

An Interview with Martin Barker

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Abstract

In this interview, recorded in January 2022 at his home in Bristol, Martin Barker and I discuss elements of his career and research.

Introduction

It is unusual to find an academic (particularly one working in the supposedly ‘Mickey Mouse’ discipline of Media Studies) described as ‘a national hero’ but explore any online space dedicated to horror films, or comics, and it will not take long to find Martin Barker described as such. In this age of Impact, Martin’s quiet but forensic approach to understanding how media might matter to different communities has always reached beyond the scholarly journal and the lecture theatre and out into more public spaces. And it is for his work opposing voices for censorship that he is perhaps best known (see Barker, 1984a, 1984b, 1989, 1995, 1997; Barker and Brooks, 1998; Barker and Petley, 2001; Barker, 2014). Yet the intellectual explorations of his career have ranged widely – from philosophical considerations of media through examination of racist ideologies, from his enthusiastic exploration of what magic can achieve in children’s narratives through his dogged refusal to cede ground to the harbingers of ‘effects’. This has often brought him into direct conflict with moral crusaders and policymakers, whether their objects of concern were comics, video nasties, pornography or ‘difficult’ films like *Crash* (US dir. David Cronenberg, 1996) or *Baise-Moi* (France dir. Virginia Despentes and C. Trinh Thi, 2000). Martin retired in 2011 but he continued his lively interest in popular culture and took immense pleasure in dialoguing with scholars across disciplines right up until his illness. His teaching career developed coterminous with the disciplines of media and cultural studies and the establishment of the polytechnics and later, their institution as post-92 universities. Barker came from a philosophy degree and his intellectual curiosities grew alongside what he considered the deficiencies of positivist ways of knowing which were developing ‘models of the audience’ within the disciplines of MCS and more psychologically influenced mass-communications that then were taken up in policy and political discourse.

Martin turned to his reading of Kant’s philosophical anthropology, Marx’s materialism, Bakhtin’s and particularly Volosinov’s insights on language and, in combination with his involvement in left wing politics, interests in football, poetry, science fiction and narrative, he began his alternative and often oppositional discoveries of meaning making in and through media. The ontological shifts Barker proposed in asking why media might matter and to whom have often run contrary to the ‘instinctive’ or ‘common sense’ worries about media effects that have dominated UK newspaper headlines and policy white papers throughout the past six decades, but his approach has always been unswervingly generous, seeking to understand the possibilities of fantasy, story-telling, meaning making that popular but controversial media have proffered to often marginalised groups such as working class children, teenage boys and girls. His work has not been inspired to ‘rescue’ those pleasures but to recognise the experiences of different audiences, to uncover the significances of their orientations to their favourite but maligned media, recognising how those experiences might be conditioned by social relations situated in their everyday worlds. It is in that attention to more than the *prima facie* meanings of the media object and the specific cultural politics that seek to denigrate, or

even ban, horror comics and difficult films, that Barker found himself embroiled in battles with the likes of the Viewers and Listeners Association and sundry MPs.

I met Martin in 1994 as his research practice was moving into audience studies proper. I was interviewed for a fees-free PhD at the University of the West of England and began teaching alongside Martin on the core module Introduction to Media and Cultural Studies – very quickly I found myself swept along by the commitment Martin showed for students, their intellectual enquiries and the unpredictabilities of the seminar space, the possibilities of exploring media as meaningfully significant to different audiences. Working with Martin was amazing, his knowledge was encyclopaedic, his enthusiasms were infectious but his willingness to be challenged offered invitations to both students and colleagues to explore how and why we know what we know.

The interview below took place at Martin's home in Bristol as his health was declining rapidly, and, for me, it was an opportunity to revisit our friendship and professional collaborations - our conversation was at times quite melancholy, Martin felt he had not quite achieved as much as he would have liked but it was also punctuated by much laughter and happy reminiscing about a long and productive career. I have edited the transcript slightly for clarity and readability but have aimed to keep Martin's words as authentic as possible. My interjections/questions have been kept to a minimum – Martin's memories are much more interesting than the questions I asked to prompt them.

Our Conversation

Clarissa: A key area I wanted to hear about was what brought together the Cultural Studies team at Bristol Poly? And alongside that, how would you reflect on your teaching career?

Martin: Chance brought us together. I was appointed in 1969 to teach General Studies at Bristol (then Bristol College of Commerce which became Bristol Polytechnic almost immediately after I arrived) and General Studies was doing anything you could think of with business studies students, engineers, lawyers, management students. And I was crap. I was really awful. I had no notion of what was involved in teaching. I had no notion of the syllabus or what made good student activities. I was terrible.

Anne Beezer joined the Polytechnic as a sociologist in 1971. And we hit it off very quickly and I realised this was someone I could learn from. I remember seeing her in a seminar with a group of students and just being amazed at the way in which she elicited thoughts from students. It was brilliant. She was brilliant. I loved working with her.

Jean Grimshaw came later. The result of the merging of colleges of education with polytechnics and Jean transferred across and I think possibly with a touch of, not unwillingness, but nervousness, Jean teamed up with Anne and me. We became JAM. Jean, Anne, and Martin. Jean was very different: she also had a strong teaching background because she'd been in the College of Education; she was left centre, a Labour Party activist, but she

was also the first person to introduce me to the beginnings of feminist ideas and was a significant feminist philosopher in her lifetime. She joined us as we began to formulate a Cultural Studies approach – we had developed a teaching project called ‘Ideas in Society’ along with a course embarrassingly called ‘Concepts of Man’. It was a while before Jean persuaded us to make this ‘Concepts of Human Nature’. We were aware that we were doing things that went against various mainstream currents. But it wasn’t a very explicit politics, though I think my head of department suspected it was. He disapproved of us but didn’t know quite what to do about it especially as we attracted students.

