

Comics and audiences

Roger Sabin,
University of the Arts, UK

Let me tell you a tale about comics and audiences. I was once very flattered to be invited onto a BBC Radio 3 arts programme to talk about the latest graphic novels. In the studio, the host greeted me, and got me a coffee. We chatted and he smiled, and all was well. Then the 'On Air' light went on, and he started his introduction: 'Tonight's show is about comics', he said, 'the kind of things read by your cousin Kevin who has the hygiene problem...' It went downhill from there.

I'd like to say that the incident happened pre-1986, before the great 'raising of consciousness' about the worth of comics had begun. But, alas, this was in 2007. There was no harm done, but it was a reminder that people within the 'comics community' sometimes forget how much naked prejudice still exists against the artform. Certainly things have changed immensely since pre-*Maus*, and, indeed, have changed since 2007. But 'respectability' is not a given, and stereotypes like that of the 'fanboy' still linger.

Which is one way of saying why the study of audiences is important. It can expose stereotypes, offering alternative views of readers based on scholarship, and ask what ideological work is being performed when shorthand representations are mobilised. It can challenge all kinds of other myths about comics – for example, that they have deleterious effects on behaviour: if you think the ghost of Fredric Wertham has been laid to rest, check out some of the press that surrounded the Colorado shootings (if there's one thing worse than cousin Kevin, it's cousin Kevin with a machine gun). More than this, it can tell us what comics mean to individuals – the place they hold in people's lives. In so doing, it can complement other kinds of analysis in order to offer a fuller picture of both text and reader.

Of course, audience analysis is not new (the founder of this journal, Martin Barker, was a pioneer in the 1980s). But the fact remains that it has continued to be the poor relation to textual exegesis. In the world of academic conferences and journals, it is routinely acknowledged that the vast majority of submissions will be from Literature departments. Not that there's anything wrong with lit crit – just that we need to remember that 'that's not all there is'.

Perhaps the low visibility of audience research has something to do with the amount of time it takes to do. It can mean rifling through archives of comics to explore the letters pages (sure, many comics have been digitised, but the search engines are not always that

great, and you still need ‘the thing’ in front of you). It can mean constructing fiendishly subtle questionnaires. It can mean organising focus groups, or spending hours in face-to-face interview situations. And all of that is not very ‘efficient’ in the terms of today’s academic environment, when governments around the world increasingly expect results quickly and cheaply.

Among the inefficient contributors to this special edition of *Participations* we have: Martin Barker on the reception of Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*; Shari Sabeti on teenage readers of graphic novels; Benjamin Woo on reading and collecting as media-oriented practices; Kevin Patrick on *The Phantom* and Australian fandom; Ian Gordon on the letters pages in *Superman*; Liam Burke on audience responses to superhero movies; and Ofer Berenstein on the rituals fans perform when buying their comics. Cousin Kevin - you were never more interesting.