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Adapting Clive Barker

by NICOLAS LABARRE

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Abstract

This text examines the American comics produced around the Clive Barker brand during the author's rise to fame in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in particular the mini-series *Tapping the Vein* (Eclipse, 5 issues, 1989-1990) and the open-ended series *Clive Barker's Hellraiser* (Epic/Marvel Comics, 20 issues, 1989-1992). It examines the way both publishers used specific illustrative styles to articulate the emerging Barker transmedia brand with existing publishing and readerly practices in comics. The text calls attention to the role played by such of a collective graphic style – as opposed to the oft-examined individual graphic choices – in shaping and framing such adaptations.

Keywords

Comics, adaptation, horror, style, painting

Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse aux comics produits aux États-Unis à partir de l'œuvre et de l'image de marque du romancier d'horreur Clive Barker à la fin des années 1980 et au début des années 1990 : en particulier la mini-série *Tapping the Vein* (Eclipse, 5 numéros, 1989-1990) et la série *Clive Barker's Hellraiser* (Epic/Marvel Comics, 20 numéros, 1989-1992). Le texte analyse la façon dont les deux éditeurs concernés – Eclipse et Marvel – ont utilisé le nom de Barker, alors en passe de devenir une étiquette transmédiatique, pour produire des comics en prise avec les transformations du marché de la bande dessinée aux États-Unis. L'article s'intéresse particulièrement à la notion de style graphique collectif, plutôt qu'individuel, et à la façon dont ce style a pu devenir une caractéristique définitoire de ces adaptations.

Mots-clés

Comics, adaptation, horreur, style, peinture

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Adapting Clive Barker

par NICOLAS LABARRE

In the mid-1980s, British horror writer and multimedia artist Clive Barker suddenly became a global celebrity, with the success of the short stories compiled in *Books of Blood* (1984-5), and his directorial debut, *Hellraiser* (1987; quickly followed by *Hellraiser 2* in 1988, which he did not direct). By the late 1980s, Barker's early success had turned him into a brand name author, upon whom multimedia franchises could be anchored (Murray 25-49): his second movie, *Nightbreed* (1990) – *Clive Barker's Nightbreed*, on the movie posters – was promoted in a way similar to Tim Burton's *Batman* the year before, with tie-in t-shirts, comics and two video games by adaptation specialist, Ocean. Though the film was a commercial and critical failure, and Barker disowned the studio-mandated cut, *Nightbreed* briefly affirmed his centrality in the field of horror, which was then very close to the mainstream, both in print and at the movies (Carroll 2-4).

This text examines the American comics produced around the Barker brand during this rise to fame, with the mini-series *Tapping the Vein* (Eclipse, 5 issues, 1989-1990) and the open-ended series *Clive Barker's Hellraiser* (Epic/Marvel Comics, 20 issues, 1989-1992). It attempts to chart the way Eclipse and Epic used specific illustrative choices to incorporate Barker's works in existing brand strategies and readerly practices, while retaining the intermedial appeal of the rising Barker brand. Many studies have touched on the role of individual graphic styles in comics adaptations (for instance Baetens; Bragard; Lagerwall; Skilton et al.; Harris-Fain; Labarre, "Absent Humanity"; Bragard and Thewissen), but I will argue that the Barker adaptations display evidence of a collective 'painterly' style, born of preexisting technologies and practices, and reinforced by deliberate editorial choices.¹ I will attempt to demonstrate that this shared visual style served as a way to articulate a medium-specific architext – 'the relationship of inclusion that links each text to the various types of discourses it belongs to' (Genette 82) – to a transmedia 'adaptation network' encompassing both Barker's original works and their successive iterations across media (Newell 15-16). Though it takes Barker as a starting point, this article thus also focuses on the specificities of the comics industry within a broader transmedia operation, with the assumption that the Barker adaptations may help us better understand the current situation of that industry.

1 The only other study of a collective style in comics adaptation which I am aware of is to be found in William B. Jones's guide to *Classics Illustrated* and its "house style" (Jones). Though often treated with a measure of scorn, and mistakenly de-historicized, the restrained style in *Classics Illustrated* reflected and reinforced the editorial intent which guided the series. Conversely, in his studies of comic book films, Liam Burke identifies the looser but widespread elements of style in use in canonical superhero comics (through framing, performance, etc.), and the way they have helped create a cohesive aesthetics for comic book movies (Burke 228-262).