In the 80s, there was a period of about five years when due to Thatcherite impacts, a large number of people left public service industries, particularly nursing. And started asking ‘who am I? What am I doing with my life?’. And older men started being made redundant and wanted to ask ‘who am I, what I’m going to do with my life?’. They came to polytechnics to do courses; Cultural Studies was one of the places they learned to explore themselves. We had these generations of students, some of whom were absolutely, fantastically, clever - I even remember some of their names: Juliet Donald, Faith Tait. They were wonderful students. Particularly the women: very, very strongly motivated. Very demanding of us. Yeah, so if there was a political project, it was as much a student political project as it was a staff political project. They were just wonderful.

When we became a whole degree stream and called ourselves Cultural and Media Studies in the early 90s, people like Jane Arthurs, John Dovey, Martin Lister joined us. There was an abortive attempt to develop a Science and Cultural Studies degree, which brought Pete Broks in. That didn’t work. I kind of helped to get it going in the first place, but I was so scientifically illiterate I was no help to anybody. So there were things that didn’t work, but the Cultural Studies degree for a time looked good. It became more overtly media related - John Dovey had clear New Media orientation, Martin Lister had a Photography orientation, so there were much clearer, immediate imperatives than there had been before. It was good that it was taken out of Anne, Jean, and my hands - it became a thing with much more gravitas. When it had been just the three of us, we were interesting but minor. I think we were perhaps a little outside the loop: for instance, Anne and I edited *Reading into Cultural Studies* (1992) together and it was hated in Cultural Studies circles. But now, with some names with real strength, known nationally and internationally before they joined us, the School carried a certain weight and seriousness that I don’t think it had before. And there would have been a political orientation too, clearly at least left of centre. And with critical questions about culture and politics.

By that time there was less of a close connection between my teaching and my research, partly because I’d taken on the role of Head of School and that carried its own weight. I wasn’t very good at it. I was too intense. I could never let anything go. But then there was no management training and you do need management training if you’re going to manage well. I think I irritated people quite a lot, but it meant my own work became, not secondary, because it was the time of the Newson inquiry (2003) and things like that, but it wasn’t so closely wound up with the particular things I was teaching. Teaching was becoming

more programmed. Rather than that kind of spontaneous thing where I'd had the opportunity just to go and say, look what happened, let's talk about it. Things were getting syllabised. In some ways I think that was a good thing. It gave the students some clarity on what they could expect, and it was better for the weaker students. It meant the more adventurous ones felt a bit constrained. It was part of that kind of bureaucratisation post CNAA and universities taking responsibility for their own syllabi.

Clarissa: I wanted to ask about how come your academic career took this particular trajectory - you studied philosophy at BA and MA level, so how did you end up in studies of popular culture?

Martin: I guess there's three things. First one was the philosophical inheritance I was taught at Liverpool University, which was a dry analytic department of very little interest. But it did make me look at words and ask how I knew what they implied – a sort of conceptual analysis which later coupled with my encounter with Immanuel Kant late in my second year. I read *The Critique of Pure Reason* in its entirety one night. I didn't go to bed and it just knocked me out. I gradually realised that Kant was trying to answer three questions in all his work, what is a human being? Where are we going? And what can we hope for? And if you weren't answering those questions, even if indirectly, then there's little point in your work.

And that coupled with the second thing that was really important to me in this period – my discovery of the early Marx, particularly the 1844 manuscripts, and the writings on James Mill. They're fascinating. My brother Colin, who died several years ago, and I looked at some of the writings on James Mill and agreed this was both philosophy and poetry simultaneously. We set it out as a poem and put it on our bedroom walls. Because it was just so beautiful.

And they were part of a much bigger scene of ideas I was encountering in the early-to mid-70s, ideas around the role of conceptions of human nature in Marx's work. Contrary to, for example, Louis Althusser arguing there is a rupture in Marx's work, ditching all that early stuff in order to become scientific. Norman Geras wrote an incredible counter to Althusser called *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, in which he argues the centrality to Marx's work of the notion of human nature, or species-being as he calls it, what is it that characterises us, particularly as a species, and how in there are stored up potentials for transformation. Now you can see the link with Kant I'm making there and if you look at my very early writings I wrote about Kant as a challenge to Marxism, and Kant as a challenge to Weber.

I was, by this time, teaching on a course at Bristol Polytechnic in the Philosophy of Social Sciences, so I taught myself some basic Sociology. I loved it. I really wished I'd done it sooner. I remember reading Durkheim's *Suicide* (1897/2005) and saying, 'Jesus you can do this stuff?' and then reading critiques of Durkheim such as *Social Meanings of Suicide* by Jack Douglas (1967/2015), where he takes apart many of the empirical claims of Durkheim. This was debating at a level I'd never seen before. Alongside those big philosophical conceptions,

I was beginning to see how that might translate into what kinds of empirical research you can do. But I had never learned about empirical research, I had no idea what it meant.

I was toying at the edges of something and then I encountered Cultural Studies. Watching at a distance with fascination how folks at the Birmingham Centre showed how you might look at a soap opera, at a woman's magazine, in these lovely small piece essays which made you think 'God I never thought to ask that before'. But then they got tangled up in the late Marxist debates about Bachelard, Althusser, all the other big name foreign theorists - I was intensely skeptical of that post Marxist revisionism. So, it was my positioning myself as a Marxist and watching these double-edged set of investigations that meant I became fascinated by popular culture.

The third thing was meeting Anne Beezer, a really important feature in my life. She taught me how to teach. As I said, I was a terrible teacher in the very early days: rigid, didactic. When we developed a basic course in 1971 – we didn't call it 'Cultural Studies', we called it 'Ideas and Society', but you can see the linkage is there. We went to Birmingham; we showed it to Stuart Hall. And he said, 'Where are the materials for this? It's empty. You could fill it with anything'. We scurried away and started reading up furiously in popular culture studies and we then had to face the question, how do you teach this to students, and how do you get them to become active as students? Anne showed me how.

