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"I like to think of it as a bridge across": The Tight Association between Neil Gaiman and DC's Vertigo Imprint

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"In the larger cultural consciousness, Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* is the definitive title of early Vertigo comics, achieving massive success in bookstores as the graphic novel market started to grow." As illustrated by this quote from Oliver Sava (np) on the AV Club website, the association between Neil Gaiman and Vertigo runs deep in the collective imagination, and is as recurring in the press as in academia. Wherever you turn, Gaiman's name appears to be indissociable from the mature-reader, supposedly censorship-immune imprint founded by DC Comics in the nineties—and as to know why, the most straightforward answer seems to be, as emphasized by Sava, the massive success of Gaiman's acclaimed comics series, *The Sandman* (1989-1996). Another convincing explanation for the strong amalgamation between writer and label is the fact that *The Sandman* is one of DC's six comics series from which Vertigo was born in 1993—along with *Shade the Changing Man*, *Hellblazer*, *Animal Man*, *Swamp Thing*, and *Doom Patrol*. Therefore, as suggested by Imp on impactcomics.com, Gaiman's series did nothing less than to "creat[e] a whole imprint around itself," "chang[e] what people expected from comics," and "chang[e] what mainstream publishers considered publishing" (np). Somehow, however, confining the strong association between Gaiman and Vertigo to financial and historical matters feels reductive; the whole purpose of this paper is therefore to examine why that might be, and to suggest deeper and subtler reasons justifying such a lasting association in the collective imagination.

Gaiman's work crystallizes Vertigo's editorial ambitions

On close examination, beyond the *Sandman* series, Gaiman's aesthetics and work as a whole foster consistent resonance with Vertigo's editorial ambitions—especially as far as the question of boundaries is concerned.

Not only scholars, but also the press abundantly discuss the fact that Vertigo is characterized by both a probing and a breaking of boundaries, on many levels. As emphasized by Karen Berger, Vertigo's creator and executive editor from 1993 to 2013, "without Dick [Giordano], Paul [Levitz] and especially Jenette [Kahn]'s encouragement and support for *pushing boundaries and taking creative chances*, Vertigo never would've happened" (Morris np, emphasis mine). According to Christophe Dony, what the six launching titles of Vertigo shared was a subversive impulse, a strong will to stand out from and ultimately resist the dominant

practices of the mainstream comics industry (*Entre Références* 3). Gaiman likewise tends to depict himself as an avant-garde innovator, as can be seen when he explains that he deliberately wrote and published the non-conventional storyline *The Doll's House* before the crowd-pleasing *Season of Mists* (McCabe 287), or when he says that he felt like he "was taking on the role of a Columbus, saying 'I believe there is a land—over there—to the west of us! I'm going to head out and see if I can find that land'" (Bender 36). Since such a concern for boundaries and subversion lies at the core of Gaiman's work, not only for Vertigo but generally speaking, I find it particularly enlightening to compare the different aspects of this blurring of boundaries in the writer's and in the imprint's publications.

A newspaper article published by Abraham Riesman on vulture.com in January 2018, entitled "How Vertigo Changed Comics Forever," seems, for instance, highly representative not only of Vertigo's aesthetics, but also of the way in which these aesthetics are perceived and synthesized in the contemporary collective imagination. What it notably puts forward is the fact that unlike many other labels, Vertigo addresses a very broad audience, the imprint being loved by teenagers as much as by adults. As Christophe Dony argues:

> Over the years and quite unsurprisingly, the Vertigo label seems to have played with the paradox inherent to the concept of rewriting and, in so doing, has provided links between older and newer versions of comics and established connections between audiences of different generations, thereby challenging the assumption that a comics canon is always oriented towards a specific audience or a certain era of comics historiography. (*The Rewriting Ethos* para.33)

Gaiman's work is likewise turned towards a wide audience: not only does he write for children (*Chu's Day at the Beach*, *Fortunately the Milk* to name but two) and for adults (*Neverwhere*, *American Gods*, *Anansi Boys*), but most of his novels, albums, comics and short stories are very hazy as to which public they actually target. For instance, the presumably children-oriented abecedary *The Dangerous Alphabet*, published in an album format in 2008 and illustrated by Gris Grimly, is foreworded so as to be hilariously intertextual and cheeky, in a manner that certainly engages an adult reader. The children's book *Blueberry Girl* (2009, illustrations by Charles Vess), while it seems designed to reach a younger audience, is also a very moving poem about parenthood. Conversely, the novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013), although publicized as Gaiman's first adult-oriented book in years, could as easily be enjoyed by a much younger reader and actually features all the typical characteristics of young adult literature, since it tackles themes such as friendship, first love, relationships, identity, and addresses various coming-of-age issues. Even though many of these publications are subsequent to Gaiman's major years of involvement with DC/Vertigo (in the late eighties and early nineties), between fairy-tales for adults and scary stories for children, Gaiman has now long been writing for an audience that resists strict delineation—just like Vertigo, which

notably engaged widely with a female audience, a rarity in the mainstream comics industry at the time.

