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Kicked into the Gutters: or, 'My Dad doesn't read comics, he studies them'

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KICKED INTO THE GUTTERS:

or, “My Dad doesn’t read comics, he studies them.”

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I never dreamed that I would become a comics researcher. Just about everything about me indicated against it. I didn’t much read comics as a child (the odd solace of comics on holiday, plus a period of secret fascination with ‘Paddy Payne, Hero of the Skies’ (*The Lion*, late-1950s)), and didn’t at all as an adult, apart from a brief period of reading *2000AD*. But comics, for seventeen years or so, became a focus of my intellectual life. If there is worth in the ensuing autobiography, it is in the weird combinations of accident and necessity that can characterise real research histories.¹

I went to Liverpool University in 1964 to study Philosophy. Not just any old philosophy: Liverpool’s Department had a studious fixation with the minutiae of analytic and ordinary language philosophical work, which provoked but didn’t move me. No, I wanted Philosophy (capital P). Instead of Ludwig Wittgenstein, my mind got blown away by the eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant, in particular his ‘architectonic’, and the way that he proposed a vast account of the nature of ‘man’ along with such small extras as an understanding of the nature of human history, human ethics and potentials – all derived from his ontological accounts of reason, understanding, imagination and the senses. I was really only interested in philosophy in so far as it would answer *big* questions (including political ones), by dealing with *big* concepts: the exact opposite of everything I was being taught. One sign already of

what would motivate me eventually in the study of comics: I am a contrary swine. But it is still a *long* journey from philosophical anthropology to panelology ...

This was the 1960s, and I was hectically involved in both student and radical socialist politics. Malgré what many people say, it was a great time to be alive and committed. Its aftershocks were complex, but it left me essentially a happy, busy person, who entered higher education teaching in 1969 without a clue what I was really doing there. The answer to that came slowly during the 1970s. With just two colleagues, Anne Beezer and Jean Grimshaw, I became involved in the British cultural studies tradition. Cultural Studies (note the capitalisation), now, is a wide-reaching collation of fields and approaches. If they have a common core, it is in the commitment to study the role of the ideational and imaginative within all aspects of human life. But in those early heady days it was more specific. Then, cultural studies (note the lower case) was grounded in debates within academic Marxism about the role of ideology in the maintenance or break-up of power blocs.

The pull of cultural studies was paradoxical to me. I won't speak for Anne or Jean, whose trajectory has been different from mine, but for me there was a theoreticism, and a politics consonant with that, that just rang all wrong. The project was vital, the emergent theories all to pot. The courses we developed at, then, Bristol Polytechnic combined it with elements of philosophy and sociology to study the nature of ideas and ideologies, from the broadest (we examined socio-biology and behaviourism as theories of human nature, along with accounts of 'human needs') to the most particular (we studied everything from TV police series, as a case-study of narrative, to *Daily Mail* reports on immigration, in order to query definitions of 'racism'). Because we were in a Communication subject group, our students were also acquiring practical audiovisual skills. What to do for content, though? Our

bridge between theory and practice was to get our students to combine two processes: deconstructing some particular media materials, so as to bring out their implicit patterns and proposals to audiences; and then designing and producing an audiovisual demonstration of what they had found through that deconstruction. At their best, these could be quite remarkable – I have to this day vivid memories of particular projects on Press reporting of a students' grants demonstration in London; on a curious docu-comic produced to celebrate the Iranian Embassy siege by the SAS; and on the role of the presenter in TV Current Affairs debates. Mind, some of them were truly awful, as well. But they had the collective virtue that they pressed our students to work at the gaps between the specificity of their materials and the gross easy conceptualisations then dominant.

This was when I encountered Irena. Irena knew what she wanted to do – she wanted to study *Superman*. She also knew how she wanted to study him – through the lenses of Carl Jung's psychology. I tried to supervise Irena, with rising despair. The despair wasn't primarily with her, but with two things: the seeming arbitrariness of applying Jungian concepts to something as distant and detailed as the pages of particular issues of *Superman*; and my own inability to do any better – I knew damn all about this comic, or comics in general. And it got my goat.

