Sex and Media; The Work of Martin Barker

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Abstract

Although it was not a major focus of his academic work, Martin Barker made a substantial contribution to understanding discourses around sex and pornography, and to developing the study of audiences of sexual representation, sexual fantasy and pornography. In this article I outline that contribution, focusing on three of his publications.

Keywords: sex, media, pornography, discourse, fantasy

Audiences R Us

When I first started teaching in Media Studies in the mid 1990s I inherited a course titled 'Media Text and Audience'. It was the year that Princess Diana died and it seemed that everyone was perplexed by the public response to this; it took journalists by surprise, and it was seen both as emblematic of something really important about the cultural moment and as somehow false, histrionic and hysterical. I used the lyrics that Elton John sang at her funeral as part of an exercise we did in class, puzzling over what we might think they 'meant' and how we could arrive at any idea of the song without paying attention to the people listening to it; the great and good in Westminster Abbey and beyond it that great mass of people weeping, while further off, others made jokes or attempted analysis. I was fascinated by what Diana might mean to people, to me, an anti-royalist interested and confused by my own responses to her death. I was not an audience researcher but it was an interesting moment to begin learning and teaching about audiences.

The course as I ran it moved through a number of models of the audience, drawing on different disciplines - uses and gratifications, film spectatorship, theories of reception from literary studies, writings about live performance. On we went - theories of reception, encoding/decoding, reading formations, negotiation, interpellation, the 'active' audience, imagined communities, taste cultures, fandom, taste, distinction, cultural capital, subcultures, consumption, and finally (odd now to think of it, but it is years ago) trying to grapple with what the internet might mean for ideas about an 'audience' and whether that term could continue to be helpful as people began to engage in virtual spaces, becoming more producerly and perhaps free of regulation and constraint all the time.

I remember introducing Martin's essay, 'Audiences R us', in which he notes that 'when audience theory and research talks about "the individual", it is not actual individuals, but an idea of an individual which is being debated' (Barker, 1998: 186) and that these are not recognisable for actual individuals and their encounters with media. Although we used examples of audience research on the course, really what we were studying were ideas about audiences, how theorists had tried to conceptualise audience, usually without testing this in any way. In the essay Martin describes the different responses of two people to the film *Breaking the Waves* (1996, dir. von Trier), asking how we might diagnose the kinds of responses to media found in 'classic ordinary talk', as well as in contemporary theoretical work, and how this might help us to make sense of the complex and rich practices that encounters with media occasion.

The essay moves into a discussion of the concepts that different disciplines have produced about audiences, and in particular the assumptions that underpin ideas about 'exposure' and 'consumption'. It deftly pulls apart many of those assumptions, drawing attention to the way these neglect the real complexity of our experiences; how the 'light' consumption of holiday reading involves 'a digestive stuffing of the senses and mind' undertaken at 'great and undemanding speed' and instantly forgotten; how audience 'activity' - choosing a film to see, reading reviews, getting ourselves to the cinema - may be

carried out precisely in order to achieve a welcome and planned state of passivity. The concepts we use are often imprecise and limited, focused obsessively on particular 'moments' of reception and ignoring the significant work that goes into the before and after of those moments, as well as their contexts - the places we go to, the preparations we make, the materials we consult, the conversations we have, the way films, shows, music and books become part of our lives and our histories with and in media.

This essay was different from anything else I had found for the course. It was unique in its insistence that our models and concepts of the audience be accountable, be genuinely useful as tools that are able to explain our encounters with media in ways that we might recognise and be able to verify through research. It showed how these had often 'been fashioned at quite a distance from actual research' and how they failed to 'throw light on what real, concrete audiences do and say with their media' (Barker, 1998: 190).

I liked it, not only for the attention it paid to the audience, but for its critique of scholarly discourse and its determination to build better kinds of thinking and research.

In the following discussion, I want to examine these aspects of Martin's approach to media and cultural studies in general and to share some thoughts about his work on sexual representation and consumption, the area where my own research interests overlapped with opportunities to work with him. I think it is fair to say that though this area was not a major preoccupation of his, he made a distinctive and significant contribution here - one of the many measures of his intellect, curiosity and skill. I will focus on three examples; a report from 2007 and two articles written in 2014 and 2018.

