

Collection ACME

La bande dessinée en dissidence

Alternative, indépendance, auto-édition

Comics in Dissent

Alternative, Independence, Self-Publishing

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Reassessing the Mainstream vs. Alternative/Independent Dichotomy or, the Double Awareness of the *Vertigo* Imprint

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Abstract

This article examines how the traditional mainstream vs. alternative/independent dichotomy usually employed to characterize the cultural production of comics in the US may have become outdated, and perhaps even obsolete, when considering and analyzing the editorial policies and ideological agenda of Vertigo, DC's adult-oriented imprint. More specifically, this essay sheds light on how Vertigo engages in a critical, ironic, and sometimes ambiguous discourse with both the history of the medium and staple practices and traditions from the mainstream and alternative wings of the American comics production. In so doing, I maintain that Vertigo is characterized by a hybrid identity and has developed a "double awareness" that allows it to appeal to both mainstream and alternative audiences. Vertigo's hybridity, however, is not devoid of cultural, political, and even sociological implications that upset the categories of reception and production structuring the field of American comics. These implications underlying both the hybrid character of the label and its concomitant politics of demarcation in regards to the mainstream/alternative dialectic will first be explored through the label's obsession with processes of rewriting and recuperation, and second, through a close-reading of some of Vertigo promotional books' covers.

Résumé

À la lumière d'une étude de cas examinant les pratiques éditoriales ainsi que le discours politique et culturel du label américain de bande dessinée Vertigo (DC Comics), cet article illustre la faillibilité du modèle binaire *mainstream* vs. alternatif/independant souvent utilisé pour caractériser la production de comics aux États-Unis. Plus précisément, cette étude explore comment le label Vertigo entretient un discours critique et ironique établissant des liens parfois ambigus avec d'une part, l'histoire du médium, et d'autre part, certaines pratiques et traditions issues des pôles dits *mainstream* et alternatifs de la bande dessinée américaine. Ainsi, cette contribution entend exposer l'identité hybride ainsi que la « double conscience » de Vertigo et offrir une réflexion sur la poétique de démarcation adoptée par le label. Cette poétique de démarcation n'est pas dénuée d'implications culturelles, politiques, et même sociologiques. En effet, elle bouscule les catégories de réception et de production

structurant le champ de la bande dessinée américaine. Afin d'illustrer l'identité hybride et la politique de différenciation du label, nous examinerons comment le catalogue de Vertigo est marqué par de nombreux procédés de récupération et analyserons les discours subversifs émanant de couvertures de certains ouvrages promotionnels du label.

The cultural production of comics in the United States can be assessed in terms of a dichotomy between mainstream vs. independent/alternative spheres. At one end, the mainstream pole of this dichotomy is corporate-driven and dominated by genre formulas and fantasy-escapist storylines — among others, the countless superhero titles from publishing houses such as Marvel and DC Comics. In contrast, the alternative pole of this dialectic allegedly rejects the mercantile, or at least profit-driven attitude of the mainstream and therefore adopts a “self-marginalizing identity,” notably in focusing on genres such as autobiography and the travelogue as well as in showing more than an interest in self-reflexivity, formal experimentation, and perhaps to a lesser degree, historiography (Charles Hatfield, 2005: 111). This is the case, for example, of a vast array of self-published comics as well as a majority of narratives brought out by Fantagraphics, Top Shelf Productions and PictureBox. These publishing houses could be labeled independent in the sense that they are not owned by media corporations and have put out what many might consider to be challenging and innovative works, if not avant-garde, in terms of visual aesthetics, formats, and/or narrative structures and styles. However, it should be specified that in American comics culture, the term “independence” primarily refers to the nature of the publishing structure. As a result, being “independent” does not necessarily coincide with publishing avant-garde or “alternative” content. Publishing houses such as Dark Horse and Dynamite Entertainment, for example, are traditionally labeled independent because they are owned and operated by a small group of people, contrary to Marvel and DC which are owned by larger media corporations — respectively Disney and Warner Bros. And yet, in maintaining connections with the mainstream sphere, including strong ties with popular genre fiction, the superhero formula, and the publishing of licensed franchises of other media — notably *Star Wars* and *Buffy* for Dark Horse¹ and *Terminator* and *RoboCop* for Dynamite — these independent houses resist the alternative label. In other words, Dark Horse and Dynamite Entertainment do not propose an alternative to what characterizes the dominant industry.²

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1. It should be noted that Disney's recent acquisition (October 2012) of the Lucasfilm corporation and therefore, of the *Star Wars* franchise, has changed and will continue to change the landscape of Dark Horse comics. After over twenty years of partnership between Dark Horse and Lucasfilm, future *Star Wars* comics projects will be handled internally by Marvel, which is part of the Disney corporation since 2009.
 2. For a similar line of reasoning, see the contributions of Charles Hatfield and Jean-Matthieu Méon in this volume.

Although reductive, as Charles Hatfield suggests, this binary model “mainstream/alternative” of the US comics production has nevertheless “reflect[ed] decades of conflicts within the industry itself” (2005: 111). First, alternative comics — whether produced by small-scale structures or individuals — have rejected the oversimplified and action-packed narrative formulas of heroic fantasy that have often maintained a social, cultural, and political status quo in favor of a literary and/or artistic sophistication inclined to realism, satire, and more often than not, the examination of taboos. In fact, Hatfield has pointed out that alternative comics emerged from a “subculture” that is “lowbrow and shabby in origin” but “tends to be highbrow both in its material obsessions and its self-conscious rejection of bourgeois norms” (2005: xii). Alternative comics thus “waver between [...] the punk and the curator, so to speak” (Hatfield, 2005: xii). Second, as Hatfield perceptively exposes, the aggressive sales strategies with which mainstream publishers have flooded the direct market³ in the 1980s have reinforced the “anti-bourgeois” (2005: 20–23) sentiments and position of alternative or, for lack of a better term, “culturally independent” comics.

