

Martin Barker's Work in Relation to Fan Studies and Fans: On 'Rogue' Readings, 'Figures of the Audience', and 'Waves' of Scholarship

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Abstract

Martin Barker's body of work has rarely been contextualised as a series of contributions to fan studies, despite Barker's various empirical studies regularly engaging with fan readings and practices. In this article I assess how Barker, from the end of the 1980s onwards, challenged the assumptions of fan studies by seeking — as a kind of 'rogue' reader — to complicate what might be understood as 'fandom', especially at points when fan studies was invested in monolithic or reductive 'figures of the fan' (Hills, 2020). I take two main approaches to this. Firstly, I explore how some of Barker's book reviews and review essays in the nineties (1993b, 1996) challenged emergent norms of what would become known as fan studies, arguing that Barker's own empirical work can be re-read to suggest a distinctive mode of fannish redecoding. Secondly, I move on to address how Barker's individual and collaborative research projects typically and transversally cut across identified 'waves' of fan studies (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007) in provocative ways, again acting as 'rogue' readings. Ultimately, I argue that Barker's work can, at times, be understood as an unusual combination of the ethics of 'first wave' fan studies — seeking to give a voice to disempowered fans — combined with some of the mainstreaming tendencies of 'third wave' fan studies. However we place Barker's work in relation to fan studies, though, it surely deserves greater recognition and commentary among scholars of fandom. Prior to the publication of books such as *Enterprising Women* (Bacon-Smith, 1992) and *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins, 1992), Martin Barker was already popularising his empirical audience research on 'committed' comic book readers (Barker, 1989) in a volume targeted squarely at the very fans he had analysed (Barker, 1990). And perhaps surprisingly, this dialogue between academia and fandom was carried out without Barker himself identifying as an aca-fan.

Keywords: aca-fandom, fans, figures of the audience, interpretive community, redecoding, rogue reading, waves of fan studies

Introduction: Audience Studies... or Fan Studies?

Perhaps one puzzle about the scholarly reception of Martin Barker's body of work is that it has rarely been contextualised as a series of contributions to fan studies, despite Barker's various empirical studies regularly engaging with fan readings and practices. His analysis of readers of the comic *Action*, for example, distinguishes between casual, regular and committed readers of the title (see Barker 1989, 1990, 1993a). And right through to his collaborative work on *Game of Thrones* (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021), Martin continued to produce analyses of fandom – the *Game of Thrones* study distinguishes between those intent on debating and discussing the series, those who produced their own fan texts, and those who consumed fan-produced content without creating their own (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 38-39).

Martin was already publishing what amounted to major studies of comic book and film fandoms across the 1990s. Of course, one explanation for the relative absence of his work in fan studies is that he embraced, and played up to, his role in relation to audience studies. Indeed, later in his career, and acting as a guru-like figure on the subject, he would be called upon to make overview statements about whether audience studies was a field (Barker, 2019) and what its futures might be (Barker, 2006a). These were sometimes conference keynotes, or interviews recognising Barker's status in audience studies specifically (Barker and Reason, 2022). However, his work was far more diverse than this. His highly influential edited collection *The Video Nasties* (Barker, 1984b) featured a textual analysis of the 'nasties' from Barker himself (1984c), and he would go on to write volumes of textual analysis rather than audience study in *From Antz to Titanic* (Barker and Austin, 2000) and *A Toxic Genre* (Barker, 2011).

In part, then, Barker's displacement from histories of fan studies might, to be blunt, have transpired somewhat by his own design. But I want to argue that there are other rationales for this disappearance. I will consider how Barker's work cannot be fitted into 'waves' of fan studies (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007: 1, 6-7; Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington, 2017: 8), instead tending to critique almost all of the theoretical resources drawn on by these differing versions of canonised fan studies (including Jenkins's 1992 *Textual Poachers* just as much as Bourdieusian and psychoanalytic approaches to fans). Barker's understandings of fandom might instead be viewed as *transversal*, cutting across the 'waves' of fan studies. At the same time, Barker (1993b) refused to adopt a value judgement of fans, putting him at odds with the cultural politics of early fan studies, that 'fandom was beautiful' (Coppa, 2014) and so needed to be defended against pathologisation. And although he wrote about media that he was passionate about (see Barker, 2006c and 2006d for rare acknowledgements of his investments in objects of study), Martin also did not align his work with emerging orthodoxies of 'aca-fandom' (Stein in Largent, Popova, and Vist, 2020; Proctor and Barker, 2020b). For Barker, his own positioning was a distraction – what he wanted was to gather an empirically convincing portrait of what audiences, fans among them, were doing with texts. In this regard, his personal media consumption was largely treated as an

irrelevance rather than a vital concern, as it would arguably become for fan studies. Indeed, in terms of this *dispositif* of fan studies, I will argue that Barker was very much a ‘rogue’ reader-writer, refusing to go along with the shared theories and expressed cultural politics of first wave fan studies (Barker 1993b, 1996). And this figuration – thinking of his version of audience studies as a kind of ‘outsider’ or ‘rogue’ practice that speaks back to forms of cultural power – was a key component in Barker’s professed self-understanding (Barker, 2019: 136).

In this article I will therefore assess how Barker’s work from the end of the 1980s onwards challenged the assumptions of fan studies, seeking to complicate what might be understood as ‘fandom’, especially at points when fan studies was invested in monolithic or reductive ‘figures of the fan’ (Hills, 2020). Barker began publishing on comics fans at around the same time as Henry Jenkins was presenting his initial work on media fandom (Jenkins, 1988; Barker, 1989). However, Barker’s assorted fan analyses might best be captured by way of the slogan *‘fandom is complicated’*. Though this might seem to be a banal encapsulation, it conveys a sense of always refusing scholarly orthodoxies and dominant academic narratives, and so captures the multiple ways in which Barker’s work on ‘committed’ audiences refused to contrast ‘fans’ as one readership against ‘non-fans’ or ‘ordinary’ audiences as another.

Barker’s work on fandom not only critiqued tenets of emergent fan studies, but also challenged ‘figures of the fan’ outside the academy, for example in powerful discourses of censorship and moral panic. While he generally maintained a critical distance from fan studies, I will ultimately argue that Barker’s work can in fact be argued to represent one of the strongest realisations of the ethical underpinnings of first wave fan studies, not due to a celebratory ‘fandom is beautiful’ valorisation, but rather via a principled dismantling of the politics of Othering through which comic book (Barker, 1997), horror (Barker, 2013b: 77), fantasy (Barker, 2009a: 287), and porn fandoms (Barker, 2014) were all variously – and highly problematically – figured as deviant audiences needing to be governmentally/discursively policed. In relation to fans, rather than fan studies, Barker was dedicated to undermining discourses that denigrated pop culture fandoms (Barker, 2002: 19, note 6).

How might Barker’s ‘rogue’ readings of fan studies have positioned him as something of an outsider to this enterprise whilst his work was simultaneously one of the finest examples of what fan studies set out to achieve? The common thread spanning this apparent paradox, I will suggest, is the ‘figure of the audience’ (Barker, 2013b: 71-72). As I will demonstrate, Martin was just as committed to challenging reductive senses of fandom in academic work as he was to challenging reductive fan discourses circulating in cultural politics beyond the academy. As a result, there is only a seeming puzzle here – in fact, these two sides of Martin’s work are perfectly explicable via his emphasis on the politics of analysis, and on how audience studies should always be committed to democratisation (Barker and Reason, 2022: 260). This was equally true for him in relation to the presumptions of fan studies as it was for wider social and cultural understandings of fandom, as I will go on to show.

A ‘Rogue Element’ in Relation to Early Fan Studies: From ‘Natural’ Readers to ‘Viewing Strategies’

In one of his assessments of audience studies, Barker argued that ‘the role of audience research has often been like the Fool in Shakespeare: asking awkward questions of reigning assumptions’ (Barker, 2006a: 131). And in a later examination of whether audience studies could be described as a field, there was a similar emphasis on its ‘rogue’ status:

So, are audience and reception studies a field, a “discipline,” or a science? I do not think so—although I think that the aspiration to be so is not altogether a bad thing—provided we retain something of the agent provocateur stance that has long characterized our relations with other people’s claims. *I believe that our best destiny is to be a rogue element within the broader media, communication, and cultural studies domain, demanding—and providing—empirical evidence in the face of normatively charged claims.* (Barker, 2019: 136, my italics)

Responding to works in fan studies such as *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins, 1992), *The Adoring Audience* (Lewis, 1992), and *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek* (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995) in contemporaneous book reviews, Barker (1993b, 1996) recurrently enacted what would become his defining sense of audience studies. He adopted the position of an agent provocateur, reading fan studies for ‘reigning assumptions’ and guiding ‘claims’.

