

Vertigo's Rewriting Ethos: The Poetics and Politics of a Comics Imprint - Abstract

This dissertation critically examines Vertigo, DC Comics' adult-oriented imprint, in combining a wide range of approaches that include cultural sociology, narratology, comics criticism and postmodern theory. More precisely, the present work provides a (re)examination of the label's poetics, politics, and history, which the critical community have rather restrictively confined within the broader discourse of the art form's development, that is, the increasing maturation and legitimation of comics through the graphic novel phenomenon, the boom of 'adult' comics, and the canonization of singular 'serious' and 'respectful' comics creators. Moving beyond this rhetoric of maturation, this study argues that, since its inception, Vertigo has aimed to develop a particular rewriting ethos in order to stand out as a distinguished producer and organization within the American comics field.

Aspects of the label's register of rewriting can be seen in its programme, agenda, and cultural identity, all of which are of course intrinsically linked to the 'second-degree' and revisionist impulses underlying many a Vertigo graphic narrative. A majority of Vertigo comics are indeed based on dense intertextual networks; they can be described as 'palimpsestuous' because they provide new perspectives on historical and fictional persona, narrative traditions, or particular storyworlds that they transform or subvert (e.g. *American Vampire*, *Animal Man*, *Doom Patrol*, *Fables*, *Sandman*, *Swamp Thing*, *The Unwritten*, etc.). These and other Vertigo series' multilayered processes of re-narrativization coincide with their (meta)engagement with genre-meshing practices, issues of dis/continuity and dislocation, as well as memory and historiographic concerns. Vertigo has both enhanced and reformulated these comics' particular poetics and politics of revision in order to advance its own stance of rewriting at the macro level. This macro stance of reconfiguration entails innovative 'expert' perspectives on medium-

and culture-specific issues such as multiversity, seriality, the renaissance of the auteur paradigm, and the mainstream/alternative dialectic.

The present work investigates this manifold rewriting ethos by providing a critical survey of Vertigo's catalogue, (re)readings of particular series' postmodern aesthetics, an analysis of the imprint's key and innovative editorial policies, discussions of extradiegetic material as charged with narrative and brand power, and a reassessment of the label's connection to the so-called 'British Invasion' movement. In so doing, this study adds evidence to Vertigo's reputation as a norm-breaking comics producer beyond its so-called 'literary' qualities and 'adult' sensibilities.