From Taboo to Epic and Eclipse

Barker's work was first adapted at a time when American comics publishing was undergoing two conjoined phenomena: the 'British Invasion', whereby a group British writers led by Alan Moore were revitalizing popular comics genres, notably horror and superheroes (Licari-Guillaume 2017; Ecke 2019); and the increased attention paid to adult readers, in particular through the development of the graphic novel format (Hatfield; Gabilliet; Baetens and Frey; Williams). The adaptations under study partake in these two movements and sometimes illustrate the tension between them.

Barker's first intervention in American comics is to be found in the first two issues of the aptly-named *Taboo* (Fall 1988; Summer 1989), an expensive (\$9.95, when a comic book cost about \$1 at the time) black-and-white horror magazine created by Alan Moore's frequent collaborators, Stephen R. Bissette and John Totleben. Barker contributed to the first issue with an introduction, accompanied with a vivid ink illustration, in which he claimed his affection for comics and for their potentially forbidden thrills: '[In comic books] I found a world of extraordinary anatomies, that carried a barely concealed sexual *frisson*,' (C. Barker, "Introduction" 3). He thus resisted any attempt to reframe his reading of comics as a conventional or legitimate cultural practice, while aligning them with the horrific sensuality of his own work. Barker's contribution to #2 took the form of a single image, in the inside front cover, a color study of monstrous creatures for what would have been a terrifying children's book.

In these two issues, Barker appears to align himself with the most independent side of comics publishing, one which he was well aware of (Gaiman and Barker): author-driven, aware of the history of the medium and of its main genres but eager to disregard the aesthetic and narrative limits placed on mainstream comic books. In *Taboo*, and in a contemporary interview in comics culture magazine *Greed* n°5 (September 1988), Barker himself is celebrated as a singular horror writer and as an artist whose visual work is evocative enough to be presented even outside of a narrative framework. His name does not appear on the covers, and he is not afforded any special place in the issues. Though *Hellraiser* had already been released, he appears among his peers, as a taboo-breaking, idiosyncratic practitioner.

This intriguing position did not last, for Barker was approached by both Eclipse Comics and Marvel's Epic imprint to license his properties (Ringgenberg and Barker 81), probably at the time he wrote his *Taboo* editorial. In both cases, the intent was to place Barker in a very different role, that of a saleable commodity. The move should not be read as implying that publishers did not care about Barker's voice and style – contemporary interviews and testimonies testify to the respect he commanded in the industry – merely that they also planned to leverage his celebrity. However, the tension between these two distinct positions in the field appeared quickly: although Steve Bissette offered an introduction to Eclipse's *Clive Barker Illustrator* (1990), he later abandoned a long-announced adaptation project when Eclipse bought the rights he was expecting to get (Humphrey). In this case at least, the commercial allure of the Barker brand prevailed over an author-driven engagement with his work.

Despite very different origins, Eclipse and Epic occupied a broadly similar niche by the late 1980s. Eclipse had been created in 1978 by author Dean Mullaney, precisely as a reaction to Marvel's publishing policy, and was one of the earliest publishing institutions to arise of the ground-level comics trend (Williams 63–66). Like many other publishers whose existence was made possible by the rise of the direct market in the mid-1970s,² it published creator-owned books in popular genres, offering creative freedom and financial incentives to comics creators while not seeking to break away entirely from the content and presentation of mainstream comic books. The first books Eclipse published were black-and-white trade paperbacks in the album format, but by the late 1980s, it was also publishing colour books with high production values, conceived as an attempt to move away from traditional comic books. The Barker books were at the forefront of this transition ("Eclipse"). While the Epic imprint was part of Marvel Comics, one of the established leaders of the comic book market, it was to some extent a response to the rise of publishers such as Eclipse, an attempt by Marvel to offer an independent space for creator-owned books, so as to entice or retain talented creators unwilling to work on company-owned characters (Clarke 195–96; Labarre, *Heavy Metal* 122–26). There were differences between these two institutions: in particular, Epic could afford to be a loss-leader thanks to the backing of Marvel, and, as a result, was sometimes described as an alluring destination for Eclipse creators and series by the beginning of the 1990s (Kreiner). Nevertheless, Epic and Eclipse played broadly similar roles when they both started taking an interest in adapting Barker (they also closed shops almost simultaneously in 1994, with the collapse of the direct market).

