

## **Revisiting Martin Barker's contribution to Audience Studies**

DELLER, Ruth <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4935-980X>>

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## Revisiting Martin Barker's Contribution to Audience Studies

Ruth A. Deller  
*Sheffield Hallam University, UK*

Writing this article ended up being much more challenging than I had anticipated. I naively figured providing a summary of Martin's contributions and challenges to the discipline might be somewhat straightforward. But the further I got into revisiting (and in some cases, visiting for the first time) his writings, the more I became overwhelmed by the task. How to approach such a vast body of work that encompassed so many themes? How would I ever find the time to do it justice? And how could I summarise so many ideas? In fact, I can hear him chuckling away and shaking his head in slight bemusement at my quandary, because *of course* it is complex, but for Martin that complexity is precisely where the opportunities for new knowledge arose – and as complex as his thinking was, his writing was often beautifully simple. Also, handily, he has summarised a lot of his work very effectively himself! (Barker, 2012).

One of the things I most valued about Martin's work was the broad spectrum of topics covered – from war films to children's animation via big budget sci-fi and fantasy, horror, celebrity, comics, theatre, news, and sex media. This no doubt reflected his passion about the whole field and his sense of intellectual curiosity. However, what is clear in all his work is a desire to challenge orthodoxies, and to eschew 'easy' answers. He was incredibly prolific, and it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of all of his audience-related research, so please forgive me if your personal favourite study does not make an appearance! I have focused here on what my own key takeaways are, and I have organised these according to two key areas: the first is his own research with audiences, and the second is his 'state of the discipline' work – pieces that provide evaluations, critiques and challenges for audience research. Naturally, of course, several studies encompass both of these elements.

## **Complex Audiences, Compelling Reading – Martin Barker’s Audience Research**

Martin’s audience research was extensive and far-reaching – the studies I have revisited in writing this paper are those on comics (Barker, 1984a, 1989), *Judge Dredd* (Barker and Brooks, 1998), *Crash* (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001; Barker, 2003b), *Lord of The Rings* (Barker, 2005, 2006a, 2009, 2016; Barker and Mathijs, 2012), *The Hobbit* (Barker, 2017), *Alien* (Barker et al., 2016), *Game of Thrones* (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021), cinema live-streaming (Barker, 2013b) and porn audiences (Attwood, Smith and Barker, 2018, 2021; Barker, 2014).

Some of these projects were smaller-scale, with tens of respondents. Others were enormous, with tens of thousands of respondents, and many researchers from around the world, such as the *Lord of the Rings*, *Hobbit* and *Game of Thrones* fantasy audience projects (there is also something pleasingly fitting about there being a trilogy of fantasy-themed projects given the *LOTR* and *Hobbit* film franchises were also trilogies!).

From his early work with comic book readers to more recent studies with audiences of pornography and *Game of Thrones*, one message repeatedly comes through: audiences are complex, diverse, sometimes seemingly contradictory, but always, *always* fascinating (and, of course, most studies also highlight the challenges of audience(s) as a term!).

His research covers a range of cultural forms and uses various methods, with a particular fondness for questionnaires, interviews and focus groups, as well as using the research of others, including industry bodies (e.g. Barker, 2013b). All of his studies try to grapple with the question of ‘so what is really going on with audiences?’.

If that all sounds somewhat nebulous, it is not because his work is vague, but because it is *incredibly curious* about the phenomena and people at hand. Participants are asked a range of questions about the cultural objects in question: their likes and dislikes, sure, but also their expectations, their disappointments, their experiences of wider discourses and public debates, their relationships and communities, the way they feel about characters, plots and technical details, the environments in which they experience media content, the connections they make with wider social themes (e.g. climate crisis, sexual politics) and much more.

As a primarily qualitative researcher I particularly love the amount of space given over in most of these studies to the voices of the respondents – it is fascinating, familiar, at times frustrating, and, often, amusing to read page after page of thoughts, opinions and experiences. I particularly enjoyed spending time with a friendship group of teenage boys discussing their expectations of *Judge Dredd* whilst also giggling about their relationships with girls; a group of previously unconnected women whose positive experiences of *Crash* enabled detailed discussion of their relationships to film, sexuality and taste, and with other viewers who found that film ‘unsettled’ them in different ways.