This sheer diversity in public, both for Vertigo and Gaiman, is equally reflected in the diversity of characters they feature in their body of work. As Riesman highlights, Vertigo's characters "came from a dizzying array of ethnic backgrounds, defied gender stereotypes, and were often queer in ways that mainstream art in any medium was loath to depict at the time" (np). The same goes for Gaiman's texts, which feature characters from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds (particularly in *The Sandman* and in *American Gods*, but also in less renowned books such as *Cinnamon*), sexual orientations, ages (with children as main protagonists in *The Graveyard Book*, *Coraline* and *MirrorMask* to name but a few), genders (think of Wanda/Alvin in *The Sandman*), social backgrounds (with *Neverwhere* and its subtext about homelessness) and so on. Both Vertigo and Gaiman also tend to play with the boundaries of literary genres and styles, with Vertigo delivering stories about "criminals, high fantasy, low fantasy, realism, surrealism, sci-fi, political drama, and sci-fi political drama all at once" (Riesman np). Of course, with its "horror, fantasy, and high literature all rolled in one" (Carpenter 98-99), Gaiman's *Sandman* is one of the titles which earned Vertigo such a reputation, but the same goes for many other Gaiman creations, such as his story *Stardust (Being A Romance Within The Realms of Faerie)*, which probes the boundaries between comics and illustrated prose, but also between the repertoires of the marvellous, fantasy, fairy tale, epic and romance. As another example, Gaiman does not hesitate to weave into his horror short story *Click-Clack the Rattlebag* threads of humour and the grotesque—references that might be lost depending on the mood of the reader, but that Gaiman emphasized during a public reading of his story at the New York Public Library for Halloween in 2014 (see "Click Clack the Rattle Bag. Live from the NYPL" in the bibliography), thus earning laughter from the audience for an otherwise chilling tale.

Another boundary that Vertigo and Gaiman seem equally keen on probing is the line of demarcation between fiction and reality, with a more specific focus on metadiegetic references and on the amalgamation between narrator and writer. As argued by Isabelle Licari-Guillaume:

> Vertigo scriptwriters also reinforced their "brand image" by staging themselves within their works of fiction. This was particularly visible when narratives took a metadiegetic turn, and within Vertigo there were many instances of writers appearing in their own stories. (7)

Metafiction is a central motif in Gaiman's writing, be it for Vertigo or not. His representation as the figure of the narrator in his own work, as well as an emphasis on the fact that what he narrates is "a true story," appear more than once (notably in his comics "Feeders and Eaters" with Mark Buckingham and in "The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch," with

Michael Zulli). In *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr Punch* (illustrated by Dave McKean), the blurring of the lines between invention and autobiography is so tight that Gaiman later had to explain that it was purely a work of fiction.[1] In the afterword of *The Dream Hunters*, a tangential story to *The Sandman* published in 1999 and illustrated by Yoshitaka Amano, Gaiman fictionalized the origins of his tale and later had to disclose the fact that his story was a pure invention:

> I wrote an afterword, intended to fill several pages giving a perfectly spurious account of the history of the story I had just written. [...] Mr Amano had drawn and painted twice as many pictures as we had expected, and all but one of them were included in the book, leaving only one page for the afterword. We printed it in very small type and forgot about it. [...] SANDMAN: THE DREAM HUNTERS was published, and I learned that if you put things in small type at the back of a book they are believed, unquestioningly, as the first stream of requests came in from people and from universities who found themselves unable to obtain the source texts I had claimed to have drawn from. I explained to each of them that I had made them up [...]. And I would like to apologize to anyone who has spent time trying to find the stories that THE DREAM HUNTERS was based upon. They exist in Lucien's library,[2] not in any of our own. (*The Absolute Sandman Volume Five* 516)

Beyond these questions of genre and fictionality, Gaiman and Vertigo similarly blur the lines between the so-called "high" and "low" (or mainstream) cultures through equally esteemed references to all kinds of cultural productions. According to Dony, the label "not only adapts and rewrites allegedly 'popular' texts, but also constantly refers to and/or engages with more 'classical' or 'canonical' stories and myths—works of fiction which, needless to say, are generally considered to be part of a so-called 'higher' culture" (*The Rewriting Ethos* para. 20). Hence, Vertigo's artists "paid homage to cape-and-cowl legends like Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, to be sure; but they were just as interested in Monet and Dalí" (Riesman np). It is of course the case for *The Sandman*, in which Gaiman mixes references to Greek mythology and Shakespeare with references to DC characters and folklore, but this dialectic between "high" and "low" cultures also erupts in all of Gaiman's body of work, as Carpenter argues when discussing *Violent Cases* (Gaiman's first collaboration with McKean, in 1987, published by Escape Books). According to the critic, at the time, "Gaiman was about to challenge the arbitrary division between independent, art comics and mainstream, genre comics, and it started with his subject matter" (75). For instance, in *Stardust*, Gaiman mixes the fairy tale ("low") and the epic ("high") traditions, and opens his story on a poem written by John Donne ("high"), interestingly enough entitled "Song" ("low"). *Stardust*, which was originally released

[1] In his introduction to the short story "Queen of Knives," in the collection *Smoke and Mirrors*, Gaiman explains that "This, like my graphic novel Mr Punch, is close enough to the truth that I have had, on occasion, to explain to some of my relatives that it didn't really happen. Well, not like that, anyway" (22).
[2] In *The Sandman*, Lucien's library is a place of the Dreaming which contains every book anyone ever dreamt of writing.