Both Eclipse and Epic elevated Barker to a different position than the one he had briefly occupied in *Taboo*. By opting to have his name overshadow that of the other creators working on the books, they installed him as the 'mothership' – which Henry Jenkins describes as the 'core property that is extended to other platforms' (226) – for a crossmedia and transmedia operation. By 1988–1989, the coexistence of the Barker novels and movies, under his creative control or not, demonstrated the existence of a burgeoning 'adaptation network' (Newell), which both publishers were eager to tap into.

In the mini-series *Tapping the Vein* (5 issues) and in a subsequent series of six independent 64-page graphic novels, Eclipse published adaptations of stories from *Books of Blood*. Epic, which had initially considered adapting *Hellraiser 2*, instead put Barker at the heart of a *bona fide* transmedia operation, spinning original tales out of the film material, first as a quarterly, then at the pace of 8 issues a year. In the introduction to the first issue of *Clive Barker's Hellraiser*, the label's editor, Daniel Chichester describes this move as an artistic impulse:

Epic had been offered the chance to do a comic adaptation of HELLBOUND, but neither Archie [Goodwin] or [sic] myself felt a straight adaptation could do justice to the runaway-train-of-malevolence feeling that had impressed us about both movies. (Chichester np.)

2 In the 1970s and early 1980s, comic book distribution shifted from the newsstands to specialized stores, which received a substantial discount but could not return unsold issues. This transition had a profound effect on the type of readers the comic books were written for, encouraging longer serialized narratives for instance.

This was spun on the back-cover of the first issue into a claim for the specific ability of comics to deliver illicit thrills, which would not be permitted in film. While this was ironic given the history of the two media since the mid-1950s, it may have resonated, only a few years after the strident reaction to the so-called ‘video nasties’ in the UK (M. Barker): ‘All-new chilling tales that take you beyond the horror that began in Clive Barker’s darkly malevolent films—tales of terror the movies don’t dare unleash...’ (Clive Barker’s *Hellraiser*, back-cover).

Also of note in these various texts is the elevation of Barker as an *auteur*, since he is attributed creative ownership of *Hellraiser 2*, even though the film was scripted by his friend Peter Atkins, and directed by Tony Randel; Barker provided the original story and served as executive producer. This apparent slip confirms the existence of the aforementioned adaptation network, anchored by Barker’s name and encompassing products he validated even without having directly created them. Furthermore, as suggested by Brigid Cherry, this extended vision of authorship was and has remained a common mode of engagement with the ‘Barker brand’ (“Beauty” 113-114).

Barker himself later offered a more commercially-driven reasoning for accepting these adaptations, which complements Chichester’s description and articulates the classical economic case for transmedia developments:

Archie [Goodwin] had been a fan and said how cool it would be to get some Hellraiser stuff going. It would be a great way to expand the mythology, if you like, and indeed find a new audience and find people who haven’t got to the movies or to the books and would maybe be brought into the movies and the books because they encountered these ideas in comic book form. (Ringgenberg and Barker 81)

For Epic, opting for extension rather than adaptation – note the repugnance associated with the concept in Chichester’s quote, possibly as a veiled criticism of Eclipse’s choice – also offered the opportunity to produce an open-ended series, which could be prolonged as long as it was successful, with no risk of running out of material.³ For Barker, the comics versions of his work were, in the words of Brigid Cherry in 1990, ‘a good marketing ploy’ (“Straight” 13): they were a way to outsource the expansion of his brand and to drive fans to work bearing his name. These comics, coming after the *Hellraiser* films (and *Candyman*, by the time of the *Comics Journal* interview), were helping construct an adaptation network he had control over, as opposed to the feeling of dispossession he had endured with two early low-budget film adaptations in 1985 (*Underworld*) and 1986 (*Rawhead Rex*). By the end of the decade, he was embracing the network eagerly, and made it a key part of his continuing success (Cherry, “Straight” 13; James). While these comics may also have contributed to the medium’s history of illicit thrills, which Barker had described in *Taboo*, they did so in a controlled and carefully branded way

3 A few years later, in 1992, Epic did produce a straight adaptation of *Hellraiser 3 (Hellraiser III: Hell on Earth Movie Special)*, adapted by Peter Atkins from his screenplay. Clive Barker’s name featured prominently on the cover, while Atkins’s name only appeared inside the issue.