One day in the late 1970s I trudged to our Library to find, from its pre-electronic catalogue, what it could offer me on comics. Just two items turned up. One was an early collection on aspects of popular culture, with one essay on Superman and other things (Biggsby, 1976). The other was a weird leftover book, surviving from the days when this had been a teacher training college, by one George Pumphrey (1956). Sorry, who? And what, when it was once at home, was the

‘Comics Campaign Council’ to which he attached so much importance? More intriguingly, what exactly was this campaign to which it must have been attached?

I had never done empirical research. Philosophers in my experience reduce ‘empirical evidence’ to randomly generated slick examples which allow them to make a neat point. But I had at least learnt, through working with our students, how to sample newspapers, magazines and other ephemera in order to conduct close analyses. A combination of this with my philosophical training and political commitments did produce one useful tendency: a will to take a hard look at other people’s concepts, to strip them out, and to explore their implicit claims, theories and world-views. That had enabled me to research my first ever book. *The New Racism* (1981) examined the emergent account of ‘culture’ in the political speeches of anti-immigration campaigner Enoch Powell, and a peculiar confluence between this and the rise of two strands of innatist biological thinking: ethology, typified by Desmond Morris and Robert Ardrey; and the socio-biology of Richard Dawkins and Edward O Wilson. But I had never learnt to do the kinds of thorough digging that, for instance, would be bread-and-butter to a historian. Intrigued by my own ignorance of this comics campaign, I blundered gaily into all kinds of areas. Some, I got miraculously right – a letter to a teachers’ paper, asking if anyone had memories of the campaign, turned up six people who had been pretty centrally involved. Others, I got dreadfully wrong and had to be rescued by those more knowledgeable – belated thanks to those comics collectors who told me gently that you can’t just expect someone to offer you a spare copy of *Crimes By Women 3* – but who nonetheless helpfully led me to reprints, copies, cheap and cheery rip-offs. Learning to do empirical research has become over time a way of rebuilding myself. To me, now, it is driven by three tough questions:

- a) How do I know I am going about this inquiry in the right ways?
- b) What am I getting that is new, surprises me, or challenges existing thinking?
- c) What needs rethinking as a result? What further research should follow on?

The first has taken me longest to come to terms with – issues of method and methodology in media and cultural studies are particularly fraught.

Interlude 1: My research into the horror comics campaign was inchoate, a melange of questionnaires (badly designed, they taught me nothing), archival investigations (where I made up the rules as I went along), searches for and analyses of the comics involved (here, the payoff was slow, but considerable), and interviews with participants. It was these last that in the end, almost by accident, gave me the story.

What I eventually learnt was astonishing. That the leading role in the entire campaign had been taken by the British Communist Party. That in the course of their involvement they blinded themselves to what they were doing, shifting their rhetorics from talk of ‘American cultural imperialism’ vs ‘British heritage’ (a specific Stalinist position) to talk of ‘horror’ vs ‘children’ (a classic moralistic position). That as a result of this move, they ended up attacking the very comics which (analysis revealed) were among the few popular cultural materials of that period to resist the McCarthyite paranoia about ‘communists’. In other words, their adopted rhetorics led to them attacking their few friends. Many other issues were broached in the process, not least the curious role played by images of children and childhood.

My findings kept suggesting further issues and directions. First, how to think generally about campaigns of this kind? The crucial thing to emerge was the difficult fact that the campaigners’ accounts of their own motives and purposes could not be trusted. Only when I dug behind their claims did the *politics* of the campaign come

into view. The then-prevailing concept of a ‘moral panic’ wasn’t specific enough to handle this complexity. That indicated *more work to do*.