in 1997-1998 under the Vertigo imprint in a prestige format as a four-issue mini-series, was classified as a comic book,[3] consisted in fact in an illustrated story, and was later published as a novel. What is more, the blurring of the lines between "high" and "low" is actually emphasized and promoted by Vertigo, especially in/on Gaiman's books for the label. The back cover of the 2014 edition of Gaiman and Dave McKean's *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr Punch* advertises "a complex art not often seen in mainstream comics." Such an in-between position does not come without difficulties, as Dana Jennings indicates in a *New York Times* press article:

> Still, Vertigo does have its critics. Fans of the small, independent presses say Vertigo is too mainstream, tainted by being part of DC. Superhero fans meanwhile accuse Vertigo of being too avant-garde. "It's regarded with suspicion by both sides of the river," Mr. Gaiman said of Vertigo. "I like to think of it as a bridge across." (np)

This intertextual dialectic between "high" and "low" finds echoes in the position that both Vertigo and Gaiman seem to occupy within the literary field, in the sense of Bourdieu's dichotomy between a symbolic and an economic capital, with Vertigo combining during its first decade (which could be called its golden age) "the best of both worlds: the financial ethics of an indie company with the selling (and hiring) power of a multinational corporation" (Riesman np), and Gaiman being constantly acclaimed as an award-winning storytelling master[4] while repeatedly conquering the top of the bestselling lists.

A chicken-and-egg situation… and cases of retro-assimilation

On the whole, it thus appears that Gaiman's aesthetics fit particularly well with the editorial ambitions of golden-age Vertigo (from its creation in 1993 up to 2013, when Karen Berger left the label), especially as far as the treatment of boundaries (generic, symbolic, . . .) is concerned. However, when it comes to knowing whether the label influenced Gaiman, or whether it was the other way around, we seem to face something of a chicken-and-egg question. My contention on the matter is that it is actually a case of co-construction.

On the one hand, it is absolutely indisputable that Gaiman's aesthetics helped to build the imprint. The fact that *The Sandman* is one of the six series from which Vertigo originated is consequential: the blurring of boundaries in Gaiman's work contributed to breaking the generic and narrative conventions[5] of the time, and thus created an atmosphere of

[3] "There was only one small catch. Stardust wasn't a comic—it was a prose novel. Sure it sounded like a comic book, was published by a comics company, was serialized like a comic, was sold alongside comics in comic book shops, and was illustrated by a comic book artist. But it wasn't a comic" (Carpenter 408).
[4] It is, for instance, the main argument of the advertisement for his workshops on masterclass.com.
[5] Amongst others, Carpenter notes how Gaiman helped change the narrative conventions of comics, particularly the issue of violence: "mainstream comics had thrived on fight after fight after fight, all

dissemination and abundance which played a part in setting the tone and providing the impulse for the imprint. This influence is highly documented in the press,[6] which contributes to the assimilation between writer and label, and does not only go back to questions of genres, motifs, characters, public and such, but also to a certain type of publication mode that subsequently became federative for Vertigo, as emphasised by Carpenter:

> While it may have looked like most other ongoing monthly titles and while it certainly wasn't a creator-owned series, when Gaiman decided to end it, *Sandman* became a singular, unified work—a long novel if you will—ten volumes, thousands of pages, all under the direction of one authorial vision. Gaiman established a new paradigm that would become the model for most of the Vertigo titles to follow. (400)

As Dony argues, Gaiman's *Sandman*, in the same way as Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing,* helped define the imprint when its first 46 issues migrated to the brand new catalogue, by developing "what would become the characteristic poetics of dark, fantastical, and self-reflexive rewriting strategies of Vertigo before the actual creation of the label" (*The Rewriting Ethos* para.11).

On the other hand, by redefining "both the material product and cultural status of mainstream comics throughout the 1990s" (Round 27), Vertigo itself created a space for its writers and artists (amongst them Gaiman) to develop and expand these same strategies, to experiment, and thrive.

The fact that Gaiman's work crystallizes Vertigo's editorial ambitions and therefore fits the label so well is probably one of the main reasons why some of Gaiman's titles, previously published elsewhere, were later re-assimilated by Vertigo.

As a matter of fact, going back to Gaiman's timeline with the imprint shows that Gaiman did not write all of his "Vertigo titles" for the imprint, since many of them were actually written before Vertigo was a full-fledged, well-established line. Amongst the titles that were initially published as part of Vertigo are his *Stardust* with Charles Vess, and *The Children's Crusade* (1993-1994), a seven-issue comic book crossover and limited series whose first and last issues were written by Gaiman and Alisa Kwitney. One of the very first comic books ever published by the imprint in 1993 was the first issue of *Death: The High Cost of Living*, a three-issue series by Gaiman and Chris Bachalo tangential to *The Sandman*. In 1999, Vertigo released *Neil Gaiman's Midnight Days*, a compilation of new and previously published stories, some of them

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punctuated with feats of strength, exhibitions of power, and scenes of destruction. [...] Gaiman change[d] the game. *The Sandman* would feature violence, some of it graphic, but it wouldn't feed the audience's hunger for it. Gaiman seemed intent on proving that mainstream comics could revel in words and ideas, imagination and cleverness" (104).

