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Relaunching in the age of the author: *The Dreaming* and *Doom Patrol*

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Introduction

At its inception in 1993, Vertigo published six ongoing series whose creation predated the imprint: *Swamp Thing* (fondly remembered for Alan Moore's run on the title from 1983 to 1987), *Hellblazer* (initially written by Jamie Delano, but subsequently passed along to other British scripters), *Animal Man* and *Doom Patrol*, written by Grant Morrison until 1990 and 1993 respectively, *The Sandman*, written by Neil Gaiman, and *Shade, The Changing Man*, written by Peter Milligan. Many of these series starred third and fourth tier characters of the DC Universe, which had been given fresh starts under Karen Berger's stewardship, and infused with thematic interests that were eccentric for the industry at the time. Sex and gender, avant garde art, politics, mysticism, folklore, and technological advances were some of the topics writers explored in the imprint.

In particular, *The Sandman* (1989-1996, drawn by numerous artists) and *Doom Patrol* (1989-1993, drawn primarily by Richard Case) were cornerstones of Vertigo Comics. They exemplified the modus operandi that was the basis for the early days of the imprint: taking third stringers from the DC Comics catalogue and getting a highly idiosyncratic writer to breathe new life into them by coupling them with his obsessions and interests. *Sandman* started as a very continuity heavy series which aimed at making sense of and connecting the divergent versions of the character that had appeared in DC Comics history.[1] The first one was Wesley Dodds, a vigilante who fought crime in the 1940s armed with a gas mask and gas gun, one of the most striking designs of the Golden Age of comics. The second one was a more straightforward superhero in colorful tights created by Jack Kirby during his time at DC on the 1970s. Gaiman added a mythical dimension to the proceedings by making his Sandman the undying anthropomorphic representation of Dream, who had been held captive by occultists for most of the 20th century. *The Sandman* told the tale of what happened when Dream got out, rebuilt his kingdom, reconnected with his family (all of whom are also anthropomorphic concepts),[2] navigated the complex politics and feuds of mythical beings, and slowly but surely damned himself through his actions. To this, Gaiman added his interest in folklore, literature (the infamous *Sandman* #19 co-starred William Shakespeare) and the nature of stories,

[1] This was not the only way in which it heavily employed continuity: several of its characters, such as Cain and Abel, hosts of the House of Mysteries and House of Secrets, were little used background characters which Gaiman repurposed for his aims.
[2] The Endless, composed of Destiny, Death, Dream, Destruction, Desire, Despair and Delirium. Their dysfunctional relationships make up a large part of the narrative backbone of Gaiman's series.

making the series a prolonged reflection on the act of narrating. Many conflicts in *Sandman* were resolved not by punching and destruction, but rather through the use of lateral thinking and imagination.

The Doom Patrol, on the other hand, had been a group of bizarre characters created by writers Arnold Drake and Bob Haney and artist Bruno Premiani. The twist on the concept was that their superpowers made them more akin to freaks than to superheroes, and that their origins were marked by trauma. The Doom Patrol was comprised of a human brain inside a robot body (Robotman), a radioactive being living inside a human enclosed in bandages (Negative Man), and a Hollywood actress with the ability to change size (Elasti-Girl), led by Niles Caulder, known as The Chief, a super-scientist confined to a wheelchair. The group soon became distinguished by the tagline "World's Strangest Heroes." After thirty issues with lackluster sales, the group was killed in a standoff with their oldest enemy and remained in limbo for the better part of 20 years. A revival ensued in 1987, written by Paul Kupperberg, with art by Steve Lightle and Erik Larsen. But the book gravitated towards a more traditional vision of superheroics, losing the weirdness that had distinguished them in the beginning. When Grant Morrison was given the title in 1989, they[3] proposed to take the characters back to their rightful place as the weirdos of the DCU. This they did in several different ways: they turned the Negative Man into a non-binary genderqueer character named Rebis; they added Crazy Jane, who had 64 different personalities each one with her own superpower; they introduced bizarre antagonists like the Brotherhood of Dada, which strived to make the world a senseless place; they created a painting which eats cities; they turned the Pentagon into a complex occult ritual; and they created a character based off the Charles Atlas ads of the 1940s and 50s whose superpower was flexing his muscles to cause alterations in the natural order.

These two series were also examples of a particular conundrum. Those characters, by design, remained a DC Comics property, while at the same time having been indelibly marked by the authorial qualities of Gaiman and Morrison. This essay seeks to answer the question: What happens when a particular vision, developed in the milieu of corporate comics, becomes the template subsequent creators seek to emulate?

In the case of *The Sandman,* DC more or less cordoned off Gaiman's original run and turned it into one of their perennial *qualité* comics, a bookstore seller which continues to make a fair amount of money for the publisher.[4] At the same time, the company maintained a cordial

[3] Morrison recently came out as non-binary and stipulated that their preferred pronouns are "they/them." The article has been edited to honor their preferences.

[4] According to data made available by Diamond Distributors, which gathers data of sales made through comic book shops, the first volume of *The Sandman*, Preludes and Nocturnes, placed 43 in the 500 most sold graphic novels in comic book shops (Diamond Comics Distributors). According to data gathered by

relationship with the writer that allowed them to create spinoffs of the story with the original creator's blessing. This was the tactic employed in 1996 when they launched the first iteration of *The Dreaming*, a series which consisted of arcs with rotating authors telling stories of secondary characters from Dream's world. Halfway through, *The Dreaming* shifted into a continuing story, scripted by horror author Caitlin R. Kiernan. Her experience writing the comic in the wake of Gaiman calls attention to the difficulty of said process:

> And from the start, THE DREAMING has been saddled with living up to what Neil Gaiman did with THE SANDMAN. It doesn't take long to get puking sick of hearing "It's just not the same," or "It's not as good as THE SANDMAN," or "Why is it so much darker than THE SANDMAN," or even "It's almost as good as THE SANDMAN." I know the comparisons are inevitable, and even logical, but it's been an uphill battle trying to get readers to look at THE DREAMING as a series separate from THE SANDMAN, with its own tone and atmosphere and concerns. (Guran)

Kiernan's experience surely did not get any easier when Gaiman ignored continuity changes and character development in *The Dreaming* in one of his own continuations of the Sandman universe, *Endless Nights*. Finally, the original *Dreaming* series was swept aside in the new one, which reboots the world. The original series is also indicative of an approach taken by Vertigo between 1996 and 2000, which consisted in trying to ride the coattails of *Sandman* as much as the imprint could (Licari-Guillaume, *« Vertigo's British Invasion »* 158-68).

However, *Sandman*'s characters have rarely appeared in the DC Comics "main universe." This could be explained by the fact that even though the name Sandman has had a complex history in the DC universe, Dream as conceived by Gaiman is essentially a completely different character, with his own story logic and universe. The main universe could always use Wesley Dodds, the 1940s Sandman. Additionally, when the original *Sandman* series finished, its continuations were framed inside the Vertigo imprint. That is to say: they were expected to boost the circulation and cachet of Vertigo, not of the regular superhero universe.

