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Vertigo: the first few months (1992-1994)— according to *The Comics Journal* and *Wizard*

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"Without Matt Wagner, Neil Gaiman, and Grant Morrison, DC's Vertigo line is Joe Orlando's 1970s mystery books with their underwear showing" (Sim 54). This was how *Cerebus* author Dave Sim snarkily worded his opinion on DC comics' new imprint on 1 April 1993, in the keynote speech on creators' rights he gave at ProCon, the United States' very first comic industry professionals-only convention. Sim's one-liner implies that, without its top creators, Vertigo had achieved little more than the merger of two mainstream genres (horror and superhero) under the cover of facile titillating ploys, a dismissal that provides a good introduction to this overview of the early critical reception of Vertigo in the US fan press's leading titles.

After over a quarter century has passed since the launch of Vertigo, even the most diehard fans have imprecise memories about the circumstances and context that surrounded its debut. '"Successful"' cultural products are deemed so because of their posterity, of whatever recognition they garner after being circulated and meeting with positive public response. But such "success stories," which by definition are recounted retrospectively, often brush over—when they do not plainly ignore—the initial circumstances in which a given cultural phenomenon came into existence and the early responses thereto.

The emergence of Vertigo was no exception. Whereas the imprint was born out of an editorial agenda whose background is fairly well-known today (see "DC Comics in the early 1990s" below), a reconsideration of its early reception undermines the idea that Karen Berger's cutting-edge imprint burst onto the US comic book scene as an overnight sensation in 1993. It did take some time before DC Comics' hype of the Vertigo line translated into actual visibility and "popularity."

The Comics Journal vs. *Wizard Magazine*

While this topic might warrant a book-length treatment, it will be addressed here, in order to remain within a manageable framework, from the angle of the two main comics news and criticism magazines of the early 1990s, i.e., *The Comics Journal* (*TCJ*) and *Wizard Magazine*

(henceforth shortened to *Wizard*).[1] Before the mid-1990s, anyone with a more than passing interest in US comic books had no other choice but to read magazines printed on paper (regardless of the earliest Internet comics discussion boards, an information vehicle then limited to an admittedly small number of computer-savvy users). At the beginning of the decade, *TCJ* and *Wizard* exemplified two poles of the comics fan experience. *TCJ* was at first a fairly traditional comic fanzine edited by Gary Groth and Mike Catron; they had taken over an existing fanzine, *The Nostalgia Journal*, in 1976, and renamed it *The Comics Journal* in 1977. Kim Thompson soon joined the editorial team, and Groth and Thompson gradually transformed it into a magazine with a highbrow agenda, aspiring to become the foremost agent of cultural respectability for US comics, just as *Les Cahiers du cinéma* had been to the film medium in France after World War II. By the turn of the 1990s *TCJ* had lost interest in the most fannish aspects of the comics reading experience and expressed consistent scorn for it. It focused instead on investigative reporting about the industry, lengthy interviews of veteran and contemporary creators, and often contrarian highbrow criticism of both old and new comics (Spurgeon & Dean). Throughout the 1980s Groth and Thompson simultaneously built Fantagraphics, the company that was to become the leading American publisher of alternative comics, graphic novels, and classic comic strip anthologies to this day.

Wizard debuted in the summer of 1991 and was pretty much the exact opposite of *TCJ*, partly because the latter used newsprint whereas the former was printed on glossy paper (as of issue 7). *Wizard* was the brainchild of Gareb Shamus, a comics fan with a B.A. in economics. His newsletter for comic book stores *Wizard: The Guide to Comics* morphed into a magazine in 1991: from then on, every issue was geared toward the hardcore fans of mainstream comic books by offering them news, interviews, and previews about the latest releases, movies, anime, trading cards, collectors' market trends, and a comic book price guide updated every month. Whereas *TCJ* dedicated most space within its pages to independent creators' comics and, to a lesser extent, non-US comics, *Wizard* promoted contemporary US superhero fare, in particular the titles issued by then newcomers Valiant Comics and Image Comics. *Wizard* pandered to the segment of fandom most fascinated with the collectors' market for back issues and its (largely fictitious) potential for commercial profit.