[6] As an example, a recent article by Richard Newby on hollywoodreporter.com reports that "*The Sandman* is a series that, while helping to establish the goals of DC's Vertigo imprint and leading to a number of spin-offs, and inspired works, is something of sacred text" (np).

by Vertigo and some of them not. What is interesting in this case is that in his introduction to the 2016 edition, Gaiman explicitly affiliates his work to the imprint, welcoming the reader "to the Vertigo collection of shorter, previously uncollected Neil Gaiman pieces" (np). Since Gaiman does not usually tend to spotlight the publishing houses that he works with in his paratexts (such as introductions, afterwords, biographical notices, but also interviews and the like), one might deduce that in this case, the association of the collection with Vertigo (even for the texts that Gaiman did not write for the imprint) suggests a meaningful (possibly aesthetic) cohesion between the collected pieces that goes further than a simple marketing strategy. As for *The Sandman*, we have already seen that the series was assimilated by Vertigo at the time of its creation, in 1993, with issue #47, and that it was part of the reason why the label was actually created in the first place.

Vertigo also retrospectively assimilated the title *Black Orchid*, an atypical and very contemplative comic book created in 1988-1989 by Gaiman and Dave McKean and initially published by DC Comics as a three-issue limited series. Vertigo incorporated the title in 2012 as a hardcover deluxe edition (a collected edition had previously been published in 1991 by DC).[7] The same goes for Gaiman and McKean's *The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Mr Punch*, a graphic novel initially published in the U.K. by Gollancz in 1994 and then re-appropriated by Vertigo in 1995. This story features an adult who recounts how a Punch and Judy show shocked him as a child and still intermingles with personal memories of his relatives and surroundings at the time. With its issues of memory and violence, its examination of the ways in which children intercept and perceive fragments of adult conversations, and its metafictional aspect which makes it really hard for the reader to discriminate between fictional and autobiographical elements, *Mr Punch* fits Vertigo's aesthetics remarkably. The affiliation between the graphic novel and the label is reinforced by McKean's art style which, according to Wagner, Golden and Bissette, "elevates the visuals beyond the values present in typical comic book art. […] The design of the book is simply innovative and unique" (165). As a result, if one wonders why Vertigo shows such a strong impulse to retrospectively assimilate specific Gaimanesque titles that were not initially published by or written for the imprint,[8] one might argue that it is so because some titles simply fit Vertigo's agenda singularly well.

This being said, one major question remains: are these aesthetic resonances between Gaiman's work and Vertigo's catalogue the only reason why their association is so strong in the collective

[7] It is worth noting that shortly before the final word was added to this paper, DC Comics announced the final shuttering of its Vertigo imprint in 2020, soon to be replaced by the umbrella imprint DC Black Label targeting a public of 17 and up. After migrating from DC Comics to its Vertigo imprint in 2012, *Black Orchid* has thus been released again through the brand-new DC Black Label in 2019 (Hilgenberg np).

[8] Gaiman himself discusses the use of such a term on his blog (*It Occurred* np).

imagination? Such a claim seems all the more difficult to justify if one takes into account that many other writers and artists working for Vertigo develop similar contents and storytelling strategies (which is quite teleological, since their productions make the imprint's aesthetics, and are thus obviously "typical" of the label),[9] even when they are not writing for Vertigo (as is notably the case for Alan Moore).[10] What is more, confining the strong association between Vertigo and Gaiman to a matter of similar aesthetics, and thus to the only issue of *content*, overlooks one crucial aspect of the question: it seems to me that the niche that Vertigo used to occupy within the field (be it comics, literary, or social) stemmed not only from the particularities of its products and their contents, but also—and I would argue, as importantly—from the *position* that the imprint claimed in the field. This, I think, is absolutely central to the way Gaiman and Vertigo are so strongly associated in the collective imagination. In other words, my contention is that the resonances between Vertigo and Gaiman not only stem from the similarities in the contents of their production, but also from the closeness of their stances, or postures.

Gaiman's posture crystallizes Vertigo's stance in the field

The idea that Vertigo's posture is central to the success of the imprint has been explored by various critics, amongst them Isabelle Licari-Guillaume. According to her, the posture of the imprint is notably crucial as far as issues of authorship are concerned, and "Vertigo's narratives, like Vertigo's editorial structure [are] built around the importance of the act and the performance of authoring rather than on the individual person of the author" (2). In an article published in 2014, Christophe Dony shows "how and why strategies of rewriting have been central to Vertigo's poetics and editorial project for over twenty years" (*The Rewriting Ethos* np), and more particularly how the rewriting *ethos* of Vertigo is connected to issues of memory, and therefore to processes of (self-)canonization and discourses of cultural legitimacy.

[9] "The Vertigo imprint Karen Berger had built with Gaiman, Morrison, Delano, Milligan, and the rest had often gravitated towards some common elements. On the most superficial level, adult themes, violence, horror, science fiction, and crime seemed to be the bonding agents that helped make a Vertigo series. Of course, most of them contained far more than that, but there was something of a Vertigo style that was easily recognizable" (Carpenter 448).

[10] *Swamp Thing* is not the only Moore production to have been claimed by Vertigo after it had been published by someone else: *V for Vendetta*, initially serialized in the British comics magazine *Warrior*, later became part of Vertigo's catalogue. More contentiously, some of Moore's creations for Wildstorm's "America's Best Comics" imprint (such as *Tom Strong* and *Promethea*) then joined Vertigo's catalogue although Moore had by then vowed never to work with DC Comics again–and thus, by virtue of DC's purchase of Wildstorm after Moore had signed a contract with the then independent company (many thanks to Reviewer 1 for the details!).