I shook my head reading audience expectations of how *Game of Thrones* might end for their favourite characters such as Daenerys, Varys, and Jon, knowing the disappointment

that the series' finale might have brought them, and I nodded in agreement with *Hobbit* fans who could not understand why that book needed three films. Repeatedly, these studies remind us that there are multiple ways of being an audience member, and multiple responses to culture – some of which may even appear contradictory. After all, 'Culture is messy. People live their lives in complicated ways, adapting and mixing among the possibilities that they encounter. They learn new things, they change their minds... New cultural forms appear, speaking in distinctive ways to those that embrace them' (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021: 153).

Regardless of the subject at hand, or the method(s) used, we repeatedly find audience members negotiating pleasures and displeasures, debating issues of morality and taste, and often wrestling with discomfort. Respondents display anger, passion, confusion, humour, desire and sadness – sometimes all at once. Backgrounds of age, class, gender, ethnicity and education play a role in people's experiences - but not always in the ways we expect. Audiences come to media and cultural forms with certain expectations and sometimes end up surprised, sometimes disappointed.

Not all of these studies focus solely on the audience experience. Martin's own audience research comprises only a small part of *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (1989) for example, and several publications contextualise the audience research with long analyses of texts and discussions of industry and political contexts – often as a counterbalance to much cultural studies work which tends to only focus on one of these aspects.

Probably the most ambitious publication in terms of scope is *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, Its Friends, Fans and Foes* (Barker and Brooks, 1998). This book manages to consider the historical, political, industrial, economic, social and cultural contexts of *Judge Dredd*, provide a lengthy analysis and critique of audience studies as a discipline, and grapple with the complexities of dealing with hours of qualitative data from audience research - as well as exploring the range of responses different audience members have towards the film both before and after its release. In addition, it deals with 'failure', 'dislike' and 'disappointment' – not only on behalf of audience members, but also the researchers themselves who found the project taking unexpected turns. It is a dense and, at times, slightly unwieldy piece, which is fitting precisely because it is ultimately about the unwieldy complexities of trying to define, research and analyse 'audiences'. As they note in the conclusion, 'The more we researched and analysed, the more we became aware that a key problem in all work on audiences is that everybody thinks they know what the issues are, before they begin' (Barker and Brooks, 1998: 301).

Although all of Martin's audience studies highlight complexity, they do not simply leave us with a mass of unfocused data and ideas. Most attempt to organise material either through key themes and concepts (e.g. the various publications arising from the *Lord of the Rings* project include those focused on 'identification' (Barker, 2005), 'visualisation' (Barker, 2006a), 'spiritual journeys' (Barker, 2009), and 'pleasure' (Barker, 2016)); or by identifying different subgroups within the data (e.g. the 'committed' and 'casual' readers of *Action*

comics (Barker, 1989) and the seven types of audience member identified in the *Game of Thrones* research (Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021)).

Revisiting these studies, one thing is clear about Martin's intentions – yes, audience research can be messy and complicated, but trying to make sense of those complexities is precisely the job we are tasked with. Or, in his own words,

as anyone who has ever conducted however small a piece of audience research will tell you, the wonder and fearfulness of it is that it always surprises. Easy predictions will fail. Too tidy concepts will falter. For those who do it, the joy of such research is precisely in taking those surprising, difficult materials and letting them teach us about complexities. (Barker, 2006b: 137)

## **We Can Always Go Further – Martin Barker's Challenges for Audience Studies**

Many of us, when asked to discuss Martin's influence on audience research as a whole, might (rightly) point to his stringent critiques of the 'effects' model and the political and media hysteria surrounding controversial media (e.g. Barker, 1984b; Barker and Petley, 2001; Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001; Barker, 2014). Yet his work (e.g. Barker and Beezer, 1992; Barker and Brooks, 1998; Barker, 2003a; Barker, 2006b; Barker, 2012; Barker, 2013a; Barker, 2019) reveals dissatisfaction with the limitations of *almost all* audience research theories, approaches, methods and models: uses and gratifications, ethnography, encoding/decoding, cultural studies, discourse analysis, fan studies, cinema studies and more. Indeed, I am not sure there is any approach that escaped his critiques at some point – including his own! He was especially critical of any studies that 'read more like clever position-taking than as attempts to advance our overall understanding of audiences and audience research' (Barker, 2006b: 126). He urged against both complacency and canonisation, noting that 'we need to explore tougher forms of research. Ideas currently semi-sacred may have to be held up to hard, very hard scrutiny. It may hurt. But the pain is worth it' (Barker, 2006b: 139).