As a ‘rogue’ reader of early fan studies, Barker interrogates it as an ‘illustration’ (1993b: 669) of cultural studies’ desired orientation of the time – this involves the ‘*rehabilitation of fans*’ via the ‘resistant reader’, just about the only genuine hero on the horizons of the new cultural studies’ (Barker, 1993b: 670). Yet Barker contests the scholarly narrative that is set out here, suggesting that perhaps fans have never been as monolithically stigmatised as some would seem to suggest:

[Joli] Jensen writes of the stigmatizing of fans... Her evidence for this, I have to say, is sketchy – a small sample of press reports and academic commentary treated as universalizable. I have a problem with this. I can think of many contexts in which ‘fans’ are treated as anything other than a homogeneous group. In British football, a good deal of ideological work has gone on over many years to distinguish... between ‘genuine fans’ and ‘hooligan minorities’... Whence, then, the conviction that there is a universal image of... [fans]? I am suggesting it comes from the... intentions of cultural studies, who want to heroize them. (Barker, 1993b: 670)

In point of fact, studies decades later continue to evidence fan stereotyping – typically gendered (Gerrard, 2022; Cann, 2015, 2018) – and to demonstrate the cultural reproduction of pathologised fandom as young people replay stereotyped images of fandom (Booth and Dare-Edwards, 2021: 227-228), even whilst fandom is said to have become far more culturally ‘mainstreamed’ in the 21st century than it ever was in the 1980s and 90s (Sergeant, 2021: 176; Booth and Dare-Edwards, 2021: 214-215). But this refusal to accept what he sees as the weak evidence of *The Adoring Audience* leads to an aside where Barker ponders whether such versions of cultural studies operated with ‘all the abrasive critical attention of lint’ (1993b: 669). His criticisms of the fan-as-hero starkly prefigure wider shifts in fan studies, towards adopting a less universalising image of fandom and allowing for analyses of ‘reactionary fandom’ (Stanfill, 2020) and ‘toxic’ fans (Salter and Blodgett, 2017). Such movements have, of course, been inspired by a range of fan-cultural phenomena from Gamergate onwards, but Barker’s critique of fan studies circa 1992 carries these concerns *avant la lettre*. He argues that *Textual Poachers* and *The Adoring Audience* invite readers to ‘take a particular attitude’ to fans – i.e. to respectfully accept their meaning-making creativity. Yet for Barker, such a stance – were it to be generalised in cultural analysis – risks ‘validating the terms in which chauvinists [...and] fascists... “experience the world.” Ah, but these books do not consider such people’, he chides (Barker, 1993b: 670–671). Emergent fan studies is thus critiqued for its ‘real political problem. ...[I]s the implication that those fans are most radical who most participate in the public worlds of fandom? In my experience with comic[s] fans, almost the exact obverse holds’ (Barker, 1993b: 673). By depicting fans as resistant, and as creative poachers, Barker notes that Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* also fails to analyse how fan culture polices its boundaries and activities:

There is a disturbing moment when Jenkins remarks the occasion when, in a debate about a *Star Trek* episode, some fans tried to raise the issue of abortion rights. They were ‘policed’ to silence. An exploration of the implications of that would severely undermine his implicit claim that fan activity is almost a radical politics in itself. On the contrary, ... as my own research into comics fans has taught me, fandom operates by rules and limits that frequently debar any attempt to weaken the boundaries between fandom and other cultural, or social and political worlds. (Barker, 1993b: 673)

This last sentence could almost be emblematic for work on contemporary fandom in an era of social media and ‘culture wars’, where rightwing fans seek to purify ‘their’ franchises of ‘politics’, by which they mean left-leaning cultural politics that they vehemently contest (Hills, 2021). Alongside problems of fan politics and policing, Barker offers a third key critique of Fiske (1992) and Jenkins (1992) – neither scholar shows any detailed interest in the *texts* that people become fans of:

What is remarkable is that in so much recent work on fans, there is virtually no interest in the *nature of the texts* that fans enjoy. Fiske is in fact offering a purely formal criterion for [‘producerly’] fan texts – one that, in truth, I can find no exceptions to. Would someone please show me a text that does not contain gaps and contradictions, that therefore fans could *not* work on?... [And] nowhere in the book [*Textual Poachers*] could I find Jenkins even *mentioning* that nine-tenths of the TV programmes which have become objects of fan fascination are science fiction programmes.it certainly earns no extended discussion. The nature of the texts as texts is of so little interest to him. (Barker, 1993b: 671-672)

The same criticism occurs in Barker’s response to John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins’ (1995) *Science Fiction Audiences*, as he notes that ‘[s]urprisingly, though, there is not much on science fiction itself as the particular object of their fans’ devotion’ (Barker, 1996: 365). However, this review has an even more dramatic bone to pick with the emerging canon of fan studies, reading it as symptomatic of a ‘validation of audiences... resulting... in the... over-celebration of “audience resistance”, but equally importantly in a *death of method*’ (Barker, 1996: 366). As well as issues of fan-cultural politics, policing, and textual specificity, Barker layers problems of evidence into the swirling brew of his rogue dissent:

the researcher’s evidence is presented in such a way that it is nigh on impossible for others to query its validity, its scope, or the interpretation offered. We have fallen back closer to a kind of attentive journalism... [and] we seriously need to consider some protocols for presenting evidence appropriate to this kind of work. (Barker, 1996: 366)

There is an epistemological Othering here, of course – fan studies should be more than ‘attentive journalism’, approximating to replicable and assessable methodology, and thus to a more social-scientific perspective rather than to humanities-derived incarnations of cultural studies. In such an Othering, Barker displays a fierce commitment to method above all as a guarantor of scholarly value (and for a later counter-argument on audience studies’ methods, see Turnbull, 2020: 119-120). Elsewhere, Barker gives a fuller account of the ethics of academic knowledge production, arguing that ‘[w]e never just research. In the act of researching, we generate knowledge in shapes which privilege some uses and actors over others. We work in some very distinctive power/knowledge nexuses’ (2013b: 79). Rather than simply privileging a scientific model of theory-testing, Barker’s work is therefore committed to the ethico-political meanings and motives of research. Audience studies, like fan studies, thus needs to ask itself ‘To whose benefit—but therefore also to whose possible disadvantage—is our research being conducted? Who will have access to the research’s findings, in ways that will enable them to understand, evaluate and make use of it?’ (Ibid). If ‘attentive journalism’ is one of the cultural Others to academic research worthy of the title,

then so too are ‘the ongoing efforts of governments to commercialize higher education’ – despite this, Barker points out, ‘to a degree, universities remain places with special capacities to produce critical-democratic knowledge’ (Ibid).

It is within this nexus that Barker consistently pays acute interest not just to what might be termed the figure of the scholar, but to what he labels ‘figures of the audience’, since these are crucial to the trust that academic researchers can gain from their respondents (Barker, 2013b: 71). Barker views such figures as uniting much of his research (2013b: 77), whether into the 1950s horror comics campaign (Barker, 1984a), the UK comic *Action* being withdrawn from sale in 1976 (Barker, 1990), the ‘Video Nasties’ moral panic of the 1980s (Barker 1984b, 1984c), or the *Daily Mail*’s campaign against the 1995 David Cronenberg film *Crash* (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001). Figures of the audience

can praise or derogate. They offer ‘explanations’ of how culture works. They are at work in political culture, pointing the finger at people, praising or damning them. They can point on towards policy implications. And thus they surround and confront audiences as they participate in and enjoy forms and practices which powerful others either celebrate or distrust. *But also such figures commonly operate within academic fields* (Barker, 2013b: 71-72, my italics).

It is by attending to how figures of the audience circulate – and how they are articulated with cultural, discursive and governmental forms of power – that audience researchers can win the trust of those they are researching. This is so because politically-minded researchers can ‘locate and critique the “figures of the audience” at work, and then construct kinds of research which could talk to the actual audiences, gather and make sense of their experiences—including of course their experiences of being defined by those working figures’ (Barker, 2013b: 77). The central issue is once again to critique ‘reigning assumptions’ (Barker, 2006a: 131) via figures of the audience, in domains of scholarship and policy (Barker, 2013b: 80).