Next, the campaigners’ theories. What struck me then, and still strikes me now, is the interweaving of rhetorical claims with bits of science. Most notably, Fredric Wertham’s work on the horror comics provided an intellectual justification of some force and complexity for the campaigners. Yet it was so *easy* to see how poor his evidence and argument were. How, then, had he been so persuasive? The contrary swine in me would have his day – I realised that Wertham depended on an un-argued agreement with concepts which are still present and, to this day, largely accepted without argument. None more than the concept of ‘identification’. What should this tell us about the status of such concepts, and how do we ensure we move beyond such disguised partisanship? *Work to do* – on two fronts. First, to look at the way campaigns such as this recruit ‘scientific theories and concepts’ for their purposes; second, to make sense of these disinclinations to inquire into some concepts, in my very own field.

Then, the comics themselves: by this time there was a rising interest in cultural studies in what became known as ‘textual analysis’. Crudely, this was grounded in semiological theories of meaning, which permitted moves from how meaning may be ‘encoded’ within forms of culture generally, to accounts of the particular meanings made in local instances. With care, these could be adapted to the study of comics pages. But in this work was an unquestioned assumption: that encoded meanings work by a process of *transfer* (whether this be called ‘encoding’, or ‘interpellation’). Even though this semiotic tradition set itself in sharp opposition to American behavioural psychological traditions, it shared at least one concept with those traditions: the concept of ‘identification’, as a means for depicting how people might

become engrossed in a narrative and its meanings. But my analysis of the story which constituted the epicentre of the British debate over the ‘horror comics’, “The Orphan”³, put that entire concept at risk. *Work to do.*

Why this repeated focus on ‘identification’? Because of the implications for the audience: unknown, unloved, condemned by implication, no one would speak for them, except perhaps me. I wanted to know who they were. What were their pleasures and engagements with these publications? I had no information, and not a clue on how to find any. Perhaps, given the long lapse of time, it was impossible to find out.² It took me several years and two further projects to gain the methodological tools to see how this might be done. In the meantime, I could at least defend their *right* to enjoy these comics, and show that the comics *couldn't have affected them in the ways that were claimed.* **End of Interlude 1**

What emerged from two years’ research on the British horror comics campaign (see Barker, 1984) has largely stood the test of time. Several years later, I was able to examine British Cabinet Papers for this period, and to discover that the Government had been even more loath to introduce the censoring Bill than I had guessed (this led me to reassess how far the campaign *had* to succeed – I realised retrospectively that I had been a bit deterministic about it all). It was even more of a pleasure to learn that first a Scottish comic fan, then two folklore researchers had picked up on the story of the Glasgow vampire scare (which I used to illustrate the ways in which the ‘panic’ about the comics latched absurdly onto other issues), and run with it, to uncover a whole separate history there (Breadner, 1985; Hobbs & Cornwell, 1988). It was a reminder of how much remained to be researched.

The piece of research that most directly flowed from this first one concerned the case of *Action* (1976). I tripped over this story whilst researching the 1950s, and became intrigued at the possibility of tackling some of the unexplored issues left over from there. In particular, since it was now 1986, only ten years had elapsed. Might I be able to find some of the former readers of *Action*? Some fifty letters in random local British newspapers later, I had around 170 addresses, which eventually gave me 137 completed questionnaires. This questionnaire did work – in ways I had not anticipated.

Interlude 2: *Action* was a product of the British comics industry entering and responding to a crisis of falling sales. Having to reinvent itself, and its relations to readers, the then IPC brought in new editors, writers and artists – eventually finding a long-term winning formula in its comic *2000AD* and the character ‘Judge Dredd’. *Action* was one attempt, and a short-term spectacular one, along the way. Forced off the newsagents’ shelves after only eight months by a powerful campaign against it on moral grounds (“too violent”, “celebrating gratuitous hooliganism”, etc, etc), *Action* had won a readership who showed a real devotion to their comic – and complained bitterly at its passing. So, what was the story? How did it get to be produced (I hadn’t thought of asking that question of the horror comics, although Jack Kamen, EC’s uncelebrated artist on “The Orphan” and later my friend, belatedly taught me to think about this)? What was the hidden history of *this* campaign (I definitely knew not to trust the official accounts)? And what might I learn about the readers, their pleasures and preferences?