The opposition between the two titles can be reframed according to the sociological categorization popularized by Pierre Bourdieu: *TCJ* was concerned with the creative autonomy segment of the comics medium, whereas *Wizard* catered to consumers of its more heteronomous products (Beaty and Woo 74-75; Pustz 66-109). In everyday parlance, the former treated the medium first as an art form, second as a cultural commodity, while the latter

[1] The information presented in this paper has been gathered through a page-by-page browsing of the following corpora: *Wizard Magazine* number 17 (Jan. 1993) through 37 (Sept. 1994) in digital copies and *The Comics Journal* number 155 (Jan. 1993) through 171 (Sept. 1994) in paper copies.

was geared toward fans who perceived comics as an entertainment industry generating products that the "discerning" collector might be able to resell for spectacular profits at some future point. Predictably enough *TCJ* reviled *Wizard*, its readers, and everything they incarnated about the comic hobby—while *Wizard* plainly ignored *TCJ*. The two magazines were perfect opposites, which is why it is fruitful to look into how both addressed the emergence of Vertigo in its first two years from late 1992 to 1994.

DC Comics in the early 1990s

1992 was a mixed year for DC Comics. The company's public visibility was fairly high, especially in the last quarter, thanks to the "Death of Superman" event, but not so much in the summer, despite the theatrical release of *Batman Returns*. DC's share in the comic book market hovered between 15% and 20% throughout the year, making it a distant second to Marvel's 45-to-50% share during the same period (as confirmed by the "Wizard Market" column in the 1992-1993 issues of *Wizard*). As the oft-repeated story goes, late in 1991, DC editor Karen Berger was given the go-ahead by president & editor-in-chief Jenette Kahn, executive vice-president & publisher Paul Levitz, and vice-president and editorial director Dick Giordano, to create an imprint with a dual agenda: endow with a distinct identity the cluster of non-superhero titles authored by (mostly) British creators she had been supervising since the late 1980s and foster the emergence of more titles in the same creative vein. This move was part of a gradual shift in the company's economic strategy to promote imprints likely to generate titles with long-term profitability in the trade paperback segment, which had thrived consistently owing to the growth of direct market distribution over the previous fifteen years. DC thus expected to consolidate the foothold it had gained in the general bookstore market following the unexpected and continuing runaway successes of Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* since 1986, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* since 1987.

The strategy was anything but risk-free, though. By then DC was already dealing with the fiasco of Impact, an imprint for younger readers that had never managed to take off since its 1991 debut and was finally discontinued two years later. Piranha Press, DC's imprint launched in 1989 to enter the alternative comics market that had coalesced in the wake of Fantagraphics, proved a commercial disappointment; it folded in 1994, having failed to foster creators likely to become counterparts to Fantagraphics' Los Bros Hernandez or Charles Burns. Its successor, Paradox Press (1993-2001), produced only a handful of titles that did not become best-sellers in bookstores, regardless of often positive receptions leading to film adaptations.[2] And yet, DC launched two new imprints in 1993: Vertigo in January and the "multicultural" Milestone

[2] The two most representative examples are John Wagner and Vince Locke's *A History of Violence* (1997) adapted into a film by David Cronenberg in 2005, and Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner's *Road to Perdition* (1998) adapted for the big screen by Sam Mendes in 2002.

Media in February. Even though Milestone was technically a separate company whose output did not fall under DC Comics' editorial control (Brown), its titles were published and distributed by DC and it was most often treated in the mainstream and fan press as an entity comparable to Vertigo.

The appearance of Karen Berger's imprint took place amid considerable indifference both among the general public and mainstream comics readers. Take the leading US daily newspaper, *The New York Times*. In 1992-1994 it (predictably) ran few stories about the comics industry: three pieces published between 15 and 22 November, 1992 dealt with the "Death of Superman" event culminating with the release of *Superman* 75 (Nov. 1992) and its disappointing aftermath for the industry (McDonagh H25; Brozan B22; Rich 1-2); two articles addressed the black-owned and minority-focused company/imprint Milestone Media in September 1992 (Byrd 8) and August 1993 ("WHOOSH!" C1, C6); one covered the 1994 summer crossover storyline "Zero Hour" (Chun 41). Not only was no article devoted to Vertigo specifically but the only reference to the imprint in the *Times* during that period can be found in the August 1993 piece on Milestone Media, at the end of a paragraph on gay superheroes and "superheroic women" in contemporary comic books:

> DC Comics, the publisher of "Wonder Woman," the longest-running comic book with a female hero, has begun several more comic books with female leads in the last few months, including "Black Canary," about a crime fighter in fishnet stockings; "Catwoman," Batman's feline adversary, and "Black Orchid," a mysterious character in DC's Vertigo series, which features graphic violence and strong language and is geared to mature readers. ("WHOOSH!" C6)

This example shows that, by summer 1993, the editorial identity of Vertigo was summarized for mainstream audiences ("graphic violence and strong language [...] geared to mature readers") in terms reminiscent of the late-1980s outcry over "grim and gritty" comics (Ayres; Lopes, 113; Quinnan), and ultimately still echoing the scapegoating tones of the moral panic that had hit the comic-book industry four decades earlier and given birth to the Comics Code Authority. Apparently, the substantial press kit distributed by DC Comics to major newspapers and magazines around the country, including the *NYT* but also the *Village Voice* and *Esquire* (Curtin 44), in the fall of 1992 had not had much of an impact. The special Pulitzer Prize awarded to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (announced in April 1992), which is commonly remembered nowadays as a sign of the comics medium's rising status in US mainstream culture as of the early 1990s, was then much too recent to have already impacted the dominant perception of comics in the American public. In hindsight, it makes sense that the debut of an imprint for sophisticated comics readers was then a non-event for the US mainstream media.

The initial media blitz within the industry

The launch of Vertigo was announced publicly in the fall of 1992. The next-to-last issue of *Amazing Heroes* (*TCJ*'s sister title devoted to mainstream comics), cover-dated June 1992, contained a lengthy preview of DC's upcoming titles with announcements for early 1993 about *Death: The High Cost of Living* (hereafter *DHCL*), featuring Dream's sister Death, and a new Sandman series featuring Wesley Dodds (the future *Sandman Mystery Theatre*)—yet not a word about a new imprint dedicated to the Berger-edited titles (Harrington 18-19). In October, dealers and comic book store patrons were informed about the creation of Vertigo through *Advance Comics* and *Previews*, the monthly catalogs issued respectively by Capital City and Diamond, the two leading national comic distributors. Both publications' covers featured Vertigo and spotlighted interviews with the likes of Karen Berger and Neil Gaiman.

In *Advance Comics* and *Previews*, the imprint was advertised through a strong focus on Gaiman's forthcoming *DHCL* mini-series. The debut of Vertigo posed a specific problem (illustrated here by *Advance Comics*' order form): it was to be marketed as "innovative," whereas the line-up of its first month included only three genuine novelties (the one-shot *Vertigo Preview* and two limited series, *DHCL* and *Enigma*) and six pre-existing ongoing series (*Animal Man*, *Doom Patrol*, *Hellblazer*, *Sandman*, *Shade the Changing Man*, *Swamp Thing*). The latter were all slow sellers by the standards of the direct market, with the notable exception of *Sandman*, a regular in Diamond's 100 top selling monthly titles. To tease the interest of dealers, the *Advance Comics* issue cover-dated January 1993 (released in October 1992) included *Vertigo Sampler*, a free 16-page black and white promotional comic with brief plugs on the six ongoing series, and excerpts from the imprint's first three original titles (*DHCL*, *Enigma*, and *Sandman Mystery Theater*, which was scheduled to start in February 1993).

DC's initial media blitz, as often happens in the comic industry, had mostly short-term effects. While the whole Vertigo line-up cover-dated March 1993 (minus the perennial ultra-slow seller *Shade*) made Diamond's Top 100, only *Sandman* and the new titles remained in the list in the next two months (as evidenced by the "Top 100" columns in *Wizard* issues 19–21). As for DC's multicultural imprint, Milestone Media, it ended up getting significantly more mainstream media coverage than Vertigo (Brown 26). Within the industry, however, it did not take long for Berger's imprint to become a household name. In 1994, the first year when the San Diego Comic-Con's Eisner Awards included Vertigo nominees distinct from DC nominees, *TCJ* noted that, "DC received the most awards for a publisher, thanks to the company's Vertigo imprint" (Gallagher 34) with Neil Gaiman (best writer), P. Craig Russell (best penciller/inker), Todd Klein (best letterer), Brian Bolland (best cover artist), Karen Berger (best editor) winning in five categories. In Britain the same year, the 5th UK Comic Art Awards distinguished Peter Milligan and Duncan Fegredo for their Vertigo work.