As such, when Barker (1993b) contests the depiction of resistant and politically ‘heroic’ fans in early fan studies – an accusation he goes on to reiterate across a considerable phase of his career (see, e.g., Barker, 1993a: 180; Barker 2006a: 140, note 9; Barker, Mathijs and Trobia, 2008: 215; Barker 2009b: 392, note 9) and which I suspect underpinned his unease about fan studies for quite some time – then he is challenging a particular figure of the audience or, rather, a figure of the fan (Hills, 2020: 162) for being intensely culturally-politically reductive. Figures of the fan perform cultural work; they ‘surround and confront audiences’ just as other figures of the audience do – and in academic contexts they can operate to devalue or legitimate particular kinds of scholarship. Fan studies may have emerged via a ‘first wave’ sentiment of ‘fandom is beautiful’ (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007: 1; Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington, 2017: 3), itself aimed at revaluing the figure of the fan against stereotyping pathologisation, but for Barker this concern (which actually accords

with his own work on censorship and moral panics, for instance defending the interests of comic book/horror genre fans) seems to have been outweighed by his countervailing 'figure of the academic', via whom empirical complexity should first and foremost be adequately mediated.

More than this, however, his opposition to fan studies' initial figure of the fan also appears to have been rooted in a sense of the unintended consequences of its cultural work – i.e. that it was not only legitimating fandom in the academy and contesting fan stereotypes, but was simultaneously reinforcing the boundary-policing carried out by fans themselves, potentially reifying fandom as a 'special' kind of audience (Fiske, 1992) that could be separated from non-fans or ordinary audiences (Coppa, 2014). As Barker puts it:

The work of Henry Jenkins, Lisa Lewis, John Tulloch, John Fiske, Camille Bacon-Smith and others has been important and influential. It has also, rightly in my view, been quite sharply criticised for its devotional attitude to... fans, which has gone far enough in some hands to want to treat, for example, *Star Trek* fans as a kind of radical political resistance movement. (Barker, 2002: 19, note 6)

Consequently, it is not wholly unexpected that scholars indebted to Barker's work on liveness and audiences (Barker, 2013a), such as his former PhD student Kirsty Sedgman, would have indicated their concern to avoid positioning fandom as a 'special' form of audiencing. Sedgman notes 'the danger' faced by those aiming to study fandom in new contexts such as live performance, that in an effort 'to bring together a wide range of activities under the title *Theatre Fandom*, I have in some ways contributed to that conceptual segmentation of fan as a "special kind of audience"' (2022: 195). It is to combat this tendency, and to struggle against a figure of the fan as discursively bounded, distinct and specialised, that Sedgman proposes 'the necessity of understanding fandom not solely as a label applied to those who exhibit a particular set of characteristics or who engage in distinct fannish practices, but as a series of shifting investments that ebb and flow over time' (Ibid). The alternative – something problematically structured into early fan studies' figure of the fan – is that

If fandom gets hierarchised according to practices of doing – with the 'authentic' fan being the one who has watched a particular film the most, say, or who has retained the most trivia, or bought the most merchandise or visited the most conventions – rather than simply according to the feeling of intense investments, then fandom will always fracture along lines of privilege. (Sedgman, 2022: 196)

On this account, fan studies must, as a 'political imperative' (Ibid), seek to avoid reinforcing and amplifying practices of stratification, hierarchy and privilege that have been performed through fan discourses and identities outside the academy.

Bearing all this in mind, Barker's 'rogue' readings of early fan studies are certainly astute, but they are not merely speculative-theoretical or logical/conceptual criticisms – as he points out, he is drawing on his own empirical methodologies and work (with comic book fans in particular) in order to raise such questions. Proto-canonical fan studies is therefore challenged from a position of *empirical audience studies' work on fans* which has rarely been recognised as fan studies *per se*. The matter of empirically-inspired critique is equally true for Barker's line of textual criticism – i.e. that early fan studies failed to focus sufficiently on the texts that people were fans of – given that his work on comics had already sought to analyse how specific comic books could have inspired and sustained readers' committed engagements. Though we might expect a leading audience studies' researcher to be opposed to forms of textual analysis – and Barker's work certainly opposed psychoanalytic film studies' concepts and interpretations (Barker, 2005) – he also repeatedly sought to understand audience-text relations:

The... stand-off between textual analysis – with its tendency to impute responses to audiences – and audience research, which frequently finds the unexpected, the surprising and 'wayward' responses, is singularly unproductive. No serious research can be designed or developed on this interface. ... [However,] *through carefully structured audience research* it may be possible to derive a range of competing accounts of what the 'text' is – which aspects become particularly visible, what 'wholes' are constructed, and thence what kinds of purchase and 'influence' on people these texts can have. (Barker, 2009b: 388)

Here, Martin is discussing the global *Lord of the Rings* project which he masterminded (Barker, 2006b, 2008b; Barker et al., 2008). His concept of 'text' is audience-led, to be sure, in terms of setting out to systematically analyse patterned readings which parse the text in particular ways, but he retains a keen interest in textual structures, since these are what audiences must, ontologically, be working with.

Across his career, Barker continued to reject work akin to early fan studies that he saw as prioritising 'interpretive communities' without a sufficient concern for textuality (Barker, 2006c: 87). *From Antz to Titanic* (Barker and Austin, 2000) even involved an attempt to return to a model of audience-text relations that was not wholly dissimilar from the model first developed in *Comics* (Barker, 1989). Where the 1989 model involved a 'contract' theory (1989: 261), Barker would later call his cinematic approach "pro-filmic" ... [it is] about being 'in front of' films, and the way that the role of implied audience is constituted as a 'space' between film and audience... I offer it as another acronym: *Proffering a Role Opposite a Film'* (Barker in Barker and Austin, 2000: 193). In each case, Barker sought to analyse what audience positions were proffered by a media text, and what kinds of audiences, sociologically and sociohistorically, were more likely to take these up. His first attempt at conceptualising this ran into difficulties when he posited 'natural' readers for the comic *Action*. These were the

'committed' readers, i.e. the fans, most likely to embrace the comic's implied reader role by recognising and valuing its subversive and politicised takes on action-adventure, thereby not only adopting an implied reader position, but also engaging in a dialogic and implied social relation with the text (Barker, 1989: 258; Barker and Brooks, 1998a: 15). But commentators rightly pointed out the problems of identifying specific groups of fans as 'natural' audiences. For Gemma Moss, this risked downplaying a wide variety of readings that an analyst might not identify as being part of the textual 'contract', something which itself would have to be inferred by the academic reader (Moss, 1993: 119). And for William Proctor, otherwise very much an admirer of Barker's work (see Proctor & Barker, 2020a), the 'idea of "natural readers"... is problematic or, at least, undeveloped. Is there only one "contract" offered by the text and only one kind of "natural reader," for example?' (Proctor, 2017: 736).

In any case, Barker's first attempt at modelling fan readers as a 'natural' readership was something that he set to one side. By the time of *Knowing Audiences*, his work displays a far greater awareness of the discursive contexts within which texts are encountered:

Action was surrounded and bathed in public discourses of danger from its launch, whereas *2000AD*, although touched occasionally by disputes, consciously insulated itself with the 'distance' that science fiction imposed. The effects of disciplinary discourses... may occasion a polarisation of responses by fans, who wish to protect their beloved objects. (Barker and Brooks, 1998a: 18, note 40)

Figures of the audience, and figures of the fan, constitute one discursive surround which texts and audiences have to interact with. Yet even here, Barker again rejects the idea, foundational to fan studies of the 1990s, that fans were negatively stereotyped in dominant cultural representations, instead arguing that comic book fans' 'strength of resistance to the designation "fan"' in the late 80s/early 90s was instead responding to a

complex of two presences. The first is the 'fan' as projected by the comic itself (and other comics, and the surrounds of comic paraphernalia themselves, such as fanzines, marts and conventions). ...Secondly, there are the kinds of engagement with the medium that the comics industry itself currently encourages... In other words, the image of the 'fan' is not some social/mental 'stereotype'... which actual fans feel insulted by. Rather, it is a *real site* which the comics industry has created and encouraged. Go to a convention – or just read about going – and experience the careful management of the possible encounters between readers and creators. ...The image of the 'fan'... is a cartoon drawn from the *actual* social relationships allowed by the dominant production forms in the present-day comics industry. (Barker, 1993a: 179-180)

In this sense, there can be no 'natural' fan-reader, since fandom is always-already marked by 'disciplinary discourses' in terms of industrial norms, production forms and materialising discourses. It might be argued that Barker is theorising the 'affirmational' or text-centred and author-hero-worshipping fan here (Booth, 2015: 12-13) – long before the binary of affirmational versus transformational fandom would become part of fan studies' debate – and that Henry Jenkins (1992) and others were alternatively sparking fan studies into being at around the same time via a focus on transformational fandom, i.e. fans who sought to play with and creatively rework their fan objects. Yet it remains peculiar that Barker's analyses of comic book fandom (1989, 1993a) have not played a much larger role in textbook accounts of fan studies' formation (for instance, Mark Duffett's *Understanding Fandom* cites Barker and Brooks (1998a) on the issue of media effects but does not discuss Barker's work on comic-book fandom (see Duffett, 2013: 126).

