

Ambiguous Authorities: Vertigo and the *Auteur* Figure

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Abstract: This article examines authorial performance in the context of DC's Vertigo line. In the 1990s, Vertigo gained its reputation as an innovative and progressive imprint by promoting the work of British scriptwriters, who were hailed as true author figures, despite the inherently collaborative nature of the mainstream comics industry. In a manner reminiscent of "*auteur* theory", writers such as Neil Gaiman, Warren Ellis or Grant Morrison developed attractive authorial personae which they consistently displayed through interviews, letter columns or social media, but also, more importantly, by inserting their avatars within the comics they scripted. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that their work in fact simultaneously asserts and destabilizes writerly authority, in a manner that is consistent with Linda Hutcheon's view of postmodernity. By multiplying author figures and playfully disseminating authority, Vertigo authors question their own authorial control over the text, asserting instead the crucial role played by the reader.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Vertigo Comics

In the late 1980s, following the tremendous success of Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986-1987), DC Comics began recruiting a number of scriptwriters from the pool of talent that developed around British anthology titles like *2000 AD*. Under the guidance of American editor Karen Berger, several successful titles such as Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol* (1989-1993) and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989-1996) emerged. Six of those ongoing titles were subsequently united under the Vertigo imprint in 1993.

Since its inception, Vertigo has built its identity as a game-changer and has striven to destabilise conventional mainstream practices in terms of production and narrative standards: it pioneered the trade paperback publishing format, while its creators focused on non-superhero genres, devising new ways of using imagetext and, crucially, forging specific authorial personae for themselves that gave more visibility to said

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innovations. In this article, I focus on early Vertigo comics and the way its British authors developed specific auctorial personae (what Jérôme Meizoz calls the author's "posture") with the approval of Karen Berger, who focused explicitly on giving more visibility to scriptwriters in an industry that had been historically dominated by star artists.¹ As Berger explains: "The Vertigo titles, or the books that became Vertigo, they were led by the ideas, by the writers really wanting to do something different in comic books" (Round 2008).

Thus, the writers' authorial "postures" were both "auto-represented" (forged by the authors themselves through interviews and autobiographical texts), and "hetero-represented" (fuelled by other actors in the field) (Meizoz 45). Vertigo's efforts to reinforce the author figure can be read as a self-legitimising strategy: as critic Christophe Dony underlines, the cultural legitimacy associated with authorship (as opposed to craftsmanship) endowed Vertigo with the respectability it needed to assert itself as a halfway house between mainstream superheroics and the more iconoclastic efforts of alternative cartoonists (Dony 7). The distinctive authorial posture of Vertigo's authors was further reinforced by the creators' foreign origin: their "Britishness" was another way in which these authors stood out.

This opposition between the supposed individuality of the author and the crucial influence of editorial control suggests that authorship should be approached as both an individual and a collective phenomenon. Vertigo creators all strove to delineate their individual posture by either adopting or rejecting the archetypal features associated with authorship in our collective imagination (Meizoz 26). This paradoxical status of the author is mirrored diegetically by narrative strategies working *against* the *auteur* paradigm. Many Vertigo narratives suggest that authorial power can be fragmented and dispersed, thereby undermining the author's centrality. Ultimately, poetic choices in early Vertigo texts seem to reflect the ambiguous status granted to scriptwriters within a cultural industry, which encourages individuation as a collective strategy: Vertigo's narratives, like Vertigo's editorial structure, is built around the importance of the act and the performance of authoring rather than on the individual person of the author.

1.2 Auteur Theory

Discussing authorial roles in an industry that usually relies on cooperation between several distinct creators appears problematic if one considers the author as the single decision-making entity in a finished text. This issue has been tackled most prominently within film studies with the introduction of *Auteur* theory in the mid-1950s, popularized in the U.S. by Andrew Sarris in 1962 (Sarris). *Auteur* theory was first coined in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* to describe the *Nouvelle Vague* directors. This controversial approach

¹ There were exceptions to that rule, such as Marvel's star writer Stan Lee. However, on the whole, readers tended to follow artists more than writers.

to authorship posits that although the making of a film involves a number of different people, the director can be said to be the *auteur* of their film in the sense that they are in charge of all aesthetic choices through a control over, for instance, framing, camera movements and montage (Assayas and Baecque 7).