Every year around May we would seek out 'objects' that could be developed as project outlines, asking students to think about everyday, but curious, things – for example letters sent to households offering money. We'd ask students to think about what kinds of letters they were. What do they do to the status of money? Students were tasked to gather a body of letters – not a sample, we wouldn't know what a sample was! To gather a body of letters and look at the language they use. Look at what they promise. Look at any cautions they put in. The project was to explore the status of the idea of money in contemporary culture and then to make a presentation because it was coupled with communication skills to make that visible to other people, they had to show the detail, to show the language. We encouraged students to be inventive in their presentation – we had video, tape/slide and audio for them to use – so if you were studying car adverts then you could cut out and re-lay things, you could compile them, make a collage of them.

Three things then – that set of debates around Marxism, around ideology. In this period, I was quite heavily involved with *Radical Philosophy* and many in the editorial collective were debating the nature of ideology: where is it located? What is its function? How do we investigate it? For example, Joe McCarney's *The Real World of Ideology* (1981). The tremendous impact of those ideas on me coupled with my adherence to the notion of species being; of human potential, the capacity to form a rational society. The Kantian what can you hope for? All those things woven in amongst each other.

Then alongside that, seeing this evolution in Birmingham towards this fascination with Continental Re-Theorisations and then the challenge of getting students to look closely and learning to look closely myself. Hence my first piece of work, *The New Racism* (1981), was an investigation, not of the impact of racism, but of the contemporary forms of racism. If there

is a thread going through my work, it is not the audience research, it's the identification of *forms* first. What are the things that might influence people? If we don't know what it is we're talking about, the emergence of cultural and ideological forms, then how can we ask other questions?

The emphasis on hope was always very important to me, and it'll couple later on with my fascination with notions of imaginary, imagination, and fantasy. Where we develop possibilities as against those who see them as risky enterprises, and the defence of imagination seems to be really important to my work, though I don't think I've ever developed it in writing as much as perhaps I should have done. But the other side of that is we need to identify the forms of culture that are emergent – I've been very influenced by Raymond Williams (1977), that notion of emergent, dominant, and residual cultural forms. If I take a quite recent piece of work, you can see the kind of flip side of this.

In my book about the Iraq war movies (Barker, 2011), I spotted this strange trend to produce films that were bound to fail. It came entirely out of teaching – a huge amount of my research came out of my teaching, something would emerge which I was puzzled by, I'd be thinking this doesn't make sense, something is missing here. And I identified, I think it was, 23 films that came out over a five-year period. They all have a central theme to them – the emergent notion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Which operates as a kind of ideological counter – you can play it – once you say 'PTSD', then anything is excusable, and everything is explained. It can be embedded in films. It can be embedded in characters. It can be embedded in situations but what was missed in that theme? It's why I came to say that I hated the much-praised film *The Hurt Locker* (dir. Bigelow, 2008) – because what it does is to say, let's celebrate this man who is the new role model for a soldier, he has PTSD, but he's conquered it. He rides it, he loves it. He is it.

It is about identifying an emergent form; in this case it has a name which has become a whole institution. There are medical practitioners, lawyers, journalists, politicians, many others who build their reputation on the back of saying we're dealing with PTSD – so that allows you to not ask about the politics, the situations in which those soldiers operate. That's the downside. That's when I say you can talk here about ideology, its ideology embodied and embedded in institutions.

The films were financial and critical disasters, such that one review called them 'a toxic genre' (I took that as the title for the book). Identifying films as a toxic genre underscored that they were guaranteed to be loathed by audiences, avoided by audiences. Dismissed, attacked, critiqued. So why did people go on making them? There was an impulse to make. There was an important impulse to make, but there was a knowing in advance that you were certain to fail, right? And it was those contrary impulses which meant here you have 23 films, some of them very cheap, some of them really expensive. But they were being made because there was a driver in the culture, saying there is something we need to address. But we don't know how, and we can't get it right. One little film, *Badland* (Lucente, 2007) is a quite extraordinary film. I showed my students one clip from right near the end of the film. It's about a soldier who's gone rogue and has kidnapped his own daughter. At the end she dies, in a moment of

absolute random awfulness. There is no meaning to it. It is about his total sense of existential collapse. It is a beautiful film. It is horrific. It is not a war film, it has very small conflict flashbacks. It is about the impossibility of him finding a place back in America.

So yes, hope is there as one end of the dimension. But then at the other end of the dimension, we can identify cultural moments and nexuses here, where tensions show. And that's what I tried to do in my work with Roger Sabin (2007) on *The Last of the Mohicans*. We wanted to do something together, but it also partly came out of a teaching situation.

But I want to add a tiny bit more to what I said about *The New Racism* - because I said it was not about the impact of racism, though I don't want in any way to downplay that. But I just didn't have the skill set or the contacts and the right to explore that. Sivanandan (that's Ambalavaner Sivanandan, director of the Institute for Race Relations, and founding editor of *Race & Class*) said to me when he read *The New Racism*, 'That's fine - you've dealt with the white problem, leave the black problem to us'. And he was right, I didn't have the capacities to do that. The book is useful, but it worries me that in the resurgence of interest in race that we've seen in the last decade people have gone back to my book - I think it's a mistake. *The New Racism* dealt with a different moment in a different time and a different set of circumstances, so I don't think it's worth going back to. The best thing that I ever did on race was the essay with Anne Beezer, about the Scarman Report (1983). What we did there was to show the operation in a real live context of a new formation of ideas about race around culture. And the idea of communities of culture, cultures of community and the idea of the incompatibility of communities. I think we demonstrated a method, a way of investigating the particularities of ideas, what underpins them and how they might be used politically. But times have changed too much for *The New Racism* to have much relevance now (I've been reminded of all this by the two Lenny Henry documentaries on the impact of Caribbean cultures on Britain after 1945).¹

For example, the centring on notions of religion, I have nothing to say about that in *The New Racism*. You have to recognise what I was dealing with there, and in the article on Scarman, alongside the then rise and short-term dominance of theories of biological reductionism was the emergence of people like Desmond Morris, EO Wilson, Richard Dawkins and the ideas of social Darwinism, and the idea that these might be deep seated tendencies rooted in us. That's not there now. The circumstances have changed. The shape of racism today is different. There's a kind of common tendency in all my work, which is to look for the local forms that emerge in which people conduct their debates and their dialogues and produce materials and produce ideas and fictions and imaginings. And how those change. Sometimes that means that I'm defending forms that have been attacked on what I would argue is spurious grounds. They're seen as risky, dangerous, subversive, harmful, etc.