Although this struggle has possibly consolidated the position and agenda of both poles, I want to argue that Vertigo — the adult-oriented imprint of DC Comics — challenges this useful, yet perhaps outdated binary model and thereby urges us to reconsider the very heavily-loaded terms “mainstream,” “independent” and “alternative” and how critics (can) use them in relation to comics structures and narratives. Vertigo is something of an oddity in the present landscape of US comics publishing. Belonging to a parent mainstream publisher, DC, which is itself part of a larger mainstream entertainment company, Warner Bros., the imprint could hardly be considered financially or artistically independent. The first core titles that launched the imprint in the early 1990s (*The Sandman*, *Swamp Thing*, *Hellblazer: John Constantine*, *Animal Man*, *Shade the Changing Man* and *Doom Patrol*) all have their roots in the DC universe, for example.⁴ Most of them are revampings of long-forgotten, unpopular, or “second-class” characters of DC. Further, Vertigo remains faithful to serialization which, as Hatfield has argued, is well-adapted “to the market’s emphasis on continuing characters” and long-running narratives (2005: 112).⁵ The

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3. The direct market is a distribution system that was developed by Phil Seuling in 1974 which aimed at maximizing the profits of both the comics industry and the comics retailers (specialized shops). In order to do so, Seuling avoided intermediary distributors and directly bought comics from the publishers to re-sell them to comic book stores. For a more detailed analysis of the reasons and consequences of the direct market, see Jean Paul Gabilliet (2005).
 4. This is not a characteristic of early Vertigo titles only. In fact, many other and more recent Vertigo titles are directly inspired from older and/or defunct DC characters and/or series. This is the case, for example, of *Army@Love* (2007–2008), *Sgt. Rock: Between Hell and a Hard Place* (2003) and *Haunted Tank* (2008–2009).
 5. Hatfield has perceptively observed that serialization has also been used by alternative artists. On the one hand, serialization “remains the standard” because, Hatfield suggests, it allows alternative artists to publish long autobiographical series and thereby to court more easily, for

floppy-format comics published monthly by Vertigo also feature advertisements for the new releases of new or popular goods (comics, movies, figurines) produced by the label or its parent companies. Despite this corporatist behavior, however, Vertigo has produced innovative, quirky, and provocative material in terms of styles, techniques, and genres since its inception in 1993. The mature contents and aesthetics of many Vertigo titles are not as innovative or as radical as in the works of alternative and underground artists such as Art Spiegelman, the Hernandez brothers, or Robert Crumb — to name but a few. Nevertheless, it is tempting to characterize the label as “culturally independent.” As Marc Singer has observed in discussing the works of Grant Morrison, Vertigo “[has] sought to occupy the space between superheroes and alternative comics” (2012: 21). The label, Singer contends, has “carve[d] out [an] interstitial market [...] within the comics industry,” a market “that fell between younger and older readers, new and familiar genres, mainstream content and *independent* creative practices” (2012: 27; emphasis added). Neither truly mainstream, nor completely financially or artistically independent or alternative, Vertigo could thus be argued to fit somewhere in the middle of the dichotomy “mainstream/alternative” which should not be understood as a rigid binary but rather, perhaps paradoxically, as a model of two intermingling forces. Perhaps what Vertigo proposes, then, is an “alternative to the alternative,” as Thierry Groensteen puts it in his discussion of his own editorial practice in his contribution to this volume.

Following this logic, then, I contend that the imprint carries the connotation of a hybrid identity as it results in the mixture of two separate yet interrelated spheres. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha explains that hybridity functions as a space which is characterized by unfixity, uncertainty, and instability. For the postcolonial scholar, this liminal space — for which he coined the term “Third Space” — disrupts the unity and homogeneity of cultural identity (1994: 36–39). As I hope to demonstrate, Vertigo can be said to function as a “Third Space” in the landscape of American comics publishing because it constantly subverts the authoritative and pre-formatted identity patterns with which one traditionally and reductively characterizes the “mainstream” and “alternative” spheres of the industry. In order to show that Vertigo is a site of ambivalence and reflects the impossibility of essentialism, I first explore how the imprint deploys strategies of recuperation and imitates styles, topics, and traditions that are typically associated with the mainstream production or its alternative counterpart. Second, I examine the covers of three promotional collections of the imprint to illustrate how Vertigo affirms its hybrid identity in highlighting the subversive, transformative, and rewriting impulse underlying the imprint’s strategies of recuperation. More specifically, I show that in borrowing from and poking fun at some

example, with fans, the direct market, and therefore wider recognition (2005: 153). On the other, alternative artists have also pushed serialization to extremes as in the case of Dave Sim’s series *Cerebus* (Hatfield, 2005: 153).

of the conventions typically associated with the mainstream and alternative poles of the American comics production, Vertigo may be said to function as a site of “resistance,” or at least has adopted a poetics of demarcation and differentiation in regard to this dialectic. As a result of these processes of recuperation, borrowing, and transformation, I maintain that Vertigo has problematized the mainstream/alternative dichotomy and has therefore acquired a “double awareness” that allows it to speak to and for mainstream and alternative audiences.

**A DIVERSIFIED CATALOGUE,
OR, STRATEGIES OF REWRITING AND RECUPERATION**

Most obviously, Vertigo challenges the traditional mainstream vs. alternative binary model in presenting a large palette of works to its audience. In over twenty years of existence, the imprint has produced a rich, diversified, and heterogeneous catalogue. Its focus on genres such as horror, fantasy, and science fiction can reveal a penchant for mainstream values, including a taste for “cheap thrill” similar to early 20th century American pulp fiction. At the same time, Vertigo’s concern for the subversion of these genres — visible in how countless titles deploy metafictional perspectives and intertextual commentaries⁶ — can be said to reflect some of the values of alternative or “culturally independent” comics, namely a debunking attitude towards the institutionalization of comics and a rejection of formulaic plots and mainstream codes and standards.

In the early 1990s, Vertigo departed from the conventional narrative formula of superhero storylines that were, and still are, prevalent on the American market today. In discussing the early years of the imprint in a 2008 interview, Karen Berger — former executive editor of Vertigo — claimed that the label wanted to promote “the ideas, [...] the writers really wanting to do something different in comics” (quoted in Julia Round, 2010: 16). As Julia Round has argued, the first core titles and series published by DC’s imprint, for example, shifted the focus from masked vigilantes and heroism to more mature subject matters such as mythology, religion, eco-criticism, and meta-fiction (2010: 19–21). This move away from mainstream topics was not as radical as that of alternative and underground comics artists from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in the sense that all those titles were revampings of characters from the DC universe. Nevertheless, these rewritings involved many transformations that combined a re-articulation of the personae in new generic contexts such as horror and crime fiction with psychedelic and self-reflexive elements.