Barker's more developed sense of 'viewing strategy' (2006a: 137), which begins to be fleshed out via the work on investment in *Knowing Audiences*, complete with its acronymic 'Sites for the Production of Active Cinematic Experience' and 'Desired Regulative Ideal Viewing Experience' (Barker and Brooks, 1998a: 154, 235), does not prevent him from returning to the matter of the 'implied reader' in a study of *Being John Malkovich* audiences (Barker, 2008a). In a characteristic move, Barker discusses Horst Ruthrof's (1981) *The Reader's Construction of Narrative*, since he often enjoyed basing his analyses on atypical sources. Drawing on Ruthrof's 'sadly neglected book on the role of the literary reader', Barker suggests that it furnishes him with 'a particularly apt account of the notion of the "implied reader" ... which takes us back to considering the text in light of the work that has been demanded of the reader' (Barker, 2008a: 12). Ruthrof analyses how texts generate a vast number of interpretative possibilities, arguing that only a 'research worker with a special aim' would entertain them all; actual readers select an 'interpretative stance' which structures their subsequent interpretations, with the text itself working to structure these abstractions (Ruthrof, 1981: 49). Barker's point is that, according to his empirical work with *Being John Malkovich* audiences,

people did try to attend with something like the devoted attention to detail that a 'research worker' might give – there was an impulse in those most devoted to it to find/achieve a fantastical unity across the film, even as that required a quite exhausting speed of prediction. And perhaps the most remarkable thing is that *BJM* works best with audiences who are willing to be perpetually unsettled. (Barker, 2008a: 12)

Arthouse movie fandom in this analysis (see also Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001: 137 on 'unsettled' readings of the Cronenberg film *Crash*) means that even when considerable audience interpretative work has been done to attain a textual 'whole' in terms of meaning, these audiences are still highly aware of the provisionality and fragility of their claimed 'textual meaning'. Ruthrof reflects on the phenomenology of textual interpretation later in

his study, distinguishing between Edmund Husserl's 'noetic' act of experiencing and 'noematic' recalled experiences to argue that

Readers are interested above all in the story's dynamic qualities, its 'noesis', whereas critics attempt operative explanations of the whole, an exercise for which they require an overall 'noema'. Ironically, though, there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a story's noema; there are only noematic aspects which, for fleeting moments, conjure up the illusion that we have grasped the whole. (Ruthrof, 1981: 75)

In fact, Ruthrof concludes, any notion of a stable and experienced text is always liable to be displaced by 'a story as a world in motion'. This is so because the 'dynamics of narrative process and imagined world' will always be extended by 'the motion of... continuous interpretations by the changing individual reading consciousness, different readers, social groups, nations and epochs' (Ruthrof, 1981: 76). The logical conclusion of this is problematic for text-oriented analysis, though, and this was how Martin tended to approach audiences – as audiences for and of discrete texts, whether these were the 1995 Danny Canon film of *Judge Dredd* (Barker and Brooks, 1998a), or *The Lord of the Rings* Peter Jackson films (Barker et al., 2008), *The Hobbit* movies (Barker and Mathijs, 2016), Ridley Scott's *Alien* (Barker et al., 2016), or *Game of Thrones* (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021). Yet taken to its extreme, Ruthrof's text-as-world-in-motion means that audiences cannot be fans of 'a' (or 'the') text, but are instead fans of a continually unfolding and dynamic textuality, forever emerging through new readings and new discursive surrounds. This sense of textual de- and restructuring is embraced by at least one of the research teams in the *Lord of the Rings* World Project (Mikos et al., 2008: 129; Mikos, 2008: 212). But Barker resists dissolving 'the' text into vastly pluralised activations, stressing instead that his work has generated 'testable... propositions'

that the more a person commits to a film, the more their response is likely to be patterned, and even predictable; and the more a medium or cultural form is embedded within a culture, the more certain it is that responses will be highly patterned. I propose that we should think of these patterned ways as 'positional responses', because they indicate an emergent point of nexus between individuals-in-groups and media forms. ...[T]he positionality of such systems of response... provides the theoretical ground for the methodological move that I have argued for on several occasions – that investigating people's hesitations, doubts, refusals, disappointments and frustrations can give special access to their recognition of positional ideals. (Barker, 2009b: 389)

This arc of development across Barker's work tracks from implied readers and how actual readers take up these positions, through implied social relations and how these are adopted

(the 'natural reader' of the late eighties), and then onwards to the discursive world of *implied readings* and how actual readers navigate these through a sense of refusal, or being unsettled, disappointed or aggravated (the 'positional readings' of the late noughties). Fandom, we should note, is part of a set of highly patterned responses, being both a commitment to a fan object and an embedding of cultural forms within a (fan) culture – it matches both of Barker's 'testable propositions', potentially layering them together. And as recent work on fan readings has shown, fans can also tend to be very much aware of the 'positional ideals' of their responses, i.e. what they are supposed to think of certain episodes/stories/instalments/franchises (Booth and Jones, 2020: 26).

But if Barker does not fully embrace the 'noematic' text as merely an illusion of stable meaning-making, he is absolutely alert to how audiences for the fantasy worlds of Tolkien (and others) revisit texts that matter to them:

there are occasions when a film leaves behind talking points, needling incomplete understandings, recallable pleasures, dream materials, points-of-connection with other parts of our lives. Then there are the films we want, maybe need, to go back to— to see again, to check our memories, to relive the experiences, to explore afresh. The concept of a viewing strategy seeks to leave as an open, researchable question what the effective 'moment of closure' is. (Barker, 2006a: 135)

Considered in these terms, we might even suggest that one testable definition of fandom is that it features an unusual viewing strategy – a way of relating to a fan object – which *actively denies and counters any experientiable 'moment of closure'*, and hence always allows for the possibility of new discussion, analysis, understanding and experience of the fan object. Such a stance could constructively engage with fan practices of re-watching and re-consuming without reducing these to nostalgia, also allowing for a sense of fandom as a 'play mood' (Petersen, 2022) in which the fan object can never cease to take on new colourations and inflections. Were any moment of closure to arrive, and the fan object to feel 'exhausted' of meaning potential, then one would perhaps no longer be displaying a fannish viewing strategy. Jonathan Gray's reworking of Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, which gives 'enduring fandom' as an example, might also help to capture this discrete viewing strategy: 'I propose... that we talk not of encoding/decoding, but of encoding/redecoding and of reading through. Both reading and the text are a continual journey *through*, a continuance of motion, and while there might be determinate moments, there are always potentially more determinate moments to come' (Gray, 2006: 34). Fans, I would suggest, are inveterate redecoders – something, of course, that multiple creative industries seek to co-opt, rely on, and discipline. And Martin Barker's work can help us to illuminate this. Indeed, a number of empirical studies of (trans)media 'engagement', a concept that Martin was very much intrigued by (Barker and Reason, 2022: 262), have already demonstrated that audiences displaying ongoing engagement with texts and brands diverge from 'media time' and move

far closer to a sense of 'fan time' (De Kosnik, 2016: 158) where engagement continues far past the point at which media industries are concerned with measuring and/or monetising it (Hill, 2019: 121; Evans, 2020: 172), and even on into important memories across people's lives (Tosca and Klastrup, 2020: 164). Likewise, a recent survey study of young peoples' understandings of fandom showed that they linked fandom not only to content and experiences of community, but also to a notion of 'support' for celebrities/franchises (Booth and Dare-Edwards, 2021: 224). Although this idea of 'supporting' a fan object could threaten to become somewhat transactional, perhaps coloured by neoliberal cultural contexts (Booth and Dare-Edwards, 2021: 225), it nevertheless again shows the significance of fannish 'redecoding' and enduring, ongoing 'engagement' that exceeds any one moment of response to any one media text.