TCJ's unenthusiastic interest for Vertigo

What about *TCJ* and *Wizard*? Neither title treated the appearance of the new imprint as a ground-breaking event. In *TCJ*, which was traditionally dismissive of any so-called innovation coming from either of the Big Two (i.e., Marvel and DC), the advent of Vertigo was signalled by a simple two-page ad (20-21) for *DHCL* and *Enigma* in issue 155 (Jan. 1993) (fig. 1). It is important to note here that DC was not one of *TCJ*'s usual advertisers! A small panel featuring Death (p. 80) also appeared in that issue's Neil Gaiman interview. In the following issue's long piece on "The State of the Industry, 1992-93," Valerie Potter wrote:

> DC is launching two new imprints with which it hopes to attract readers other than white, male adolescents—the comic industry's largest readership. The Vertigo imprint, launched in January, consists of some new and some previously-existing mature readers titles; individually, the existing Vertigo titles have already gained an adult following, and DC hopes that the Vertigo logo will entice these readers to seek out the whole line. (Potter 10)

Over the next few months, the only references to Vertigo in *TCJ* appeared in "News," a selection of, generally, a hundred-odd brief announcements of forthcoming titles from a wide spectrum of comics publishers. As of issue 156, Vertigo appeared in the DC header along with the company's other imprints whenever some of its new titles were listed in the month's column.

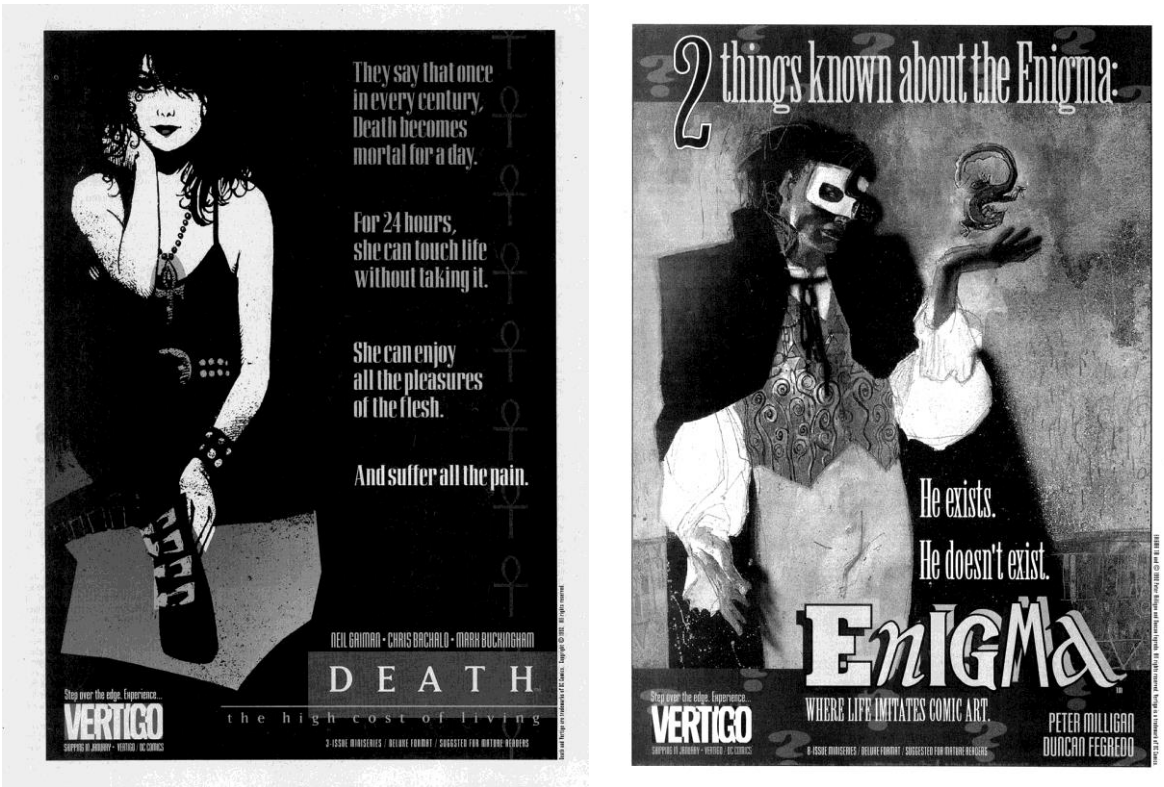

Fig. 1. Double black and white ad for two of the first Vertigo titles, *Death: The High Cost of Living* and *Enigma* (*The Comics Journal,* no. 155, Jan. 1993, pp. 20-21).