These first titles (*The Sandman*, *Swamp Thing*, *Hellblazer: John Constantine*, *Animal Man*, *Shade the Changing Man* and *Doom Patrol*) carried the seeds of two of the recurrent strategies that would later make the imprint’s trademark, namely: rewriting and (generic) subversion — the former often tying in and overlapping

6. This is most visible in titles such as *Animal Man*, *Flex Mentallo* (1996), *The Unwritten* (2009–present), *Fables* (2002–present), *Jack of Fables* (2006–2011) and *Air* (2008–2010).

with the latter. Throughout the 1990s and even to date, Vertigo has manifested more than an interest in the re-appropriation of characters, icons, and historical figures [*The Sandman* (1989–1996), *Uncle Sam* (1997), *Human Target* (1999, 2002, 2003–2005), *Chiaroscuro: The Private Lives of Leonardo Da Vinci* (1995–1996)], popular genres such as horror [*Hellblazer* (1988–2013), *House of Mystery* (2008–2011), *American Vampire* (2010–present), *Lucifer* (2000–2006)], speculative and science fiction [*Orbiter* (2003), *A.D.D* (2012), *Terminal City* (1996–1997), *Cairo* (2007), *Transmetropolitan* (1997–2002)], folk and fairy tales [*Fables* (2002–present) and its spin-offs *Jack of Fables* (2006–2011), *Cinderella: Fables are Forever* (2011) and *Fairest* (2012–present)], noir, crime, and detective narratives [*Scalped* (2007–2012), *Incognegro* (2008), *100 Bullets* (1999–2009)], the Western [*Preacher* (1995–2000), *El Diablo* (2001)], war stories [*The Other Side* (2006–2007), *Adventures in the Rifle Brigade* (2000), *War Stories* (2001–2003)] as well as apocalyptic fiction [*Y: The Last Man* (2002–2008), *Sweet Tooth* (2009–2013)].⁷ Additionally, Vertigo has published works directly adapted from the life and works of science-fiction, horror and gothic masters. Jeff Lemire's *The Nobody* (2009) is a modern take on H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* (1897), *In the Shadow of Edgard Allan Poe* (2003) revisits the life and morbid tales of the American author, and *The House on the Borderland* (2004) is a graphic adaptation of the eponymous novel by William Hope Hodgson. The list of examples could go on and on. Generally speaking, a wide array of Vertigo titles are “based on” or “inspired from” other texts that they transform, parody, mock or comment on. By nature, Vertigo's texts are therefore intertextual since they draw on, quote, or rearticulate common themes, motifs, or characters present in other texts located in a said genre or often distinguish themselves from other generic traditions through self-reflexive twists and meta-fictional elements.

Thus, Vertigo has borrowed a tradition of satire, counterculture, and meta-fiction from the alternative wing of comics in the US. While criticism may be leveled against this form of subversion since it relies on knowledge of comics, literature and genre criticism that a majority of the Vertigo readership may not be familiar with, it nevertheless takes up some of the values that have been prominent in and function as a testament to alternative comics. The first one is the inclination of Vertigo comics to re-explore genres that were long absent in comics, usually through ironic recasting and elements of pastiche aiming at challenging, or at least calling into question, the values of heroism, justice, and truth reflected in mainstream American comics culture. Additionally, this often subversive take on specific genres, usually

7. These examples are not meant to represent an exhaustive list of the genre-related works that Vertigo has published but rather to illustrate the generic diversity of the imprint. Additionally, it should be noted here that genres are arbitrarily defined categories. I am not suggesting that the titles I have mentioned above specifically belong to the genres I have connected them to. In fact, it is difficult to be precise as far as genre categories are concerned when discussing Vertigo titles since a majority of them consistently makes clear that genres are permeable concepts.

accompanied by self-reflexive twists and metafictional elements, imitates one of the important endeavors of alternative comics artists, namely, as Hatfield puts it, to raise “knotty questions about truth and fictiveness, realism and fantasy, and the relationship between author and audience” (2005: x). The second principle to take its cue from the counterculture stance adopted by alternative comics artists that a majority of Vertigo titles attests to is that of “learned connoisseurship” (Hatfield, 2005: xii). Alternative artists have recurrently drawn on and quoted other works, or have openly poked fun at some of the conventions of mainstream comics. So too do Vertigo titles, albeit in establishing connections with more popular genres and folk traditions. Finally, although Vertigo titles are generally grounded in popular genre fiction, and therefore arguably mainstream tradition, their focus on Gothic elements and themes such as madness, disintegration, excess, mutilation, ghosts and doppelgangers as illustrated in *Preacher*, *Uncle Sam*, and *The Sandman*, for example, is reminiscent of the underground comix artists’ quest for “another” reality. Pivotal to the Underground Comix scene was indeed the challenging of conservative societal and cultural values and the will to promote a new understanding or “access” to reality, notably through the production of psychedelic works sometimes crafted “under influence.” It is therefore possible to interpret the Gothic twists deployed in a wide array of Vertigo titles as the promotion of a similar agenda to that of the Underground Comix Movement.

One of the other ways through which Vertigo, thus allegedly mainstream, shares similarities with the alternative or “culturally independent” press is through the recently increasing development of the memoir genre. The memoir is yoked to autobiography as well as self-representation and sometimes flirts with the travelogue. It usually focuses on the anxieties of the artist/narrator, often deals with his/her sexuality, and now and then echoes the character’s coming to terms with the repressive political regime s/he has experienced. Needless to say, these concerns and the way they are tackled have been part and parcel of the alternative comics press since the Underground Comix movement and have never ceased to be discussed and problematized in that pole of production, even to this day.