Transversal Fan Scholarship: Rolling Over and Cutting Across the 'Waves' of Fan Studies

Having referred to what I see as a key development in Martin's work – from implied readers to viewing strategies – I want to point out a further way in which his audience studies can be narrated. His major collaborative projects always display a kind of *rollover structure*, where something successfully learnt or operationalised in one study is carried over into future work (Barker et al., 2016: 9). Fandom was involved in these rollover structures – *The Lord of the Rings* project did not ask about specific fan practices, and this was introduced (after much discussion and a Symposium event to debate questionnaire design) into *The Hobbit* project (Barker and Mathijs, 2016: 161). It proved so useful in terms of identifying audience patterns and groupings that it was carried over into the *Game of Thrones* project, where it underpinned major findings on 'Fan Watchers' (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 23-24). By tracing these iterations, it is also possible to identify that Martin's work becomes somewhat more relaxed about using the term 'fan' – this is neologised away in much of his earlier work, whether via concepts of 'committed' readers in *Comics* (Barker, 1989: 60) or high 'investment' in *Knowing Audiences* (Barker and Brooks, 1998a: 237; Barker and Brooks, 1998b: 229; Barker, 2006a: 136). But in his later work, such as *Alien Audiences* (Barker et al., 2016: 41) and *Watching Game of Thrones* (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 38), fandom and fan studies are more broadly accepted rather than held at arm's length. By 2017, Martin would even contribute to the *Journal of Fandom Studies*, though his submission was concerned with paratextual theory in relation to 'ancillary' materials such as merchandise and publicity/promotion (Barker, 2017a; Barker, 2004; Egan and Barker, 2008) rather than with theorising fandom *per se*.

Given Barker's critique of the heroicising and celebratory tendencies of *Textual Poachers* and *The Adoring Audience* (Barker, 1993b), and hence his criticism of their reductive figure of the fan, it seemingly makes little sense to align his 1989 and 1990 work on comic book fans with what has been termed the 'first wave' of fan studies by Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007: 1). They characterise this as follows:

In its ethnographic orientation and often advanced by scholars enjoying insider status within... fan cultures, the first wave of fan studies can be read as... activist research. And thus we referred to this wave as 'Fandom Is Beautiful' to draw parallels to the early... stages of identity politics common for other groups heretofore Othered by mainstream society. Similarly, early fan studies... attempted to redeem them as creative, thoughtful, and productive. (Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington, 2017: 3)

As noted, Barker certainly claimed no 'insider' or 'aca-fan' status. And nor did he view convention attendance especially positively, given his emphasis on fans' dislike of industrial disciplining processes (Barker, 1993a: 179-180). On the face of it, his work seems less interested simply in revaluing fandom – 'Fandom is Beautiful' – and much more interested in how 'committed' readers of comics might display political complexity. For example, rather than downplaying the proclaimed fascism of one of his *2000AD* study respondents, Barker undertook a detailed analysis of it in a piece of work that now reads – in light of today's culture wars – as markedly ahead of its time (Barker and Reason, 2022: 258).

Barker is usually highly critical of approaches to audiences, such as the psychoanalytic or psychosocial, that grant any non-self-transparency to processes of self-identity, instead tending to view people's hesitations and silences in interviews as readily culturally explicable, and so railing against concepts of identification as much as analyses of the unconscious (Barker, 2005: 357-358; Barker in Barker and Austin, 2000: 192-193). He demonstrates this commitment when analysing a fascist fan of *2000AD*:

there is much to be learnt from his account of himself. He *is* influenced by Judge Dredd, there is no reason to deny him this. And that influence does reinforce a tendency, which we may as well call 'fascist', towards believing in some total police-state. But what shows in his discourse is a search for an ethical ideal which has found some cultural materials which, precisely because of their real textual characteristics, he can use as a resource. That is how real thinking goes. (Barker, 1997: 28)

The emphasis on 'real textual characteristics', and Barker's refusal to displace a textual focus from audience research, rings out once again, as does his argument that any media 'influence' on committed readers is never a question of their 'vulnerability', but occurs through, and is produced by, their active readings of media, hence not really meriting the connotations of the term 'influence' as it is wielded by censors and cultural critics. This fan may talk about being influenced, Barker assuredly grants him that, but he is nonetheless interpreted as searching 'for an ethical ideal'. Most notably, Barker does not read this participant's politics as final, settled or dogmatic – and hence as something to be wholly Othered, despite his distaste:

And that brings me full circle to my opening query about his hesitations over 'class'. My suspicion is that that hesitation underlines the fact that Smith is poised between two different ideological accounts of the world: an authoritarian/fascist approach; and a socialist rejoinder. Given his life circumstances, a settled choice might never be made – I can't know. But if ever I were to meet my respondent, my goal would be to argue with him about visions of a future world, not to cleanse him of some wayward media influence. (Barker, 1997: 28-29)

Reading Smith's unease about discussing his class background and using class categories as evidence of a multivocal, Volosinovian clash between differing political worldviews may, I suspect, be a bit of a stretch. In any case, it interprets hesitation as a wavering between discourses that can readily be rendered as culturally meaningful, suggesting that audience understandings are always effable rather than ever significantly going 'beyond words' (Turnbull, 2008b: 182). Whether or not this is itself ontologically reductive, what I think is more telling is Barker's *commitment to dialogue and the dialogic*, which extends beyond conceptualisation on the page (Barker, 1989: 275-276) and into his professed praxis – were he to ever meet this fascist respondent, he would want to have an argument about fascism versus socialism! Fandom certainly is not beautiful here, but it is complicated, marked by discursive hesitations as much as by professed politics.

In *Fandom*, Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington outline second wave fan studies as reacting to the celebratory tone of first wave work, suggesting that

The second wave of fan studies... [found] a new conceptual leitmotif in the sociology of consumption by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984). This second wave... highlighted the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan cultures... In these studies, the answer to why fandom and its academic analysis matters is thus a very different one. Documenting how the choices of fan objects and practices are structured through fans' habitus as a reflection and further manifestation of our social, cultural, and economic capital, such studies were still concerned with questions of power, inequality, and discrimination, but rather than seeing fandom as an *a priori* tool of empowerment, they suggested that fans' interpretive communities... are embedded in existing social and cultural conditions. (Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington, 2017: 5)

But just as Barker's work never neatly aligned with a notion of 'Fandom is Beautiful', nor did his audience studies' work on fans (in the guise of 'committed' readers and 'invested' audiences; Barker and Brooks, 1998b: 229) find Bourdieu's theorisations to be of much value (Barker and Mathijs, 2012: 676). Barker's thoroughgoing critique of major concepts and theoretical frameworks – his focus on always 'asking awkward questions of reigning

assumptions' (Barker, 2006a: 131) – similarly extended to 'interpretive community', meaning that he would not have viewed fandom in this light at all. Quite to the contrary, he puzzled over 'the virtually unaddressed issue of the manner in which individuals are understood to *belong* to such "communities"' (Barker, 2009b: 390; Barker and Mathijs, 2012: 682). And rather like his objections to Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, which he saw as being imposed on data rather than convincingly evidenced (Barker, 1996: 366), Martin also suggested that the rise of 'interpretive community' (present in Jenkins, 1992: 2, 91) 'consisted of essentially theoretical enquiries. There has been very little address to the question: how to investigate empirically the formation, operation, and functions of real interpretive communities' (Barker, 2006c: 88). Stressing, as ever, empirical complexities, Barker wondered what might be 'the conditions for the formation of different kinds of interpretive community? ...What happens when the practices of different interpretive communities come into conflict?' (Ibid). And given his interest in when text-audience relations might end, or whether highly invested audiences could still be returning to a text years later, Barker also asked, in relation to his *Lord of the Rings* research:

How long do interpretive communities have to operate to become effective? ...[And h]ow do people leave interpretive communities? For instance, someone who has had contact with the Tolkien Society and experienced its ways of 'reading' the books (for their literary and ethical value), but subsequently withdraws (as some have, calling it puritanical): does s/he automatically shed that reading style as part of the act of withdrawing? What happens to their capacity to enjoy and find meaning in the books/films as a result? (Barker, 2006c: 89)

In an unusual reflection on his own consumption of Tolkien's work as a 1960s reader, Barker says: 'I would pose the possibility that reading styles may operate and survive most strongly when they are part of wider common projects, be they cultural, intellectual, spiritual, or political' (Barker, 2006c: 90). From his own Tolkien engagements, he goes on to suggest a very specific – rather than theoretically generalised – account of interpretive community:

Preparing and writing this account of 1960s readings [of *The Lord of the Rings*] has been the impulse to clarifying these questions to myself. And in one crucial respect I want to extend the range of kinds of interpretive community about which we may talk. ...I want to propose the notion of a projected community – that people may conceive of a set of shared values, even of sorts of people with whom they would want to form a kind of community, but so far only in their heads, or partially, or fragmentarily. That conception might become the stimulus to action, to finding others who share it... I want to argue that *1960s Tolkien fandom can best be understood as a very particular kind of projecting towards an interpretive community*. (Barker, 2006c: 90, my italics)

That is, any sense of fannish interpretive community needs to be historicised, but ‘interpretive community’ can also be read not just as a scholarly concept to be applied to fandom, but as a cultural achievement preceded by forms of hope, projection, and project-building. Sounding akin to political activism, this version of interpretive community is never a given, but needs to be made, and re-made, by participants over time. Uses of the concept objected to by Barker do seem to have been archetypally synchronic, with audience readings from a specific cultural moment being gridded onto the term, while his questioning of ‘interpretive community’ was resolutely diachronic – concerned with the formation, development and cessation of roles and frames of interpretive community. As far as second wave fan studies was concerned, Barker was quite some intellectual distance away from ‘finding a new conceptual leitmotif’ alongside a group of fellow scholars, being concerned instead by the limitations and empirical weaknesses of any such ‘leitmotif’, whether this was Bourdieusian or a matter of ‘interpretive community’.

Nor did third wave fan studies offer a ready home for Barker’s career-long analyses of fandom. In this instance, as Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington indicate, ‘while the second wave of fan studies proved effective in demonstrating what fandom is not—an *a priori* space of cultural autonomy and resistance—it had little to say about the individual motivations, enjoyment, and pleasures of fans’ (2017: 5). They narrate the turn to third wave fan studies as one of an increasing micro level – and often psychoanalytic – focus on the ‘*intrapersonal* pleasures and motivations among fans’ (Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington, 2017: 6) combined with a macro level focus on fandom as a ‘taken-for-granted aspect of modern communication and consumption’ (2017: 7). Quite clearly, Barker’s work would have no truck with psychoanalytic approaches to fan audiences, though his later collaborative work in *Alien Audiences* and *Watching Game of Thrones* does engage with fandom as a culturally normative aspect of media consumption rather than as a sequence of specialised audiences. Overall, though, there is relatively little sense that Barker’s work intersects with the classificatory system of three ‘waves’ (Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington, 2017: 8) set out in the first and second editions of *Fandom*. To the contrary, given his marked criticisms of first and second wave focal concerns, and a partial resonance with third wave definitions alongside sharp critique of psychoanalytic concepts, Barker’s lengthy engagements with fandom might best be described as *transversal*, and hence as cutting across (and into) ‘waves’ of fan studies, once again acting as a ‘rogue’ reader intent on challenging collective assumptions. Though it might make some sense to divide scholarship aligned with fan studies into such waves, studies of fandom – not always the same thing as ‘fan studies’ – can be less clearly located through this taxonomy, marking out multiple conceptual and critical differences from fan studies’ ‘waves’.

For instance, *Alien Audiences* enacted a partial agreement with third wave fan studies via the fact that of the six audience categories that respondents were invited to select as a self-description, only one of which explicitly used the term ‘fan’, this label – ‘film fan’ – actually became dominant in the data set (456 out of 1125 responses; Barker et al., 2016: 41). At the same time, people recounted activities that would be assumed to characterise media fandom *without* classifying themselves as ‘film fans’ (Barker, Egan, Phillips and Ralph 2016:

43). However, this evidence of fandom's mainstreaming and normalising could also be an artefact of potential ambiguity in the label 'film fan'; someone could just as well be a fan of the *Alien* franchise, or of sf/horror media, for instance, without feeling aligned with the category of 'film fan', especially if this were read by respondents as being akin to cinephilia. Categories that could also have involved fan experience included 'following particular kinds/genres of film', 'film student/scholar' and 'film expert/professional' – in a sense, the fact that fandom was restricted to one specific category actually worked somewhat against 'third wave' arguments that fandom had become an extensive, normative element of people's cultural identities, since it divided fandom from potentially associated or compounded cultural practices.

The *Alien Audiences* research project rolled over Barker's interest in empirically interrogating 'interpretive community' from his *Lord of the Rings* work (Barker et al., 2016: 109). However, the *Alien* audience memories that were gathered by the project allowed Barker, Egan, Phillips and Ralph to identify an audience grouping that was 'not perhaps as strong as an "interpretive community" ..., as this has commonly been understood' (2016: 38). Among those who had dubbed *Alien* a 'masterpiece', the film acted as a marker of a kind of 'media generation', with fans feeling united by having seen the movie at or close to its initial release:

with something such as *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* or *Alien*, it is their audiences' own reactions which constitute the event – without that intensity, it would not exist. We want, therefore, to propose a further dimension to... developing debates about media generations: the idea that audiences can... share an awareness of having had a unique, life-forming experience. ...It seems that, with *Alien*, for lots of (especially early) viewers there was a sense, first, that 'everyone knew' that the film had to be seen, and second, that having experienced it, the world of science fiction and horror film could not be the same again. (Ibid)

Nor did this sense of *evaluative community* more than interpretive community (Booth and Jones, 2020: 23-25) mean that, for these fans, *Alien* was something consigned to a nostalgic past. Quite the reverse, as the authors observe: 'those nominating "Masterpiece" overwhelmingly write about the film in the present tense' (Barker et al., 2016: 24). In another empirical case of redecoding and the fannish viewing strategy of enduring, experiential engagement, *Alien* is simultaneously an important life memory for these respondents (Tosca and Klastrup, 2020: 164) and a contemporary (re-)activation of textual and cultural meaning. It can be filtered through academic debates and readings (Barker et al., 2016: 36), but 'it achieves a particularity which, for some..., takes it beyond being just a film. It can become a special token, a marker, ...and can even... add to how a film can comment on our wider lives' (Barker et al., 2016: 32).

This analysis can be profitably read alongside Goran Bolin's *Media Generations*, published the following year (2017). Bolin argues that 'generational identity... is only activated in... specific moments. This also goes for... media generational consciousness' (2017: 132); most of the time we do not think of our relationship to media as generational. But media coverage can seek to commodify a 'discursive repository of generation markers... [as] part of the construction of the self-perception of this generation. In this construction, the media and culture industries... play an active part through the provision of media representations, but also as mediators of collective memories' (Bolin, 2017: 127). By contrast, *Alien Audiences* demonstrates how it is not only specific situations (such as a class reunion) that can bring back the past, but additionally particular media texts connected to formative fan passions and memories (Bolin, 2017: 98). And although it could be suggested that niche, targeted media – such as DVD/blu-ray extras and fan-focused documentaries, etc. – might work to construct a fan-discursive repository of *Alien* as a 'generation marker', it seems more likely that this sense of evaluative community – akin to Barker's 1960s Tolkien readers grasping for a sense of shared project – will have been projected towards over time through fan talk, sociality and discourse. Or, at the very least, that it will have been projected both through 'grassroots' fan interaction and via corporate amplification and mythologisation.