Ruth Amossy defines the concept of "discursive ethos" as the image of the self that is built through the discourse (61). For Jérôme Meizoz, the notion of *posture* can be understood as the articulation between the "discursive ethos" and a variety of behavioural elements (para. 2). In the following discussion, I will make use of the concept of *posture* rather than *ethos* for two reasons. Firstly, I will not only focus on Gaiman's discourses in his paratexts, but also on some of his concrete actions in the social field. Secondly, in the case of Vertigo, I will include in the discussion a selection of elements raised in interviews by some of the imprint's most prominent figures, such as Karen Berger, as well as various comments that can be found on back covers as well as introductions. Yet, since Vertigo is not a person but an organization, these introductions and comments are less part of its "discursive ethos" properly speaking than the result of concerted processes of selection of information—in other terms, behaviours. As a result, the notion of posture seems particularly appropriate to discuss the pervasive link that exists on many levels between Gaiman's and Vertigo's ways of positioning themselves in the literary and social fields.[11]

Breaking media, labels and genres

We have already covered the fact that, in terms of *contents*, Vertigo as well as Gaiman repeatedly blur boundaries on many levels (such as genres, public, genders, cultures) in their production. One could wonder if they also share a similar *posture* as far as this blurring of boundaries is concerned.

For the back cover of the collected edition of *Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess' Stardust* published in 1998, Vertigo selected praises hinting that the book does not work according to the classic text-image relationship in comics. As the quote reads "The story alone is wonderful, but enhanced by the gorgeous artwork […]," the usage of "but" emphasizes the severable aspect of image and text, even though it is published by a comics company. On vertigocomics.com, Vertigo advertises the Sandman Revival (2019) by enhancing the insignificance of the medium when it comes to the impact of the initial series: "Get to know […] Sandman / Telling the story of Morpheus, the Lord of Dreams, The Sandman reads like a dream itself—surreal, surprising and unforgettable—and is considered a landmark work of fantasy. In any medium" (np).

The back cover of *Black Orchid* (2013 edition) features a similar comment that is all the more consequential since it also appears on the back covers of *Neil Gaiman's Midnight Days* (2016 edition) and *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr Punch* (2017 edition): "Neil

[11] It is also worth noting that I will distinguish between the notions of *content* and *posture* for the sake of clarity, whereas it is evident that in reality they intersect, which makes their configuration all the more interesting to explore.

Gaiman is, simply put, a treasure house of story, and we are lucky to have him in any medium." Here comes again the emphasis on the inconsequence of the medium, as long as the story is skilfully crafted. What is more, and maybe even more importantly, this is a comment by Stephen King, and even though King briefly turned to comics for DC in 2010, the medium is certainly not what comes to mind when thinking about his literary career. This, in a way, neutralizes the context medium-wise and stresses the contents, the stories instead, at least as forcefully as the quote itself. What Vertigo enhances when selecting this comment for these back covers is the importance of stories over any other consideration, medium included. The posture of the imprint, in this case, is very counter-intuitive: it is one of detachment from the notion of medium, as if making comics was not central anymore in an industry that is otherwise heavily codified.

That is precisely the posture adopted by Gaiman as well, in his paratexts but also during interviews, in which he frequently emphasizes stories rather than media, or even labels.[12] At the end of *The Sandman Overture*, when asked which genre is his favourite, Gaiman retorts that he "like[s] stories better than genres" (np). This dismissal of genres, in Gaiman's case, goes considerably further than a simple shrug. It is a genuine *mise-en-scene* that ranges from exploration to explosion. In the original "Sandman Proposal" in 1987, for instance, he says that in his mind *The Sandman* "would have superheroic elements, and it would be firmly rooted in fantasy, and it would be a horror title, with a Mature Reading tag" (*The Absolute Sandman Volume One* 546). Of course, Vertigo does not fail to advertise this eclecticism, and notably praises "the depth and range that have become a hallmark of their acclaimed author" on the back cover of *Neil Gaiman's Midnight Days*. Here is what Gaiman states at the end of his afterword to "Preludes and Nocturnes," the first arc of *Sandman* (#1-8):

> There was a definite effort on my part, in the stories in this volume, to *explore the genres available*: "The Sleep of the Just" was intended to be a *classical English horror story*; "Imperfect hosts" plays with some of the conventions of the old DC and E.C. *horror comics* (and the hosts thereof); "Dream a Little Dream of Me" is a slightly more contemporary British *horror story*; "A Hope in Hell" harks back to the kind of *dark fantasy* found in Unknown in the 1940s; "Passengers" was my (perhaps misguided) attempt to try to mix *super-heroes* into the SANDMAN world; "24 Hours" is an *essay* on stories and authors, and also one of the very few genuinely horrific tales I've written; "Sound and Fury" *wrapped up the storyline*; and "the Sound of Her Wings" was the *epilogue* and the first story in the sequence I felt was truly mine, and in which I knew I was beginning to find my own voice. (*The Absolute Sandman Volume One* 609, italics mine)

In this afterword, after mentioning his project to explore many genres in his *Sandman* (different types of horror stories, dark fantasy, essay, super-heroic), Gaiman engages in a long

[12] This posture is all the more playful as issues of media and labels lie at the core of Gaiman's body of work.

list in which the last two items are not even genres anymore (a "story to wrap up the storyline," and an "epilogue"). Ironically enough, he then underlines that it is precisely in the last one, the epilogue, which is not linked to a specific genre, that he finally began to find his own voice.