As soon as 1996, Vertigo showed an inclination towards the ideas and concerns traditionally associated with the memoir with the launch of a sub-imprint called “Vérité,” which invoked the realism of the movement “Cinéma Vérité.” Although short-lived — the line was abandoned in 1998 — Vérité published three mini-series in 1996 (*Girl*, *The Unseen Hand*, and *The System*) as well as two one-shot comics [*Seven Miles a Second* (1996) and *Hell Eternal* (1998)] that deal with real-life events, situations, and experiences. Similarly to many alternative comics, those titles address issues such as homosexuality, mundane matters, and consumerism.

The reason for the short-lived experience of the sub-imprint is not clear but one can hazard the guess that it had to do with the previous commercially unsuccessful endeavor of another DC imprint called Piranha Press and after that, its own not so prolific successor, Paradox Press. The creation of Piranha Press in 1989 was

DC's response to the increasingly fashionable trend of alternative comics. It aimed at publishing new alternative talents but was not financially viable. DC therefore put an end to this effort in 1993. New editors took over, renamed the imprint and formed Paradox Press which wanted to publish graphic novels that lacked the science fiction and fantasy elements characteristic of many titles of the Vertigo line. Because of low sales, Paradox Press ended its activities in 2001. Noteworthy is that then, Vertigo — which was at that time well-established on the market and had already shown a penchant for more alternative works — took the opportunity to re-edit the successful titles of Paradox Press, including *Road to Perdition* (1998), *A History of Violence* (1997), and *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995), a memoir dealing with the experience of growing up gay in the American South during the Civil Rights Movement.

It is only more recently, however, that Vertigo has demonstrated a desire to publish more works in the vein of memoir and autobiography and has therefore shown a stronger penchant for what are usually regarded as alternative concerns and topics. In 2004, for example, Vertigo released *It's a Bird*, a semi-autobiographical story that follows a comic book writer through his grappling with DC's most famous character, Superman, and how his perception of the superhero changes as he experiences a family crisis. In 2005, Vertigo published *The Quitter*, a graphic novel by Harvey Pekar who has been a well-established alternative artist since the 1980s thanks to his famous *American Splendor* — a series dealing with the author's everyday-life struggles — which was adapted into a movie in 2003. As a follow-up move to *The Quitter* and the critically acclaimed movie *American Splendor*, Vertigo took the safe bet to publish episodes of the *American Splendor* series between 2006 and 2008. The latter year was also marked by two original graphic novels (*Sentences* and *Incognegro*⁸) that have some memoir-like traits in the sense they are both inspired from real events. The same year also saw the releasing of a semi-autobiographical series entitled *The Alcoholic*. In 2010, two works in the same vein were released including *Cuba, My Revolution* and *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*. The former is a partly autobiographic coming-of-age narrative presenting how Sonya, the protagonist, supported the communist Revolution and admired Fidel Castro but then left the country shortly after. The latter is a memoir by Sarah Glidden, a liberal American Jew, which recounts the story of her birthright trip to Israel during which she constantly questions her perception of the country's policy towards Palestinians, and doubts her faith.

Thus, although Vertigo showed a penchant for more realist works in the vein of autobiographies and memoirs since the mid-1990s, it patiently and “mainstreamly” waited to give these more “alternative genres” a more consistent shot. It is only gradually that Vertigo developed a growing interest in these genres and consider-

8. In fact, *Incognegro* could be better located in the noir tradition or in detective fiction — although, in typically Vertigo fashion, the book actually challenges some of the generic conventions of those genres, including the traditional quest for truth and justice of the detective.

ably enriched its catalogue with “real-life” related works and “realistic” narratives. This is evidenced by the fact that it is only after the well-established international commercial success of Marjane Satrapi’s memoir *Persepolis* and the realization of the importance that works like Satrapi’s could acquire in both bookstores and comic book shops that Vertigo followed suit. In an interview with Julia Round, Karen Berger claims that Vertigo is “finding that, particularly in America, book publishers are into graphic novels like *Persepolis* and real-life based [narratives]” (Berger, 2008a).

Following that logic, it is not surprising that in 2011, the first non original graphic novel that Vertigo translated and acquired the rights for was *Marzi* (2005–2011). Originally published by the Belgian publishing house Dupuis as a series, *Marzi* revolves around the childhood memories of the author growing up in the politically tormented Poland of the 1980s, including the country’s departing from the oppressive communist regime at the hand of the Solidarity trade union and the growing concern of the media about the impact of the Tchernobyl catastrophe for the next generation of Polish citizens — the generation of the author. Because this is the first graphic novel that was not originally produced for the Vertigo imprint, this choice of adapting, translating, and publishing foreign material may hint at the possibility of another staple practice of alternative publishing houses, namely the re-edition of national and international works whose aim is to create a canon, or at least bring attention to the cultural heritage of comics.⁹ This practice of re-edition and patrimonialization is mostly performed by the alternative wing of the comics production in North America via publishing houses such as Drawn and Quarterly, Kitchen Sink Press, Fantagraphics, and PictureBox, for example.¹⁰ This primarily “alternative” strategy also seems to be international in scope. The French publishing house L’Association, for example, has recurrently published groundbreaking work from diverse geographical horizons such as Serbia, South Africa, and Scandinavia.

The trends of the catalogue and the policies of the imprint that I have briefly outlined above reflect what I have referred to as the double awareness of Vertigo. On the one hand, Vertigo clearly shows some parallels with the literary alternative pole of comics production in America. Its concern for (generic) subversion and

9. It is a bit early to claim that *Marzi* may become a canonical work. Moreover, the fact that Dupuis remains a “traditional” publishing house in the landscape of European comics makes it less clear to define what Vertigo’s intentions are behind this adaptation.

10. The digging up, translating and publishing of non-anglophone works by North-American alternative publishing houses may be perceived as yet another reaction against more traditional publishers whose catalogues generally feature “original” work only. Alternative artists and publishers alike often criticize the ethnocentric and endogeneous character of this mainstream tradition as practiced by Marvel and DC, for example (cf. Erwin DeJasse’s contribution to this volume). It should be pointed out, however, that the so-called “independent” publisher Dark Horse has also translated and published foreign material, including Juan Díaz Carnales and Juanjo Guarnido’s *Blacksad* (originally published by Dargaud) and Marc-Antoine Mathieu’s *Dead Memory* (originally published by Delcourt as *Mémoire Morte*).

its concomitant calling into question of mainstream values, its recently increasing inclination to turn to the memoir and international work, as well as its penchant for literary sophistication corroborate this. On the other hand, however, Vertigo is “mainstreamly” careful about how to proceed as it seems to pay a lot of attention to the ways in which the market and the audience react to these efforts.