Three months after the July 1993 "Black comics artists" issue (issue 160), in which Milestone and its creators were prominently featured, Vertigo made the cover of *TCJ* 163 (Nov. 1993), adorned with spectacular Chris Bachalo artwork (fig. 2). The issue's Vertigo segment included the transcript of a roundtable gathering *TCJ* editor Gary Groth, Karen Berger, Rachel Pollack, Ann Nocenti, and Nancy Collins, as well as interviews with artist Ted McKeever and Neil Gaiman. The segment was preceded by "Vertiginous Heroes," the *Journal*'s very first review of Vertigo titles (*Animal Man* and *Shade the Changing Man*) by Rich Kreiner, who also recapped the genesis of the imprint and tried to define the specific flavor of Vertigo (Kreiner 41-44). This attention culminated in Kreiner's plug for Ennis and Dillon's *Hellblazer* run in "Hit List," the monthly column in which *TCJ* contributors were free to praise their personal favorites (Kreiner 111).

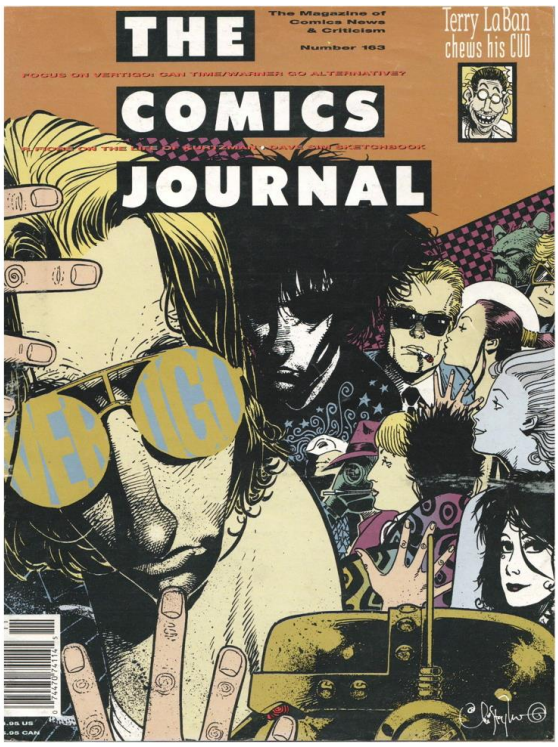

Fig. 2. *TCJ,* no. 163, Nov. 1993. Cover art by Chris Bachalo.

The Vertigo roundtable, with its then unusual all-women line-up, emphasized (almost to the point of belaboring) the imprint's main specificities: the key role it assigned to writers in the creative process, the targeting of a readership over 16 that wasn't exclusively male, Berger's desire to avoid creator-owned genre material—a commercial deadlock in her opinion—and instead cater to both "the progressive current comic reader and [...] people who don't normally read comics by publishing different types of material" (Groth, "Vertigo Roundtable" 56). Groth saw as an "artistic problem" the fact that Vertigo books, in his words, "were neither fish nor fowl, they weren't superheroes but they still retained elements of superheroes." The panel participants responded that the use of superheroes or superheroic ingredients was no

limitation *per se* and allowed the scripting of "weird fantasies" according to Pollack, "magic realism" according to Nocenti, or "various shades of metafiction" according to Collins (Groth, "Vertigo Roundtable" 58). In the issue's second interview conducted by Gary Groth, Neil Gaiman gave a more balanced if less enthusiastic assessment of Vertigo titles:

> I like some of them, I don't like others. Having said that, most of them I respect, whether I like them or not. I think they're being produced by people who are at least trying to produce material that is there to be read. [...] [T]he Vertigo titles [...] tend to aim really high and then either miss spectacularly or occasionally hit spectacularly. (Groth, "Bring Me A Dream" 72)

Note the contrasting approaches of the roundtable participants, enthusiastic supporters of the imprint standing by their editor, and the more distanced, slightly haughty posture of the imprint's bestselling writer who tries hard to say nice things about his fellow Vertigo creators while being aware of the inevitable unevenness among them.