Framing Sex, Violence and Media

Martin's belief in the need for academics to contribute to public and policy debates in this area and his own approach is clearly demonstrated in the first of these - a report on sexual violence in film that he led for the BBFC (Barker et al., 2007). Debates about sex and the media are often framed in very loaded and skewed ways, a framing that is evident in the BBFC's own introduction to the report which reveals a highly simplistic view of the relevant issues; the need to balance audiences' freedom and the dangers of 'harm' that might be done to them in the course of their consumption, in line with a tradition of concern about media 'effects', the idea that media texts - and particularly those depicting sexual or violent material - can have a direct and predictable (probably negative) impact on the attitudes and behaviours of audiences (see Barker and Petley, 2002).

From the opening paragraphs of the report's executive summary, it is clear however that Martin's approach is dramatically more considered and methodical than this; he details that his findings draw on a survey of 243 websites containing online debates about five films, responses from 760 individuals (with a total of 1178 comments) obtained from an online questionnaire, 79 completed paper questionnaires collected from a special screening of one film, and 20 focus groups recruited at a range of locations.

As he goes on to explain, the responses to the five films are distinct from one another, with few overlaps. He notes that participants show little interest in screened sexual violence per se, and that where this does appear it can be understood as a delight in 'bad taste', an anti-censorship stance focused on the importance of individual judgement and an interest in BDSM. He ends the introduction by stressing the importance of context. The discussion is a glorious exception to the rule that has produced countless bland and simplistic academic reports for policy makers and public bodies - it is clear and detailed, meticulously planned, sound and thorough, describing a variety and complexity of textual forms and audience responses, all clearly contextualised.

Martin's report for the BBFC is characteristic of his approach to the study of sex and the media in its precision and care, and in its willingness to listen to participants, not only by engaging with individual responses but paying attention to correlations, contrasts and patterns across and between those responses.

Talk About Porn

This close attention is evident in the talk that Martin gave about how 'pornography' was conceptualised in British newspapers between 2000-2010, at an event I organised with Clarissa Smith as part of our AHRC funded Onscenity research network programme held in London in 2011. Several years later we asked him to write this up as a short article for our *Porn Studies* journal as part of a special issue we were putting together about the challenges of talking and writing about porn (see Attwood, Maina and Smith, 2018). The article shows something of the range of Martin's skills in analysing the discourses, framings and sensibilities that shape the kind of approach adopted by organisations like the BBFC and that underpin much public talk about sexual representation.

In it Martin outlines some interesting differences between the way that tabloid and broadsheet papers talked about pornography over a ten-year period. In the tabloids, porn was presented through a 'prurient fascination with the pornography business' or with 'kiddie porn' which functioned as 'the marker of total outsideness, evil, corruption and horror' (Barker, 2018: 7). Broadsheet newspapers instead tended to use 'porn as a metaphor', attaching the term to a diverse range of objects, sites, states, and practices, such as

> Animal porn: puppy porn, pet porn, talking-pet porn, barnyard porn, panda porn, alpaca porn, etc.
> Nature porn: landscape porn, tree porn, gardening porn, horticultural porn, etc. Food porn: gastro-porn, potato porn, charcuterie porn, etc.
> Property porn: real-estate porn, homes porn, DIY porn, etc.
> Info-porn: digital news porn, econo-porn, disaster porn, etc.

> Techno-porn: car porn, bikes porn, cathode porn, medical porn, brain porn,
> etc. Emotional porn: grief porn, poverty porn, anger porn, divorce porn, death
> porn, pathology
> porn, misery porn, parenting porn, lovecouple porn, etc.
> Status porn: servant porn, posh porn, aristo-porn, fogey porn, political porn,
> anarcho-porn,
> pinny porn, etc.
> Sheer oddities: word porn, commonsense porn, productivity porn, abstinence
> porn. (Barker, 2018: 8)

As he notes, this kind of usage works to 'emphasize the superiority of the user' and their difference from the things they are talking about. Journalists use phrases and words like this;

> Taking us over.
> Can't stop ourselves.
> Spending too much time. Tempting, luscious.
> Surrogate thrills.
> For the sake of it.
> We know we shouldn't.
> Pointless.
> Exaggerated feelings and emotions. Not getting or doing the real thing. Too
> tasty to be real.
> Predictable, dull.
> Over-styled. (Barker, 2018: 9)

These articles do not talk about sexual activity, desire or identity, but instead use the term pornography to denote 'a symptom of weakness, of self-indulgence, of loss of contact with your real self/the world/other people, of wasted time and uncontrolled attention, of lack of finesse/critical judgement and of excessive attention to feelings, emotions, sensations, bodies that "we all" might be tempted by occasionally' (Barker, 2018: 9).