Julia Round has suggested that Vertigo has contributed to significant changes in the industry since the 1990s. Among other transformations, Round contends that “Vertigo’s production and marketing [has] emphasiz[ed] the notion of ‘star creator’ (whether author or artist) whose name sells the book” (2010: 20–21). She goes on arguing that this has produced “a constructed concept of singular authorship that brings comics closer to the notion of literature” (2010: 21). Additionally, she claims that while “the adoption of the graphic novel format, [...] a new self-awareness and literary style brought the scope and structure of the Vertigo comics closer to the notion of literary text” (2010: 22), it also helped the label to increasingly market its products in bookstores. Karen Berger corroborates this move and even goes further when explaining that Vertigo is now “perfectly poised to increase [its] presence in the large bookstore chains, as well as expanding [its] reach into *independent* stores and *alternative* bookselling arenas” (quoted in Round 2010: 19; emphasis added). Berger may be exaggerating. She is obviously biased as she worked for over 20 years as the executive editor of the imprint. Nevertheless, her remarks provide food for thought.

Round argues that the transformations I have outlined above (the “star-creator” concept, the literary refinement and the graphic novel format) have considerably blurred the distinction between mainstream vs. alternative comics. I am not rejecting this claim. However, I would like to suggest that she downplays the importance of two factors in claiming that Vertigo has redefined the comics medium. First, the transformations she refers to are not the sole product of Vertigo titles. More precisely, the “star-creator” concept, the literary refinement, the graphic novel format, and the recent increasing interest of Vertigo in the memoir genre are deeply indebted to underground and alternative comics. In fact, these “transformations” clearly echo the idea of “recuperation,” which Jean-Christophe Menu (2005) sees as one of the processes by which big mainstream publishers copy and adapt popular aesthetics, editorial strategies, and/or narrative techniques first developed by alternative artists and small independent presses.

Next to adopting (and adapting) certain aesthetics, themes, and formats from alternative artists as well as policies from the independent press (such as the concept of creator-owned property), Vertigo also revives and recovers material, quite literally, in numerous other ways than those advanced by Menu. In fact, Vertigo recuperates as much from the alternative press as it does from the mainstream. The strategies of rewriting that pervade Vertigo’s catalogue and characterize its policies show the imprint’s penchant for thematic and cultural recuperation. As suggested above, many Vertigo titles start from intertextual assumptions. Vertigo comics quote,

allude to or refer to existing characters, distinctive genres or particular texts. Perhaps this homage to genre works may even be considered a self-conscious reverence to the medium's populist origins, one that illustrates Vertigo's willingness to engage in a critical dialogue with the pulp tradition that is considered the ancestor of the comics medium (Gabilliet, 2005: 16). Another type of recuperation might be the fact that numerous titles from ill-fated DC imprints such as Paradox Press, Helix (a shortlived sci-fi label), and Minx (a label with a teenage girl target-audience) migrated to the Vertigo catalogue after the disappearance of those subimprints (*Transmetropolitan*, *Road to Perdition*, *Stuck Rubber Baby*). Relatedly, popular and critically-acclaimed series such as *Ex Machina* (2004–2010) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999–2007, 2009–present), which were initially produced by a competitor publisher — Wildstorm, whose rights were acquired by DC in 1999 — were later transplanted to the Vertigo catalogue as well. Undoubtedly, these last examples of recuperation are primarily the result of the commercial and critical success of these texts, which helps ensure the imprint's financial viability and therefore its ties to the mainstream.

In a similar line of reasoning, because of its strong ties with its parent company Warner Bros., Vertigo also returns comics in circulation after or concomitantly with the success of film adaptations based on comics produced by DC or one of its imprints. This was the case with *Road to Perdition* which was turned into a successful blockbuster featuring Tom Hanks in 2002, and even more so with David Cronenberg's 2005 filmic adaptation of *A History of Violence*. About the latter, Bart Beaty went so far as claiming that “absent the film version of the story, the comic book would be little remembered” (2008: 30).

The second factor that Round downplays in arguing that Vertigo has redefined the comics medium is the fact that the imprint hardly ever experiments with style and format — a staple strategy in the alternative and culturally independent press. Although a couple of exceptions could be pointed out such as *Vertical* (2003), *Can't Get no* (2006), *Seven Miles a Second* and *The System*, for example, a majority of the Vertigo titles adopt “mainstream aesthetics” and formats. Most Vertigo series, for example, still rely on letterers and colorists to meet the demanding industrial requirements of monthly publications. Those series are also later typically published in the conventional trade paperback configuration. The most successful ones enjoy reprints in hardcover or deluxe editions (*Fables*, *The Sandman*, *Preacher*, *Y: The Last Man*) that ensure commercial viability — perhaps one of the sacred pillars of the mainstream. Mini-series [*Cairo*, *Joe the Barbarian* (2010–2011), *100%* (2002–2003), *Daytripper* (2009–2010), etc.] are also generally later gathered in a graphic novel and/or trade paperback format that is market- and bookstore-friendly.

Thus, Vertigo may not have redefined the comics medium as much as it has adopted an ambiguous position in regards to the mainstream vs. alternative dichotomy. As I hope to have demonstrated, Vertigo borrows, recuperates, adapts and transforms ideas, topics, and traditions. But in so doing, it establishes as many (dis)

continuities and parallels with the mainstream as it does with the alternative press. This seems to suggest that there is no clear-cut distinction between mainstream and alternative comics anymore and that, possibly, what was once perceived as an alternative effort has now entered the mainstream sphere.¹¹ But it is precisely this unresolved tension that makes the imprint interesting. Very much like comic art, which as Hatfield suggests “is a mixed form” that “resists coherence” because of, among other things, “its fractured surface,” Vertigo too can be said to “resist [...] coherence” and to be “radically fragmented” and ambiguous (2005: xiii).