In the following year, besides regular announcements in the "News" column, the references to Vertigo appeared in a handful of reviews: G. Morrison and Jon J. Muth's *The Mystery Play* was literally executed by Ng Suat Tong in issue 168 (Ng 49-51); *Death: the High Cost of Living* was given a lukewarm pass by Ray Mescallado in issue 169 (Mescallado 49-52); in issue 171, however, Gaiman and McKean's then upcoming graphic novel, *Mr. Punch,* got a glowing endorsement from Greg Stump and Eric Reynolds (Stump and Reynolds 32-33) and Charles Hatfield wrote a very positive review of Milligan and Fegredo's *Enigma* (Hatfield 68-70).

It is essential to underscore that the emergence of a new DC imprint was of secondary importance for Gary Groth's magazine over the 1992-1994 period. *TCJ*, which was more interested in the evolution of the medium than day-to-day micro-events, showed much more concern for the deaths of Harvey Kurtzman in February 1993 (issue 157) and Jack Kirby, in February 1994 (issue 166)—two giants of the comics industry since the 1940s, memorialized by the magazine as artistic martyrs who, throughout their careers, were victimized by the corporate denial of their creators' status. Another key event of the period was the Mike Diana obscenity case, which began in the spring of 1993 and led to the cartoonist's conviction a year later. This loomed large for the *Journal* because of its significance in the freedom of speech debates that had agitated the comics industry since the post-war period.

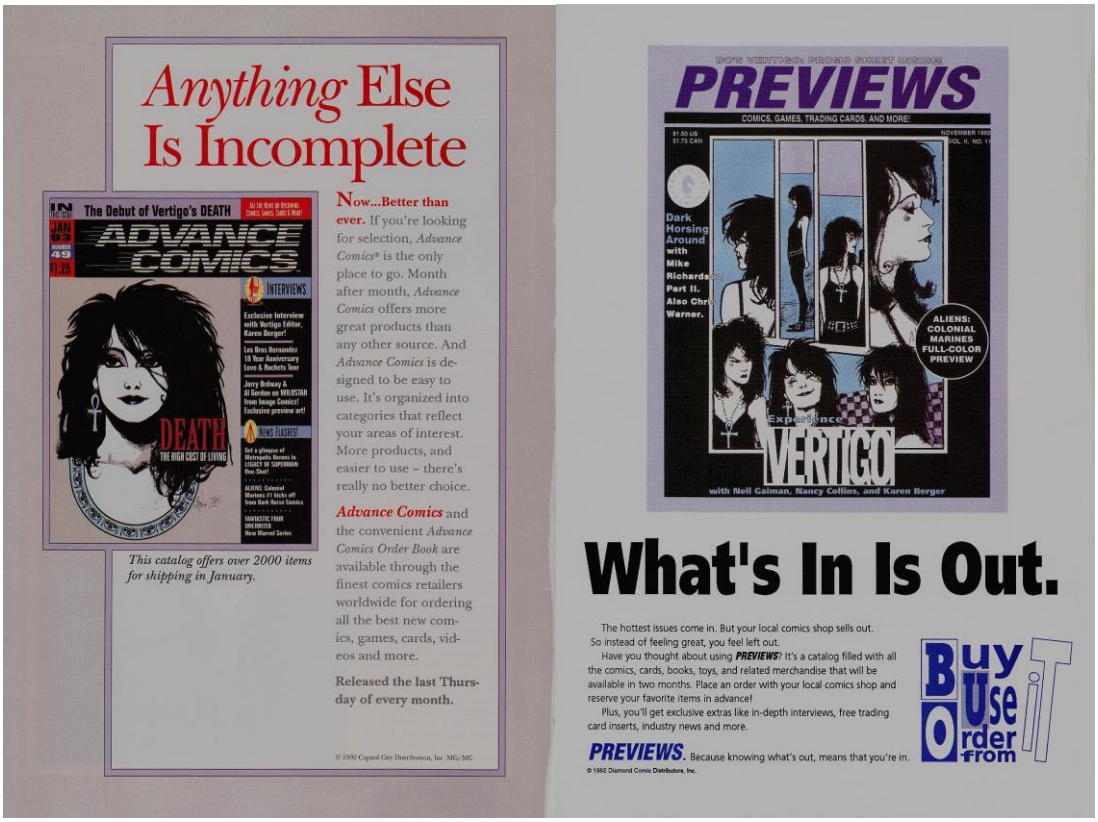

Fig. 3. Full-page ads for *Advance Comics* and *Previews*. *Wizard,* no. 17, Jan. 1993, pp. 64-65.