In the case of *Doom Patrol*, the logic of the superhero universe prevailed: some time after the Vertigo series ended, the characters and stories of Morrison's (and Rachel Pollack's, who succeeded Morrison in the title, keeping the tone) run were integrated back into the main DC universe, where they have been the protagonists of a series of runs of varying quality. First, John Arcudi, and Tan Eng Huat relaunched it with a completely different cast, excepting Robotman. Then John Byrne, in characteristic John Byrne fashion, attempted a complete reboot which not only erased Morrison's and Pollack's stories, but also the original run, in a largely unnecessary and trite exercise in nostalgia. Finally, Keith Giffen and Matthew Clark tried a holistic approach, which incorporated Morrison's and Pollack's ideas alongside other

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Bookscan and shared on the ICv2 site, said first volume appears regularly on the top graphic novels sold in bookstores (Alverson).

weird characters such as Ambush Bug. This was the first time creations such as Crazy Jane and Danny the Street were introduced into the main DCU continuity. Nevertheless, this attempt to integrate different versions of the Doom Patrol was steamrolled by *Flashpoint*, DC's 2011 event which rewrote continuity, and the characters landed in Geoff John's hands, who applied his signature "maturetalgia" to the characters, keeping some superficial Silver Age elements handy whilst adding a patina of mature-like storytelling.[5]

The latest relaunch is what concerns me in this essay. DC got Gerard Way, international rock star and comic book writer, to take over *Doom Patrol,* and launched the Sandman Universe imprint, with Neil Gaiman's blessing and supervision, based around flagship title *The Dreaming*, written by Simon Spurrier. The way these decisions came about also sheds light on the waning importance of Vertigo as a whole (see Licari-Guillaume, this volume, pp. 14-17). Way was approached not only to revamp *Doom Patrol*, but also to engineer a whole new imprint called Young Animal. The way Young Animal works is eerily similar to the early days of Vertigo: a mix of revamped and relaunched C-list heroes from DC's history and a handful of new concepts and characters. Yet, they steered clear from the Vertigo label when launching the imprint, preferring to rely on Way's cachet as a young(ish) creator with a rock background. In fact, Young Animal is a "pop-up imprint": it is supposed to appear when there is something to print, and to disappear when interest wanes. It would seem, then, that the endurance of a brand or house style is relatively unimportant for DC in this case.

The Sandman Universe Imprint was a slightly different case. Its covers bore the Vertigo label, but the way the line was constructed, with four heavily related titles with their own sub-branding, meant that the possibility for it to exist independently of Vertigo was always strong. However, Gaiman's association with the imprint and the fact that *Sandman* was its first big hit probably dispelled any attempt to launch the Sandman Universe outside of Vertigo.

What interests me here is in how relaunches and continuations work in a shared superhero universe when they have to pay homage not only (or not mainly) to the continuity of the universe but also to a specific creative vision. What consequences does the original Vertigo model of rebooting and relaunching engender when faced with continuations? How do writers navigate this middle space? How do these new series differ in graphic presentation from their

[5] Tegan O'Neil, in an article for *The Comics Journal*, sums up her own version of the same process discussed here: "It's long enough ago that all the rather precious but also rather important [...] possessiveness Gaiman and Morrison in particular were allowed to extend over their particular versions of what are still essentially *shared universe* characters has faded in favor of a more permissive realm wherein the absent founders' versions are forever ascendant. Because there's just more money to be made from the versions of these characters people really like, don't you know?
DC went out of their way to make things right with a small group of creators who came over in the wake of the guy who started the whole thing having left the party first, feeling *significantly* fucked over by the experience" (O'Neil).

models? How do they fit a discourse that is meant, at the same time, to pay homage to Vertigo and to move on from said brand? And how does a superhero universe highlight and integrate not only important narrative moments in continuity but also the stylistic preferences of certain noteworthy creators? These are some of the questions I will be tackling in this essay.

Reboots, continuations, and the weight of the author

I will follow William Proctor's distinction between reboots, remakes and continuations. This, of course, calls attention to the problem of continuity: how stories connect with each other, which stories count in the fictional world and what it all means. Proctor pinpoints that a reboot is always linked to a narrative series, not an isolated cultural product (Proctor, "Regeneration & Rebirth: Anatomy of the Franchise Reboot"). A reboot

> [...] means that the pre-established continuity no longer exists and is deleted from the storyworld's data banks [...] and that new narrative information reprograms the imaginary world's memory and is disconnected from an earlier iteration [...] A reboot aims to purge the system and begin again with a tabula rasa [...] onto which a brave new world can be etched. (Proctor, "Reboots and Retroactive Continuity" 226)

A remake, on the other hand, rehashes the original story, which is usually confined to a single narrative unit, and does not presume to start a new continuity. Finally, a continuation picks up previous narrative threads and builds from there.

Proctor, taking a page from Colin Harvey's *Fantastic Transmedia* (Harvey), mentions horizontal and vertical memory. Horizontal memory is the memory that is needed to understand a current narrative: "installments, chapters, sequels, prequels, and so forth" (Proctor, "Reboots and Retroactive Continuity" 228). Vertical memory, on the other hand, remembers "every text in the DCU [...] but it also 'remembers' the infinite spiral of intertextuality" (Proctor, "Reboots and Retroactive Continuity" 228). What is paradoxical, as Proctor correctly points out, is that stories that have been produced can never be truly erased, unless you somehow managed to mindwipe the entire human population of Earth. Someone will always remember (perhaps even fondly) that which the reboot aims to delete. And these stories continuously come back in surreptitious ways: sometimes rehashed in the new continuity, sometimes casting a stylistic shadow over the proceedings, sometimes homaged in subtle and not so subtle ways.

This dialogues with what Douglas Wolk calls "super-readers," capable of remembering every appearance of a character, artifact, villain, etc. (Wolk 89-92) But I would like to highlight that these super-readers not only remember everything that has to do with the story world, but also much that has to do with authorial style: what each writer who worked on a character brought

to said character, which plot points they consider good and which bad (and who to blame for them), how the book looked in a particular time period, both in terms of drawing style and color, typographies, etc. They may not be able to articulate every preference or every criticism, but they are able to construct a history of the superhero genre that is also authorial.

This is truer in the case of Vertigo, whose authors carefully cultivated an authorial image. As Isabelle Licari-Guillaume has put it: "The imprint stages its writers as authors whose personalities are just as colorful as the characters they create. Authorial identity at Vertigo is a discursive performance that unfolds in the paratext as well as in the stories themselves, in order to build an attractive brand image" (Licari-Guillaume, *« Vertigo's British Invasion »* 229, Licari-Guillaume's translation). This point is also made by Jochen Ecke in his essay "Warren Ellis: Performing the Transnational Author in the American Comics Mainstream" in which he characterizes the British Vertigo writers construction of the author as performative in the Austinian sense: by enunciating themselves as multifaceted and extravagant authors they created the social fact that they were a different type of author from what had come before. Ecke also points out to the instability of the author function in American comics, where writers must fulfill a variety of roles, many of whom are shared with their artistic companions, such as artists and editors (Ecke 163-165). This strand of thought is also voiced in Julia Round's essay about Karen Berger as builder of Vertigo as a particular type of creative endeavor, shedding light on the importance of creative roles not usually associated with the author in American comics (Round 15-17, 21-23).[6] This is particularly interesting because, as Licari-Guillaume stresses, the selling point of Vertigo were the writers, not the artists.