HYBRIDITY AS DEMARCATION

According to Round, Vertigo’s alleged redefinition of the medium has resulted in “an industry where both the dominant and independent publishing companies now spend much time of their energy on producing literary, creator-owned, book-length material” (2010: 27). Implied here, as already suggested above, is the idea that the poles “mainstream” and “alternative” intermingle. This arguably complicates the double awareness of Vertigo. However, even within the blurring of this dichotomy, Vertigo has developed a hybrid identity of its own. In fact, Vertigo has affirmed its “other” and perhaps unique identity not only in mixing characteristics and practices from both spheres of the dichotomy but in challenging and/or turning into ridicule some of the concerns, ideas, and sensibilities usually associated with either the mainstream or the alternative press. In other words, Vertigo has developed a poetics of demarcation and differentiation in regard to this dialectic.

In what follows, I explore this hybrid identity of Vertigo in three promotional titles released by the imprint: *Vertigo: First Taste* (July 2005), *Vertigo: First Offenses* (November 2005), and *Vertigo: First Cut* (2008).¹² More specifically, I examine how the covers of these collections highlight the subversive character and the poetics of demarcation that the label claims. This (subversive) demarcation is made manifest in two distinctive ways. First, it is conveyed through the rejection of the dominant discourses that characterize the mainstream and alternative spheres of the industry, albeit in an ambiguous fashion since the covers’ aesthetics borrow from Hollywood, literary genres, and conventional mainstream marketing. Second, these

11. At the risk of generalizing, it is worth noting here that American culture is particularly poised to absorb “alternative” texts and narratives in order to re-inscribe them in a mainstream sphere and context of mass-distribution. Matt Groening’s *The Simpsons* epitomizes this trend. Initially an “alternative” comics series that was deeply influenced by the Underground Comix scene, *The Simpsons* has now been adapted into an animated sitcom that is produced by the Fox Entertainment Group company, perhaps one of the most conservative media corporations in the US. It should be noted, however, that this mainstream appropriation of alternative content does not necessarily coincide with the “emptying out” of the challenging, subversive, and/or satirical content of these texts.

12. Vertigo pursued this series with the publication of *Vertigo: First Blood* (2011) which, for reasons of space constraints, I have decided not to include in this sample.

covers engage in a critical reflection and ironic commentary on the history of the medium.

It should be noted that these promotional Vertigo books do not resemble some monthly or quarterly “alternative” or “culturally independent” publications whose contents are experimental, reflect a critical discourse on the medium and thereby often function as a manifesto of the alternative publishing house.¹³ In fact, they do not feature original content but the debut issues of famous series of the imprint. Consequently, they reflect a mainstream inclination towards advertisement. These collections are indeed especially low-priced and feature stories written by famous “star” authors such as Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, and Neil Gaiman. They are intended to attract new readers, introduce them to various successful titles and artists, and eventually aim at making them purchase other issues of the stories. However, the covers of these books also emphasize the originality of the imprint and pay tribute to its envelope-pushing attitude. This is illustrated with the use of superlatives mentioned on the covers. In *First Taste*, the imprint is characterized as the “most provocative,” in *First Offenses* as “the hardest-hitting,” and in *First Cut* as “the sharpest.” These slogans of course relate to the artwork of the respective covers on which they are written whose art and aesthetics bring to mind ideas of violence and groundbreaking content.

The cover of *First Taste* (see Pl. XXIV a), for example, depicts soda cans whose content seems to be blood, as illustrated by the stain of blood that literally splashes on the bottom righthand corner of the cover on which the ridiculously cheap price of the book is printed. Associated with the phrase “first taste,” the image is quite telling. It suggests that there will be much blood-spilling going on in the book and that the reader may be driven by it, perhaps even addicted to it as would a vampire.¹⁴ While this first reading of the cover may initially suggest a gratuitous and unnecessary outpouring of violence that characterizes much of the action-packed mainstream production of comics, it is also possible to finetune the analysis and suggest that the aesthetics of the cover challenges, perhaps even mocks, both mainstream and independent/alternative artistic traditions. First, the image of the soda cans, for example, indicates a clear reference to Pop Art. The Pop Art movement used to employ mass-produced objects or pop culture imagery in order to react against the fine arts tradition and elitist culture —thereby often reassessing the value of the objects by displacing them from their original context. Similarly to Pop

13. In this respect, one could mention the magazine *Comics Comics* published by Picturebox or the three issues of the collection “L’Eprouvette” published between 2006 and 2007 by the French publishing house L’Association.

14. It should be noted here that this vampiric metaphor is not an innocent one. Vertigo recurrently publishes works that draw on and are inspired by vampire fiction and bloodsucking characters. Most notably, characters reflecting this trend include Proinsias Cassidy in *Preacher*, or Richard Savoy in *The Unwritten*. Other examples of works worth mentioning in this respect include *Bite Club* (2004), *American Vampire* (2010–present), and more recently *The New Deadwardians* (2012) as well as *iZombie* (2010–present).

Art practitioners, Vertigo deliberately and self-consciously plays with this idea of dislocation which creates new affiliations. While this is reminiscent of the strategies of rewriting and recuperations that pervade the catalogue of the imprint, it also echoes the parodic impulse and quotational obsession that typify many alternative comics while yet criticizing their sometimes elitist and high-brow character.