I knew how to be a bit more systematic this time. I interviewed all the major figures involved in the development and production of the comic (company decision-

makers, editors, in-house production staff, writers, artists). I obtained, by a mild subterfuge, an entire set of the first (pre-censorship) run of the comic. I was then given, as a gift, a rare and immeasurably valuable item: one of only seven surviving copies of the edition suppressed by IPC when *Action* was withdrawn in September 1976. It allowed me to do a story-by-story, panel-by-panel comparison between what the comic *would* have been, and what *was* issued when a bowdlerised *Action* returned to fade away, after 6 weeks' absence. And my questionnaire to my 137 respondents was designed to allow me to explore some very specific questions, which I had begun to realise were important. If 'identification' isn't a useful term for capturing how people engage with such materials, what might be? I was developing a concept of 'commitment', designed to capture the different ways in which, and degrees to which people feel that a story, or genre, or publication (or whatever) sufficiently speaks to them that they *care* about it, *involve themselves* in it, and thereby *make demands* of it. So I asked my former readers to tell me if they had been Casual, Regular, or Committed readers of *Action* – and then analysed the results, quantitatively and qualitatively. The results were striking – a clear, sharp difference showed in the very understanding that these groups had of the nature of the stories, and the uses to which they could be put. Crudely, the more Committed the reader, the more he (they were mostly male) saw the comic as intelligent, questioning, cynical, anti-authority. This is the *exact opposite* of the image presented by both campaigners, and 'media scientists'.

Although the context was totally different (mid-1970s, in the midst of a spate of moral campaigns around various media, with a wholly different publishing context, etc), as with the 1950s it emerged that there was a political drive. Summed up, and made into a practical imperative, by an anonymous company spokesman who instructed *Action*'s production team to "take out all that adult political stuff and turn it

back into a boys' adventure comic", this politics resonated with a wider set of issues. It made me address much broader questions about the maintenance of cultural categories (welcome aboard, Pierre Bourdieu) and about the ways, at a particular historical moment, cultural resources can encapsulate and embody the imaginative needs of social groups (make room there, please, for Lucien Goldmann).

As a result of doing this research, new doors opened for me. The immediate successor to *Action* was *2000AD* – a sardonic, blackly-humorous science fiction comic. With over-weening ambition, I set myself to research and produce a critical history of this comic. I read every edition (Prog.) of the comic in IPC's archive, and started to analyse them. I interviewed editors, writers and artists. I explored (new for me) the important connection with the rising network of specialist comics shops in Britain. I began to study the economics of the comics industry: patterns of capital investment, rates of amortization of capital, calculations of distribution, financial decision-making processes ... I was becoming lost in a field where I simply wasn't grounded enough. The work slid quietly into several drawers, there still to lie – apart from one aspect, to which I return in a moment. **End of Interlude 2**

By now, I had 'scores to settle' inside my own field. By the mid-1980s there was a rising acceptance that it was good to link teaching to research (an acceptance institutionalised in the early 1990s by the official loved/hated Research Assessment Exercise). Now I was able to develop a whole module for students on comics: their history, their textual nature, their cultural status, their different national traditions, and so on. Increasingly I had to skirmish more widely, to see what reading resources I could find for my students. By this time, Cultural Studies (now definitely capitalised) had developed a tendency to fads, leaping from theory to concept to approach with an

un-self-critical abandon. Part of my motivation for being a researcher in the first place was to put a distance between myself and this tendency. Around the late 1970s, we were encountering more and more of the output from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which was changing, and fast, away from where I stood politically. The new phase that emerged offered heady, but to me hostile, mixtures of feminism, Althusser and psychoanalysis. This got embodied exemplarily for me in one essay by Angela McRobbie, an essay that was quoted, feted, reprinted – and utterly wrong. McRobbie’s analysis of the British teenage girls’ magazine *Jackie* found within it an “ideology of adolescent femininity” (McRobbie, 1978). The problem was, she didn’t say what editions of *Jackie* she had used, and her method (a ‘take’ on Barthesian semiotics) was singularly un-transparent. I spent many an obsessive hour in the British Newspaper Library tracking down those elusive editions, and then – an act that even now leaves me feeling faintly nauseous – reading a sample month of every year of *Jackie* from its start in 1964. Part of my reason was, again, that suspicion of the overarching theorisation, and its ‘tidy’ and convenient political conclusions. Feminism *had* to win, the ‘patriarchal’ comics *had* to be the villains – no matter what their girl-readers might have thought about them.