In other words, instead of being shared by the different people involved (from scriptwriter to actors, technicians, etc.), the author function rests entirely on the director, whose vision determines what the film should be. *Auteur* theory explicitly posits an ideal *auteur* unrelated to issues of concrete filmmaking. To borrow from Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, the author “builds a sort of *mythical narrative* in which all collaborators are merely executing a task which is controlled from beginning to end by his or her perfectly lucid mind.” (Esquenazi 71, my translation, my italics)

In comics too, critics often posit a central, decision-making creator who envisions all aspects of the finished comic book. Some, like Arlen Schumer, have suggested applying *auteur* theory to graphic storytelling. He writes:

The *auteur* theory in both film and comics [...] pertains to those directors and comic artists who did not / do not write their movies or comics, but collaborate with screenplay writers or comic writers; by dint of the act of directing a film, and drawing a comic book story, the director and the artist are the true authors/*auteurs* of their respective final product (Schumer 447).

Schumer designates the artist as the primary *auteur* of a work. However, he also suggests that a “legitimate exception” should be made for scriptwriters who are particularly involved in the visual structure of the pages; although the writer does not craft the images, they direct their making in a decisive way. Schumer cites Moore and Harvey Kurtzman (known for his contributions to *Mad*) as examples of such author-writers. Similarly, I would suggest that most of the British writers working at Vertigo during the long 1990s indeed belong to this category. All of them provided detailed panel descriptions and some even attached thumbnail sketches to their typed scripts, which affirmed their involvement in the visual dimension of comics production.

Within Vertigo, the foregrounding of the writer as author in comics was accomplished through a whole body of texts that included not only comics but also a number of paratextual writings such as interviews, editorial presentations, etc. These strategies compare very well with the way some filmmakers staged their own public image. Critic Vincent Hediger provides valuable examples in the persons of Alfred Hitchcock and Cecil B. DeMille. He suggests that these directors constructed their image through extra-filmic means, either as storyteller in the case of DeMille (Hediger 50) or as “sadistic master of ceremony” in the case of Hitchcock (60, my translation), who would also sometimes pretend to be tricked by his own stratagems, thus adding a more relatable side to his persona. It seems that a similar strategy was at work within Vertigo,

with authors playing their own roles in paratexts; however, as we shall see in the next section, this construction was also predicated on the specificities of comics as a medium—notably its use of specific promotional spaces like reader columns, and the possibility for creators to be graphically represented within the diegesis.

2 Building an authorial persona

2.1 Paratextual strategies

From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, Vertigo scriptwriters cultivated new ways of relating to their readers. The personae they built were, in many cases, both approachable and fascinating. There was something of the rock star look in the way Grant Morrison, Alan Moore, Warren Ellis or even Neil Gaiman appeared in photographs: an abundant beard, long hair, all-black wardrobe, sunglasses and elegant costumes were ways to construct themselves as public personae, people whose looks are as intriguing as their work. Alan Moore in particular was among the first to actively seek public exposure:²

While writers like Steve Moore and John Wagner were happy to stay relatively anonymous, even pseudonymous [...] Alan Moore instead ended up creating the character 'Alan Moore', someone with an instantly recognisable appearance who was enthusiastic, affable, if a bit loud and weird, and always willing to share his opinion (Parkin 141).

Fan conventions, interviews and answers to fan mail were efficient ways for creators to reach their audience in a pre-internet era. In this respect, it is interesting to note that all Vertigo books featured a common monthly column, “On the Ledge”. Each month, “On the Ledge” showcased an upcoming book, or gave the floor to one member of a creative team, from editors to artists and writers. Beyond its promotional dimension, the column was one of the places where Vertigo’s identity as an imprint took its shape. Writers, in particular, were invited to write about their work, but also in many cases about themselves.