The end of Gaiman's short biography in *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr Punch* reads that he "is a professor of the Arts at Bard College, and is waiting impatiently for the wisdom that comes with growing a beard to arrive." Here, Gaiman openly mocks the boundaries of the biographical note by using a humorous tone as well as a quirky, supposedly personal detail about his beard, which is in total rupture with the quite formal third-person speech typical of the genre. In the same spirit, in his journal on neilgaiman.com, he breaks the convention of labels and cyber links that typically close each post, by paradoxically creating a label saying that he is too tired to write a label: "LABELS: ABSOLUTE SANDMAN, COMPLETELY ABANDONS THE IDEA OF WRITING LOTS OF LABELS AND GOES TO BED INSTEAD, LOCUS AWARDS" (*I didn't grow up* np).

An "economically disinterested" attitude

In the previous pages, we have already seen that Gaiman and Vertigo tend to blur the lines between the so-called "high" and "low" cultures, in a way that finds echoes in the position that they both occupy within the literary field (to be understood in terms of Bourdieu's dichotomy between symbolic and economic capitals). One could wonder how they concretely negotiate such a posture in their actions and paratexts.

Of course, in actual fact, both Vertigo and Gaiman are undoubtedly concerned by economic issues, and more particularly by the saleability of their products. One of Dave McKean's interviews is quite enlightening in that regard and creates a nice contrast—even counter-example—to what Vertigo and Gaiman both put forward in their own discourses. In his interview with McCabe in the early 2000s, McKean explains why he was "very happy to leave DC" in order to "just do the work that [he] enjoy[s]," which is not, to him, the priority of the house nor its imprint: "if I do approach them with a book, they're enthusiastic, but it's tempered and 'How can we make this work?'" (McCabe 23). McKean emphasizes the same economic imperative when discussing the creation of *Black Orchid* with Gaiman:

> You know, *Black Orchid* was a commercial venture. We had to pitch them a character, and we had to try and come up with something about it that made it interesting for us […]. And Arkham, for me, was, again, on that rung. It was on the commercial rung. [I] was trying to buy a house. I was a working illustrator, and I needed a job. (23)

In the same collection of interviews, horror editor Stephen Jones recounts Gaiman's genesis of *The Sandman* with similar emphasis on business and strategy:[13]

> Neil had been around as a journalist, he was well known and well respected. But suddenly, he started doing fiction, and he started doing comic books. As I said earlier, Neil is very well-read, very erudite writer. So he took tropes and ideas and concepts that most writers would use in books, and introduced them to comics. I'm a comic-book fan from way back, and nobody had ever done that before. And it was a brilliant concept, because the comics field was absolutely ready for it. They needed to attract new, "adult" readership. He said, "Let's assume that the comics people don't know this stuff. It's a whole new market we can expand." And obviously it's been incredibly successful for him. It was a phenomenal marketing idea. (McCabe 42)

In their respective discourses, however, Gaiman and Vertigo make this economic dimension practically disappear. Vertigo's strategy is to emphasize mostly its symbolic capital by insisting on the impact it had on the comics field. In an interview, for instance, Karen Berger says that her "reason for creating Vertigo was to do more really smart, provocative, psychological, edgy comics" (Morris np). On the back cover of the edition of *Black Orchid* retro-assimilated to Vertigo, in an otherwise very sleek design, the presentation of the graphic novel reads: "Simultaneously a deconstruction and a resurrection of an entire genre, this tale of the uncanny lives of Susan Linden embodies the new maturity in graphic storytelling that revolutionized the medium at the turn of the millennium." Every inch of this text lays emphasis on the seemingly tremendous impact of the book, whereas none of the typical many-copies-sold type of tag makes it on the page. Incidentally, this comment is presented as promotional rather than critical (it does not feature any name), and can thus easily be read as a self-assertion of Vertigo's outstanding status in the comics field. In 2019, following the announcement that DC Comics was going to shut down Vertigo, Karen Berger, its creator and first executive editor (from 1993 to 2013), stated on Twitter that "Corporate thinking & creative risk-taking don't mix. DC nixing Vertigo was a longtime [sic] coming. But hey, we changed the game & we had a blast doing it! Honored to have worked with so many incredibly talented creators & editors & thx to all our fab readers!" (quoted in Polo np). It is not hard to deduce that the "creative risk-taking" she praises in this quote lies on Vertigo's side (at least Vertigo in its golden age), and that the imprint as she envisioned it should be seen as completely disengaged from "corporate thinking" and the mundane monetary matters that it entails.

Gaiman's posture reflects quite the same economically disinterested attitude, though with a more playful tone. On his blog, for instance, he engages in a long text about nature, beauty and

[13] Stephen Jones tends to be as straightforward as McKean regarding pragmatic (and monetary) issues. Thus, he explains his extraordinary output as an editor in the following terms (with what McCabe describes as his "typical irreverent wit"): "I average about three or four books a year. That's because I have to pay the mortgage. London's an expensive city, and I don't earn as much as Neil or Clive [Barker]" (McCabe 39).

fireflies. Then, at the very end of the post, almost as an afterthought, he mentions the opening of the promotional website for the movie adapting his book *Stardust*:

> I only got online to tell you that if you take the dog for a walk last thing at night you can find yourself unexpectedly seeing the first fireflies of the year twinkling in the bushes, and what a fine thing that is. But then when I got online I discovered that the Stardust Movie site is now live at http://www.stardustmovie.com, so I thought I'd mention it. (*Fireflies* np)