Clarissa: That's connected, isn't it, to the way you drew on Volosinov: The idea of speech genres? And on very specific spaces?

¹ [Lenny Henry's Caribbean Britain](#) BBC2, 2022.

Martin: It's work I never finished. I wrote the chapter on Volosinov (in *Comics*), there is something in that chapter which I think, is very characteristic of me. Which is very, very close attention to what Volosinov says. How he writes, how he makes his case trying to tease out what? How does this work?

Clarissa: It is a key skill of yours, one I really envy! You are forensic!

Martin: Ha! I was thinking about another publication of mine – an essay in the *Journal of Fandom Studies* (2017), looking at paratexts, and I re-read this bit in the middle of it, where I give a long description of Gerard Genette's (and Maclean, 1991) work on paratext exploring, how does this work as an argument? And if there is a characteristic of my work which repeats itself a lot, it is the willingness to take time to look very, very closely at an idea or a piece of work. To say how does this work? Why does he draw this distinction? Why does he use this example? Where is it taking us? And I suppose it's one of my strengths, that willingness to take time and tease out the details. Sometimes it takes me into areas where I'm not as confident as I should be so, for example, I remember when I read the first piece of psychological research on the notion of 'identification', MacCoby and Wilson (1957), I asked how their conclusions are arrived at and how warranted are they. Close analysis of the essay revealed they make something like thirteen predictions and two of them come true. Then they say, 'there they are, we proved it'. It's that disjunction, which you can only get at by reading very, very closely and making lists and saying you've claimed this. Where's the evidence? So close examination of key texts is something which I do an awful lot of. Teasing out their implications.

The same when we did the work on *Game of Thrones* (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021), exploring Gierzynski's work (Gierzynski and Eddy, 2013; Gierzynski, 2018, 2019) in detail and recognising their contribution to debates, what they did and what was interesting. But also stopping and thinking and being able to say this conclusion is weird, and why.

Clarissa: You did that in your teaching too: you would identify something when teaching and you'd get students to really delve into what was being said and then sometimes you would develop it into a research project?

Martin: Yes, I was going to talk about *The Last of the Mohicans*. I was teaching a course at Bristol Poly on comics, and I wanted to show students how the way you told a story changed it, that you could tell it in many different ways. I went to *Forbidden Planet* (in its first incarnation on Park St Bristol), which had racks and racks of comics, looking for different versions of the same story. The great thing about comics is they stand still in front of you. Films don't stand still in front of you, you've always got the problem of fugitive time. So, if I could find several comic book versions of the same thing, it would be great for teaching. I started looking at superheroes – they bore me silly but I thought they might work. I popped my hand into a box of random leftovers and there were some *Classics Illustrated* – I came

across two versions of *Classics Illustrated Last of the Mohicans* and my eyes popped open a little bit and then I found a third, not in the Classics Illustrated series, and I thought here's my material. I could use the beginning of the story or find a key moment in it and then lay it out on sheets of paper and we could look at them together and say how does it make a difference to how you sense character, situation, motivation, etc. And what role do aesthetic properties play? Is it well drawn? Is it badly drawn? And then later in a conversation with Roger [Sabin], we realised there were several different film versions particularly the [then] recent Daniel Day Lewis one (US dir. Mann, M. 1992). And then looking back, we began to find more and more, and it was just that sense of something spiralling out, which coupled with the motivation, doing something with Roger who is just such a nice man (I value that in people: that's why I wanted to do *Game of Thrones* because I wanted to do something with you and Feona!) But the starting impulse, could I use this in teaching; is there a project in here? And then seeing the project take shape over many meals - pizzas taken in a restaurant on Villiers Street. Always the same pizza place. Always the same bottle of white wine which we'd share and then stagger out into the night to go our separate directions. It was a regular bi-monthly arrangement. It was lovely.

But having committed to it, I had to do it thoroughly and that's the other side of what you called the forensic. If you're gonna do it, do it thoroughly. So, for example, discovering that there was a copy of one last version in an archive that I could get at. But then also being willing afterwards to say honestly, do you know? I think we got something wrong, and an essay that I am very proud of, which I think has gone completely unnoticed, is an essay on the 1936 version of the Last Mohicans. We theorised it in the book very quickly and cheaply. And it never convinced me.

So, I got a small British Academy grant to go to America and go into the University of Southern California where they had the United Artists Archive. And they had eleven dated versions of the script of this film. The last one became the screenplay. So that enabled us to ask what could have motivated the change from this version to that version when everything changes. Then tracking what that implied and saying there's a hole in here – we can't understand this. Until I found an as-told-to-autobiography by the film's producer, not the director. The director was a puzzle, we never found out why someone had become the director for it, but the producer, the money man, he had a clear motivation. He was determined to produce something that would sell abroad because he felt cheated in the American market and suddenly everything tumbled into a sort of shape. It's the commitment to being able to admit when I get something wrong. I need to go back and revise my opinions on it. Going back to the archives revealed that the film's politics were not in rejecting US isolationism but lie much more in the kind of pleasure it afforded audiences – 'it is a film that decidedly refuses any of this 'modern' nonsense about Indians. In the name of industrializing the countryside, it is possible to cheer and mourn simultaneously the 'passing' of these lesser beings – even if we do admit, as they go, that 'our side' may also have faults' (Barker and Sabin, 2006: 23). That essay has gone almost entirely unnoticed - that's OK - it was in *Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen...* so possibly not the most easily available of

publications, but that's the problem with academic publishing sometimes - that what might be the best fit for an essay means that it doesn't get seen by the people you would like to see it!