I would like to focus on the specific example of Grant Morrison’s “On the Ledge” column, which appeared in Vertigo comics cover-dated September 1994, not long before the debut of his series *The Invisibles* (1994-2000). The text’s tone—playful, ironic and offbeat—is quite typical of the way Vertigo creators and editors addressed their readership at the time. Morrison begins by explaining that in order to write his column,

² That said, Moore’s posture is ambivalent in that he has consistently refused to appear in conventions and other events since the end of the 1980s.

he had to begin by practicing an activity that was representative of the ideals that (he thought) Vertigo embodied—in this case, bungee jumping. He continues:

In a world devoid of meaningful content, I value style above all else and Vertigo, if it is anything, is surely the native land of comic-book style. Here at Vertigo you'll find [...] people who regularly and fearlessly venture to the extremities of human endeavour by travelling the world, ingesting strange drugs and indulging in extravagant sexual practices and dangerous sporting activities. People, in short, who are interested in Living Life [...] Oh, and I'm supposed to plug my new monthly book, *The Invisibles*, but I've run out of space (quoted in Milligan 25).

In other words, the column features a long exploration of Morrison's personal life and beliefs, which are presented as fitting Vertigo's essence (even though said "essence" is never explicitly defined). The phrase "here at Vertigo" and the use of the generic term "people" make it difficult to decide whether Morrison is talking about Vertigo's characters³ or about the staff itself, but in both cases, his account is romanticized rather than literal.

Beyond the oblique advertising of his new book (made all the more ironic by the extract's last sentence), what Morrison provides here is a definition of Vertigo: the imprint is based on writers whose personalities are as colourful as the characters they invent. Morrison's identity is a performance, a discursive posture that appears in the paratext as well as within the books he wrote for the imprint, such as *Animal Man* and *The Invisibles*. As critic Scott Kiehl suggests in commenting on Morrison's subversion of the tropes of consumer society: "We have had Morrison the writer and Morrison the character; we have now entered the age of Morrison the brand." (Scott 10). Other creators like Gaiman or Warren Ellis were similarly involved in strategies of self-branding that helped them assert their position as recognisable cultural icons.

The growing popularity of comics writers also favoured their emergence onto the wider cultural scene. While most comics creators had been virtually anonymous outside fan circles, Gaiman states that he was in 1996 in the same situation as Moore had been ten years before: "as the comics writer who people who don't read comics know who they are" (Hasted, "I'd Rather Write Broadway Musicals" 120).

³ All of these activities had been depicted in Vertigo comics prior to 1994: *Animal Man* travels a lot, Swamp Thing's fruit turns out to be a drug (*Swamp Thing* #43), and Constantine swaps bodies with Swamp Thing to have sex with Abby (*Hellblazer* #10). However, they seem to apply much better to ulterior texts such as *Transmetropolitan* (drug use), *American Virgin* (sexual practices) and *Y: the Last Man* (travelling). This is perhaps symptomatic of the impact Morrison has had on the direction chosen by the line.

2.2 The internet revolution

From the 1990s onwards, the development of Internet websites and message boards provided the means for authors to continue building their public personae. Some were more willing to play the game of exposure than others. Among the less interested was Peter Milligan, who distanced himself from the image-building strategies of his comrades and shared few personal details; Milligan did not rely on the Internet to create a visible public persona (although he is currently gaining more visibility). In a 2006 interview, he declared: "I've been really late and slow getting to this [the internet]. Only fairly recently have I got a website and even more recently a Twitter account [...] I think it can be irritating but also a great way to interact with fans" (Núñez n.p.).