In both cases, Barker was elevated above the comics material bearing his name: he had become a source, a branding element, and a ‘mothership’, rather than a fellow practitioner. On the covers of both *Hellraiser* and *Tapping the Vein*, Barker’s name tops the page, in a typeface that is as large as the title of the book. The two publishers thus employed a strategy described by Simone Murray as a key feature of the contemporary adaption industry, which ‘insistently [covers] its tracks – avidly playing into the cult of the celebrity literary author for its own commercial self-interest, but ever ready to point away from its own interventions’ (27). In this instance, a crucial intervention was the separation between Barker and his role as a visual artist: to make him adaptable and saleable on the market as it existed, he could not be tied too closely to an idiosyncratic style, a point I shall revisit later. Thus, Eclipse did not ignore Barker’s visual art, but they celebrated it in two expensive artbooks, neatly segregating him from their comics line.

As a novelist, Barker’s brand was constructed in the shadow of Stephen King’s and with frequent references to the Maine writer despite their widely different approaches to horror (Winter 147-153; 171; Badley 73-74; Costorphine 43-46). Since part of Eclipse’s ambition at the time was bringing comics to the bookstores via the graphic novel format, the publisher unsurprisingly chose to mirror that strategy: the first two issues of *Tapping the Vein* feature two variations on the famous King quote describing Barker as ‘the future of horror’, which would undoubtedly have been familiar to readers of contemporary editions of Barker’s prose fiction. When *Marvel Age*, Marvel’s promotional magazine, interviewed Barker in 1991, they used the same quote by way of an introduction (Lackey and Barker np.)

However, King served merely a springboard for the construction of the Barker brand in comics. For instance, each issue of *Tapping the Vein* features a different biography and photograph of Barker on the back-cover, referring to his general career or to specific projects from the period. Epic adopted a similar strategy of mentioning Barker’s name of the back-cover of nearly every issue, and the first issue of *Hellraiser* includes a one-page introduction by the writer, even though he wrote nothing for the book. The attention paid to the novelist, as opposed to his characters, signalled that the project was different from the numerous intermedial projects which Marvel had been pursuing since the late 1970s, from *Star Wars* (1977-1986) to *Alf* (1988-1992).⁴ Or perhaps more accurately, it signalled that while these projects had hinged on specific cultural products, in this case Barker *was* the product. Accordingly, Epic quickly moved beyond *Hellraiser* to produce a Clive Barker’s *Nightbreed* series (1990-1993), a *Nightbreed/Hellraiser* crossover (1991), and various adaptations in the form of mini-series. The building-up of the Barker brand even led Marvel to craft an entire line of comics around a series of characters which he designed but did not write, a ‘Barkerverse’ to use the author’s own terms (C. Barker, “Clive Barker on Razorline”). About 40 comics across four series were printed in the Razorline imprint, between 1991 and 1993, when poor sales and a collapsing market led to its cancellation. Strikingly, Clive Barker’s name appears on the cover of nearly a

4 Another key difference lies in the fact Barker retained the rights for this work. A 2011 reprint of the *Hellraiser* series asserts that Clive Barker is “the owner of all rights to publish and sell same” and a similar note is to be found in the original series. Unlike many other Epic titles, this means that the comics artists were operating under a work-for-hire contract.

hundred Marvel comics between 1990 and 1993, while his direct contribution is limited to a couple of introductions and story ideas.

This embrace goes beyond the impulse of enrolling the new Stephen King and rests in part on Barker’s willingness to lend his name to comic books, a medium for which he has consistently expressed affection. It also suggests that Barker’s fame could be put to use very quickly in the context of existing trends in the comics world. By relocating Barker into comics, Eclipse and Epic fashioned a medium-specific version of his brand, one which rested in large part on illustration.

