Making a Fuss About Audiences: Youth in Martin Barker's Work

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Abstract

This short essay celebrates how Martin Barker's work unpacked the politics underpinning moral campaigning and their assumptions particularly about youth audiences.

Keywords: Martin Barker; media effects; children; moral panics; audience reception

Introduction

I may not have known Martin as well as other colleagues yet his work and the few occasions where we collaborated always created a safe and warm space to return to whenever I needed to discuss, write or teach about the significance of popular culture and the reception of popular texts. The first time I met Martin was in Brussels, in a mentoring workshop for PhD students, where I experienced the richness of Martin's critical thinking, and also his generosity and kindness to young scholars. Alongside David Buckingham, David Morley, Sonia Livingstone and Kim Schroeder, Martin turned three days in 2012 into a hub for learning about epistemological and methodological rigour in audience research. In writing this essay I have gone back to look at how Martin told the personal story of his research and I was pleased to see that my memories of him were in line with this. What follows is not an exhaustive critical review of Martin's work, but more a tribute to his remarkable contribution to audience reception studies and, in particular, to research on young audiences.

Martin Barker investigated the significance and complexity of the reception process, intrigued by public anxieties over media texts (e.g. British horror comics, controversial cinema, fantasy texts, pornography) (e.g. Barker, 2011; Barker and Mathijs, 2008; Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021). He examined the concepts used to discuss audiences of popular culture in order to understand the cultural and political workings of reception (e.g. Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001; Barker, 2022), concluding that we should 'distrust easy concepts and theorizations- they are the bane of understanding, and the tools of our enemies' (Barker, 2002: 73). His notion of the decoding of a cultural text as a practice of 'intercalation into the reader's social career' (Barker, 1993: 176) led to an understanding of diverse reception practices as 'consequent upon' and not 'determinant of' media consumption itself (1993: 177), and this was to become the backbone of his argument against indoctrinating effects approaches. He problematised dominant assumptions about audiences and offered insights into their sophisticated repertoires and negotiations, tastes and distastes, emotional engagements and detachments (e.g. Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001), always attentive to the historical moment in which heightened anxieties over texts emerged, in order to provide a clear contextualisation of the topic at hand (Barker, 1984, 1989; Barker and Petley, 1997/2002).

Martin's writing focused on shaping and interrogating audience research (e.g. Barker, 2006, 2013). In his outstanding work on comic culture in the 80s, he developed a conceptual framework for talking about the politics around popular culture and audiences, with contributions that 'still hold ground against similar and impressive works' (Eaton, 2011: 205). Among his major contributions to research in this period was the problematisation of 'identification' and of assumptions about how audiences engage with texts. In this work (and later, writing on violence and controversial texts), he interrogated the theories and concepts embedded in moral panics around audiences and in psychological, feminist-psychoanalytic and sociological research. His problematisation of identification and the way it assumes a one-way process of reception provoked an interest in knowing who audiences are and what they

make of texts (e.g Barker, 1990). By deconstructing dominant discourses about effects and harm he brought to the fore the gender, race, class and age hierarchies that underpinned these, noting how predominant assumptions, coupled with effects laden methodologies and politics need to be teased out (e.g. Barker, 2002). His work on audiences of controversial texts (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001; Barker 2011) prompted him to consider the ontological significance of reception research in media studies and the need to listen to audiences, study their lived experiences, and to learn from this what should we be looking for in our research. As he says, in the first Particip@tions editorial with Ernest Mathijs 'We believe audience and reception studies matter and we are prepared to make a fuss about it' (Barker and Mathijs, 2003: 1).

Martin published reflexive and critical discussions of audience research methodologies and the ontological nature of the field (Barker, 2019). Self-reflexivity through research – 'Learning to do empirical research has become over time a way of rebuilding myself' he said (Barker, 2002: 70) - kept him pushing both epistemological and methodological inquiry (Barker, 2006, 2019). Much of this work was collaborative (see for example, the *Lord of the Rings* project, the *Hobbit* project, the *Game of Thrones* project, the Porn Research project). As well as sharing with readers the birth and development of an idea, a model, a research design and reflecting on his findings, Martin worked with his collaborators' and his own tastes, repertoires and practices as audience members. To instill this self-reflexive work of the group into the research - is it not that the very essence of being a reception scholar after all (Barker & Mathijs, 2003)?