Martin also shows that whereas 'kiddie porn' marked the distinction between the sexually fascinating and the forbidden for the tabloid press (Barker, 2018: 9), broadsheet journalists drew a line between the porn-like things they wrote about with 'a certain zeitgeisty playfulness' and what they called 'extreme pornography', imagined as an omnipresent force with 'a magnetic hold' over sexual representation and overtly sensual expression in fashion, music, and dance. This figuration of extreme porn provided a way to link ideas about misogyny with conventional notions of 'healthy' sex which allow sex 'no independent goals, of bodily exploration, excitement, sensuousness or the like' (Barker, 2018: 10). It presented porn as 'a cataclysm waiting to happen' and suggested that it would be 'appalling' not to feel 'disgust' about this (Barker, 2018: 11). It worked to make dissent from this view of porn particularly difficult; attempting to control the terrain of discussion - what can be said, what

must be felt - and closing down other forms of speech and feeling. It also worked to obscure what we might be able to see of pornography - its diverse forms and the variety of people's relations to these. Deconstructing the use of the term, as Martin does here, reveals something very important about discourses around pornography (and indeed sex) - porn is simultaneously made to stand for a range of problems and problematic stances while a very limited and conservative way of thinking about 'sexually overt materials' is enforced (Barker, 2018: 12-13). His argument, broad ranging yet concise, is very clear in its conclusions about the difficulties it presents for academics working in the field and the need to *do* something about this.

One of the most impressive things about Martin was the drive to *do* something, to find new and better ways of carrying out research, to create spaces for dialogue, to intervene in public debate. In the audience work that he was to become best known for in the later part of his career, he set out new priorities for audience research - moving beyond the unhelpful concepts widely adopted in Media Studies and speculation about media engagement. He developed a focus on interpretative communities and their viewing strategies and pursued 'checkable methods' for exploring these. He worked with an approach that could identify patterns of response and also capture rich and elaborate discursive positions. He focused on what he named 'orientations' - strings of connected tendencies in the way audience members might engage with particular kinds of media, including their reasons for watching, their hopes and expectations, the evaluative criteria they drew on, their ways of watching, their preferences, the judgments they made, their feelings and attitudes, emotions and responses, and the range of activities associated with their engagement (see chapters 2 and 3 of Barker, Smith and Attwood, 2021 for a discussion). Martin developed his approach on big projects which tracked audience responses to hugely successful films such as *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) and TV series such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) as fantasy film and TV moved from the margins to the centre of popular culture.

Porn Audiences and Fantasy

During this period Martin also wrote about sexual fantasy as part of a project initiated by Clarissa Smith on porn audiences. The project used an online questionnaire to collect responses from people who engaged with porn to talk about it (see Smith, Attwood and Barker, 2015a, 2015b; Attwood, Smith and Barker, 2017, 2018, 2021).

It drew on the approaches to audience that Martin had developed and discussed elsewhere (see for example, Barker, 2009; Barker and Brooks, 1998; Barker and Mathijs, 2008; Barker and Mathijs, 2012; Barker et al., 2016; Egan and Barker, 2006). One of the most interesting aspects of the data we collected was what it suggested about fantasy; Martin gave a talk about this at our conference 'Sexual Cultures', hosted at Brunel University in 2012, and it later became an article, again for *Porn Studies*, in 2014.

In this, Martin begins by reviewing understandings of fantasy, noting how widely they are reproduced, surfacing in Papal declarations (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 1989) and policy documents (Papadopoulos, 2010; Bailey, 2011, Horvath et al., 2013). He identifies 'five widely-claimed dimensions of fantasy' in this kind of uncritical thinking;

- Fantasy is wild, undisciplined imagining.
- Fantasy involves childish and immature attitudes.
- Fantasies are erroneous, unsupportable beliefs.
- Generically, fantasies are other-worldly stories populated by stereotyped characters.
- Fantasists are people who are unable to function normally, too disconnected. (Barker, 2014: 145)

He notes that 'fantasy' is generally reviled - particularly in comparison to 'imagination' and that sexual fantasies in particular have been understood as the outcome of repression, as compensatory, 'essentially unproductive; at best of limited value; at worst, adolescent, deficient, and dangerous' (Barker, 2014: 148). This stance is found even in more sophisticated scholarly accounts such as that of Linda Williams on body genres (1991), which draws on ideas about 'identification' and simple 'mimicking'.