In contrast to Milligan, Vertigo writers whose work has received more critical attention tended to be very present online through websites, blogs, and then increasingly through social media. Gaiman's blog, for example, became a prime source of information for fans who could not only keep up with his works and public appearances, but also learn about his personal life, his pets, his children, his friends and more. In an interview with the website *Bookslut* conducted in 2006, Gaiman even jokes about the thousands of e-mails that flooded his inbox after he wrote about the illness of Fred, his black cat (Crispin n.p.).

Another writer who came to the fore as a major internet figure is Warren Ellis. He too has used the metaphor of the "brand" to describe his public persona: "As a commercial writer I am a commodity. I am a brand, it's unavoidable." (Meaney 27'09" - 27'14") Beyond his own website, (warrenellis.com), Ellis regularly guest wrote for other platforms. In 2000, he published "The Old Bastard Manifesto" on CBR, a comics news and database website (Ellis n.p.). Ellis's Manifesto contained his views of the comics industry and the changes that were needed to foster creativity. However, the tone used in the text is very close to that of a fictional character created by Ellis, namely *Transmetropolitan* hero Spider Jerusalem, whose adventures were serialised at Vertigo from 1997 to 2002.⁴

The angrily ironic tone and the systematic hyperboles, in addition to tropes such a drug-taking and narcissism, is typical of Spider's verve. As was the case for Morrison and *The Invisibles*, the writer's discourse merges with his characters', thus blurring the boundary between public and fictional personae. Through the conflation of author and writer, Ellis's blog articles feed into his image-building as a larger-than-life, fascinating author. One of the measures advocated by Ellis in order to improve comics was that more retailers should rack their books by creators rather than by titles of publishers. He insisted on the fact that readers had begun to follow writers (and to a lesser extent artists) when, in the past, their loyalties had gone predominantly to characters and publisher brands. In other words, Ellis suggests that comics creators of the late 20th

⁴ *Transmetropolitan* was first serialised under DC Comics' now-defunct science-fiction imprint, Helix, which published the first twelve issues. When Helix disappeared in 1993, *Transmetropolitan*, its most profitable series, became part of Vertigo.

century have indeed become authors, at least in the sense that they were recognised by the public (hence the “brand” analogy).

2.3 Metatextual presence of the author

As previously suggested, 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. For example, Grant Morrison played an important role within *Animal Man* (1988-1990). At the end of Morrison’s run on this series (in issues #25-26 published in 1990), the main character Buddy Baker becomes aware of his own fictionality, and realises that he is being manipulated by a demiurgic author, Morrison himself. Although the act of drawing was consistently shown as a metanarrative signal (for example on the cover of #5 where Buddy Baker is depicted in the process of being drawn), artists did not have a role to play within the narrative, where the role of author is entirely claimed by Morrison. In *Animal Man*, the metatextual encounter of the character with his creator in issue #24 bypasses the artist, emphasizing instead the act of writing; Morrison is shown seated at his typing machine, and his writing has a direct impact on diegetic events. The reader is therefore encouraged to consider verbal creation as superior to graphic work, while the artist is relegated to a secondary role. Even though “Morrison” the character is obviously a drawing in a book created by a team of artists (namely Chaz Truog and Doug Hazlewood), readers are encouraged to view “Morrison” as a direct emanation of Morrison the author, with Truog and Hazlewood merely following his directions.

Moreover, Morrison’s metatextual project acquired specific depth because of his mystical approach to fiction; in his worldview, writing is indeed a magical act that allows one to alter reality in a certain way. Morrison has consistently defended this thesis in a number of interviews, presenting his series *The Invisibles* as a sigil, a text designed to change both the minds of readers and his own personal life (since he identified with the main character and claims what happened to King Mob also affected him). The magazine *Rolling Stone* summed up the situation as follows:

The Invisibles starred a bald, leather-clad guy called King Mob who looked just like Morrison. He tried to blur the lines between himself and the character, adopting King Mob's lifestyle and fetish wear. "I became the character," he says, "and he was copying me instead of me copying him" (Hiatt n.p.).