Young People in Martin Barker's Work

Martin's inquiry into how audiences make meaning of media texts as part of their social experiences, and how social experiences, ideologies and politics speak back to meaning-making practices, has been the thread running through Martin's work. One component of this is his address to young people as audiences, a theme documented elsewhere by scholars who study children as media audiences (e.g. Buckingham, 1993; Buckingham and Jensen, 2012; Tsaliki and Chronaki, 2020). Martin's work was also often concerned with the politics of censorship, scrutinising moral campaigns and the discourses of media effects. Young people are at the very heart of ideas about vulnerability when it comes to media representation (Buckingham, 1993, 2000/2012), and as audiences of controversial or despised cultural texts they have often been the focus of what he called public scares. They are a recurring theme in his work. In his research on the 1950s moral campaigning against horror comics (Barker, 1984, 1989), Martin critiqued the targeting of children and young people as vulnerable audiences (Barker, 2002). His work showed how the British Communist Party led the campaign against horror comics, assuming that these represented the threat of 'American cultural imperialism' to 'British heritage', and how this both masked and shifted fears about horror vs children (Barker, 1984, 1989, 2002).

This was followed by an extensive critique of the 1980s Video Nasties campaign and bill (revisited in Tsaliki & Chronaki's edited volume on discourses of anxiety over childhood) (Barker, 2020) and his work on young fans of *2000AD* (Barker, 1993). Drawing on his early academic background in philosophy and Marxism, he was particularly concerned with issues of class, race and ideology. The political underpinnings of the 'violent media' debates were beautifully contextualised in his book with Julian Petley (1997/2002) *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate*, where the problematisation of the effects discourse in relation to childhood is the focal point. Here he highlighted how views about childhood and paranoia about the effects of violent representations focus on working-class youths who are assumed to be at risk of becoming delinquent because of their lower-class status and how these 'can be turned to political uses, charged with the emotions that we do really feel for our children' (Barker and Petley, 1997/2002: 7). More recently he revisited the Video Nasties case, offering a conceptual framework for thinking about moral campaigns and for analysing and challenging anxieties around children and childhood (Barker, 2020). He suggested the need to acknowledge the historical moment in which claims take place (see the model Buckingham and Jensen, 2012 propose) and investigate further a) the gerrymandering nature of such campaigns and their latent political discourses, problematising notions of their 'unprecedented' nature, of truth and reliability; b) the ways in which a 'panic' becomes a management vehicle of censorship and regulation; and c) the lack of depth and critique in such campaigning, in order to advance the level of the public debate on such topics (Barker, 2020: 45).

His work with Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood on young people's consumption of pornography (Attwood, Smith and Barker, 2018) for the Porn Research project (2011-) offered a mapping of young people's practices, tastes and explorations of pornography and contributed to a larger body of work deconstructing anxieties over youth sexuality (e.g. Tsaliki, 2016) and casting light on young people's sophisticated cultural, affective, political and social engagement with pornography in terms of taste, class, identity management and literacy (e.g. Mulholland, 2013; Buckingham and Chronaki, 2014; Spišák, 2017; Chronaki, 2019).

Martin interrogated claims made about young people and media through apparently simple questions about texts, audiences and their assumed vulnerabilities. In questioning who speaks, why and when, he built an account that accentuated the historicity and cultural situatedness of each wave of anxiety. In fact, he was adamant about the need to challenge the claim-makers and urged other scholars to go beyond merely describing 'what is wrong' with claim-making and to vocally challenge the 'truthfulness and trustworthiness of the campaigners' claims' (Barker, 1990, 2002, 2020: 35). He worked painstakingly to unveil the histories behind the cultural texts he was studying and the politics behind moral outrage, deconstructing public scares, unmasking claim-makers' motives, unpacking the child/youth as a political construct situated at the centre of policy reforms. His aim was to tenaciously problematize commonsensical claims about audiences but also to study audiences' engagement with texts, building his way towards an understanding of what he called 'the

'contract' between audiences and generic forms' (Barker, 2002: 75), a notion to which he was committed throughout his life, contributing to work (e.g. Buckingham, 1996) on the social nature of emotion and the affective workings between texts and audiences; the ethical work required by [young] audiences; class connotations and ideological dilemmas and work.

Conclusion

I conclude with a return to Martin's work and his analysis of *Lion King* (Barker and Austin, 2000). *Lion King* is my soft spot when it comes to Disney, and Martin's account of the film brings all the magic and emotion back. Goosebumps at the jungle animals' greeting of king Muphasa and newborn Simba, tears at Simba's huddling under his dead father's paw - Martin made it all live - and it has always been like that with his work: beautifully written research stories, passionate, daring, epistemologically robust, intellectually stimulating, analytically rich. His engagement with the text, audiences, institutions, his readers, collaborators, co-authors and students, all of this has been part of a self-reflexive, rich analysis: a research story of which the analyst himself is a vital part (Barker, 2002). For Martin everyone was important to and as audience: this included himself and his relationships to the texts and audiences he was studying (Barker, 2002), the censors (Barker, 2017) and publishers and their ideas about audiences (Barker, 2002). Martin leaves all of this with us, alongside his advice to keep *making* a *fuss about audiences*.

Biographical Note

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