I've gone back on several occasions, most importantly to *A Haunt of Fears* (1984a) - when I wrote it, Cabinet papers for the 1950s weren't yet available, but they were a couple of years later and I thought there is something I want to check here. When the Cabinet papers became available, I discovered, to my surprise, that the Tory party, then in power, was deeply unwilling to have the legislation. They were really worried about its implications: for example, that it might make technically illegal any books about the Holocaust which might get into the hands of children. They thought it was really important that children *should* know about the Holocaust and what it meant. And they were right. So why did the campaign succeed? How was it that it would succeed? Tracking back on those Cabinet papers and putting in a new understanding, led me to write an additional chapter for the American edition of *Haunt of Fears*. So, I have gone back in light of later research, and tried to be honest and reviewed my earlier conclusions.

Clarissa: We must come to your role in the Video Nasties Campaign, which was really significant, given that there didn't seem to be terribly many other people willing to stand up and say 'hang on!'. How difficult was it to see what's really going on, when you're in the thick of it?

Martin: Absolutely this. I went blind into the Video Nasties campaign. It was just because nobody else seemed to be willing to say 'how do you know what you say you know?'. My real breakthrough moment was when I got a phone call from Brian Brown who was at the Oxford Centre, he said 'There is a story of a conspiracy here, I'm going to tell you and I'll send you the documents. I can't publish them, can you?' It was about the emergence of a Christian Right campaign, even to the right of Mary Whitehouse who were bidding for influence on British politics, and their way in was the video nasties.

Clifford Hill (founder of Prophetic Word Ministries) was one of the prime motivators, but I knew nothing about this when I went in. I just thought it was people making contentious claims which probably had no substance - I had to say probably because at that time getting hold of the films was really difficult. After a long, long struggle, I managed to get hold of a copy of either third or fourth generation VHS copy of *I Spit on Your Grave* (US dir Zarchi, M. 1978). You might like this story - I went to watch it in a colleague's studio and while I was watching it, someone had locked up and set the alarm. So, I sat in this room all on my own, watching this dodgy third generation break up of a film; when it finished, I stepped out of the studio and all the alarms rang through the entire building, porters came rushing to see what was going on. Others were saying this is a dangerous film, that it went too far - I had to sit down and say, how am I going to make sense of what kind of film this is?

So eventually I contacted Meir Zarchi, who was the film's director. He was a weird man. Judith [my wife] and I met him in America. But his motivation for making the film was

entirely honest. It was in response to his experience of encountering a young woman who'd been raped in Central Park, his rescuing her and taking her to the police. He had wanted to make a film that captured the experience of what it must have been like for that woman. Now, whether he made it wisely or not, that's another judgment, but his motivation was pristine.

My interest in the video nasties campaign was sparked by one small article in *The Sunday Times* called 'Seduction of the Innocent' (Holbrook, 1983). I recognised the reference, and I knew Fredric Wertham's (1954) work, and I knew, though the journalist didn't, how bad it was. So, I proposed an article to *New Society*, as it then was (1983), and they said we'll only carry it if you have talked about at least one film concretely in detail, which is why I got hold of *I Spit on Your Grave*. It was a chain of circumstance that found me dumped in the middle of the campaign, feeling deeply inadequate, scared out of my wits but not able to back down. So, when people see this as somehow brave, there were few options open to me. And very few other people willing to stand up and speak – but you can see why if you look at that bruising encounter with the Bishop of Norwich and Mary Whitehouse! I had to ask Mary Whitehouse to stop interrupting me – to say to her 'you're very rude' (Open Space, 1984). That was probably the only time she shut up, for me at least!

But the most important thing I learned then is how important it is to be aware, and critically so, about the ways moral campaigners talk about their 'object'. How campaigners name it, describe it, make claims about it - their control over the languages of debate. You have to look closely at their implicit theories of the effect/danger of the cultural forms they are attacking – because then we can ask ourselves: what kinds of research could actually test their claims? What are the *implicit ideals* and the *silent unexpressed fears* they're appealing to? And this connects with something quite central to what I uncovered in my research - the surface rhetorics of campaigns conceal their real motives – in the horror comics campaign, or the video nasties I found *concealment* of the real motives and purposes of the campaigners. So, we have to try to identify and understand the *emotions* they're appealing to, because that's how politicians, the media, and the public are pulled in and, as researchers, we have to find the ways to understand their languages and speak back to them.

Clarissa: You probably don't remember this, but when we were teaching together and we had a lecture the day after the verdict in the Bulger case, and you came into the lecture theatre at 10am with a big stack of the day's papers and said, 'I went out this morning at 6:00 and got the newspapers and so I'm doing a different lecture - we need to think hard about how this story is reported'. Then you did the most amazing lecture exploring how differently each individual newspaper talked about the parents, the children's lives, Thompson's and Venables's lives, and how conceptions of the 'good child' and the 'respectable poor' underpinned those stories. In the seminars afterwards, instead of talking about, well, all the questions that had circulated for weeks... were they guilty, or weren't they, or did they watch *Child's Play 3* (US. dir. Bender, J. 1991) - the students were critically engaged around how particular figures of motherhood emerged in the news discourse, and how placement – of

images, quotations, headlines – were all contributing to these emotional stories of blame, criminality, class, and media effects. You showed us how *paying attention* could really uncover so much.

