

Martin Barker and Comics Studies: A Personal Appreciation

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Summing-up Martin Barker's contribution to Comics Studies is difficult because it is so huge.¹ He is, as the cliché goes, a foundational scholar. Which is not to say there were no scholarly works about comics before Martin, just that he moved the goalposts by asking new questions. Although his career has spanned Film Studies, Audience Studies, Racism Studies and more, the work he produced in what would become known as Comics Studies (it did not exist as such when he began) – five books and several essays – set a benchmark that has rarely been equalled. More than this, he inspired a generation of scholars to believe that comics could, and should, be taken seriously.

A contribution is sometimes not just about dry text, and Martin's forté was giving talks. These were delivered at conventional academic conferences but also in less orthodox settings, and were extemporised without notes, in an entertaining style that made him legendary. He had previously tried his hand at performance of various kinds (at one point he was a member of a troupe calling themselves 'The Awfully Nice Poets') and he approached the academic stage as a performer – knowingly goading the audience and always having fun. He structured his talks around a series of questions, always pausing for effect somewhere near the middle, pointing his finger heavenwards, and declaring: 'And that poses a puzzle!'. He would then conclude by solving the puzzle via a dazzling display of theoretical dexterity and political nous.

If you are interested in sampling a typical Barker whirlwind, have a look at the transcript of one from 1989 reproduced in a comics fanzine called *FA* (from a tape I still possess)² - just to note, this talk was given at a comics convention, not an academic conference, and that is because comics studies was not yet institutionalised. Martin was a pioneer in opening up new venues for scholarship, and comics conventions were one of them.

¹ The article was written July 2022. Martin died September 2022.

² The *FA* piece can be viewed here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bS3-C7EAA4oHnTeMib9CsqFVPRwfbUS1/view>.

He harboured no snobbery at all about his audience: if you wanted to listen, you were welcome. And the comics fans loved it.

Expanding this point, what tended to happen at the conventions was that Martin (and later David Huxley and myself), would book a room, and advertise in the programme in the hope that somebody showed up. The conventions were focused on comic dealing, fans meeting star cartoonists, and cosplay (like they are today), and outsiders to the world of fandom were not always welcome. But Martin showed that there was an appetite for academic commentary, and, as you can see from the FA transcript - which derives from a convention called UKCAC in London - he was never short of an audience, with whom he would banter in a fiercely engaged way (the transcript includes the feisty qs-and-as).

Arguably, it was from these small beginnings at the conventions that comics studies in the UK grew, gradually being co-opted by the universities. Martin was embedded in Cultural Studies (working first at the University of the West of England and then Sussex University and eventually Aberystwyth University) and as that discipline developed to look at diverse popular forms, Martin was at the forefront of research into comics, but always from the Marxist perspective that drove Cultural Studies in the UK in the 1970s/80s³ (specifically, this was a Marxism that read ideology through textual analysis, and which incorporated methodologies from Sociology). Having said this, he never forgot the comics fans, and continued to speak at conventions and to publish in fan publications (many fans stayed close friends, and one of Martin's later books was dedicated specifically to them: *Action: The Story of a Violent Comic* (1990). Some went on to become luminaries in comics studies).

The spread of Comics Studies was gradual, growing from isolated essays in journals to academic book-lists, and from modules about comics on existing courses, to entire degrees. The foundation of the MLitt in Comics & Graphic Novels at Dundee University in 2011 was a watershed moment, and today there is a firmly established network of higher education courses and scholarly organisations. Martin's books are still set texts on most of them, though he has frequently expressed unease that some of the scholarship that followed in his wake has drifted away from the questions of power and subversion that fuelled his own work (he is amusingly disdainful about the change in focus from 'ideology' to 'discourse').

To look at Martin's books in turn: The first was *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (1984). Focusing on the panic about American horror comics in the UK between 1949 and 1955, which led to an organised campaign and the passing of the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act of 1955, Martin revealed the behind-the-scenes role played by the British Communist Party. The Party got involved because it saw the comics as symbolic of the 'Americanisation' of culture. The book argues that the problem was that some of the hated comics (especially those published by EC) were 'progressive' in the sense of being anti-McCarthyite and anti-racist. This is a book, therefore, about the irony of misunderstanding pop culture. Martin had been a child when the horror

³ If Martin had a predecessor, it was David Kunzle: their Marxist politics and concern with audience reception made them similar, though Kunzle is an art historian.

comics campaign took off, and although his parents shielded him from the comics at the time, this book is probably his most personal.

The second was *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (1989), which looked at British comics like *Action*, *Jackie* and *Shiver and Shake* (particularly the strip 'Scream Inn'), and which asked complex questions about their 'effects'. It is a theoretically dense book, arguing for a variety of positions, the most notable of which is the idea of a 'contract'. Martin states: 'A "contract" involves an agreement that a text will talk to us in ways we recognise. It will enter into a dialogue with us. And that dialogue, with its dependable elements and form, will relate to some aspect of our lives in our society' (Barker, 1989: 261). To explore this contract, the book is rooted in the hard work of actually reading the comics (e.g. did *Jackie* really socialise women in the oppressive sense that some feminist scholars had suggested? Not if you read them closely and followed story arcs). In *New Statesman and Society*, I applauded the book's approach, but cautioned that 'the blurb is over-optimistic in suggesting that this is a work comics fans will enjoy' (Sabin 1989: 32). That is still true: it remains Martin's least accessible but most academically influential work.

