image as a respectable mainstream publisher.

Another interesting trend in that new roster is the fact that many of the creators involved come from outside the field of comics. Like Gerard Way himself, who was mostly known as the singer of *My Chemical Romance* before he broke out in comics), the writers of DC Vertigo are also podcasters (Tina Horn), game makers/visual artists (Zoe Quinn and Rob Sheridan) etc, although they are familiar with the world of comics (for example, Tina Horn, in the Vertigo NYCC panel, said "she grew up reading Vertigo—*Sandman* and *The Invisibles* were name dropped as her favorite stories"[Pascal]). This fact is not, in itself, a novelty—many comics writers of the Invasion did something else before they got their first assignments, like Gaiman who was a journalist. The difference is that these people are already famous for their previous careers, and so are likely to bring their own audiences, which we can read as an attempt to lure new readers to Vertigo books. As Rob Sheridan tellingly explains:

> Coming from a visual field, it was my instinct to write it cinematically but I also wanted to write it that way because my fan base from my work in music and visual arts, they're not exactly comic book people. They're the type of people who have read the Watchmen

> graphic novel and some stuff like that, but they're not going to the comic book store every week. ("Indie Comics Spotlight")

This approach once again failed to revive interest in Vertigo's books, and on June 21st 2019, after weeks of rumours, DC confirmed that Vertigo would be closing down at the end of the year, along with DC Zoom and DC Inks, two imprints that had been introduced in 2018 and targeted children and young adults, specifically female. DC would continue to use the Vertigo brand for exact reprints of material previously published by Vertigo, thus capitalizing on their back catalogue. The few surviving series (mostly those of the Sandman Universe) would be transferred to DC Black Label, the part of the line that caters to a 17+ audience.

Concluding thoughts

Meanwhile, improbable as it might have seemed in 1993, Image seems to solidify its position as an heir to Vertigo, with hit creator-owned titles (*Monstress*, *Saga*, *The Walking Dead*) and cult favourites (*The Wicked + The Divine*, *Sex Criminals*) that span several years of publication, gathering their own audience as they go. Some of these authors are clear products of the Vertigo era—I've mentioned Brian K. Vaughan, whose writing was deeply influenced by both Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman (Collins 36-40). Another usual suspect is Kieron Gillen, the (English) writer of *The Wicked + The Divine*, a series which channels the reflection on godhood and popular culture that was at the heart of *Sandman*. Interestingly, Gillen has talked about the importance of Shelly Bond, both as a Vertigo editor and as a talent hunter: "When Shelly's name was on a worrying number of my favourite comics, you can imagine how I felt when she was the first editor who ever even noticed Jamie [McKelvie] and me, back in the *Phonogram* days" (MacDonald). Bond's early interest for Gillen's work is a tribute to her instincts as an editor; the fact that it never led to a Gillen-led series at Vertigo only reinforces the sense of Vertigo's inability to compete.

Readers, too, are keen to draw explicit parallels between Vertigo's heyday and the current production at Image. For example, in the letter column of *The Wicked + The Divine* #43 p. 28 (Apr. 2019), a reader identified only as Owen writes:

> As a mid-30s comics reader who has been in and out, there is a constant regret at missing great runs while jumping aboard mediocre or disappointing ones. Binge-reading trades of *Transmetropolitan* or *Planetary* is one thing, but I've always been looking for my *Preacher*: a truly great, extended, on-going series that I could get on board with at #1 and follow it all the way through. With *WicDiv* I found that. *Wicked + Divine* is my *Preacher*.

This letter points to the permanence of Vertigo's heritage in the minds of readers (although *Planetary* was published at Wildstorm, not Vertigo), but it also takes stock of Vertigo's inability in 2019 to provide the type of reader experience for which it had been famous, which can now only be found outside of DC Comics.

Thus, as we mourn the passing of the imprint, we should be careful to remember that Vertigo's legacy, despite what Berger and Gaiman often preached, is not just about the stories: it was also about the lived experience of watching comics series unfold over time (whether in trades or in monthly issues), interacting with other fans, following high-profile creators, and trusting editors to build a consistent array of titles which, despite their diversity, possessed a common identity.