Martin: I don't remember that lecture, but of course I do remember the Bulger case. And the ways that case was so freighted with concerns that we'd seen before with the video nasties. Once again, we were seeing all the same claims of 'effects' – particularly with the Newson Report (Newson et al., 1994), which I wrote about in *Ill Effects* (Barker and Petley, 2001). It took quite a bit of time to really unpick the claims in that report because Newson wasn't clear about the films she was worried about and when I tried to ask, she was very slippery. Eventually I understood that one film the report was talking about was the arthouse film *The Baby of Macon* (UK. Dir. Greenaway, P. 1993), but on what basis was Newson making her claims? Newson wasn't a film scholar nor did she have any expertise in the broader media studies field, and neither did any of her co-authors. At the time, audience studies were really just developing but that research was already showing that 'effects' on audiences couldn't be limited to the narrow kind campaigners identified, and indeed that any effects were very often the *opposite* of what was claimed. *The Baby of Macon* was much more ambiguous than Newson claimed and the same was true of *Childs Play 3*, so then you have to ask what lies behind the labelling of some media as 'bad influences'? What are the politics at play? The Bulger case highlighted the ways arguments for censoring certain kinds of media make use of our feelings about the children in our lives to argue for protecting *childhood*, something altogether different.

Clarissa: That prompts me to ask about you sometimes being at odds with other media studies folk – I mean many of our colleagues also highlight bad influences...

Martin: If I'm honest, there was a degree of jealousy that Birmingham were doing these fascinating things, but they were intellectually loose. And nobody typified that more than Angela McRobbie with whom I think I had a very combative relationship. She wrote that essay '*Jackie, An Ideology of Adolescent Femininity*' (1978) which, when I looked at it closely, was awful. That was one of the things that drove me into doing comics research. Could I do better than she did? I made a very strange sight – a forty-year-old man reading *Jackie* in the British Library!

Clarissa: You brought in some really interesting ideas into that analysis of *Jackie*, didn't you? Like the idea of freedom in some of the stories, rather than McRobbie's claim that Jackie is all about romance and stasis, your analysis is much more about knowing what is an opportunity?

Martin: Yes! What are the paths to be free? What is the meaning of freedom? It's an incidental story, but it might amuse you. When I was late on in writing the book, I wrote to DC Thompson, publishers of many of these comics and said, was there any chance I could

reproduce any of the strips in in my book? I gave them an outline of what the book was going to do, and I got invited to meet them. So, I got an overnight train up to Dundee and was met at the station by this guy who took me on a tour of the town. And I realised that he was checking me out to see whether I was yet another academic who was just going to attack the comics. I must have reassured him that I wasn't, that I was doing a careful, thorough job answering many of the critics, and I was welcomed.

I'd gone with a working list of the stories I'd like to reproduce, one of which was a story about smoking marijuana, which had appeared in *Jackie* in '71, something like that. They said 'No, no. Our policy now is very clear. We have no drug references'. So I said, 'Oh that's fine, I understand that but if I can't have that one, how about this one?' 'Oh yes, you can have that, that's no problem!' But it was such a risky story: about a girl in bikini thumbing a lift on the back of a motorbike and going off with dreams of freedom.² That was a conscious manoeuvre on my part. I knew that was the one I really wanted but I positioned it as a fall back. And they allowed me, so bless them.

My analysis of *Jackie* found different themes in its stories; romance *was* important but not to the exclusion of everything else as McRobbie argued. There were stories about not letting the past hold you back, about being open to other possibilities – there was a brief flowering of freedom - as in the hitchhiker story - in the early 1970s, but then from 1975 onwards I found a declining confidence in the possibilities of romance for girls. What that research really helped open up for me was the need to pay attention to different dimensions – what was happening in the production of a magazine, what kinds of motifs featured in the stories and their role in the narrative and what invitations to imagination were offered to readers in those stories. Those questions stopped at the text but I was becoming really interested in how I might explore what readers felt about their comics.

Judge Dredd was my first big, funded research and I'm amazed that I got the funding for it. That was a point of transition for me when I moved out of comic book research into film research, and it was the first occasion on which I did systematic audience research. I'd done bits previously: a bit of research on *Action* audiences (1990), which had shown me you could get surprises and I was very pleased with that. I'd tried to do research on the comic *2000AD* and made a total bloody mess of it. I didn't know the working principle, which is you don't ask a question where you don't know how you're going to deal with the answers. That's the first working principle. There's got to be a way in which the responses could be turned into evidence. And I did it so badly that I got one, maybe two essays (1993, 1997) out of a big, big investment of time and energy.

When I did the *Judge Dredd* project I was aware, no, I wasn't aware enough of, first of all, the procedural requirements. It never occurred to me that a very important part of a funded research project, is the final report. And you are going to be judged on this. In the end, I just about scraped through on mine. But what I had done was to walk into a field where I didn't know my onions. So here I was, tiptoeing into the field of Film Theory. And I had never

² 'Take Me Away From All This!' in *Jackie*. No.367, 16 January 1971.

done the work in Film Studies. And of course, Film Studies had its own traditions and trajectories that had grown independently of Cultural Studies, and indeed with a sideways sneer at Cultural Studies because Film was proper culture. This was serious culture. This was financially secure culture. This was artistic culture. And here I was stomping in from the side and raising questions about audiences not knowing that Film Studies had solved the question of audiences a long time before, it had its own theories about audiences. Typified by the male gaze, for example. So, I got lucky. I got lucky in terms of the research assistant. I got Kate Brooks, who was lovely. And very dedicated and very, very good at making wry smiles when I went off on a high horse. She disciplined me very well.

Clarissa: Do you think being new to Film Studies might have contributed to the project as well, that you weren't so steeped in the settled theory that you could ask different questions?

Martin: Well, I asked myself the question, was it a successful project? It was successful in the sense that it produced a book which made some specific claims (Barker and Brooks, 1998). But it's not a book that's ever been much registered to be honest. So, in what sense was this success? It is certainly important staging point for me. I guess the most important bit of the book for me is a bit, which now we would talk about under the term engagement, and I called it investment. And the table (Barker and Brooks, 1998: 238) - several of my works have contained tables of various kinds and detail the kind of diagram of strategies of investment is to me, possibly, formatively, the most important aspect of that book, but I don't know that anybody else has ever felt that other than me!

