

Pulp Recycling: Notes on the Special Issue

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In his study, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (1984), Martin Barker documents the way in which the Children and Young Person's (Harmful Publications) Act, a piece of legislation designed to protect children from the dangers of American horror comics, came to be enacted by the House of Commons in the mid-1950s.¹ An important early example of cultural studies in the United Kingdom, Barker's study is somewhat paradoxical because it cuts against the grain of most received accounts of the period. Many researchers, for example, are undoubtedly aware of the involvement of early cultural studies scholars such as Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart with the gallant and successful defense of the Penguin edition of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the test case for the new Obscene Publications Act (1959), designed to protect works of art from criminal prosecution, in the early 1960s.

The postwar period in the United Kingdom is typically seen as one of intellectual expansion and optimism in which the gradual acceptance of an increased range of cultural forms eventually culminates in the founding of the field of cultural studies itself. Scholars can point with a certain pride to the setting up of the Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in the late 1960s and even note the involvement of the forces of the New Left in that success. *A Haunt of Fears* has a way of undoing this optimistic view of human progress, particularly when Barker notes the early role of the British Communist Party, animated by a fear of Americanization and graphic violence, in helping to create the moral panic that eventually led to the Act's successful passage.

Perhaps, however, this way of looking at things is itself suspect.

Barker's book, in my opinion, struggles as it tries to find a way to discuss some of the disturbing images that form the material of the comics. He argues against those who believe the horror comics are liable to "deprave and corrupt" those who might come into contact with them in a way that, apart from being less than subtle, ultimately does not differ from Richard Hoggart's approach in his court defense of the more prurient passages of D.H. Lawrence's late masterpiece. Both scholars pay little attention to the possible effect of the materials on their readership, focusing, instead, on the socio-political processes that cause the materials to be willfully misinterpreted. Because the composition of the readership of comics and other forms of pulp fiction is intrinsically vague, it poses a problem for scholarship. Would those who appreciate an associated medium consider its various elements to be positively base, or a wildly misunderstood form of yet to be formalized literature, or both?

The earliest pulp fiction was not meant to last, let alone collected or analyzed. It was printed on poor-quality paper, and intended for disposal after reading. Creators often had little concern for the integrity of their characters and storylines. In response to socio-political events, they created, copied and adapted, which in the case of comic books led to the miraculous resurrection of a fair number of recently deceased heroes and villains. But not many people noticed, and very few people cared. The stories promised a weekly dose of sex and romance, brawn, wit, shock, ridicule, horror or suspense; and they always delivered with a punch, even though it was sometimes at the expense of the other. But as the number of collections grew, so did the pressure on creators to remain true to a single, "logical" narrative. What is more, government interference and the increased exposure of pulp fiction and comic art urged creators to be more mindful of the other.

The studies in this issue of *Situations* deliberate the aspects of agency and voice in the process of creation, and the implications of pulp fiction transitioning from one medium to another. In "Hybridities and Deep Histories in Indonesian Wayang Manga Comics," Meghan Downes (Australian National University) analyses Indonesian comics that, while based on traditional Hindu-Javanese *wayang* (shadow-puppet) tales, stylistically emulate Japanese manga aesthetics. She explores how the

production and consumption of these comics relate to questions of social capital and changing circuits of distribution and consumption in the Indonesian mediascape, as well as to inter-Asian popular culture flows. In “Hindi Detective Pulp Fiction,” Peter Friedlander (Australian National University) discusses the relationship between Hindi detective fiction and earlier Western and Asian detective fiction. Because the novels offer their readership ways in which to engage with modernity, so he argues, they have managed to maintain their relevance, despite the rise of smartphone and Internet technology. In “Embedding Nostalgia: The Political Appropriation of Foreign Comic Book Superheroes in Korea,” Roald Maliangkay (Australian National University) discusses the politicisation of superheroes in Korea. He contends that even foreign superhero narratives can be effective conveyers of local political ideologies, and argues that because they evoke innocence, such narratives can summon nostalgia and a strong sense of community, even among those who have never felt a strong affection towards them. Finally, Jin Suh Jirn’s (Yuhan University) “A Sort of European Hallucination: On Derrida’s Chinese Prejudice,” a special addition to the issue, attempts a revisionary reading of Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of logocentrism in terms of Orientalism. Drawing upon other French theorists such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva, he argues that Derrida’s stereotyping of China is in many ways indicative of a larger strain of Orientalist thought within Parisian intellectual circles throughout the late sixties and early seventies.

Despite their value as published expressions of socio-political change, most pulp fiction, including the important subgenre of the comic book, remains of marginal scholarly interest. It is my hope that this issue will encourage further exploration of related media, and ultimately save a number of gems from the rubbish bin.

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Notes

¹ Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).