The writer-artist dichotomy has a long and storied history in United States' comics. The appearance of Alan Moore on the comics scene certainly shifted the writer-paradigm, bringing it in line with a literary paradigm, but it would be disingenuous to state that Moore was the first writer that fans could recognize. One cannot understate the importance of Stan Lee as a forebear on the construction of a certain type of writerly figure.[7] However, Lee's figure was that of the amiable huckster, the cool uncle, not the serious intellectual. It was the group of writers who followed in Stan Lee's footsteps in the 1970s which could be construed as important predecessors of the Vertigo writers. Steve Englehart, Steve Gerber, Len Wein, Denny O'Neil, Jim Starlin, Archie Goodwin, Marv Wolfman, Don McGregor and Roy Thomas were all writers who mixed superheroes with interests and topics from outside comics. They helped usher

[6] This line of thought has been further continued by Keith Friedlander in an essay focused on Karen Berger in which he draws upon the concept of "scene thinking" as delineated by Woo, Rennie and Poyntz to highlight the complex network of social relationships which go into the production of comics, and which makes authorial intent difficult to define (Friedlander 5-8).

[7] Even though the "Marvel method" made it nigh impossible to rightly ascertain the extent of his contributions to the titles.

"political relevance" into the titles, and mish mashed them with psychedelic experiences and oriental philosophy. They also mixed superheroes with other genres, such as horror, martial arts or science fiction. They were the first generation of fans-turned-pro, as opposed to pros who could not get into other professional areas. As Sean Howe describes it: "Roy Thomas's hands-off, see-what-sticks approach had ushered in Marvel's most unpredictable—and often downright subversive—era. […] 'It wasn't a corporate environment,' said one former Cadence Industries lawyer […] 'I remember stepping over people sitting in the hall, smoking pot, getting inspiration'" (Howe 239).

This does not mean that these writers were as recognizable as Alan Moore or Grant Morrison. They certainly were to comic fans, but they did not transcend the comics field to become household names in film, literature and popular culture at large as many of the Vertigo writers did. One reason was that the field of comic book production in the 1970s was a very different place, where opportunities to use your success to slide into other fields of cultural production was slim. But, as a cultural historian, I believe that it is important to point towards continuities as well as changes. Sometimes, the standard narrative of comics history, especially in the comics press,[8] tends to present the Vertigo writers as a complete break with the past, overlooking the fact that they were also readers of comics who were influenced by their peers in the field.

On the other hand, fans since the 1940s have paid more attention to artists than writers, given the visual condition of the medium, and because it was easier to recognize the particularities of an artist's style rather than those of a writer when American comics were devoid of credits. As an impressionistic example, *Alter Ego*, the fanzine created by Roy Thomas with the aim of recovering the history of Golden Age superhero comics, handed the Alley Awards in 1961, the first fan given awards of superhero comics. A category for Best Artist was included, but not one for best script-writer. There was, however, an award for "Best Story," which was handed to the *Flash of Two Worlds* (*Alter Ego* #4 4).

Nevertheless, fans usually took writers to task for narrative changes they did not like, whilst letting artists more or less escape unscathed. For example, when Gwen Stacy died, most letters were addressed to Gerry Conway, the writer, and to Roy Thomas, the editor. For example, one read: "Dear Gerry, I have just finished SPIDER-MAN #121 and am unable to contain my congratulations and anger […] Stan, and now you, Gerry, can't find any happiness for our hero. But why pick on Gwen???" (*Amazing Spider-Man* #124 31). It would seem fans are equally

[8] Ecke also expresses this when he considers that: "For most American authors prior to the 1980s, this attitude can best be defined as a quiet, craftsman-like self-effacement" (Ecke 165).

susceptible as comics critics to the practice of assigning sole responsibility for plot points to the writers.

Even when taking into account these previous examples, it can be argued that Vertigo tipped the scales decidedly towards the writer.[9] The innovations and stylistic tics that Vertigo writers employed, would come to be recognized by fans, and to be reproduced when those fans became professionals. In this way, both *The Dreaming* and *Doom Patrol* continued the tradition and relied on the recognition of the "imprint architects": Way for Young Animal and Gaiman for The Sandman Universe. Following Licari-Guillaume and Ecke, these writers perform the authorial role that Vertigo writers had inhabited (in the case of Gaiman, this is simply a continuation). They are also considered recognizable because their artistic persona is known beyond the boundaries of the comics field: they are expected to bring their fans to help expand the readership. Furthermore, as Round has analyzed, this was something that was hoped from the early Vertigo writers too: more sales through an appeal to mature readers (Round 23). Way's declarations directly present Young Animal as a continuation of the Vertigo style of relaunch: "I am thrilled to help bring DC's Young Animal to life, having been raised on experimental 80s and 90s takes on superheroes. I see Young Animal as a place to try new ideas-following the spirit of those books from the past but bring them somewhere else" (Kamen).

Gaiman, for his part, masterfully skirts the line between authorism and corporative ownership; between giving his blessing to launch the imprint, acknowledging that those characters belong to DC Comics and, sooner or later, they would be reused, with or without his consent, and "saving" some parts of the universe for his own personal use later:

> But it's a huge sandbox with so many wonderful toys that nobody's getting to play with right now. I started feeling guilty. I liked the idea of getting the toys played with again, reminding people how much fun this is [...].
> It's always been personal, and there are still areas of it that have velvet ropes set up and "do not disturb" signs hanging on the door. People will ask, "Can we do this?" and I'll be like, "No." Some of that is because one day I will want to go there and tell those stories, even if it's not for another 5 or 10 years. For this stuff, it's really the joy of looking back at the history of Vertigo. [...] Let's bring it all back, let's have fun with it. (Holub)

Both writers underline the importance of Vertigo whilst recognizing the loss of importance of the imprint, even though they cannot explicitly express why that happened, and the ways the corporate culture of DC Comics took away many of the things that made the imprint attractive to creators. It is not a surprise then, that both *Doom Patrol* and *The Dreaming* are continuations and not reboots of the classic runs. Comic book companies resort to the reboot

[9] Simultaneously, the Image founders were defending their right to draw fantastic fisticuffs and baffling babes without the handicap of coherent scripts or stories.

when something has gone wrong, and must be erased from continuity. Why would they feel the need to erase two prestige series? They would rather attempt to recapture their past glory.

Doom Patrol: how to make sense of oneself

Doom Patrol, written by Gerard Way, drawn by Nick Derington, with colors by Tamra Bonvillain and lettering by Todd Klein works by addition, taking all the different versions of the team's history as equally important. It also cuts through the problems raised by horizontal and vertical memory when it makes the metatextual concerns that come with handling wildly different versions of the same characters its text. Finally, it picks up on a running theme of Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol*: mental health.

The series' 12 issues (plus a crossover with the Justice League of America called *Milk Wars*) can be read simultaneously as a prolonged "getting the band back together" sequence and as a commentary on corporate superhero ownership, and the ways characters can temporarily escape it through fan and creator empowerment.

The story revolves around a new character who serves as our point of view, Casey Brinke, a young and mysterious ambulance driver. She cruises the city with her partner Sam Reynolds, telling Sam absurd and impossible superhero adventures. Suddenly, out of a burrito lying in a garbage can explodes the disassembled body of Cliff Steele, a.k.a. Robotman. What follows are twelve issues in which the Doom Patrol slowly but surely comes together once again as a support group/family, with a mixture of old characters (Cliff Steele, Larry Trainor a.k.a. Negative Man, Kay Challis a.k.a. Crazy Jane, Flex Mentallo, Rita Farr a.k.a. Elastigirl) and new characters (Casey Brinke, Lotion the Cat, Lucius Reynolds, Fugg). Many of the new creations seem zany and ridiculous: a cat evolved to become an anthropomorphic slacker animal, a small alien with a tape recorder in its stomach. Way, in the same vein as Morrison, also offers reinterpretations of classic characters, turning Negative Man, for example, into two merged beings, Larry Trainor and negative spirit Keeg Bovo.