But what it showed to me was that contrary to identification theory - which says you adopt a mask of passivity and lose some sense of yourself as you watch - the more it matters to you, the more it could make a difference, the more it does make a difference. Whether it be through responses of disappointment or through responses of excitement. But there is the opportunity there for understanding *how* it matters. So, we found that if viewers came to *Dredd* as a piece of *cinema*, then they would be likely to talk about its action or its use of effects - they invested in it as *spectacle*. But for those who came via the ideas and themes in *2000AD*, then for them there was much more assessment and sense of ownership over whether or not the film was 'good enough' for Judge Dredd or how it might land in relation to their own judgments about the cultural significances of comics, films, anti/heroes, fans and more. And for me, it's important to both recognise that mattering is a condition of getting involved in something and mattering is also a conditioner of *how* you get involved. That is as good a way I can find to summarise what also comes through in the ways the term engagement is emerging as a critical term.

But I haven't thought about *Judge Dredd* in a long time. In some ways I think I was lucky in that the film was so bad because it showed me the strategic importance of disappointment. Because, in disappointment, people express their hoped-for ideals, and you can get at those relatively simply in conversation. And people like talking about disappointment, feeling let down, cheated and so on. Then you see the Stallone fans who

stand against the tide and insist 'No, no, it was a great film... It showed Stallone at his best!' And they're rare, but they're real. I don't know how rare they are because we weren't doing any kind of statistical work in there – it was based on focus groups. But you also got the young boys for whom the measure of the film was could they make loud noises? Could they go and be bad in the film? In the cinema? It was a benefit to us, to Kate and me, that the film was pretty bad by most measures, particularly for the category *2000AD* followers for whom the template was set by the comic book, with its bleak dark humour. That category we called the *2000AD* followers, was one orientation or strategy of engagement...

Clarissa: They argued quite a lot, I think, about how characters should be and in a way that the 2D form might be more real to them than the film?

Martin: Ah yes, and the key expression there was what the character deserves. And again, that was part of the strategies of thinking about disappointments, when do people think things, stories, characters, ideas, deserve something? That's something that we picked up in *Game of Thrones* as well - that Sansa didn't deserve what happened to her.

Clarissa: Yes, and, actually, that is one of the ways in which your research has been distinctive - thinking about both deserve or disappointment opens up a whole range of other questions - that space in which people might be doing more than just responding? More than just being pleased by that or disliking it, but actually really relating it to other aspects of their lives and the story they're viewing?

Martin: Maybe that's where we might begin to talk about the concept of fantasy? My proper interest in fantasy really emerged when I came up with the idea of the research project on the *Lord of the Rings* (US. Dir Jackson, P. 2001-2003). A long way into my career. We ran the project coterminously with the film but working on the principle that with a three-year span of the films, we could catch responses at the kind of final stage. We had no notion of how important the films were going to be. I taught a course in 2003 where I wanted to start by getting students to think about the concept of fantasy. I did some Google searches including the expression 'rich fantasy'. And then contrasted that with 'rich imagination' to see how the ways people talk about fantasy versus imagination are structured. Imagination was all to do with the Arts - it was the *IMAGINATION*, big hands up in the air, airy fairy. Rich imagination means being arty, creative, being alive. While rich fantasy was hands down here. And there was a real sense that the *Lord of the Rings* ruptured that. That suddenly the idea of rich fantasy became palatable. It was about expanding worlds and large narratives and bigger than life characters. But characters we cared about. And a real sense that from 2003 onwards, there was a reconstruction going on of the whole status of the notion of fantasy, at least in British culture - still with residual fears about sexual fantasy, for example, but that was a more isolated phenomenon. You could still kind of worry about people with rich fantasy lives, but you could admire at the same time. What I think I've seen since then is - and we saw it in

Game of Thrones - the cultural significance of fantasy has evolved dramatically in the last 20 years.

And partly, that's a function of the publishing industry, which has built on a foundation growing since the 70s with people like Ursula LeGuin, who put a seriousness into fantasy. But that got locked largely within the orbit of a closed circuit of fantasy readers. But then you've got the new, weird, writers like China Miéville, and people like that, who emerged in the 1990s and began to break out and provide templates for other kinds of fantasy writing. A kind of richness of and gradations of writing. Then came the recovery of the early people, so for example, the recovery of *Dune* (Frank Herbert, 1965) in several versions. So, you've got that sense of them having a portentousness. *Lord of the Rings* became a front-runner of the new field of fantasy as something seriously worth investing in. Hence the search for new projects which would have the equivalent kind of weight of production, and eventually, *Game of Thrones*. A distinction needs to be drawn between the older style fantasy, which was fun, but was money chasing itself - and *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* would be the archetypes of that - and this new 'gravitas fantasy' which began to emerge where there is genuine endangerment where you invest a lot and you get a lot back, right?

Then there is another area - the superhero kind - about which I know much less. They're cinematic events. But that's what they are, they are events rather than bodies of work. I'm very tentative, very careful about saying this because I don't see enough of them - I occasionally watch one with my daughter, she is a great fan of them and I'm not quite sure what the nature of the pleasure is that she gets, except that they are fundamentally very, very silly. And I have great affection for silliness.

Clarissa: That's interesting because I don't find them silly, I feel like they're full of their own self-importance?

Martin: They are all puffed up, you're right. They are also overwhelmingly in every sense American. Which makes Rosie liking them even stranger. But they're unapologetic about this silliness. So, anyway, there was a big groundswell shift in the whole cultural status of fantasy from 2003 onwards. There's a breakthrough moment. And I would centre that on *Lord of the Rings*. It was a surprise - nobody expected it to be a) that big, b) that successful. And c) that startling - in other words, the emotional heft of it in key scenes. And hence, for those who didn't like it, a sense that it could have been even more.