Wizard's market-driven response

Not surprisingly, *Wizard*'s initial response to the birth of Vertigo was quite different—less cerebral, flashier. The first mentions of the imprint were in the (habitual) full-page ads for *Advance Comics* and *Previews* (64-65) that ran in *Wizard* 17 (Jan. 1993) (fig. 3). In the following issue, the *Previews* ad reappeared (68), but attention to DC's new imprint manifested itself more clearly: the debut issue of *DHCL* was spotlighted in "Picks from the Wizard's Hat" ("a listing of the hottest books shipping in January!" p. 102) while the following column, "More Picks," selected *Animal Man* 57 and *Sandman* 47 as their first DC/Vertigo choices. Finally, the anonymous writer of that month's "Wizard Market Watch" column noted:

> Aside from the Death of Superman hubbub, DC is very low key this month. Even the formation of Vertigo (their mature oriented imprint) and Milestone (the multicultural imprint) aren't generating any major waves in the comic industry. If DC follows up on these new projects and properly promotes them, it could do wonders for bringing new consumers into the industry. (109-110)

The readers that flipped through the issue to the end were treated to a gorgeous full-page color Death ad, visually much more appealing than the black-and-white version that appeared in *The Comics Journal* (fig. 4).

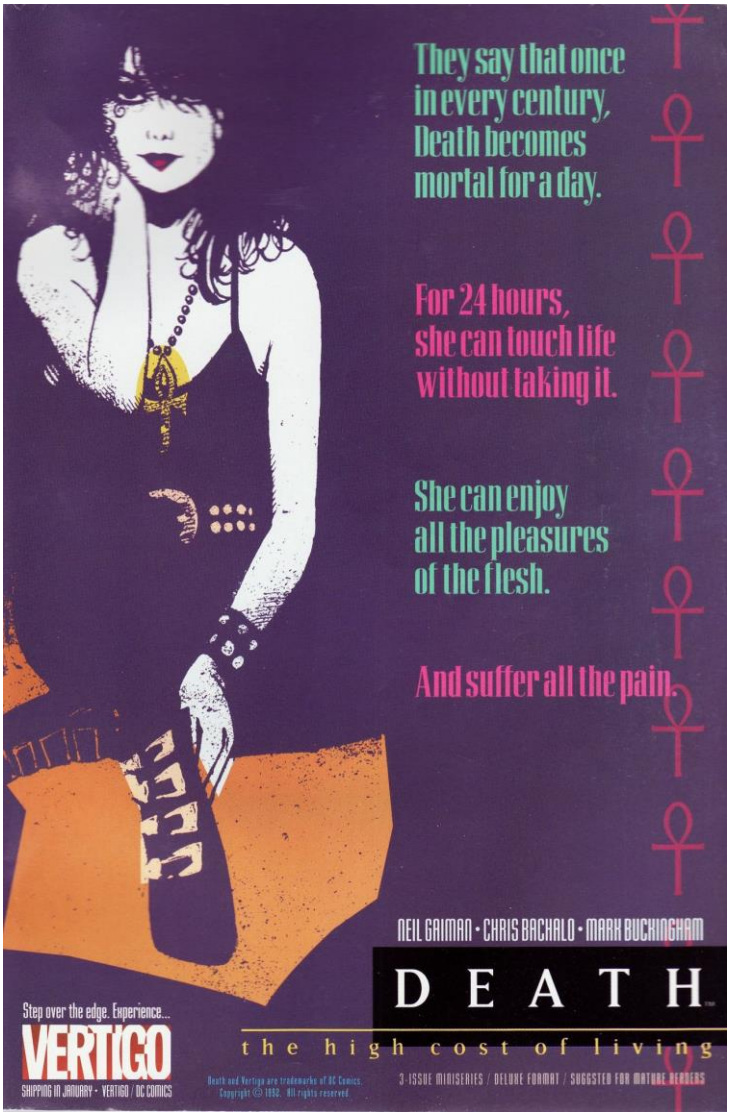

Fig. 4. Full-page color ad for *Death: The High Cost of Living*.
Inside back cover of *Wizard,* no. 18, Feb. 1993.