Fig. 1 - Cover to Doom Patrol #6, showing the cast, by Nick Derington and Tamra Bonvillain (2017). Published by DC Comics, © DC Entertainment.

This would seem to be taking the most superficial qualities of the Morrison run, namely the absurdist and original character designs, and trying to spin his own version of "weirdness for weirdness sake." But many of these confounding details —for example: why did Robotman burst out of a burrito?— reveal themselves later as carefully structured story beats, setting up future adventures.

Morrison's Doom Patrol was made up of two dimensions: on the one hand, the rich intertextual weaving of Morrison's interests (Lewis Carroll, Situationism, Dadaism, Science Fiction, Gender Theory, Alchemy, The Smiths), and, on the other hand, the use of the superhero group template as a metaphor for family or, even better, a self-help recovery group. During Morrison's run the Doom Patrol not only comes together but, through their relationships, manages to reject the toxic and controlling influences in their lives, ending with the revelation that the Chief was not the "good father" that he appeared to be but rather the villain of the piece, another mad scientist who had actually engineered the accidents that had birthed the group. Way explicitly acknowledges this thread as that which attracted him to

the book: “It was kind of my first exposure to mental health awareness and group therapy and things like that” (Graff).

Way has discussed Morrison’s *Doom Patrol*, and Morrison’s influence in the following terms: “I was so strongly connected to it as a teenager and it meant so much to me [...] it always inspired me. And then, through developing a really close personal relationship with Grant [Morrison] ... I look at Grant as a big brother, you know?” (Wheeler). But he also recognizes that any superhero book is not the work of one lone individual: “It’s interesting, even though his run is probably the most memorable run of that, aside from the original, which is really remembered, I feel like so many other people have done their versions, as well, so I don’t necessarily feel like I’m picking up the book from Grant as much as I’m just picking up the book from a lot of people” (Radish).

Fig. 2. Casey Brinke, comic book character, artwork by Derington and Bonvillain, from Doom Patrol #3 (2017). Published by DC Comics, © DC Entertainment.

This points toward the second important thread of Way’s, Derington’s and Bonvillain’s Doom Patrol: its reflection on corporate ownership of superhero characters. This is explicit in the choosing of the character who functions as the lynchpin of the first narrative arc: Danny the Street, now turned into Danny the Ambulance. Danny the Street is a sentient, homosexual and transvestite street with the power of teleportation who also functions as a demiurge. First created by Morrison and Case, Danny turned into a world at the end of their run, and then reappeared in 2010’s *Doom Patrol* v5 as a brick, following the destruction of his world form. What was originally a delimited space had become, through superhero comics tendency to amplification and exaggeration, a sentient

being capable of shifting his identity and corporeality.[10] But, more importantly, Danny becomes capable of engendering life. And thus, he graduates from being a safe space for freaks and weirdos, to manufacturing its own.

This is extremely important because we find out, halfway through the series, that Casey Brinke is Danny's creation, a comic book character dreamed to entertain and inspire the people who live in his world and whose adventures explicitly parody different aesthetics and themes in the history of superhero comics. So, Way turns *Doom Patrol* into a scaffolding structure of creation, in which authorial attribution slides between the diegetic and extradiegetic world. Danny becomes a stand-in for Way. At the same time, Danny is chased by the Vectra, an alien species who, alongside the Reboot Corporation, a group of interdimensional bureaucrats and CEOs, wants to turn him into a fast-food franchise. As metaphors go, it is certainly not the most subtle one.

Then comes issue 7, a special one-shot adventure drawn by Michael Allred with colors by Laura Allred. There, the Chief, the Doom Patrol's creator and leader, returns in a completely non-sensical adventure which explicitly harkens back to the weird adventures they had in the 1960s and to the concept of weirdness-for-weirdness-sake. The Chief even changes the team's external appearance to mimic the classic 1960s look, in an attempt at a reboot. The adventure ends with the current incarnation of the Doom Patrol abandoning the Chief once again, a toxic influence who refuses to seek help for his delusions, a vestige of a past that does not make sense anymore given their evolution as characters. After they find out The Chief has been gambling, Larry Trainor admonishes: "If I were you, I'd do some real soul-searching and ask yourself if this is the kind of life you want to continue leading" (*Doom Patrol* #7 24).

This taps into the self-help theme running throughout the book, but it is also an indictment on nostalgia. Something truly new can never come from trying to reproduce what was "fun" in the past. The presence of Allred, a cartoonist who has turned his fascination with 1960s aesthetics into a style, works beautifully to underline the point. His affinity for weird monsters, retro-futurism and Ben Day dots is in full display and juxtaposed with his mastery over facial expression: Cliff, Larry and Casey jumble around the adventure completely flabbergasted.

[10] I will not be touching on Danny's queerness in this essay for reasons of space, but it would be interesting to analyze how Danny's changes of scale and embodiment parallel the experiences of transgender men and women.

The presence of Allred points toward something that sets *Doom Patrol* (and, generally speaking, all Young Animal projects) apart from the first wave of Vertigo Comics: the style of drawing and the color palette employed. Derington's art is a particularly clean and dynamic type of "cartoonish realism". That is to say: it does not push bodies to the max, it does not go too far in the direction of caricature, but it simplifies line and action in the hopes of delivering clear narration. Derington does not utilize cross-hatching, preferring clean lines and solid spaces where color can be displayed. He draws big cartoony eyes with dots as pupils and clean and well-defined noses, which lend themselves naturally to exhibiting expression. He also neatly divides the panels, and what is happening in one rarely spills out onto another. The palette that is employed by Tamra Bonvillain also works in tandem to communicate this feeling of freshness, cleanness and brightness. Bonvillain privileges primary colors in solid blocks. Uniforms are colorful, skies are usually bright red or purple, alien civilizations parade in resplendent green and yellow.

Fig. 3. Derington's and Bonvillain's kinetic, cartoonish and colorful art. From Doom Patrol #10 (2018). Published by DC Comics, © DC Entertainment.

Aesthetically, this is one of the great changes from Morrison's and Case's *Doom Patrol* and the first wave of Vertigo titles in general. We should not over-generalize, but the Vertigo titles were known for their muted color palette and artists with a "realistic" style of drawing. What did this mean? That they skirted far away from the anatomical exaggerations that were

the order of the day after Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee and Rob Liefeld became the hottest thing in comics. They drew humans who resembled their real-life counterparts. Here's *Wizard Magazine* talking about Vertigo artists: "The covers, and the interior art, are the work of an array of distinctive artists who adhere to the idea that their endeavors should be directed towards storytelling rather than pinups and potential posters" (Curtin 45).

Discussions on the inception of Vertigo usually underline its characteristic visual identity. For example, here's Julia Round quoting Karen Berger: "we just wanted to show different types of art styles too" (quoted in Round 16). And speaking about Dave McKean's covers for *The Sandman*: "Dave McKean's idiosyncratic and abstract artwork, is the best-known example of this process. McKean's materials range from pencil and ink, to collage and acrylic, to photography and Mac manipulation" (Round 17). It is true that Vertigo covers were striking and idiosyncratic, and that some of the interior artists (like Chris Bachalo, Steve Dillon and Mark Buckingham) would go on to achieve recognition and to be distinguished as artists with a singular vision. But many others were mainly of the journeyman type, especially when it came to interior work and regular series: correct and reliable, less prone to spectacle. Or, they were up and coming artists whose growth was on display, such as Bachalo, whose highly personal and surreal style only came onto its own after several issues on *Shade*.