It should be noted that King Mob is a handsome, charismatic martial arts fighter who specialises in tantric yoga and leads a team of anarchist activists along with his lover Robin, a mysterious and stunningly beautiful redhead. The alter ego Morrison built for himself is a highly attractive one, fit to elicit a positive responses from readers. Thus Morrison reinforced the aura of his authorial persona in highlighting that he "actively seeks" recognition as a public personality (Hasted, "Interview with Grant Morrison" 62). While not all Vertigo writers shared such an extreme approach, it was not uncommon to see writers (and artists) included within the diegesis. Neil Gaiman, for example, appeared at the end of *Sandman* (1989-1996), during the wake held for the main character to which the reader is also directly invited through the use of second person pronouns: "After all, you were there. You may have forgotten, in your waking hours, what you heard that day." (Gaiman 1995 p.15) Similarly, Alan Moore was doubtlessly the model behind Gene LaBostrie, a positive and likeable character who appears at the end of his run on *Swamp Thing* (#64).

3 Vertigo writers as ambivalent authors

3.1 Subverting the author figure

The primacy of writers within the creative team responsible for a comic book was particularly developed under the Vertigo imprint. Because the label's ambition was to foster creativity, scriptwriters gained certain rights they had been previously deprived of at DC. A landmark event in this respect took place in 1996, when Neil Gaiman was allowed to end *Sandman* despite the success of the series, and obtained legal rights for it (Groth 80). Although *Sandman* had begun under a work-for-hire contract, DC altered the terms of the arrangement in favour of Gaiman, thus re-inscribing Gaiman's claim to authorship.

In the case of *Sandman*, as for several series that were published before, such as Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* (1984-1987), scriptwriters were considered (and possibly considered themselves) the main authors of their work. This is how Gaiman described his working relationship with the many artists that worked on the series: "if anything, it was a kindly dictatorship. [...] You're playing my game, you have to play according to my rules" (Salisbury 103).

Clay Smith, in his critique of the *Sandman* series, pointed to the authorial control exercised by Gaiman and validated by his readers, calling it "perversity" (or more exactly

“polyMorpheus perversity”, a portmanteau associating Freud’s “polymorphous perversity” with Gaiman’s character Morpheus). Clay posits that the frequent comparisons between Gaiman and Morpheus (in terms of appearance and role) reinforced the writer’s hegemonic rule on the text and emphasized his authority:

Dream (Gaiman) embodies a managerial control that determines much of what happens in *The Sandman*. Big Brother (Dream) knows better [...] Such nominal gestures toward and ultimate control of textuality characterize Gaiman's strategy of polyMorpheus perversity—the self-reflexive establishment of Gaiman's singular author(ity) over the impurity of the trace that (re)articulates textuality (Smith n.p.).

Smith’s thesis seems flawed in a number of ways. First of all, Morpheus is far from the only authorial figure within the pages of *Sandman*; on the contrary, the narrative teems with storytellers of all kinds, while authority – that which is associated to “grand narratives” such as religion and identity – is constantly undermined. Although Morpheus presides over narratives, he is not a storyteller, and he is in fact frequently relegated to the margins of the story (for examples during the story arc *A Game of You*, # 32-37) – he explicitly states that he has “no story of [his] own” (Gaiman 1996 p. 36). Gaiman did not in fact encourage comparisons with his character, except self-derisively, when it came to non-issues such as his preference for black clothing.⁵

3.2 Playing up to the artist’s strengths

The predominance of the scriptwriter-as-author within the Vertigo staple may be more paradoxical than it seems. It is true that authors like Moore, Gaiman or Morrison produced directive scripts, and tended to present themselves as “in control” of their work. But while a film director does have control, or at least substantial input over the final product through montage, the specific constraints of monthly publication often prevented writers from even seeing the finished pages – and in any case substantial alterations would be constrained by close deadlines.