The third book was *Action: The Story of a Violent Comic* (1990). Again, close readings were central (Martin had unfettered access to the archives of the comic's publisher, IPC), and again the theoretical focus was on challenging assumptions about effects, especially those of 'violence'. *Action* (1976) was a boys' adventure title that riffed on popular movies from the day (*Rollerball*, *Jaws*, etc.). It ended up being censored, and Martin reconstructed the storylines to show how they had been tampered-with, establishing that fears around 'violence' were an excuse to clamp down on stories that were in fact anti-authoritarian in often explicitly class terms. By mapping out the stories that 'could have been', Martin gave them back to the fans (as an aside, we had great fun arguing about whether *Action* was a 'punk' comic – I said the date was too early, but ultimately Martin was right because it surfed the same generalised wave of youth unrest).

The fourth book was *The Lasting of the Mohicans: History of an American Myth* (1996), co-authored with myself. It attempted to map all the iterations of the classic yarn in comics form, as well as in film and TV, in order to make a case for the way it reflected different notions of American 'manifest destiny' through time. The comics spanned the adventure genre (including a remarkable EC version) to more didactic Classics Illustrated-style publications, and raised difficult questions about the depiction of native Americans. The book sold miserably and Martin and I often laughed at how we had never met anybody who had heard of it. But its making was one of the happiest collaborations I have experienced.

The fifth and final book was *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes* (1998), co-written with Kate Brooks. This was really a study of the 1995 movie of Dredd, starring Sylvester Stallone, but because so much of it is about how fans compared the film with the comics, it can justifiably be seen as of a piece with the books above. The character of Dredd in the *2000AD* comics is an oddity in the sense that he is a British superhero, and readers are encouraged to laugh at his fascism (e.g. he would shoot you for dropping litter). The film had a different take, heavily influenced by the necessity to be a star vehicle for

Stallone, and *Knowing Audiences* explores the relationship between audience members' prior expectations of the film, and their eventual reactions, responses and judgements. In so doing, it proposed a new model for discourse analysis – no mean feat.

As a corpus, this list is impressive in itself, but it was supplemented by essays (in journals and as book chapters) and countless talks (more whirlwinds, more inspired young scholars...). In retrospect, Martin's comics oeuvre laid the foundations for his future work in other fields. For example, as he moved away from comics and into audience studies, questions such as the role of the imagination, identification, and engagement, and the 'effects' of violence, along with the politics of censorship, remained key themes.

The way Martin tells it, he made a clean break with Comics Studies in the 1990s. But in fact he kept his hand in, giving talks through the 2000s and 2010s, and even producing academic pieces (when Marvel brought out a version of *The Last of the Mohicans* in 2008, we mooted doing an essay, but it never happened). In 2012, he commissioned a special section for his beloved *Participations* journal about comic book audiences (for which he flatteringly asked me to write the introduction) wherein his own contribution, a piece entitled 'The Reception of Joe Sacco's *Palestine*' saw him back on trenchant form (Barker, 2012). It was his last comics-orientated piece, and he retired three years later.

There have been several attempts to trace the history of comics scholarship, and Martin has rightly been hailed as a groundbreaker.⁴ Naturally, this does not mean his work has not been critiqued down the years; notably by admirers William Proctor, Marc Rogers and Dominic Strinati, alongside another supporter, Ian Gordon, who points out that Martin never 'produced' a student who is a comics scholar.⁵ It is also true that his comics studies books are out of print, which is unfortunate, but probably due to the fact they are mainly about comics from the UK (still a backwater in comics studies). I do not subscribe to the view, however, that the books are unfashionable for asking questions primarily about class, rather than about race, gender, and intersectionality. Those other concerns were always in the mix for Martin. Ultimately, the core ideas of Martin's comics work remain as relevant as ever. All the outputs above share common concerns: that 'common sense' ideas are often brimming with complex ideologies and can be cloaks for something else (especially that scholars too easily use terms like 'identification' and 'effects' without thinking about them); and that drawing conclusions based on pre-existing notions of what you will find is a dead end (as an aside, I recall Martin being fascinated by evidence that did not quite fit the plan, and his chapter about a fan of Judge Dredd who took the character at face value, in Deborah Cartmell et al., *Trash Aesthetics: Popular Culture and its Audience*, is one of his most provocative (Barker, 1997)).

Indeed, this plea to follow the evidence (very simple, of course, yet deceptively key), is one that impacted me especially, and which I try to pass on to students. The work of actually

⁴ For Martin's own reminiscences, see: Barker, 2002; Jenkins, 2020.

⁵ See Gordon, 2017. Gordon also states: 'a field that does not know and read its own history is impoverished' (2017: 128).

reading a run of 50, 100, 200 comics is, to quote Monty Python, dull, dull, desperately dull. But it has to be done. There is nothing more dispiriting than watching a conference paper and realising at the end that, for all the theoretical fireworks, the speaker has not read the comics. Martin helped me attune my bullshit detector, and for that I am grateful (and I am absolutely sure he had the same effect on many of the academics and students he encountered).

In closing, Martin would always say that he was not a comics fan, and that his interest in them was purely as source material for asking questions about power. With respect, I am not sure that this is entirely true: for example, I remember his fannish glee that American cartoonist Jack Kamen had agreed to do the cover for *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (Kamen had drawn some of the comics analysed in *A Haunt of Fears*). He also owned a lot of comics signed by (the great) Steve Bissette. I saw with my own eyes how Martin *did* 'fit in' at those fan conventions, despite his protestations otherwise, and the close friends he made there. Above all, he loved the way comics stories – perhaps especially *Dredd* - could allow readers to imagine a better future. We need that perspective now more than ever.

Biographical Note

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