Some were even accused of being difficult to follow, too expressionistic, or bland and boring. Here's Charles Hatfield talking about Duncan Fegredo's work in *Enigma*: "Graphically, *Enigma* is a challenge. Fegredo's linework is often wild, at times messy. The early chapters in particular are filled with exploded lines, densely clotted blacks and violent sprays of ink." And talking about Sherilyn Van Valkenburgh's coloring: "[it] undergoes a similar change, from the lurid combinations of issues #1-4 to the subdued green and brown tones of #8" (Hatfield 70). And here's Rich Kreiner talking about Chas Truog's art on Morrison's *Animal Man*: "[…] strictly industry standard. As the monthly duties wore on, his penciling became more sketchy and insubstantial […]. Backgrounds were sparse. Truog was never to master the nuance of faces and eyes, and his inkers frequently allowed him to twist in the wind" (Kreiner 42).

Vertigo, by decision and by design, eschewed the bright colored uniforms of superheroes and supervillains. The Vertigo palette (if something like this can be construed when colorists were so varied) privileged browns, blues, yellows and greys. This built a perception in certain corners of the comics criticism field (especially those who strongly valued superheroes) that Vertigo books were narratively adventurous but graphically unexciting.

Derington's art pops out of the page, especially when compared with Richard Case's drawings for *Doom Patrol*, which were full of jagged lines, with a heavy use of black, grinned mouths and sharp angles in facial expressions. Some of this can be explained by the evolution of

superhero drawing house styles, who have evolved in the last decade towards a more cartoonish and brighter style, following in the footsteps of artists like Stuart Immonen and Ed McGuiness. A second explanation has to do with the evolution of coloring techniques, as an immensely more varied palette available is now available for colorists. And a third one has to do with the fact that Young Animal is much closer to the main DC Universe than Vertigo ever was. Karen Berger once said that "If I were to describe our books, the superhero aspect of it would probably be the last part of the definition. They're basically stories about odd people, or ordinary people in extraordinary situations" (Groth 58).

Almost 30 years later, Berger is no longer with the company and the superhero division of DC Comics has more or less taken over any island of weirdness and idiosyncrasy there ever was at the company. So, it is understandable that *Doom Patrol* has the textural and graphical qualities of superhero comics of the 21st century, rather than the feel of authorial comics.

As we have been saying, this is explicitly thematized in the book. Not only with the creation of Casey Brinke and its position as a twice-over fictional character, but also with the name of the company who chases Danny, Retconn, and with the reveal of the big bad of the series: Haxxalon the Star Archer, a.k.a. The Disappointment. Haxxalon, who only appears in the series as a blank silhouette with a stamp that reads "Withheld due to copyright" over his body, was an action figure, with accompanying comic book, who was created as a way to make use of a surplus of brightly green lightbulbs manufactured in China. But it was eventually revealed that said lightbulbs turned kids catatonic, and the toy and the character were banned, effectively retconned out of existence, leaving him stranded in limbo. As a consequence, he grew bitter and angry, and used Danny, in its brick shape, to kill the God of Superheroes and take his place. Therefore, Haxxalon is a victim of corporate interests who wants to wreak revenge for being created to sell toys and then being abandoned when his economic purpose could not be fulfilled.

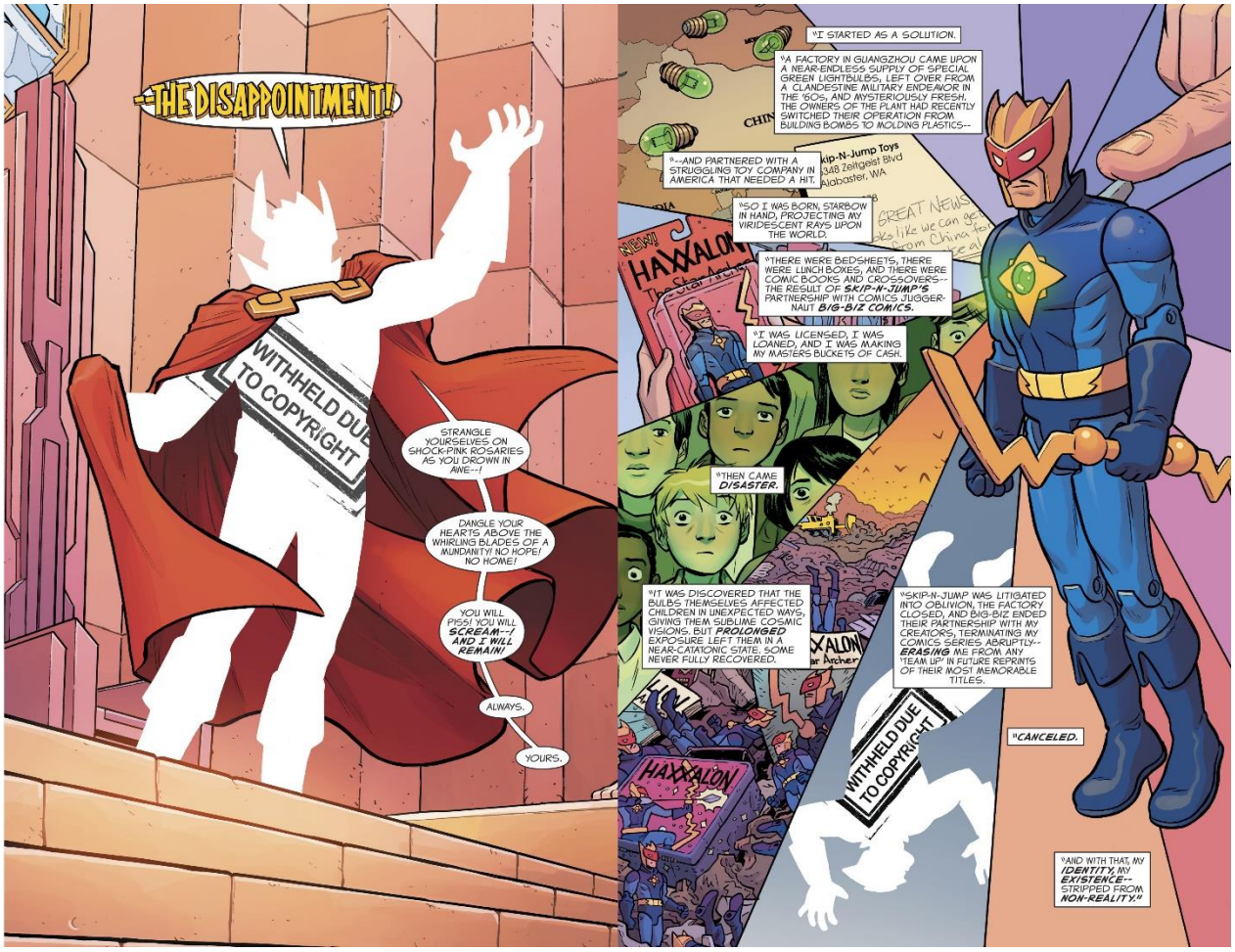

Fig. 4. The Disappointment/Haxxalon the Star Archer, from Doom Patrol #9 and #11. Art by Nick Derington and Tamra Bonvillain (2018). Published by DC Comics, © DC Entertainment.