To put it differently, because of the structural organisation of the mainstream industry, total control by the author was, indeed, impossible. There were examples of artists drawing something very different from what writers had intended – as evidenced by the uneasy interaction between Grant Morrison and Dave McKean on *Arkham Asylum*

⁵ A good example of this would be Gaiman’s claim that “The inspiration for [the character’s] clothes came [...] also from my desire to write a character I could have a certain amount of sympathy with. (As I wouldn’t wear a costume, I couldn’t imagine him wanting to wear one. And seeing that the greater part of my wardrobe is black [it’s a sensible colour. It goes with anything. Well, anything black] then his taste in clothes echoed mine on that score as well).” (Gaiman et al. “Afterword”, last bracketed remark in original) Although Gaiman’s quip does function as a way to consolidate his authorial posture, I would argue that the point is not to liken Morpheus to Gaiman (or vice versa) but on the contrary to characterize the latter as a funny, laid-back, relatable person (which Morpheus is anything but).

(1989)⁶, and even of inkers altering the work of pencillers (as was the case for Sandman # 34, in which George Pratt's hasty inking did not do justice to Colleen Doran's pencils).⁷

Many writers did work with a particular artist in mind. Authors like Moore and Gaiman actually tended to tailor their scripts to the tastes of the artist in charge of drawing the issue (McCabe 7), so that the story allowed them to develop their full potential. Moreover, a closer look at the context of production very often reveals the crucial input of artists within the creative process, for example with Darick Robertson on *Transmetropolitan* (Roberts and Coville n.p.).

In recent years, as the Vertigo label grew and developed more creator-owned series, it became more frequent to see true collaboration, with writers and artists working as a creative team. In *The Unwritten*, for example, the distinction between "story" and "pencils" disappeared, with Mike Carey and Peter Gross being both credited as creators. The genesis of the story testifies to this shared process: "[Peter Gross's story] was about a child made famous in a story and then abandoned by the father/author, and Mike [Carey]'s was about a conspiracy behind Fiction." (Arrant) This collaborative ethos, actively nurtured by editors, is attested also in Vertigo artist Jock's statement that "one of the great appeals of Vertigo is often the level of collaboration between the writer and artist, with each contributing elements to the other's work" (Singh).

I would argue that, in fact, the writer-as-author is in some measure an invention of the critical and scholarly community. Because comics studies is an emerging field, its academics are often influenced by the literary paradigm more than by visual studies, a less prominent strand in academia (Fabbretti 509). This influences what we as scholars look for and value in comics, perhaps reinforcing the focus on the writer as author.

3.3 The birth of the reader

Vertigo writers are also known for imbuing their stories with a number of clues that destabilise the monolithic *auteur* figure. This is achieved first by foregrounding the presence of the reader as an active force –a trend which is by no means specific to comics, as demonstrated by Barthes' advocacy of the "birth of the reader" (Barthes 67). Within comics, however, the part played by readers in the meaning-making process is all the more important as the medium has often been described as relying heavily on readers' inference. Many comics scholars focus on the role of the intericonic gap (or gutter) as a signifying process that needs to be deciphered by the reader, from McCloud's focus on "closure", i.e. the reader's action of "filling in the gap between two panels (McCloud 205), to Julia Round's (Round, "Gothique et Bande Dessinée" 91) and

⁶ Marc Singer's article "A Serious House on Serious Earth" documents the conflicting ambitions Morrison and McKean had regarding the book.

⁷ According to Doran, one of Pratt's friends said he inked her art in two days then went on vacation. She adds: "That book really hurt my reputation. [...] For years, I was walking around with pencils for that book in my portfolio, so if anyone gave me shit, I would just rip them out and say 'This is what it was supposed to look like!' Even the art director at DC, Dick Giordano, came up to me and apologized for it." (McCabe 108) The inking was re-done by Doran herself for the Ultimate edition of *Sandman*.