On the same page, he mentions the release of the *Absolute Sandman II*, and actually tips the reader to go and check if this time Amazon did not get the price wrong again (and a lot cheaper than its worth): "And I learned that the second volume of ABSOLUTE SANDMAN has just been announced at the DC Comics website [...] $99.00 US [...] Somehow I doubt that Amazon.com will accidentally stick it up at $14.95 this time, but it's probably worth checking to see if they do" (*Fireflies* np). The image that this type of discourse builds is one of an author who focuses less on profit than on the opportunity to share his art with people who might enjoy it. Gaiman actually plays with this economically disinterested attitude, and regularly hints at the commercial dimension of his work.[14] In yet another post on his blog, he playfully integrates a self-conscious comment stating that, in the end, he could not avoid putting forward a promotional element in a text that was supposed to focus exclusively on contents and aesthetics. The post is titled "The one where I mention Fiddler's Green and absolutely nothing else," and here is its closing line: "(Exits, congratulating self for not even mentioning the new Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Radio Series site and launch date, then realises self just messed up the whole only-mentioning-Fiddler's-Green thing and bimbles off shamefacedly resolving to do better in future)."

In an introduction to "Hold Me," a special-issue comics published in *Hellblazer* #27 and re-published in *Neil Gaiman's Midnight Days*, Gaiman relates an actual encounter with a comic book seller who told him that one of his issues was much sought-after and selling for a very good price. Gaiman tells of their exchange: "'Oh,' I said. I don't follow price guides. And then curiosity took the better of me. 'How much do you sell it for?'" (74). The way he relates this episode simultaneously stages a disinterest in money ("I don't follow price guides"); an interest

[14] In an extensive interview with Stephen Bissette and his co-editors, Gaiman discusses the pecuniary dimension of his work very straightforwardly. He explains why he passed on the project that would later be known as *the Sandman: Overture*: "It was passed on because I wanted a larger royalty than I got. I passed on it largely because I couldn't afford to do it at 1987 rates and May 1987 royalties. There's sort of a level on which it would take me about as much time to do it as it would to write a novel. I know what I get for writing novels, and I get a fifteen percent royalty, and an incredibly healthy advance. I did *Sandman: Endless Nights* as my charity project; *Sandman: Endless Nights* was a favor to Karen [Berger], it was done at the four percent royalty I've had since the beginning, for a twenty-thousand-dollar advance, and I found the time, I fitted it in, and I did it. It got them onto the *New York Times* bestseller list for the first time ever. For this one, I said, 'Look, I can't afford to do it. I can't actually afford to drop everything'" (Wagner, Golden, and Bissette 496).

for money anyway ("How much do you sell it for?"); and, on top of it all, an assimilation of this interest to a pure matter of *curiosity*.

Such an attitude has the advantage of combining the best of both worlds—actually, the best of three worlds: on the one hand, Gaiman builds the image of a writer to whom art lies way above financial matters; on the other hand, he still manages to place promotional elements where they are the most profitable; finally, and most of all, by using such a playful tone when he combines symbolic and economic elements, he creates connivance with the reader, who is invited to feel part of the game and enjoy Gaiman's ambiguous stance. In other words, to put it bluntly, Gaiman tends to claim that he is not at all interested in the money, while winking and casting the reader a knowing and ingenious smile. If Gaiman's position is somehow more playful and ambiguous than Vertigo's, both seem to go to great lengths to adopt a posture that tones down the economic dimension of their work.

Fiction, reality, and origin stories

Blurring the lines between fiction and reality is almost a constant in Gaiman's work and in his paratexts. For instance, in his biographical note at the end of *Stardust*, he suggests that it might be a true story, and that it was recounted to him by his cat:

> He is seen here taking dictation from Princess, who claims that the story is entirely true, and that she got it from her great-great-grandmother, who was the Thorn family cat. But Princess changes her story from day to day. Anyone who believes what a cat tells him deserves all he gets. (222)

Then, for good measure, he uses a shot of both of them, human and cat sitting at "their" desk, as an illustration. In the introduction to "Hold Me," which, according to Gaiman, is probably his favourite short story, he writes: "Bits of it are true, though, more or less. Or rather, they happened to me, which is not necessarily the same thing at all" (74). These are typical examples of fiction presented as (partially) real, but it also works the other way around, with Gaiman constantly fictionalising reality. This is precisely where Gaiman's and Vertigo's postures resonate, and more particularly in their tendency to create "origin stories" as often as possible.

An origin story is a backstory revealing how characters became who they are, where they come from, why they do what they do, and also, in the super-heroic context, how they gained their powers. Gaiman recounts on many occasions how he became part of the comics field thanks to Alan Moore: "I stopped reading comics when I was sixteen, gave them up as greasy kid stuff, bought nothing (except for Spirit reprints) for about seven years. Then I read Alan Moore's SWAMP THING and I was hooked, addicted, delighted, and back in the fold" (introduction to

"Jack in the Green," *Neil Gaiman's Midnight Days* 8). As for Karen Berger, in most of her interviews about Vertigo, she goes back to the fact that she did not read comics before entering DC Comics: "I didn't grow up reading comics, so I didn't come to the field with any preconceived notions. Basically, I wanted to edit books that I wanted to read" (Jennings np). Her posture is one of reminiscence towards a fictionalized past, and its constant repetition in interviews gives it some sort of a formulaic aspect which assimilates it to a tale.