For *Wizard* and its readers, the gauge of any comic's quality was its commercial potential more than its artistic creativity. While the "More Picks" column flagged the one-shot *Mercy* and *Sandman* 48 (in *Wizard* issue 19), *DHCL* 3 and *Kid Eternity* 1 (in *Wizard* issue 20), the latter issue's "Market Watch" warned its readers: "[The] mature-oriented Vertigo line is extremely popular with the older audience that's sick of the standard superhero stuff. Retailers should take care with how they order some of the Vertigo product, like *Death: The High Cost of Living*, which some dealers over-ordered and are now stuck with" (*Wizard* 20, 119). The rest of the paragraph was a praise of Milestone Media, described as a possible "sleeper surprise of the year," with "the potential to become a heavy hitter in the marketplace"—an opinion in keeping with the big article on Milestone in the same issue. In *Wizard* 22 (June 1993), William Christensen and Mark Seifert's four-page article "Religion in Comics," a motley overview of religious characters and themes in mainstream publishers comics, contained such profound statements as "Comics like *Sandman* and *Hellblazer* have explored Christian mythology"

(Christensen and Seifert 87). The authors explained that both DC and Vertigo titles tried to keep their religious references mutually consistent despite evident limitations such as Superman not encountering Sandman's sister Death when he died at Doomsday's hands. It was only in the following issue, *Wizard* 23 (July 1993), that a four-page article by Jack Curtin, "The Spin on Vertigo," was devoted to Berger's brainchild. Curtin dealt successively with such topics as Neil Gaiman's creative leadership in the birth of the imprint, the omnipresence of artists "who adhere to the idea that their endeavors should be directed toward storytelling rather than pinups and potential posters" (Curtin 45), the writer-driven nature of Vertigo books, the impact of the British Invasion, and Berger's policy of attracting women writers into her creative fold. Despite its emphasis on the imprint's commercial potential and forthcoming releases—a predictable slant in a *Wizard* piece—Curtin's coverage proves in retrospect an interesting early look at the imprint, slightly out of step with the magazine's usually fannish editorial line.

In the following issues of *Wizard*, attention to Vertigo was limited to the occasional appearances of forthcoming titles in "More Picks." However, as of issue 26 (Oct. 1993), the column "Wizard's Top Ten Hottest Artists" (which usually spotlighted the big names of Image, Valiant, and Marvel) was supplemented by a new monthly feature, "Wizard's Top Ten Hottest Writers." In its first year Neil Gaiman was cited every month for *Sandman* (he held the first spot in issues 26, 27, and 30, and slipped to second position behind Frank Miller in issues 32-37); meanwhile, Matt Wagner made the list three times for *Sandman Mystery Theater*. In issue 29, the 1993 year-end issue, *Wizard*'s early caution toward Vertigo had given way to all-out enthusiasm: Berger's imprint was extolled both for its success in 1993 (55), its publishing schedule for 1994 (44-45), and the magazine spotlighted her as one of DC Comics' six most influential people (97-98).

Conclusion: more than 1970s mystery books with their underwear showing…

In retrospect, the two magazines show the coalescence of a two-step reception of Vertigo books, namely the persistence of a traditional authorship pattern, in which any title received praise or scorn as a result of its writer's and artist's merits or lack thereof, in conjunction with a new aesthetic identity ascribed to Karen Berger's editorship and likely to be summed up in five keywords: Brits, cutting-edge fantasy, women, writer driven, no run-of-the-mill superheroes. In the early 1990s imprints were a fairly recent invention in the US comic industry, the first having been Marvel's EPIC line created in 1982. But their coexistence next to or within their parent companies (as seen in DC's Impact and Piranha Press imprints) had so far always proved an obstacle to the emergence of an artistic identity. From the start both *TCJ* and *Wizard*, despite their largely irreconcilable approaches to the medium, perceived Vertigo as a

successful combination of authorship and editorship, although the former magazine expressed its appeal in terms of the critics and the latter in terms of fans and the back-issue market. The imprint was technically an offshoot of one of the Big Two but both magazines treated it as an entity analogous to and potentially capable of competing with high-profile alternative publishers. Vertigo did turn out to be much more diverse and innovative than a rehash of old genre stories that, under a veneer of audacity, merely cashed in on the aura of a couple of fan-favorite white male creators, as Dave Sim implied in his early dismissal. The two leading US comic magazines of the 1990s disagreed with him—eventually.

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