Additionally, in presenting those “blood cans” to the reader, the cover of *First Blood* seems to critique consumption society, albeit ironically since it also conveys a sense of addiction. Thus, the cans are depicted to poke fun at the mercantile purposes of the mainstream industry while at the same time drawing our attention to the possible consequences of (over)consumption — in this case violence — with a self-reflexive twist. Further, *First Blood’s* cover, with its pop art aesthetics and blood-related content, rejects the values of sentimentality and self-indulgent navel-gazing stereotypically associated with the alternative comics wing. Finally, the use of blood on the cover of *First Taste* seems to directly comment on the restrictions imposed on publishers by the Comics Code Authority. Initiated in 1954 as a result of the crusade led against comics because, it was argued, they did not present adequate and appropriate material for children and could lead to juvenile delinquency, the Code censored the industry and forbade the depiction of monsters, ghosts, violence, as well as the presence of gore and sexually-related content. Although the weight of the Code has diminished over the years and is quasi non-existent today, it has considerably influenced the contents of the industry for decades. This is why, for example, Vertigo — as the imprint primarily publishes comics in the horror and crime genres — does not submit all of its titles to the Code and adds the phrase “suggested for mature readers” on the covers of all the books they release. The use of blood on the cover of *First Taste* thus conveys a critical stance towards the Code and the impact it has had on the industry. Additionally, it suggests to the reader that Vertigo is quite different from other publishers. It departs from the mainstream sphere which, following the Code policies, usually avoids blood altogether but differs from the alternative press as well whose “dominant narrative modes” are, as Hatfield suggests, “tragedy, farce, and picaresque” (2005: 111).

The cover of *First Offenses* (see Pl. XXIV b) conveys similar ideas about how violence and explicit content in Vertigo comics can be read as a reaction against the Code and the allegedly highbrow character of the alternative press. It presents two handcuffed hands on a vividly red background, a violent image which also features a slogan that characterizes the imprint as the “hardest-hitting.” Suggested here is the idea that the rage of a convict, or perhaps an outlaw, is about to be unleashed with devastating consequences. Again, this is not merely a gratuitous presentation of violence but rather a comment on the imprint’s challenging of boundaries in regards to the industry. The chains of regulations and censorship imposed by the Code as well as the conventions of both mainstream and alternative comics are about to be broken for the sake of artistic freedom which, among other things, can explore the deep-seated anxieties resulting from normative imprisonment. In

fact, extreme violence — as (gruesomely) depicted in numerous Vertigo titles such as *Preacher*, *The Other Side*, and *The Invisibles* (1994–2000) — is another staple of the imprint. One may therefore connect Vertigo’s challenging of American comics traditions with Richard Slotkin’s famous concept of “regeneration through violence” (1973) — although here, Vertigo’s “pushing of the Frontier” should be understood metaphorically, the enemy being perhaps here both the mainstream and alternative poles of the comics industry in the US.

Finally, the cover of *First Cut* (see Pl. XXIV c) is also quite revealing of Vertigo’s provocative attitude and mindset. It draws parallels with the cinema, more specifically Hollywood genre films, as it depicts a film reel that is unrolled with pictures from the stories to be found inside the book. Appearing on a reel, these images seem to clearly reference Hollywood genres such as romance, the western, crime, or science fiction as they depict a blonde girl lying who seems to need rescuing, a grimly-looking man pointing a gun, a Native American in a trance, or an alien bug. The reel and the genres that are associated with it, however, have been cut by a razor blade. Together with the slogan “the sharpest imprint,” this cover thus conveys the idea that Vertigo does indeed do genre work but departs from its conventional expression or classical Hollywood style.¹⁵ At the same time, the reel on the cover and its attendant discourse on genre fiction depart from the realism and authenticity usually invoked by alternative artists. Additionally, the use of the razor blade makes it clear that this departing is a radical one, one that relies on razor-sharp, or perhaps more fittingly here, “cutting-edge” style and aesthetics that echo the subversive character of the imprint which I evoked earlier.

The analysis of the covers of Vertigo’s promotional issues thus illustrates that the imprint reclaims an identity of its own, although perhaps an ambiguous and hybrid one in regards to its position within the mainstream vs. alternative dichotomy. Nevertheless, this search for identity has been marked by the imprint’s willingness and efforts to establish its own agenda of demarcation which is characterized by a provocative, anti-reactionary or activist mindset, irony, a penchant for references to popular culture and genres, and the subversion and/or dislocation of these traditions, notably through meta-fictional elements and self-reflexive twists that comment on the history of the medium. It is therefore not surprising that the imprint fought to only include the Vertigo logo on its titles. In her interview with Julia Round, Karen Berger proudly explains that “to not have the DC bullet, the

15. Interestingly, this is reminiscent of the strategies of resistance employed in the movies of various filmmakers of the so-called “Hollywood Renaissance.” Critics argue over the beginning and end of this “age” which, similarly to a literary genre, is an arbitrarily-defined marker for American film history. Nevertheless, they agree that films of the Hollywood Renaissance were auteur-driven, challenged assumptions about the role of gender and sexuality, and called into question or transgressed the traditional values depicted in “classical” or “golden-age” Hollywood genre movies. Among other examples, worth mentioning are *The Graduate* (1967), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and perhaps even the first two pictures of the *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974).

DC logo on the Vertigo books was a very very big deal and an argument that I won, obviously” (2008a). Although Berger admits that DC was still mentioned on the Vertigo books for some time, the imprint finally dropped it altogether and just went with Vertigo, because, as Berger continues perhaps looking after her own interests, “the brand became so strong” (2008a).

CONCLUSION

In examining the diversified catalogue of Vertigo and how it is characterized by processes of recuperation and rewriting strategies, as well as in exploring the covers of the imprint’s promotional issues which reflect the hybrid and subversive character of the label, I have demonstrated that Vertigo resists easy categorization within the mainstream vs. alternative dichotomy. In fact, I have shown that in using and parodying both strategies and contents from the mainstream and the alternative press, Vertigo’s unfixed identity could reflect the instability of what Bhabha (1994) calls the Third Space. Bhabha’s conceptualization of the Third Space, however, connotes a quasi “degree zero” of ideological, cultural and political involvement. This is clearly not the case of Vertigo with its referential obsessions and its attendant poetics and discourse of demarcation. In fact, it is perhaps through this deliberate and intentional playing with and calling into question of generic, industrial, and cultural conventions that Vertigo has acquired what Pierre Bourdieu has termed “symbolic capital” (prestige, honor and attention) which, as Bourdieu maintains, establishes one’s credit in a given cultural context and allows one to convert this “symbolic capital” into material “economic capital” (1991: 72–100).