Watching Game of Thrones, Barker's final published analysis of a major research project, also relates to third wave fan studies' 'macro level' focus (Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington, 2017: 7) in a number of ways (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 23-24). It concludes with a supplement to its data set examining the issue of fan disappointment with the series' ending (see Turnbull, 2008a; Barker, 2017b). More than this, though, it also uses the analysis of fan practices drawn from innovations in *The Hobbit* project (Barker and Mathijs, 2016: 167-168) to set out related findings (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 35) about 'Fan Watchers'. These are a patterned group of respondents whose emergence somewhat surprised the researchers: 'One striking result concerns the huge contrast between the numbers saying that they *enjoy looking at* other people's fan productions (5,094) and the number *producing* these (724)' (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 37). In all, the project posited seven positively engaged audience categories from its '*richly structured combination of data and discourses*' (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 17; and see Barker and Mathijs, 2016: 160). These included 'debaters' who only selected the activity 'debating the series' (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 38), 'Classic Fans' who enjoyed '*doing things around the series* – be it producing fan fiction or fan art' but sometimes did not select "debating the series" (Ibid) and 'contented consumers', who were 'marked by having... *low relations* with other groups. These people picked "visiting locations" and "buying/collecting merchandise" (Ibid). Other classifications were 'Just the Show' viewers (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 37), 'Players' adopting multiple play relationships to the show, and self-explanatory 'Book Followers' (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 39). The Fan Watchers category partly testifies to the 'third wave' normalisation and mainstreaming of fandom, given that it empirically evidences how people were perfectly comfortable with consuming fan texts as a kind of companion or paratextual framing to the *GoT* media text. Other empirical work in fan studies

had, in fact, previously highlighted this mode of fan consumption; Rhiannon Bury had centrally challenged the 'productivist' tenets of much fan studies in *Television 2.0* and elsewhere (Bury, 2018a; Bury, 2018b) by showing how, from her survey and interview data, there was also a gap between fan-textual production and consumption:

The final cluster of questions concerned cultural production. One quarter had read fan fiction and thirteen percent had written it and shared with others online. The gap between "consumption" and "production" of [fan]vids is even more striking: whereas thirty-one percent had viewed at least one vid, only three percent had produced at least one and shared with others online (six percent were unfamiliar with either type of creative work). (Bury, 2018a: 93)

On this evidenced basis, Bury argues that fan studies needs to stop assuming that textual productivity distinguishes fandom (an assumption that tracks back at least to Fiske, 1992), suggesting instead that a more nuanced 'participatory continuum' should be theorised, with more attention being paid to those, like Barker, Smith and Attwood's 'Fan Watchers', who are at 'the "less involved" end of the continuum' (Bury, 2018a: 93). It is also questionable, though, to what extent such an equation of fandom and fan-cultural production remains in place as a dominant 'figure of the fan' in fan studies. After all, Tisha Turk's analysis of the fannish gift economy in *Transformative Works and Cultures* nearly ten years ago cautioned scholars to remember that this gift economy is

fundamentally asymmetrical: because a single gift [i.e. a single created fanfic or fanvid – MH] can reach so many people, and especially because it can go on reaching people well after the initial moment of distribution, most fans receive far more gifts than we give. Even the most productive fans generally don't make as many vids as we watch, code as many sites as we use, moderate as many convention panels as we attend, or create as many links as we follow. (Turk, 2014: para 3.4)

The category of 'Fan Watcher' does, however, emphasise this argument, as well as reinforcing Bury's findings – which unlike the *GoT* study, are not specific to any one media text/franchise or its fandom.

Intriguingly, having identified the 'Fan Watcher' category, later in their analysis this term is displaced by Barker, Smith and Attwood by an alternative:

When we discovered this group, we dubbed them 'Fan Watchers'.... Now, that name seems inadequate for an orientation which so emphasizes the ways in which *GoT* combines rich lore with potential relevance. Very tentatively, we propose henceforth to call this group 'World Watchers'. Everything about the world of *Game of Thrones*... interests people in this orientation – including, of

course, the way that fans relate to it. But their interest is more philosophical than fan-driven. They are fascinated by the *possibilities* of a narrative of this kind. (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 115)

The researchers had already noted that 'Fan Watchers betray a greater *intellectualism* than the other' groups in their survey responses (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 43), but this re-categorisation is also occasioned by taking seriously fans' talk about the 'world' of *Game of Thrones* as a fantasy. Also pondering the rise of scholarly and industrial talk about 'world-building', Barker *et al.* ask: 'Is the use of the word "world" ...mainly just a linguistic foible?'. Analysing their structured mix of data and discourse, they very much argue not, observing a pronounced correlation between the *amount* of survey writing in responses and the use of 'world' terminologies: 'Counting the length of a sample 100 answers from those mentioning, and not mentioning, "world" revealed a difference of 4,933 to 1,792 words' (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 103). Their conclusion is that 'thinking in terms of "worlds" does not so much *alter* people's attitudes, as *expand their capacity and willingness to explain* their views. We might call this a form of "discursive confidence"' (Ibid). Such confidence might also be read as partly grounded by industrial disciplining, akin to the conventions critiqued by Barker earlier in his career (Barker, 1993a: 179-180). As Alexander Sergeant has argued in his analysis of the history of Hollywood fantasy film, displaying an attention to textual specificity that I think Barker would appreciate: 'the desire among contemporary audiences to talk about, discuss, and interpret contemporary fantasy cinema beyond the sheer act of narrative comprehension is not merely a result of shifting cultural dynamics that have realigned popular perceptions of the genre. Instead, it is in part a response to a set of calculated strategies embedded within the films themselves' (Sergeant, 2021: 180). Indeed, Sergeant places Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* as central to this (2021: 180, 184), suggesting that its world-building 'feels invested with a similar sense of gravitas and importance as the historical epics and psychological dramas that it competed with during their Oscar awards campaign' (2021: 184). As a result, the world that is constructed, perhaps similarly to *GoT*, is said to contain 'as much intellectual potential as it does emotional or imaginative value' (Sergeant, 2021: 184).

In their discussion of *The Lord of the Rings* audience study, Barker, Mathijs and Trobia identify how some audiences were awaiting the extended edition DVD of the last film in the trilogy 'before finalising their judgements on the films', arguing that New Line Cinema had recognised and co-opted this from earlier DVD releases by working with a figure of the audience 'within which the DVDs provide the *point of sedimentation* of people's responses. This was... a *strategic recognition in the producers*' (Barker, Mathijs and Trobia, 2008: 239). The classification of 'World Watchers' in the *GoT* study might be interpreted as a further looping between producer strategy and fan response, with fantasy's wider cultural shifts towards symbolic/allegorical and intellectualised receptions, equally present for superhero blockbusters and 'high fantasy' (Sergeant, 2021: 177) as well as being textually and paratextually cued, underpinning the Fan/World Watcher's emergent and evidenced 'discursive confidence'. Such marked confidence, I would argue, is likely to be rooted in its

normative and industrially-framed cultural status – this is a version of fandom as more than simply affirmational; it is an *amplificatory* reading pattern that mirrors and boosts the culture industry's relatively recent and insistent framing of fantasy media as culturally significant (Sergeant, 2021: 176-178).

Although much of Barker's work shows a distinct unease about fan studies' 'figure of the fan' – putting him at odds with first wave fan studies in terms of contesting its monolithic representations of fandom, stereotypes of fandom, and fan politics – his work on *Action* comic (1989, 1990) actually accords very well with what Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington identify as the 'underlying advocacy of first-wave fan studies' (2017: 3). They note that this ethical stance 'derived its legitimacy from fans' assumed disempowered social position and their problematic representation in both public and academic discourses' (Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington, 2017: 3). In *Action: The Story of a Violent Comic*, Barker uses highly unusual access to the company IPC's archive, along with interviews with the creatives and executives working on *Action*, to reconstruct comic strips that had been amended after a moral panic in the mid-1970s about the comic's images of action-adventure for children. This book was published by Titan, the imprint run by the owners of Forbidden Planet stores, as a reference work aimed at fans who remembered and valued *Action*, and those aware of its reputation. Barker refers to his empirical fan/committed readers study from *Comics* (1989) in *Action: The Story of a Violent Comic*, summarising some of his findings (1990: 284). As he later reflected:

When the book of *Action* reprints appeared... I began to get a trickle of letters from former readers thanking me for giving it back to them. For all that I wasn't a comics fan, it made me want to hear the voices of the fans and, if possible, *to be the person who would enable their de-legitimated voices to be heard.* (Barker, 2002: 13, my italics)

In the book of *Action* comic strip restorations, Martin adopts a playfully rhetorical tone of 'presenting the evidence' (Barker, 1990: 235, 255) at the same time as speaking back to child-fans' (and older UK comics' fans) disempowerment at the time of *Action*'s 1976 suspension:

One of the problems with a comic like *Action* is that at the time it is attacked, the people who might defend it – its ordinary, loyal readers – don't have much of a voice. They aren't used to speaking in public, even if they could get anyone to listen. So the defence of something like *Action* goes by default. But having once been condemned, it enters the demonology of the censors and the moralists – and is no longer around for any of us to re-examine, to see if they were right. So, here it is. Judge for yourselves. (Barker, 1990: 10)

A similar cultural politics undergirded Barker's defence of video nasties and his attacks on the rightwing political outcry about horror on video in the 1980s (Barker 1984b, 1984c). Although media studies scholars were dismissed in the UK press through the 1990s as 'trendy

travesties' (see Barker and Petley, 2001), Barker's work consistently took the side of fans in a principled manner (Barker, 1990: 12). As he would later recount, for all of his criticism of fan studies: '*In this sense and to this extent*, my ambitions were not that different from those of the tradition of fan-research which developed, particularly in America, in the late 1980s' (Barker, 2002: 19, note 6, my italics). Barker's later work with *2000AD* fans very much benefitted from his cultural advocacy on behalf of *Action* fandom – comics fans who subsequently recorded answers to a set of questions for him on audio cassette 'were glad to help me with my research, since they liked other things I had written or said about the history of comics. In other words... there was a *perceived social relationship* between us' (Barker, 1993a: 165) based not on aca-fandom, but more purely on Barker's defence of (also class-based) fan concerns, interests and priorities, against the powers of governmentality:

This comic was 'on the side' of young rebellious working-class boys. ...I believe that I showed this very concretely when I had the extraordinary luck to be allowed unfettered access to the IPC archive, and was able to reconstruct the pages of the comics that had been bowdlerised under that 'take the politics out ...' regime, and identify concretely the changes/losses to the individual stories... The guts of that work appeared in the now-so-hard-to-get-hold-of *Action: The Story of a Violent Comic* (Barker in Proctor and Barker, 2020a).

Indeed, the volume has become a fan-collector's item in its own right – the cheapest copy available on amazon.co.uk at the time of writing was £199.99. And although Barker aligns himself with enabling fan voices to be heard and legitimated, as a scholar he is careful not to replay industrial or production discourses, analysing instead how he disagrees with a number of legendary UK comics' writer Pat Mills' assertions (whilst still quoting and respecting them; Barker, 1990: 284). At one point, Barker even critiques the methodology of comic-book readers' polls:

Pat Mills told me that he had thought [*Action* comic strip] *The Running Man* a really excellent story, but that it had 'bombed' with readers because it had its hero running away. He remembered it being consistently low on readers' polls... That wasn't how I found it when I did my research with former readers of *Action*. I got readers to indicate whether they thought of themselves as committed, regular or casual readers... I found a really striking difference among their story-preferences. ...*The Running Man* was not so popular, true – but its popularity was greater with the committed readers than with the rest. And remember, it was the committed readers who wrote to me saying that *Action* was for them a comic that made them think, that changed their views on such things as the nature of heroes. ...I am pointing here to two gaps. First, there is a gap between those who vote in those readers' polls, and those who are actually most committed to a comic; apart from anything else, the real fans

often refuse to cut up their copies to get the coupon to send in! But as a result, there is a major gulf between what the most committed readers saw as the important elements in the comic, and what the producers concluded about their views. (Ibid)

Given his criticisms of early fan studies' failures to analyse the self-policing of fandom, and fans' attempts to boundary-police fandom versus 'politics' (Barker, 1993b: 673), it seems unlikely that Barker would analytically support a notion of 'real fans', though he deploys this term – surely even more problematic than 'natural readers' (Proctor, 2017: 676-677) – in this projected dialogue with Titan's fan-readers. More significant, I would hazard, is his refusal to accord cultural power to comics industry/producers just as much as his challenging of the cultural powers of uninformed or cynically grandstanding politicians (Barker, 1984b: 19). In each case, he is evidently on the side of 'real fans', defined implicitly as those whose voices have not been heard. This still is not a celebration of 'Fandom is Beautiful', but it is undoubtedly a form of scholar-activism on behalf of genre fans.

There is potentially a case to be made, then, for *Comics* (Barker, 1989) and *Action: The Story of a Violent Comic* (Barker, 1990) as co-constituting founding moments in fan studies, though they tend to be positioned – when they are analysed at all (Barker and Proctor, 2020a) – as part of the history of comics studies. Ahead of the publications of *The Adoring Audience* (Lewis, 1992), *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins, 1992) and *Enterprising Women* (Bacon-Smith, 1992), Barker is already applying cultural studies' approaches to fans, and more than that, already producing a commercially available reference book for fans via Forbidden Planet stores (and Titan) that is aimed squarely at speaking to comic book fans and communicating empirical research findings from audience studies with them. Such a thing eminently deserves further recognition and commentary within today's fan studies.

Conclusion: Audience Studies of Fans – Combining the Ethics of 'First Wave' Fan Studies and the Mainstreaming of 'Third Wave' Fan Studies

Throughout his career, Barker's work was unusual in relation to wider fan studies in terms of its quali-quant combinations – using database searches to explore patterns and questions within large audience data sets (Barker and Mathijs, 2016: 160; Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021). His focus tended to be on fantasy genre texts, which have often attracted dedicated fandoms, and consequently it is striking that his work resisted explicitly focusing on 'fans' for a considerable period of time, this seemingly correlating with his strong critiques of first wave fan studies, and an unease about its 'figure of the fan' (Hills, 2020: 162). Instead, he analyses 'committed' readers (Barker, 1989: 60-61 and 2006a: 125) and 'orientations' (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 34) to media texts. Rather than aligning his work with the project of 'fan studies', he continued to carry out audience studies of fans.

But as fandom became mainstreamed across the phase of his major funded and collaborative research projects, especially from *The Hobbit* work onwards, Barker began to focus more explicitly on fans, though his theoretical vocabulary of ‘committed’ audiences and ‘viewing strategies’ remained present. This culminated in work on ‘Fan Watchers’, and this moment in Barker’s work resonated with at least part of the (macro) focus of what has been dubbed ‘third wave’ fan studies. Barker continued to seek more empirically nuanced analyses of ‘interpretive community’, and his discussion of ‘projected’ interpretive community, as well as his questioning emphasis on the temporalities of interpretive community, both remain to be developed through further work on ‘fan-made time’ (Gwynne, 2014). His propositions on what I would call a *fannish viewing strategy*, distinguishable by its enduring engagement, have been elaborated upon in recent work (Hill, 2019; Evans, 2020) – as ever, fan studies stands to gain much from cognate analysis in contemporary audience and transmedia studies (Barker, 2012; Fast and Jansson, 2019; Tosca and Klastруп, 2020).

Despite his transversal relationship to posited waves of fan studies – not really fitting into any specific phase or taxonomy thanks to his ‘rogue’ critiques – Martin Barker’s published work on fandom in 1989 and 1990 falls right at the cusp of fan studies’ beginnings. This work may be followed by pronounced criticisms of *Textual Poachers* and *The Adoring Audience* (Barker, 1993b) but as Martin himself observed, his work with comics fans in the 80s and 90s was of a piece with the ethics of first wave fan studies, even if he vehemently disagreed with many of its academic assumptions. That is, for cultural-political reasons involving the democratisation of debate, and the challenging of forms of cultural power and governance, Barker sought to give a voice to otherwise (at this point) disempowered and disenfranchised comic book fans. And in *Action: The Story of a Violent Comic* (1990), Barker was already building on his own empirical analysis of *Action* readers and fans by writing a book that was centrally *for* comic book fans. That this title is so infrequently discussed academically is a great shame, though perhaps understandable given that it has become rather inaccessible. Years ahead of rightwing governmental discourses of academic ‘accountability’ to the public and ‘outreach and engagement’ with non-academics, Barker was already – with a progressive cultural politics – deliberately initiating a dialogue with genre fans, one that recognised their interests and criticisms of how ‘their’ beloved media had been treated in public policy and debate. This is surely fan studies of the highest calibre, in theory and in praxis ahead of its time, and it is troubling to note, once more, that Barker’s *oeuvre* has not been as fully and widely discussed in the annals of fan studies as it deserves.

It is my hope that this overview might begin such a process of re-evaluation. Fan studies truly does not need to canonise more white male scholars, but it may yet be of value to show greater awareness of the debates and the dialogues that have empirically preceded, challenged, and cut across multiple waves of fan studies.

Biographical Note

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