I had various helpers at Aberystwyth – Ernest Mathijs was a key figure in that: a very, very smart man. I learned a lot from Ernest, about European traditions of doing Media Research, for example. But the main difference was the international aspect of the research on *LOTR*. We did it in 13 languages and mainly online but with some input of paper distributed questionnaires which conditioned how much we could ask. There was one question we simply couldn't fit on a piece of paper, so it had to go. There was no choice. The question that had to go gave a list of thirteen categories and asked which of these comes closest to describing the kind of film *LOTR* was. And I had wanted to have a matching one ask 'and which categories

most definitely are not right?’ Among the key ones there would be, for example, children’s film, and that’s important - fantasy was not a children’s phenomenon any longer. It was very, very definitely an adult phenomenon. But we couldn’t ask those questions, so we didn’t.

But again, I now look back on that research and say I show my own naïveté, though indeed it wasn’t picked up on by my colleagues around the world. We asked one question very, very badly. We asked them ‘what were your main sources of information about the film?’ And people could put in any answer they like – and they said things like ‘the press’; ‘my friends’. Those are not analysable answers. That was stupid, and we couldn’t do anything with them. But on key questions where we asked for scale of pleasure and importance, we had so many answers, we had about 25,000 responses. And we nearly had disaster.

We had arranged with Computer Services allocated server-space to receive the responses - they didn’t believe we’d get many, but we filled the space. And they started throwing responses away. Kate [Egan], my research assistant spotted this was happening late on a Friday afternoon, got Computer Services to add more space to the server. I was furious when I found out about it. We got 24,639 responses but we would have topped 25,000 if that hadn’t happened. So nearly a disaster. I have been blessed with great research assistants!

The *Lord of the Rings* project was huge in its ambitions – that’s why I can’t understand how I got the funding for the *Judge Dredd* research - I was an unknown, working in a field in which I was not grounded well. With the *Lord of the Rings*, by then I was grounded enough to be able to say this is a big, ambitious project and I can handle it. The international dimension was also a selling point for the ESRC (we got a top up from Aberystwyth University to do various bits that the ESRC couldn’t fund).

Clarissa: Would you say that that research has had more purchase than *Judge Dredd*?

Martin: Do you know the weird thing? I think it’s better known by its title than by its contents, because I think the book that Ernest and I edited is a mishmash of bits and pieces. It has no central theme - that’s why I said with *Game of Thrones* that it needed to be authored by a very small number of people who can agree the shape of the overall book. I think it made the *Watching Game of Thrones* book a much, much better book. *WGoT* is much, much better for being a close collaboration between the three of us. And there are some really strong elements – such as the postscript on what happens around the endings. I’d also hold up - both because it was risky, but I think we do pull it off - the identification of the seven different orientations. Then the way we explore the consequences of that with numeric evidence as well as discursive evidence as to how they work. What do you think is the best part of the book?

Clarissa: I think the identification of the different groups is definitely up there. But also I like that we cover a lot of things: our discussion about Sansa’s wedding night and the Red Wedding and the ways they operate at different levels. Same with characters, we demonstrate how rich they are and what their resonances are for audiences.

Martin: Yes, I'm proud of the bits where having taken certain characters, we managed to define very closely who their audience is, including Arya. How she has two separate audiences of young girls and older motherly protectors and the different ways they are into that character and her storyline, I think, was a real achievement. We did do good work on characters. Whether it'll have an impact on the way in which the notion of character is thought about in any subsequent work, I don't know. Even that's partly dependent on whether the book catches.

Clarissa: Yes, but in any case, we did show that *Game of Thrones* offers audiences incredibly rich stories about the world of Westeros, that they often related *GoT* storylines to real world politics and questions of power – it wasn't *just* a TV programme, its 'messages' were varied.

Martin: Yes, and we also show that different expressions of disappointment turn out, again, to be significant for understanding how and why the show mattered to viewers. When we started exploring the seven different orientations it was clear that being involved in the Thrones narrative is more than wanting to see what happens next, that's how we found emergent 'structures of feeling'. We summed those up under opposite, but interwoven terms: 'relish', and 'anguish'. 'Relish' captures all those complicated responses to the horrible, predictably unpredictable, elements of the show, and how people talked with pleasure about things always turning out badly. And 'anguish' was the flipside to 'relish' – where you've got enough interest in, maybe even attached to, individual characters, Houses, or causes, to keep hoping that someone will succeed or even just survive! So, seeing your favourite character fall foul of forces they can't control, there's a kind of 'anguish' – hopes are broken, story arcs disrupted, characters don't get what they deserve.

That's really always been one of the drivers of my work, wanting to understand how media are significant to people and I think we really do show that *Game of Thrones* matters to people *because* they were involved in it and that mattering is also a conditioner of *how* they get involved. I know I'm repeating myself, the more it matters to you, the more it could make a difference, the more it does make a difference but that is what all those campaigners calling for restrictions on different media just refuse to comprehend. Whatever *they* chose to do, it has been a great privilege for *me* to listen to audiences, to hear what they have to say and to analyse and to find the patterns and processes in their responses – people have been so extraordinarily generous with their time and thoughts – and I've learned so much.

Biographical Note

Clarissa Smith is Professor in Media at Northumbria University in Newcastle, UK. Her research has focused on sexual media and representations and her book *One for the Girls: The Pleasures and Practices of Women's Porn* (Intellect: 2007) began life as a PhD supervised by Martin. She is a founding co-editor of the journal *Porn Studies*; recent publications include

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The Baby of Mâcon (Peter Greenaway, 1993)

The Hurt Locker (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008)

The Last of the Mohicans (Michael Mann, 1992)

The Lord of the Rings (Peter Jackson, 2001-2003)