But the metaphor does not stop there. It is revealed that the purpose of Retconn is to provide entertainment for the Eonymous, child-gods who bear more than a passing resemblance to Marvel's Celestials,[11] hell bent on destroying the universe unless a steady stream of entertainment is given to them. They seem to stand for the readers, who cancel titles through disinterest and whom the companies believe will be attracted to their titles after the umpteenth retcon. Retconn wants the Doom Patrol to become said entertainment, something that they ultimately fail at achieving… in the fictional universe: in the real universe we have been reading those adventures all the time. Finally, Way tells us that Robotman is… a product of fan fiction. Dreamed by fans who were intensely attached to Robotman as written by Morrison, and who shipped[12] him with Crazy Jane.

[11] The Celestials are a race of alien gods created by Jack Kirby who have had a hand in the genetic configuration and natural evolution of the Marvel universe through experimentation and the creation of several races such as the Eternals and the Deviants.

[12] I use the term here as it is used in the fanfiction community: the desire to see certain characters attain a romantic relationship that is seldom explicit in the text.

So, at the end of the arc we have two forces colliding, with authorial agency caught in the middle: on the one hand, the corporate masters, on the other hand, the fans. Way explicitly recognizes that every character in a corporate setting is, ultimately, an actor playing fantasies that do not belong to them or their creators. In the *Milk Wars* crossover, which concludes this run, this is even more explicit when Rita Farr, Elastigirl, is crucified with nails which sport the logo of DC Comics.

In light of all of this, *Doom Patrol* is an oddly affecting and understanding comic. More than anything, Way strives for acceptance: of self, of one's conditions, of one's history. At different junctures of the story, the way out is simply coming to terms with what one is: Crazy Jane finds a new personality and recognizes that she is a healer; Rita Farr remembers her origin story and escapes the clutches of Retconn, Casey comes to terms with her own fluid sexuality, and Milkman Man, Casey's son and an imperfect Superman archetype, learns to accept that being angry at his captors is okay. Once again, the self-help theme comes to the forefront, and opens up a dialogue with the ending of Morrison's Doom Patrol. Both stories end underlining the importance of imagination and the necessity of a better world in which ideas, outlandish characters and, over all, connection between human beings, can thrive. But in Morrison's case this is explicitly presented as an escape from the "real world" towards Danny The Street. In Way's case, the rejection of predatory corporate practices is evidently and direct, and it sparks a reboot of the universe in which the Doom Patrol's adventures take place. But said reboot does not free the characters. There is not an inherent belief that the fictional DC universe is "better" or "freer" than the "real world." There is an acceptance that corporate IP is corporate IP and that we must make do with the rules of the game as it is, just as we must make do in the real world.

The Dreaming: how to make sense of the world

If Way's *Doom Patrol* is about characterization, character interaction, and synthesis between wildly diverging versions, *The Dreaming*, written by Simon Spurrier, drawn primarily by Bilquis Evely, colored by Mat Lopes, and lettered by Simon Bowland, is all about milieu and ideas. When announced, the Sandman Universe imprint was composed of four series: *The Dreaming*, *The Books of Magic*, *Lucifer* and *House of Whispers*. It was also a "pop-up imprint," with the possibility of changing and disappearing at any moment in time. It was also part of the last attempt to relaunch Vertigo. I will be focusing only on *The Dreaming* here.

This is where the division of labor highlighted by Gaiman becomes clear. Characters who were dear to Gaiman, in particular The Endless, Dream's family of anthropomorphic concepts, are off-limits to other writers. This is particularly evident when one considers the breakthrough character of *Sandman*, Death. Early on *Sandman*'s run, Death had several appearances in the

DC Universe. This bothered Gaiman because of continuity inconsistencies. Talking about *Captain Atom* #42 and #43, where she appears as an aspect of Death in the DC Universe:

> I just felt it confused things – she wasn't an "aspect" of Death. She was Death. When one day Nekron or the Black Racer stops existing, she'll be there to take them.
> If the script or lettered comic had been run by me back then I would have noticed the continuity issues and corrected them. As it was, it wasn't a big deal: it was a fine comic as far as it went, but it tried to shoehorn Death into DC Continuity and got it wrong. So I clarified matters in *Sandman* 20. (Cronin)

Legend has it that afterwards Gaiman renegotiated his contract to introduce a clause which stipulated that every creator who wanted to use the Endless had to ask him for permission. Whilst such a thing never happened, appearances by *Sandman* characters in the DC Universe became practically inexistent after it ended. DC Comics, having learned somewhat from its relationship with Alan Moore, decided to treat those creations as more or less creator-owned. After 1996, Death only appeared in one comic set in the DC universe, an *Action Comics* issue written by Paul Cornell and drawn by Pete Woods.

The Dreaming follows the inhabitants of the titular realm, built by Dream and powered by his magic, after Daniel, Dream's current incarnation, mysteriously leaves it. But nature abhors a vacuum, and several new characters appear to fill his role, with varying philosophies and ideas on how to run the land. The disappearance of Dream also affects his ensemble cast, making characters such as Abel and Lucien act erratically and abandon their original characterization. This picks up on a recurring theme during Gaiman's *Sandman*: the clash between the romantic and sometimes reckless behavior of Dream as opposed to what he must do according to the ancient laws that govern his kind. One can read the entirety of Gaiman's *Sandman* as a long grinding of gears between responsibility and impulse which ultimately destroys Morpheus. The series also mirrors *Sandman* in that both start with an abandoned kingdom. But *Sandman* is concerned with the return of Morpheus and the rebuilding of said kingdom, eliding the decay, whilst *The Dreaming* is all about the decay and the power vacuum.

How does Simon Spurrier deal with this "anxiety of influence"? The writer seems to brush it off. He mentions that he was first approached many years ago, for a Sandman event in which there was some interest in him writing one of the ancillary titles:

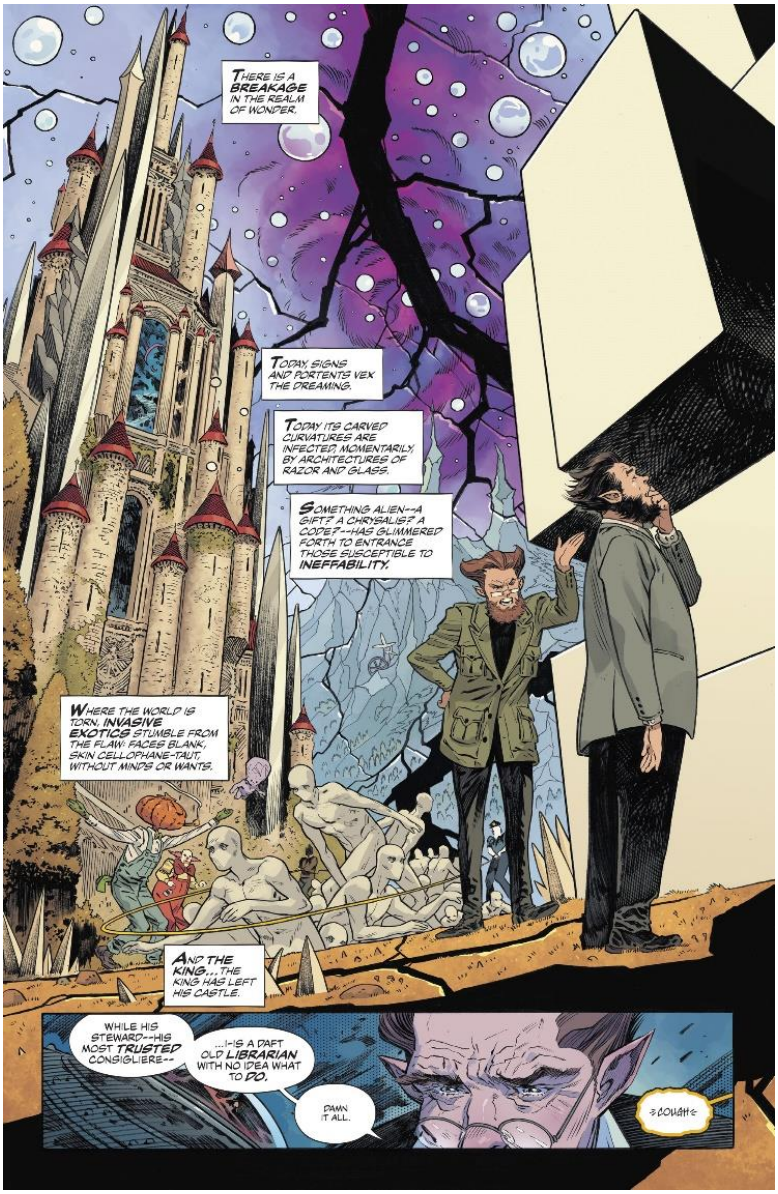

Fig. 5. The Dreaming in disarray. From The Dreaming #1, art by Bilquis Evely and Mat Lopes (2018). Published by DC Comics, © DC Entertainment.

"I had a cool idea that felt expansive enough that it wouldn't just be confined to one of the satellite titles, but would guide the entire event. That's what I pitched, basically. 'I'll do it, but only if you let me be in charge of everything.' The note that came back was something along the lines of 'thanks for this, we really respond to your ambition,' which I took to be a very polite way of reproaching me for being arrogant and pushy. I never heard anything else. Until, many years later, it all suddenly came back online. [...] Neil was evidently impressed enough by my original idea to let me helm the flagship book, The Dreaming" (Klaehn).

Rather than being daunted by the prospect of stepping into Gaiman's shoes, Spurrier takes it in stride and mythologizes his own arrogance. This is coherent with the tactic employed by the original Vertigo writers: "The personae they built were, in many cases, both approachable and fascinating" (Licari-Guillaume, "Ambiguous Authorities" 4).

However, *The Dreaming* establishes a relationship with *Sandman* that is equal parts invention and echo. Many of the characters and concepts, starting with the main character, Dora, a monstress of mysterious origins who lives on The Dreaming (but is not a dream), are original and created by Spurrier and Evely.[13] Additionally, Spurrier references several classic scenes from Gaiman's run while twisting them slightly. The most noteworthy of these appears in #14,

[13] However, Gaiman also played a part in the creation of Dora and the character is credited to both writers.

when Dora must face a Lord of Hell in a game, an issue-long sequence which deliberately harkens back to the famous #4 of the original run, with the difference that Dora's triumph comes not from mastering the game, but rather from her shrewdness at cheating.

Graphically and texturally, *The Dreaming* also goes against the grain of original Vertigo comics. The original *Sandman* had a wildly inconsistent graphic side, due to the many cartoonists who drew it. Bilquis Evely, for her part, brings a coherence to *The Dreaming* that was lacking in the original run. Her art is versatile. She can produce extremely detailed panels at the same time that she can turn expressionistic. Her body language is precise. She is less cartoony and caricatural than Derington, but she frequently twists and turns bodies according to the inner life of characters. She also makes heavy use of large splash pages which compress the action in one setting, which is reminiscent of J.H. Williams III's work on *Sandman: Overture*. Lopes' colors also tend to favour the brighter side of the spectrum, something which is appropriate for a book that takes place in the land of dreams. Sometimes, the use of double splash pages and the way Evely discards gutters and panels to reproduce something akin to dream logic is reminiscent of Stephen R. Bissette and John Totleben's pages for *Swamp Thing*. In fact, Tatjana Wood's atmospheric and psychedelic colors for *Swamp Thing* seem closest to Lopes' colors, with the difference that in *Swamp Thing*, due to the presence of Totleben's heavy inks, the line art is stronger and pops up more in contrast with the colors.

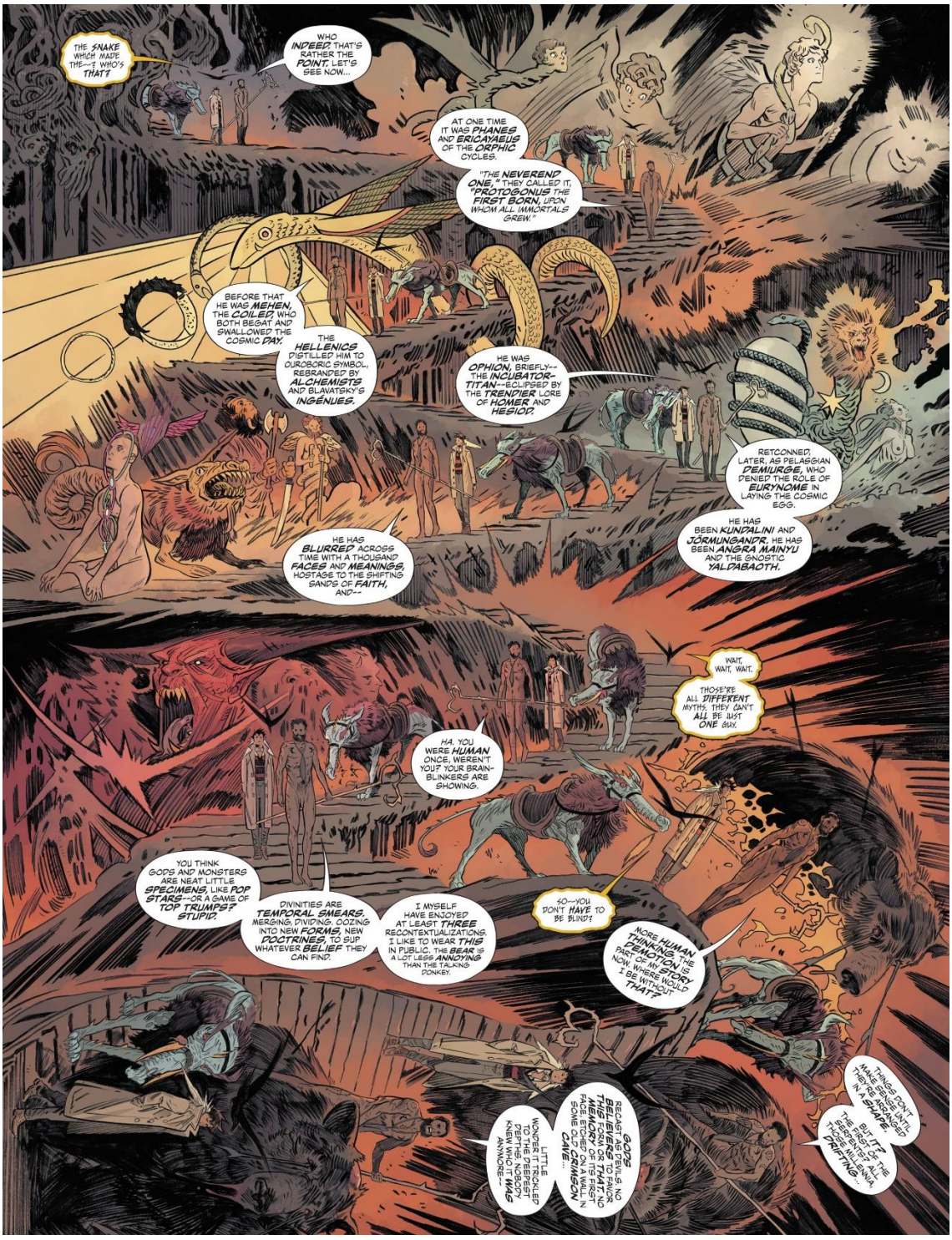

Fig. 6. A particularly evocative and inventive splash page by Evely and Lopes. From The Dreaming #10 (2019). Published by DC Comics, © DC Entertainment.