Equivalently, another cultural studies notable Valerie Walkerdine published on younger girls’ comics (*Bunty*, *Tracy*, *Judy*, and other titles hardly known outside the UK), mounting an argument about the role of their stories in ‘training’ young girls for submissive adulthood and emotional submission. Back to the British Newspaper Library. Walkerdine’s case was a degree more sophisticated, and the methods by which she looked at the stories more explicit. But here again, my suspicion turned on an egregious use of psychoanalytic theory, and yet another version of that concept of ‘identification’. So, combining a reconsideration of her textual analysis with a

minimal production history of these comics (not easy to get at – the publishers, D C Thomson, are notoriously secretive), I mounted an argument to show that Walkerdine had misread the nature of these narratives. They couldn't be direct expressions of and operations upon girls' psychic needs, as she argued – the publishers were too nervous to allow that. Only once in her studied period had these comics touched their audiences very directly, at a moment when Thomson for once loosened the reins – in a story which flatly contradicted Walkerdine's account. So nervous were they of the reaction they got, that they didn't repeat the experiment. That one, crucial story breaks the mould upon which Walkerdine's account is built.

The pattern of my work in this period was pretty unidirectional. It was a series of conscious revisitings of other people's claims about comics.⁴ I was the debunker, the sceptic within. My interest in comics was primarily that *other* people were interested in them – but kept criticising them in the wrong way, for the wrong reasons. The work on *Action*, McRobbie's *Jackie*, Walkerdine's *Bunty* etc, combined with revisitations of Dorfman & Mattelart's classic anti-Disney study and a series of journalistic critiques of children's comics⁵ came together into one book (Barker 1989). Finishing this book, and outlining my alternative to the approaches I was damning, involved a gargantuan struggle to understand the work of Valentin Volosinov – and then, in more of a hurry than I like to admit, the construction of my theory of the 'contract' between audiences and generic forms.

In the early 1990s I ascended the dizzy heights of becoming Head of School of Cultural Studies (I didn't even wince at the capitalisation!), and a 'Doctor'. By dint of submitting several books (including *Comics*), and undergoing a grilling from two good (but extremely hard-hearted) colleagues, I was awarded a doctorate by existing publication. Whilst held over that griddle, my examiners pressed me: here I was

making counter-claims to many ‘readings’ of comics, yet it could be argued that my counters were simply that, alternative ‘readings’. Perhaps they were at that level more convincing, but they still remained at that level. Why didn’t I dare to do audience research? I had of course done it with *Action*, and in a different way with the children’s comics. But the relative truth of that accusation rankled. And those *Action* questionnaires had left me distinctly unsatisfied. When the book of *Action* reprints appeared in 1991 (Barker 1991), 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.⁶ And there *was* a pleasure, in the other direction, in being invited to speak to groups of fans, to conventions, to feel that the work one does has meaning and impact outside academia. Maybe I could use this.

The one bit of the *2000AD* research to survive was a study of *2000AD* readers. In the mid-1980s, I had developed a very complex questionnaire for this purpose. My daughter gave many unpaid hours to input the data into a tailor-made computer programme, at a time when such things were still pretty primitive. The results were nugatory, and confusing. I persisted, and eventually among the brute data some small patterns emerged – patterns which suggested that there might be a number of distinctive, perhaps contradictory, orientations to the comic. So I re-approached a number of the people who had completed my questionnaire, and asked if they would allow me to interview them.

These people were scattered far and wide – the furthest away, in Australia (on this one, see Barker 1997). There was no way I could do face-to-face interviews with them. So I simply invented a device, more in indecent hope than rational expectation.