Were they isolated cases, these two origin stories could seem quite benign, even accidental. But they are not the only ones, nor the most plainly fictionalized. Maybe one of Vertigo's most striking origin stories concerns the creation of *The Sandman*. The title was born under DC Comics in 1988 (though issue 1 is cover-dated 1989), but its retro-assimilation to Vertigo in 1993 engages the imprint's responsibility for the contemporary reader who reads the introduction published in 2006 in *The Absolute Sandman Volume One* (the first volume of a massive collected edition of the whole series). This introduction was written by Paul Levitz, the company's president at the time and a major comics historian:

> Fittingly, one step in the creation of *The Sandman* began at an old house in Tarrytown on New York's Hudson Highlands, a few steps from the home of Washington Irving, whose tales formed the mythology of the region. The DC editors and management were gathered in a dusty old library for one of their periodic meetings, and the topic was keeping the well of creativity from going dry after the extraordinary rush of the mid-1980s. Not enough new series proposals were coming in, or at least not ones of a suitable quality. An old technique was suggested: the company owned some great old names that could be updated, perhaps with new characters or new versions of old ones. Three were selected and doled out to individual editors [...] and the third... ah, the third was *The Sandman*. (7)

From the setting to the tone, this paragraph reads like a story. Levitz particularly insists on the atmosphere of the scene: the "dusty old library" (rather than simply "a room") is a fitting place for the editorial genesis of a great story; the "mythology of the region" sets the tone for *The Sandman*'s mythic status to come. Even the semantic field of "new" and "old" ("an old house," "dusty old library," "going dry," "rush," "new series," "an old technique," "some great old names," "updated," "new characters," "new versions of old ones") gives flesh to the *revival* of the old DC character (one of the previous Sandman characters had a run at DC Comics in the 1930s, and another one from 1974 to 1976). The conclusion of Levitz's speech ("and the third... ah, the third was *The Sandman*") offers tones of nostalgic reminiscence and presents the series as its culminating and concluding point, in quite a theatrical manner. In actual fact, the birth of Gaiman's *Sandman* was not as straightforward as depicted in this quote and did not stem directly from this precise moment in the history of DC Comics; but in this case, in terms of posture, these facts are off the point and matter less than the romanticized image of creativity and transcendence that Levitz associates to the publishing house through his origin story.

Gaiman, for his part, offers a no less great origin story for his *Sandman*, which he dates back to the night of the Great Storm, a hurricane that unexpectedly struck England on 15 October 1987:

> I woke up the next morning and the village was cut off. [...] People had been killed, and we had no power. And I couldn't turn on the computer, and I couldn't work. So I just walked around and thought a lot. It was too dark even to handwrite. The lights were still off. [...] And then suddenly the power came on. The first thing I did was I went to the computer, turned it on, typed "The Sandman" and wrote a paragraph and a half. (Gaiman, in Campbell 99-100)

With its very nineteenth-century romantic atmosphere involving a storm, death, darkness, handwriting, and inspiration before turning back to the computerized twentieth century, Gaiman's speech attributes the genesis of his *Sandman* to a time-capsuled event worthy of the best horror comics. One could wonder, along with Paul Levitz: "Where does storytelling end and mythology begin?" (*The Absolute Sandman Volume One* 6). Jill Thompson, who was the artist on several *Sandman* stories, puts forward Gaiman's keenness to playfully fictionalize reality in an interview: when McCabe asks her if it is "true that [she] first came to Neil's attention when [she] drew a nude sketch of Death," she simply answers: "That's the lovely story he likes to tell, because it sounds much better than what I think the real story is" (McCabe 123).

In their *Superhero Reader*, Hatfield, Heer and Worcester define the origin story as "a bedrock account of the transformative events that set the protagonist apart from ordinary humanity" (3). That Gaiman and Vertigo tend to create their own origin stories is thus all the more consequential in the super-heroic context of DC Comics. It participates in the creation of their *personae* as unique, builds and emphasizes their outstanding contribution to the comics and literary fields (insofar as the genesis of their ideas and actions deserve to be commented upon), all of that in a way that almost portrays them as the superheroes of their own disciplines.

"Because *The Sandman*" is not enough anymore

These numerous probings and blurrings of boundaries, explorations of the limits between fiction and reality, and economically disinterested (or ambivalent) attitudes, are just a few of the tight and uncanny resonances that can be found between Gaiman's and Vertigo's postures. Though the study of behind-the-scenes evidence and material facts is undoubtedly crucial in developing a better understanding of Vertigo, it does not suffice to encompass the dynamics of the imprint, whose success and particular position in the comics field do not rely only on the originality of its production, but also heavily on the many ways in which it *stages* its various ruptures with what was done at the time in the mainstream comics industry. The question of

posture is, I think, far from irrelevant in this case, and is actually one of the two major dimensions (next to the question of *contents*) that were needed to make Vertigo's editorial ambitions work, and to make it stand as a landmark in the comics and literary fields. Beyond the study of Gaiman's fictional work, Gaiman studies would likewise benefit from an increased interest in the writer's posture, which could help better understand how Gaiman's non-fiction simultaneously enhances, expands and complicates the main points developed in his fiction.

In any case, Gaiman seems to crystallize the characteristics and the posture of the Vertigo imprint on many levels, and I think this might be, far more than just the themes, motifs and success of *The Sandman*, the main actual reason why Gaiman and Vertigo are still so strongly associated in the collective imagination today.

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