One could also use the image of the island to better understand how Vertigo epitomizes this cultural hybridity in the landscape of American comics publishing and the implications underlying how the imprint oscillates between symbolic and economic prestige as well as between the alternative and mainstream poles of the industry. As Dorothy Lane has argued, the island reflects the idea of enclosure and is therefore often subject to issues of power and control (1995: 3–9). At the same time, however, Lane explains that the island also operates as a site of resistance that challenges the authority of external forces (1995: 3–9). I believe this applies to Vertigo as well. The imprint indeed functions as a cultural niche that mimicks some of the structures and contents of both alternative and mainstream publishers and trends. One could even argue that the mainstream, because of its mass-production and mass-distribution capacities and structures, may be compared to a “colonial center” imposing its views and methods on smaller entities.¹⁶ Mimicking does not always imply submission, however. As I have shown, Vertigo also subverts many of the traditions and conventions of the external forces that surround it. A relevant example of this ambiguous mimicking is the publication of *The Vertigo*

16. It should be noted here, however, that DC did not invade Vertigo. The latter, rather, evolved from its mainstream parent company to fully mature into something different.

Encyclopedia (Alex Irvine, 2008) that marked the fifteenth anniversary of the imprint. This type of publication is favored by mainstream publishers because it provides a comprehensive window of the publishing house to the reader by breaking down its complex universe(s) by character. As such, the encyclopedia appeals to fans and inscribes itself in a mainstream tradition of collectibles. Vertigo's *Encyclopedia*, in contrast, "def[ies] the standard format for this type of compendium" (Karen Berger, 2008b: 8). It is arranged by series because, as Karen Berger contends, "so many Vertigo properties are driven by their own identities, with many being creator-owned and existing in their own, unique realities" (2008b: 8). Again, this seems to highlight the idea that Vertigo has grown more and more "independent" from its parent company DC and, more generally, from the American mainstream comics industry.

How can we, then, characterize Vertigo as this chapter has made it clear that the old categories "mainstream," "alternative," and "independent" now appear to be misleading? One possible answer to this question may be found in the name of the imprint. Besides a clear reference to the eponymous Alfred Hitchcock movie and its penchant for suspense and horror, the name of the adult-oriented line of DC also pays homage to Lynd Ward's *Vertigo* (1937), a wordless novel in woodcuts. Ward is considered to be one of the pioneers of the American graphic novel; his "focus on form as the register of traumatic expression [...] is one that predates the self-reflexive of formal experiments of such contemporary graphic narratives as Spiegelman's *Maus* and Joe Sacco's *Palestine*" (Hillary Chute and Marianne Dekoven, 2012: 183). Next to the ideological and political implications permeating Ward's oeuvre and *Vertigo* in particular, the label also shares the hybrid character and interstitial nature of Ward's *Vertigo*. Ward's wordless novel in woodcuts indeed "belongs to a mass cultural form that is at once experimental [...] and conventional (drawing on genre material)" at the same time (Chute and Dekoven, 2012: 184). What the name of the imprint seems to refer to, eventually, is epistemological vertigo. The imprint is indeed continually expanding the development of this vertiginous world — one with a "certain attitude, edginess, [and] irreverence" (Berger, 2008b: 8) — that resonates with a poetics of witty self-reflexivity, literary and comics reprises, as well as the subversion of both alternative and mainstream models, themes, and aesthetics. Rather than mainstream or alternative, then, perhaps the imprint could be best characterized as exemplifying a phenomenon of "trash culture," not in the sense that it can or should be easily dismissed, but rather in the sense that it constantly revisits and re-uses aesthetic and narrative traditions from both poles of the comics industry and, in so doing, conjures up ideas of instability and unfixity that challenge binary models such as mainstream/alternative or highbrow art/popular culture.

It is true that in deliberately promoting and playing with what I have referred to as the label's hybridity and poetics of demarcation, Vertigo may occupy a "comfortable" position in the market, one that, as I have suggested, may carry the seeds of

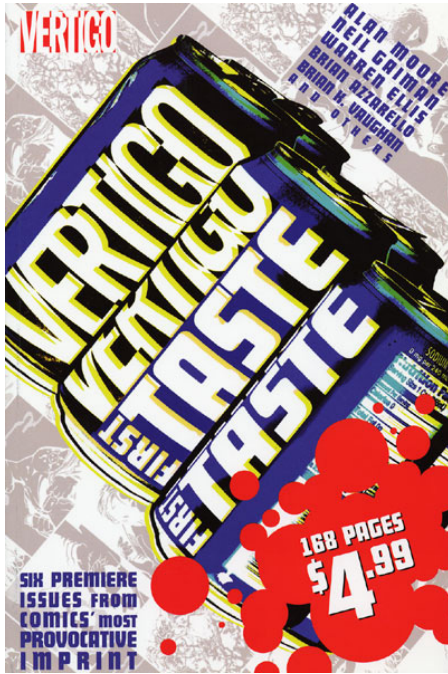
a double awareness in regards to the mainstream/alternative dichotomy. However, because fans and the critical community alike still very much rely on the categories of reception “mainstream” and “alternative” to describe and characterize most comics and graphic novels, Vertigo is often denied its hybrid status and its potential for subversion. As Dana Jennings has noted, “[f]ans 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” (2003). What Vertigo may point to, then, through its poetics of rewriting and demarcation, is the need for both comics fans and scholars to deconstruct these very notions of “alternative” and “mainstream” and to go beyond this familiar, yet perhaps outdated, frame of reference that allegedly structures the field of (American) comics.

The success and permanence of this endeavor, however, has been recently jeopardized by corporate reorganization at DC. In an effort to revitalize the DC franchise, successful Vertigo titles such as *Animal Man*, *Swamp Thing*, and *Hellblazer* have made their way back to the DC Universe. In a similar effort of (commercial) revitalization, Warner has decided to rewrite the contracts that Vertigo offered to creators in limiting their ownership rights, thereby hoping to turn Vertigo into an “intellectual property pool” from which they can freely fish out in order to produce film adaptations. These revitalizing efforts, however, have also made Karen Berger resign after twenty years of shepherding the imprint. It is therefore legitimate to ask whether or not this “alternative to the alternative” that Vertigo and Berger have proposed and built on for over twenty years can go on, whether this “other” alternative can still function as one that really stands for hybridity or as one that denies it.

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