With their agreement, I sent each person a sheet of questions – mainly gentle, open-ended questions such as ‘Tell me about your favourite stories in the comic, and why they are these ones’ and ‘How would you say your comics are important to you – do you re-read them, for instance?’ – and a blank audio cassette. Would they please record their answers? The results were strange. A majority of the people I asked did record their tapes, and they are wonderful. One, in particular, gave me a most extraordinary feeling, when a young female comic fan responded. I had been about to turn off the tape, and almost missed it. Having finished what I had officially wanted, she started talking again for a further twenty minutes, telling me her philosophy of life, and how comics-reading fitted into that – the fit was serious, sensuous and stunning. Evidently, at the start, my respondents had felt awkward – sitting on their own in a room, with a tape recorder, answering questions. To cope with this, they seemed to build up a mental picture of me, and then talked to that. I was at last being forced to think seriously about methodological procedures. I had simultaneously stumbled over a major issue of research practice, and a partial solution.

Interlude 3: The main *2000AD* research may have been sidelined, but it did throw up other occasional possibilities. While researching at IPC’s London archives in 1993, I got wind of a project to produce a new comic, *Alternity* – to be a younger version of *2000AD*. Tentatively and carefully (because we had nearly had a fall-out over the book of the best, plus suppressed, pages of *Action*), I asked if it might be possible to observe the processes by which it was planned and produced. An open acknowledgement and thanks: I had nothing but generous help from the publishers, once they knew that I was not the kind of academic they had encountered before, who comes in, appears genuinely interested, then departs to sneer and complain. And I do

believe that comics publishers were for a long time right to distrust the research community, at least here in Britain.

The story of *2000AD*'s junior partner was fascinating. Three whole tranches of commercial research were funded, dummies produced and tested, and production staff hire in readiness for a launch – which never happened (see Barker 1994). This episode was important to me. It was my first attempt to research a complete production process. And in particular it pointed me to something which has remained important to me: the ways in which, often through their own research, publishers increasingly form images of their possible audiences, to whom they then address their publications. These 'figures of the audience', which I had grown used to studying in the works of moral campaigners, demonstrably played a vital role in the planning of *Alternity*. But they were not put to the test, because of a major shift in production imperatives. In 1995 IPC was bought out by a Swedish publishing giant Gutenberghus. The logic of their publishing empire required two things: that as far as possible they should deal in brand items – there are reasons to suggest that they bought IPC in order to acquire the European rights to Disney brand titles; and that, in association with that, nothing should be published that could not, with perhaps a degree of translation, be issued in at least three countries. The history, and operation of these publishing logics are something I still hope to put on my research agenda for the future. **End of Interlude 3**

It was my very involvement with comics fans that led to my eventual departure from comics research. In 1995, the news emerged that what *2000AD* fans had been waiting for since 1977 was to happen: a big screen version of 'Judge Dredd'. But even as they celebrated that the director was to be a fan of the comic, Danny Cannon, they

shivered when they realised that Dredd was to be played by ... Sylvester Stallone. Many a brave face was put on the situation.

The film was planned for 1995. When I heard about the forthcoming film of *Dredd*, I knew I had to grab the opportunity. Taking advice on how to make funding applications (something I had tried once before, amateurishly and without success) I applied outside my domain to the Economic & Social Research Council for an eighteen month grant to study *different expectations* of the film, how these turned into *different viewing strategies* once people got to see the film, and how these then led to *different evaluations* of it. There is no overstating the excitement, and fear, that goes with succeeding in such an application – because suddenly every step in the research will be scrutinised and evaluated by colleagues. The findings of that research, co-published with my excellent research assistant, constituted the first attempt to explore the actual pleasures that audiences seek in action-adventure movies (Barker & Brooks, 1998).

