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In an academic career spanning over four decades, Martin Barker has covered a lot of ground. Following his first monograph, *A New Racism* (1981), Barker has primarily been involved with audience and reception studies, and it is within this ambit that his research into comics are seminal contributions to what we now describe as ‘Comics Studies’.

By his own admission, Barker’s interest in the medium happened quite by accident: “just about everything about me indicated against it. I didn’t much read comics as a child...and didn’t at all as an adult, apart from a brief period of reading 2000AD” (2002: 64) Why, then, the sudden and unexpected turn? At the centre of Barker’s project, firmly encapsulated in *A Haunt of Fears* (1984) and *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (1989), is a preoccupation with those unacknowledged forces which discursively surround certain comics publications, as well as a commitment to challenging those wide-spread assumptions about the influence and effects of comics on behaviour.

In *A Haunt of Fears* (*AHOF*), Barker mounted a scathing examination of the horror comics campaign in the UK between 1949 and 1955, a campaign which led to the passing of the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act of 1955. Yet, ‘[t]he campaign against the comics was not *about* the comics, but about a conception of society, children and Britain’ (1984: 6). Campaigns of this kind, of course, are not a new phenomenon, then as now. But at the epicentre of such wrathful moralizing stands the figure of ‘the child’: vulnerable, pliable, and, above all else, *innocent*. ‘Like a garden pruned to make it safe, the only things allowed will be those which the adults see as good for the children’ (1989: 280).

The horror comics campaign had its roots in the USA, and reached its zenith with the publication of Fredric Wertham’s famous (and most infamous) *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), but was also ‘a truly international fever,’ a moral virus which sent shockwaves of hostility in Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Germany, Italy and Holland (1989: 14). Given that the campaign, on both sides of the Atlantic, ‘made such powerful claims about what a “horror comic” is and what it could do to a child-reader,’ Barker ‘had to find ways of evaluating the comics to see what all the fuss was about’ (7).

Rather than the comics themselves, then, that simply ‘couldn’t have affected them in ways that were claimed’ (*ibid*), it is the political and ideological thrust that governs and surrounds the campaign that Barker unmasks (especially since a close reading of ‘The Orphan’ swiftly dispatches the moralizers’ complaints almost from the off). As a self-confessed ‘contrarian swine’, Barker sought to demonstrate that ‘the campaigners’ accounts of their own motives and purposes could not be trusted’ (2002: 70), and that the spark of hostility lay elsewhere. ‘Only when I dug behind their claims,’ explains Barker, ‘did the *politics* of the campaign come into view’ and that ‘the leading role in the entire campaign had been taken by the British Communist Party’ (*ibid*). Fearful of the ‘barbarians’ of American Imperialism storming Britain’s cultural ramparts, however, ‘they ended up attacking the very comics which...were among the few popular cultural materials of that period to resist the McCarthyite paranoia about “communists”’ (*ibid*).

But what also emerges from *AHOF* is a manifesto about readers and audiences. In order to analyse a text, whatever its genre or medium, we need to understand ‘what is involved in the act of reading it, and how it builds a relation with

its readers, and what impact is thus possible' (1984: 90). Barker's next book, *Comics: Ideology, Power and its Critics* – originally titled *Zapping Their Brains* and sadly out of print -- is in some ways a thematic sequel to AHOF, but expands, and further develops Barker's hermeneutics as he turns towards a wider selection of comic material, the bulk of them British. Beginning with another unacknowledged history, Barker looked into the curious tale of British weekly comic, *Action* (1976), which was cancelled after only eight months. Once again, the figure of the child stands at the centre as an open vessel for harmful and insidious media influence. And, once again, Barker drills down deeply to demonstrate how ill founded and steadfastly *political* the campaign against *Action* was. 'Here is a comic that went-over-the-top,' wrote Barker, summarising the views of the censors. It was a 'brimful of violence, perhaps even directly inciting delinquency' (1989: 23). It wasn't the 'violent' content, however, that was a cause for concern – and Barker has repeatedly stressed that that "'violence' is not some singular 'thing' which might grow cumulatively like poison inside of people" (2001: 3), but means different things in different contexts -- but that the comic 'stood at the edge of a very radical politics – and that couldn't be allowed' (49).

Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics is a landmark text in the field of Comics Studies (which was emergent, even nascent, at the time of publication, especially in the Anglo-American sphere). What is central to the study is the concept of ideology and it is here that Barker throws down a gauntlet: what would enable us to 'test' prevalent theories of ideology? If the ideology of 'violence,' 'romance' or what have you, and its direct consequences – its 'effects' -- is what concerns the 'contemporary witch-hunters' (2001: 2), how come they have got it so wrong, especially when so much counter-evidence is ignored? Such theories, Barker argued, are inherently political: 'it commits them to assumptions which not only precede their evidence, but shape it' (1989: 3).

But it is not only 'the establishment' that gets Barker's goat. Academics, too, have fallen into the 'effects' trap, none more so than Angela McRobbie's study of UK girl's comic, *Jackie*, wherein she sees as 'an ideological bloc of mammoth proportions' (155) which 'stereotype girls, restrict them to feminine careers, [and] enforce an ideology of romance on them' (135). Barker's chagrin comes from a number of places. Firstly, McRobbie fails to cite her sources and this set Barker on a trail to search through editions of *Jackie* to uncover the stories examined. Secondly, that the analysis is based on a parochial reading that ignores any evidence that might serve as contradiction which is paralleled by an 'un-transparent' methodology (2002). And thirdly, that the essay had been 'quoted, feted, reprinted – and ultimately wrong' (ibid). It is not that Barker 'present[ed] the magazine as a source of hidden virtues,' but that it is 'far more complicated than the critics have made out' (1989: 134). Part of Barker's project is to challenge analyses that read texts via pre-judgements that lead to 'ideology-spotting,' while ignoring the role of the reader:

[w]e will only make progress...if we can uncover such implicit theorisations and develop appropriate tests. The tricky part is that it involves an interplay between studying the texts, and thinking about their readers. Any research which claims to stay on one side of the divide only, will be silently making assumptions (1989: 247).

Other topics tackled in the book include the UK comic strip, *Scream Inn*. In a nutshell, *Scream Inn* is about a 'grotesque Gothic Hostelry [which] held a haunted room in which no one had managed to stay the whole night. A challenge: any creature

that did succeed in staying the night would win a million pounds!’ (62). Children were invited to write into the comic to propose challengers for the Inn and Barker was able to gain access to 618 such proposals which granted him access to ‘a kind of information rarely available about children’s relations with a comic,’ relation which ‘were a product of their actual live relations...not of an artificial recall’ (ibid). It is through this analysis that Barker began building his theory of ‘the contract’ as a dialogic relationship between texts and readers by drawing upon the work of Valentin Voloshinov:

The idea of a ‘contract’ suggests that a magazine like Jackie is more than just a body of contents looking for a mind to invade. It suggests that it offers a kind of relationship to its readers. We might say that Jackie extends an invitation to readers to join in and use its contents in particular ways (257).

Barker’s use of Voloshinov is certainly interesting, but one that requires further development. The concept of the ‘contract’ as a site whereby readers orient themselves to the material has plenty of potential. Comics ‘have to have a logic to which particular groups of readers are capable of orienting themselves’ (274), whether that logic involves fantastic elements, such as magic, or narrative sleight-of-hand (as in the *Scream Inn* strip). But the idea of a ‘natural reader’, that is, ‘those whose typified life-experience makes them most able to become its implied audience’ (277) is problematic or, at least, undeveloped. Is there only *one* ‘contract’ offered by the text and only *one* kind of ‘natural reader,’ for example? Moreover, as Strinati (2004: 232) states in his discussion of Barker’s work, ‘we might ask what part power has to play in the forming of contract between texts and audiences,’ and is this relationship an equal one? The comics that Barker analyses are not produced by readers, ‘but are the result of industrial and cultural production’ (ibid). In this way, Barker’s dialogical approach ‘is still a long way from considering how the relationships he discusses are influenced by the way popular culture becomes a commodity’ (233).

Although comics have historically – and unfairly – been accused of delinquency and of little cultural value, Barker concluded by stating: ‘let us have as many of the things as we possibly can. In the face of the capital-calculating machine called Thatcherism which uses morality like murderers use shotguns, all the little things like comics matter’ (301). Although he was writing in the 1980s, a period marked by neoliberalism and Conservative governments on both sides of the Atlantic, Barker’s words ring as true today as they did then.

Bibliography

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