Martin goes on to show how all these approaches work to simplify and close down what is meant by fantasy, whereas audience research opens up the possibility of attending to variety and diversity in the way that people talk about their experiences and understandings of fantasy and of interrogating 'who says this, and what they say about when and how they feel this' (Barker, 2014: 150). Focusing on 'the perceived nature, purpose and role of sexual fantasies' (Barker, 2014: 151) in relation to pornography, he draws on a sample of responses from our project to examine what people mean when they use the word fantasy.

Identifying the dimensions of these responses - Martin lists ten suggested by the participant's accounts - he shows how each of these appear 'to point to and imply a distinctive orientation to pornography – what it is for, how therefore it is characteristically found and used, what kinds may be preferred, and so on' (Barker, 2014: 152). For example, one foregrounds porn as 'a substitute for not having enough sex' or as a convenience - replacing the work of fantasy or acting like fantasy 'in shorthand'. Another marks the commitment to having a 'fantasy life', which is to be kept separate from reality, important in its own right (Barker, 2014: 153). Another still depends on the importance of connecting to 'A world of sex "out there" and to others who enjoy similar things, a feeling of sexuality as a central part of identity (Barker, 2014: 154).

These findings allow us to begin to elaborate how people relate to porn in different ways 'in terms of: how they seek out and select what to look at; the different criteria they have for what is satisfying and exciting, or disappointing, disturbing or disgusting; and their different 'careers' into and through pornography, and how these relate to other parts of their personal histories and lives' (Barker, 2014: 155). They also open up the possibility of further

investigation of how porn and fantasy might operate in different situations or for different groups of people. For example the 'world of sex out there' dimension is something that lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer responses were more likely to identify, while older participants were more likely to identify with a dimension that Martin named 'the lost world of sex' representing restricted opportunities for sex or declining desires, a return to their own youth and youthful experiences (Barker, 2014: 153).

This approach also enables the further conceptualisation of orientations of fantasy - Martin sketches out five of these, based on participants' responses, to set in contrast to the 'five widely claimed dimensions of fantasy in uncritical thinking' that he began by critiquing;

> 'Fantasy' as magnifying glass: a conscious accentuation of a desire.
> 'Fantasy' as mirror to self: a means to look at our responses to things.
> 'Fantasy' as emporium: a world of possibilities to be explored and thought about.
> 'Fantasy' as journey: a visitation to a distant realm of desires and activities.
> 'Fantasy' as other self: what I might or might not be. (Barker, 2014: 155)

The article concludes that while 'for those who seek out and enjoy porn, 'fantasy' is very varied and multiform in purpose' (Barker, 2014: 154) we might understand sexual fantasy as belonging 'in the zone of the relations between bodies, selfhood, and social and cultural permissions and forbiddings' and appreciate that 'the thinking and feeling of the relations' between these relations 'is the fundamental basis of sexual lives', how in this context we might 'usefully see pornography as being like a huge library, a bookshop, or a film archive', a measure for the sexual self (Barker, 2014: 157). It is very striking, this preliminary idea of fantasy - not simply as repression or compensation or lack of imagination, but as potentially operating in such different ways.

Characteristically, the article ends with a commitment to more 'thinking' and 'testing' about audience orientations and the need to pursue further discoveries through 'cross-tabulations, pattern-searching, model-building and qualitative mapping', something that he was able to carry out later in a more elaborate way in the *Games of Thrones* project. Like the other writings I have discussed here, it is indicative of Martin's approach across all his work, his determination to do more and do it better.

Biographical Note

Feona Attwood is an independent scholar based in the UK. She is the author of *Sex Media* (2018), co-author (with Susanna Paasonen, Alan McKee, John Mercer and Clarissa Smith) of *Objectification; On the difference between sex and sexism* (2020) and (with Martin Barker and Clarissa Smith) of *Watching Game of Thrones: How audiences engage with dark television*

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Filmography

Breaking the Waves (Lars von Trier, 1996)
The Lord of the Rings (Peter Jackson, 2001-2003)

Television

Game of Thrones (HBO, created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, 2011-2019)