Another aspect in which *The Dreaming* dialogues with and furthers the themes present in *Sandman* is the way it makes narration its subject. It is a series which, just like *Sandman*, is interested in the ways human beings make sense of the world through the art of telling stories. Its main point is that this is the only way we can understand the world and make sense of its enormous amount of information. This is explicitly stated in #11, which is situated in the

World's End Inn which had previously appeared in Gaiman's *Sandman*. This is a place where characters from different universes gather to tell stories. Dora and Matthew Raven arrive in it and find its inhabitants trapped in a closed loop. Three narrators circle continuously between a cosmological story about the beginning of abstract concepts, a detective story and a science fiction story. It is only when Dora realizes she must hijack the tale and find fitting endings for each one that they are able to break the spell and get on with their search for Dream. This is the ending she fits onto the primal cosmological story:

> Mother Womb, understanding, reached into her belly and drew forth the miracle that would save them all. An incisive thing, a blade to be swung by perception, to slice reality into such neat morsels as could fit a mortal mind. Each one shaped so that it began, occurred-- and ended. Then, and only then, could the cave-dwellers embrace the wonder their brains had conferred—and cast their eyes upon the farthest horizons. And that, my friends, is how stories came to be. (*The Dreaming* #11 19-20)

The book expresses faith in the power of stories, and the insistence that stories must, at some point, reach an ending, which also means a sort of order, a descent from the world of endlessly promising ideas to the harsh reality of finitude. This also works as a clever metacommentary on *The Dreaming* itself. When the book starts, the overwhelming feeling is one of being unmoored: what happened with Dream? Why did he leave The Dreaming? Who are these new characters? What is their story? What is that mysterious geometrical shape that seems to be birthing a god? As the story progresses, all these answers are revealed in a way which somehow diminishes their promise: in the end it is all a plan by a fictional alternate of Steve Jobs who caused Dream's exile and engineered his own master of the Dreaming, a sentient program with the shape of a moth called Wan who wants to substitute wonder and surrealism in dreams with useful information which will make humans more productive. The problem is that the end result would be the death of humanity, driven to insanity when deprived of the respite of imagination. This explicitly makes a case for information being the counterpart of stories. Information, by design, is infinite. And nowadays, information is constantly produced. Spurrier seems to be suggesting that our brains cannot deal with this deluge.

Fig. 7. Wan, new master of The Dreaming and psychotic AI. Art by Bilquis Evely and Mat Lopes, from The Dreaming #6 (2018). Published by DC Comics, © DC Entertainment.

Therefore, the final message of *The Dreaming*, at first glance, is a pretty trite one about the importance of wonder and imagination in human lives. But this is coherent with its insistence that stories must end, must take some shape. What was so intriguing at the beginning of the series becomes a classically arranged Aristotelian narrative in which protagonists are defined, antagonists reveal their intentions and a confrontation takes place. The book, however, stresses that endings are also beginnings.

This is an acknowledgment of the realities of working in a shared universe that is corporately owned. Every writer and every artist must leave the book they have been assigned, every story must end, but not really, because there are always new interpretations, new leases on life and new books to be made out of corporate IP. Spurrier manages somehow to have his cake and eat it too: recognizing the importance of endings whilst at the same time knowing that every ending is impermanent, so the best he can aspire to is to an ending of his contributions, to the finite story he had in mind. The secondary characters of *Sandman* end up realizing they have the power to bring back Dream, which is also a way to go back to their predestined roles inside Dream's universe, to the canonical interpretation of said characters, set in stone by Gaiman, and thrown into flux by Spurrier at the beginning of the series. In this way, *The Dreaming* ends up putting the toys back on the shelf. But it understands something important: for the return of Dream a spell must be cast by the entirety of the inhabitants of The Dreaming, something which makes the invocation a collective accomplishment, just as comics making is.

Fig. 8. “Everyone dreams The Dreaming”, incantation as collaborative work of art. Art by Bilquis Evely and Mat Lopes, from The Dreaming #19 (2020). Published by DC Comics, © DC Entertainment.

Conclusions

As I write these words, Vertigo is no more. It has not existed for nearly two years. What titles remained were folded into “DC Black Label,” the new imprint which houses comics published for an adult audience. This is part of a larger DC Comics restructuring consequence of the merger between Time Warner, DC’s longtime parent company, and AT&T. Nowadays DC does not have any imprint which stands on its own, based on a shared identity amongst its titles, but rather has three very bland denominations by age: DC Kids, DC Universe and DC Black Label.

What started as a corporate restructuring has, additionally, been impacted by the covid-19 crisis. In recent months DC has ended its deal with Diamond Comics Distributors, fired a large portion of what remained of its editorial staff, including Mark Doyle, the last editor in chief of Vertigo, and cancelled a swathe of titles, amongst which *Hellblazer*, the newly launched version of the adventures of John Constantine, written by Simon Spurrier with art by Matias Bergara, Aaron Campbell and Jordie Bellaire. Spurrier wrote a farewell note filled with anger:

> I’ve had books cancelled before, of course. It’s part of the game, especially with franchise characters. You go into it with your eyes open. You make sure you ask up front how many issues you’ll get, minimum, and you plan your ending so it can be deployed at any point. That’s not a relaxing way to tell stories, but it works. Mostly. Sometimes it even results in art. (Spurrier)

The feelings expressed in this note are sentiments both books analyzed here grapple with. But in these cases, they must not only tiptoe the corporate line but also recognize and deal with the enormous shadow that their former writers cast, writers who turned the books into adventure-authorial comics. They both do so with grace and gusto, utilizing an additive logic that deems their very important forebears as just one piece in the history of the world they are trying to tell.[14]

Way and Spurrier belong to a generation which saw the early Vertigo writers as heroes, and Vertigo as the perfect jewel between authorial and adventure comics. However, said fanatism does not seem to have imparted an overly deferential tone to them, but rather the comprehension that even great authors, in a corporate setting, are doomed to be just a tiny part of History. So, their versions of said characters are meant to be additive rather than to erase and top previous versions. At the same time, Derington, Evely, Bonvillain and Lopes help set these new versions apart with a graphic quality that is very different to the original comics, and which is enormously helped by the change in visual texture that digital coloring brought to North American comics. Lastly, these are all books which somehow care: about the characters, about the original writers, about the themes on display both on Gaiman's exploration of stories and on Morrison's exploration of mental illness and family. This does not detract from Vertigo's preventable demise. One is left with a confused feeling: at the same time happy that these stories exist, and despondent at the fact that evolution and growth in corporate comics is hard, and destruction comes easy.

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[14] This is a phenomenon at work not only on Vertigo titles. One could argue that almost every superhero in existence has a defining run by a noteworthy author or art team who afterwards remain forever linked to said character, and whose run every subsequent team seeks to emulate or surpass: Marv Wolfman's and George Perez's *Teen Titans*, Frank Miller's *Daredevil*, Mark Waid's *Flash*, Walt Simonson's *Thor*, etc. Sometimes a character can have several historic runs, and sometimes it can have none.

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