It was in many ways the end of a learning trajectory for me. I now had at my disposal a body of knowledge which I could deploy on the film (about the fans, about the history and nature of the character, about the significance of that character at various levels). I had at my disposal a variety of research methods, both my own and those I was increasingly learning to borrow from the social sciences. I was increasingly involved in the field of discourse analysis, which promised much as a systematic set of procedures for exploring people's repertoires and strategies for responding to things such as films. And I had a set of emergent concepts, each derived from my research engagements within the comics field – but I was off into the world of film. One project, with Roger Sabin, allowed me to cross back, as we explored together the remarkable history of adaptations and transformations of James

Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (Barker & Sabin, 1996). What was particularly interesting to me, there, was to see simultaneously that the comic book versions have their distinctive histories – but that they partake in the broader histories of culture and politics that have governed Cooper's weird role and profile.

There, and around there, I now reside. I have, since the successful completion of the *Judge Dredd* research, also succeeded in getting grant support for research into the controversy over *Crash* in the UK in 1996-7 (see Barker, Arthurs & Harindranath, 2001). I am currently studying a stage adaptation of *Crash*, and the audiences for that, which I discovered was being developed in Aberystwyth when I took up post here. I am in process of researching the strange world of art-house audiences, via lovers of *Being John Malkovich*. It is fairly clear to me that I have now left the field of comics research. I've published three and a quarter books and six essays of research directly on comics. My motives have been oddly mixed – I am not a comics fan or lover, but I have grown to love the ones that I have researched. My motives for leaving are also mixed – partly opportunistic, partly driven by a sense that the moralistic interventions which I have continuously sought to challenge are centred elsewhere, partly – let me admit it – because I personally *enjoy* films more than comics. I hope that I have left the field more developed than when I entered it in the late 1970s. I do know that many other researchers, with skills and from traditions other than mine, are doing stunning work in there now, and I wish you all well. If I have a message to leave in this 'bottle', it is this: distrust easy concepts and theorisations – they are the bane of understanding, and the tools of our enemies.

End-notes

1 This essay was not written as a response to Mark C Rogers' discussion of my work (among other British cultural studies) work on comics – in fact Rogers' essay is in general a friendly, accurate summary of main trends. However, it is arguably mistaken in three areas, as this account will hopefully show: first, some of us *have* sought to address the production histories and contexts of comics. Second, the reasons for the decline in comics research in Britain are more complicated than he allows – at least in my own case. Third, one sentence is not right: “The work of Martin Barker is all about the issue of how texts affect readers” (Rogers, 2001: 96). The debates about this were certainly my starting point – they are not where I have ended. I would also note that Rogers' compendium of British cultural studies work on comics is not as complete as he believes – there has also, for instance, been significant work here on Vietnam War comics, on Underground Comix, and on the use of comics within education.

2 Much later, in an essay revisiting my research on the campaign, I managed a small approach to this – drawing on some fragments of evidence, and locating them within a broader framework. See Barker 1999.

3 Originally published in EC's *Shock SuspenStories* 14 (1954), it was reprinted in Britain in *A Haunt of Fear* 1 (1954). This story received significantly more abuse than any other, at this time, therefore was of singular interest.

4 I returned to this later, in a one-off contribution to a book which was actually primarily about digital imaging and its impact on photography. An invitation from the editors to contribute gave me the opportunity/excuse to look at the way in which, over time, comics have dealt with the digital. Being me, I had to have someone to club in the process. Claudia Springer, in an essay first, then in a book, sought to make

big theoretical claims about the significance of a group of comics (*titles*) for yet another emergent Cultural Studies fetish of that time: the cyborg. Latterday feminisms, seeking a way to refresh their politics, took up in a big way the highly-flawed but mightily cited essay by Donna Haraway ('A Manifesto for Cyborgs') as a basis for developing theories of new gender-identities. Ever the sceptic, my essay looked at the contexts of the production of the comics which Springer claimed to analyse. See Barker 1996.

5 I have long been especially pleased with my analysis of the comic-strip 'Scream Inn' and what I learned about its readers from a close quantitative analysis of readers' applications to propose stories for this. It was my first major foray into quantitative work, and I've always regretted the fact that it has elicited no interest at all. That's a researcher's life for you.

6 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. 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 its 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.

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