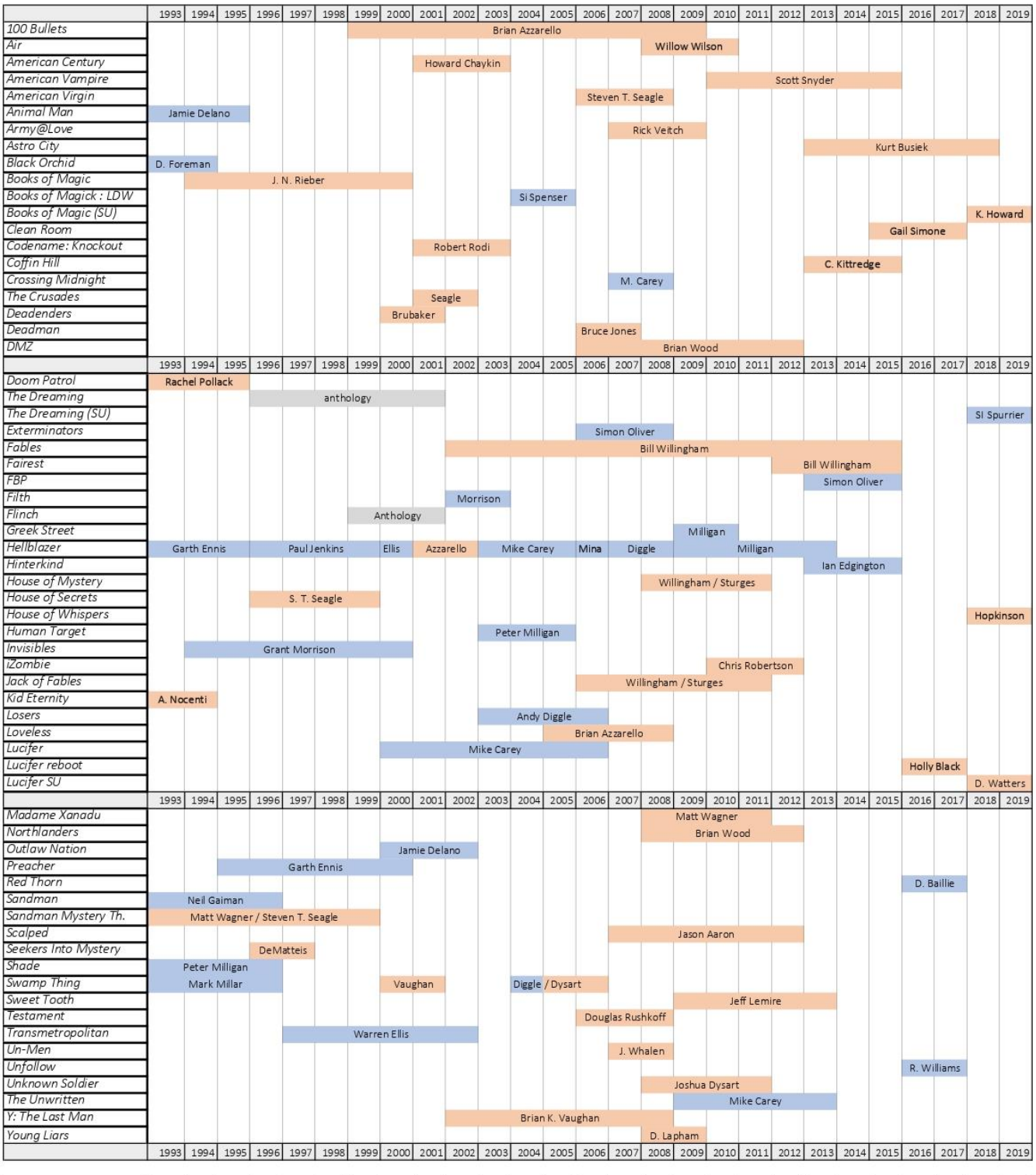

Figure 1: Ongoing Vertigo series and writers

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