He reminded us that no approach, at least taken in isolation, can fully account for the complexities of audiences and their (or, rather, *our*, for he never assumed the audience were 'other') relationship with media and culture. Yet we should not mistake this criticism as a rejection – more a call for us to keep doing more and doing it more effectively. Whilst he was not afraid to highlight the shortcomings of much audience research, he also recognised the importance, value and influence of many of the studies he found fault with. For example, both *Knowing Audiences...* (Barker and Brooks, 1998) and the edited collection *Reading into Cultural Studies* (Barker and Beezer, 1992) offer stringent critiques of many key works, including those from 'darlings' of Cultural Studies like Ian Ang, Stuart Hall and David Morley. In the introduction to *Reading Into...* he and Beezer state 'our intention is not to raise the

texts we examine... to canonical status... we want it to be seen as taking stock of the project of cultural studies and, with the benefit of hindsight, re-evaluating those directions' (1992: 5). Yet these books also highlight and celebrate the strengths of these texts, and the importance of students and researchers understanding the history and foundations of audience research.

It is very telling of his approach to what has gone before that in the inaugural issue of this very journal, space was dedicated to a previously unpublished uses and gratifications study (Blumler, McQuail and Brown, 1970-1/2003). In the editorial, he and Ernest Mathijs explain this decision:

It seems to us that this is of real importance whether or not we, today, are fully convinced by the framework that Tradition developed. The reach of such a piece of research is in itself of great significance. History informs much of the views we have of audiences and receptions and we believe the past and present should constantly be aware of each other. (Barker and Mathijs, 2003: 2)

The history of audience research was important to him, then, but perhaps not as important as its futures and its possibilities. He could, especially in the later stages of his career, have sat back as an elder of the discipline and simply offered theories, ideas and pronouncements. Instead, he attempted to rise to his own challenges, marked especially by the launch of this journal in 2003 and with his involvement in hugely ambitious projects such as *World Hobbit Project* and the porn research project.

He was also an extraordinarily giving mentor and colleague to many - a quick glance at his bibliography reveals many, many co-authored publications with a wide range of colleagues. After he passed away, dozens of scholars on social media and academic listservs like MeCCSA and BAFTSS paid tribute to the support and advice he had given them personally. He was always particularly encouraging of new scholars. I remember when I was a PhD student and published in this journal for the first time, he gave me lots of help in shaping my article, including highlighting which bits of the peer reviews to focus on (and which to ignore!). Over the years whenever we caught up at a conference, or event, he would always be interested in what I was up to – and I know my experience is far from unique. Even after his alleged 'retirement' he continued his support of other scholars and PhD students.

He leaves us with an extraordinary legacy, but also with a number of challenges. I believe he would not want me to end an article about his impact on audience studies with platitudes or sentiments – his focus was always on how we could continue to aim higher, to push the boundaries of research further and to remain endlessly fascinated. In that spirit, I end this article with a series of challenges from his work that remain timely:

we should be ready (organisationally, methodologically, conceptually) to take opportunities to conduct research that asks the questions about films, that,

often, those who make policy do not want to ask. (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, 2001: 154)

To what and whom is your knowledge intended to be relevant? What do you hope and plan to do with the knowledge you are trying to get, once gathered? Is there anybody you would not want to use your research, or any way you would not want it used, for any reason? Most crucially, in the area of research and for the kinds of audience that you are trying to investigate, what functioning “figures of the audience” are you aware of? Who mainly uses them, and to what ends? What impact on actual audiences do you believe these might have?’. (Barker, 2013a: 80)

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: 139)

## Biographical Note

Ruth Deller is Reader in Media and Communications at Sheffield Hallam University. Ruth’s research interests are varied but involve thinking about media representations of religion and gender, fan and audience studies, soap opera, celebrity, social media and reality/factual television.

Contact: r.a.deller@shu.ac.uk

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