Barbara Postema's (Postema 50) more recent approaches of the gutter. These critics can be seen as direct inheritors of Umberto Eco's theory of inferential walks, where he describes a text as made of blanks that the reader must fill in (Eco).⁸

This emphasis on reader response (which posits that meaning does not solely stem from an *auteur* figure) is also supported by textual clues, and specifically by the insistence on metanarrative structures. Some of them are quite blunt, as when the main character of *Animal Man* suddenly becomes aware of the reader's presence, crying out "I can see you!" (Morrison 1990, 11). Others are more subtle: for example, within the narrative world of *The Invisibles*, there are a number of stories entitled "The Invisibles": "a memoir by Sir Miles, a film by Mason Lang, another book by Ragged Robin, a comic book by [fictional character] Grant Morrison, an immersive video game created by King Mob, and Jack/Dane's story to Gaz at the end of the world" (Manning 36). The fact that each of these texts (in the broader sense of the term) is authored by a different character points to the dissemination of authorship and to an instability of textual authority which denies the division between an original and its copies.

Sandman, the most successful series ever published by Vertigo, still stands as a symbol of the imprint's project as it works to question issues of authority, be it cultural (as Vertigo straddles the highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy) or textual (authorial authority). In particular, the theme of religion is construed as a metaphor of the author/reader relationship, through the series' constant assertion that imagination, fiction and storytelling hold special power. Gaiman's core postulate in *Sandman* is that people create gods by believing in them and telling stories about them. As former character goddess Ishtar explains in "Brief Lives" part 5 (#45):

We start as dreams. Then we walk out of the dreams into the land.
We are worshipped and loved, and take power to ourselves. And
then one day there's no one left to worship us. And in the end, each
little god and goddess takes its last journey, back into dreams...
(Gaiman 1993, 20).

Once their believers disappear, gods dissolve back into the primal soup of human imagination. Therefore, the sacred is transferred from traditional godhead figures to more abstract notions such as imagination and storytelling. What matters is not the person (or persona) but the performance, which reduces the author to a disembodied entity whose function is disseminated in various characters.

Gaiman's public discourse provides an adequate summary of his project: in an interview, he endorses the *auteur* paradigm "I always felt that, as a writer, you get to be God" (Erwin-Gore n.p.), only to confirm that his writing aims precisely at deconstructing such paradigm: "yes, the gods have their point of view; but in *Sandman*, those have no

⁸ Julia Round devotes several pages to the issue of collaboration and reader response in her doctoral thesis. (Round 2006, 22)

more validity than the point of view of anyone else” (Bender 121). In other words, Gaiman’s *Sandman* posited a fragmented authority, suggesting that all readers are authors *in potentia*, through their ability to dream and create stories.

4 Conclusion

In this analysis of the discourses of authorship at work within and around Vertigo comics, I have shown that the imprint both consolidates and destabilises the author figure. In their efforts to achieve recognition for the medium, Vertigo writers staged themselves (and were staged by other actors in the field) as cultural celebrities; although each of them had his own posture, they encouraged the perception that they, as writers, were on an equal footing with literary authors and film directors. However, their works, when read collectively, yield a competing discourse of authorship: what matters is not the person who writes, but the twin acts of writing and reading, or telling and listening to stories. To borrow from Linda Hutcheon’s analysis of postmodernist aesthetics, Vertigo in the 1990s and 2000s “install[ed] and then subvert[ed] the very concepts it challenge[ed]” (Hutcheon 3), painting an ambivalent portrait of the comics writer as an *auteur* and as a personification of human imagination.

In a way, Vertigo writers’ complex depiction of authorship mirrors the ambiguous role they play within the comics industry: their authority is in fact backed up by a superstructure (DC/Vertigo) whose very existence negates the possibility of absolute authorial control. At Vertigo, the figure of the author is also destabilised by that of the editor: editors such as Karen Berger, Art Young and Shelly Bond (née Roeborg) played a crucial role, overseeing many series during their years of service and often contributing directly to their artistic development, while nurturing the writers’ authorial postures which in turn helped the imprint stand out on the comics scene.

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