Illustrating Clive Barker

In the editorial to Epic’s *Hellraiser* #2, Daniel Chichester affirms the consistency of the medium-specific version of the Barker brand by praising not only his own series but also *Taboo* and *Tapping the Vein*, as fine examples of the renewal of horror in comics. He also notes that several of the artists present in *Hellraiser* also worked for Eclipse’s adaptations. Indeed, the list of artists present in the early issues of the two series is a limited one, presenting a strong sense of family resemblance and helping fashion a distinct visual identity for Barker’s projects in comics.

This family resemblance can be found first in the biographies of most of the artists who contributed regularly to either or both series:

Name	Year of birth	Year of first published comics	Note
Scott Hampton	1951	1981	
Bo Hampton	1954	1983	Scott Hampton’s younger brother
John Bolton	1951	1982	British
Les Edwards	1949	1991 (?)	British, mostly known as an illustrator, did the poster for the <i>Nightbreed</i> movie
Stan Woch	1959	1984	
Kent Williams	1962	1981	
John J. Muth	1962	1982	
John Van Fleet	(?)	1987	
Ted McKeever	1960	1987	Mostly standalone illustrations and covers
Bill Sienkiewicz	1958	1980	Mostly standalone illustrations

Table 1: main contributors to *Tapping the Vein* and *Clive Barker’s Hellraiser*

This short list does not encompass the entire roster of artists who worked on the titles, of course, and a full roster would also include renowned pencilers such as Berni Wrightson, Gray Morrow, and P. Craig Russell. These stars brought a cachet to their respective titles – Russell and Wrightson were key practitioners of adaptation and horror, respectively, and Barker admired their earlier works (Gaiman and Barker) –, but their involvement was limited.

The core group of adapters is a cosmopolitan one, with British and American artists. However, except for Les Edwards, all of these authors noticeably belong in a narrow age range, born between 1949 and 1962, meaning they were between 27 and 40 when they started working on the book (while Gray Morrow was born in 1934, for instance), and they had all started illustrating comics in the 1980s.

Beyond these biographical similarities, these artists also resemble each other in their use of a painterly style. Again, there are numerous exceptions, but to open books in these two series is to be faced with reproductions of hand-painted pages, of a kind which had been all but foreign to North-American comics until the late 1970s. Two of the most prolific contributors to these two series, Scott Hampton and John Bolton were chosen by Barker himself, and while they are widely different artists, they can both be described as realistic painters, working not only with outlined shapes but also with texture, grain, gesture, and hues. This description applies equally to a variety of other artists who worked on these titles in one quality or another. Even artists who worked in a more traditional style, with inked outlines and separate colours – Gray Morrow comes to mind – were paired with colourists who added the expected volume and texture to the final comics. When Epic's *Hellraiser* introduced an original Clive Barker story, 'the Harrowers' (#17), the first chapter was illustrated by Alex Ross, who was to become the specialist of painted comics in the 1990s. In Pascal Lefèvre's examination of style in comics, colour is but one of the seven elements measuring 'the coherency of a graphic style in a visual narrative,' but Lefèvre also notes in the same article that the painterly style in comics has remained strikingly rare throughout the history of comics (70; 76–77). Its very consistent – though not systematic – application in *Hellraiser* and *Tapping the Vein*, thus made it the *collective* or *shared* style of both titles and of their most prominent stories. The selection of artists and the assemblage of colourists and pencilers confirm that this was an intentional design choice, aimed at creating a family resemblance, though one that was not enforced systematically. Unlike a 'house style' (such as *Classics Illustrated's* or the Kirby-inspired aesthetics of Marvel in the 1960s), this family resemblance bridged corporate divides, but like a house style, it served as a component for a distinct architext, a cohesive set of texts. Strikingly, though, this style rarely resembles Barker's own: instead of expanding a cohesive Barker brand, the comics thus appear to fashion a semi-distinct architext.

Barker was quoted in 1990 as saying that he would rather draw a *Hellraiser* comic book story than write one (Wendorf 23). Though the remark was tongue-in-cheek, it helps highlight the fact that the comics adaptation positioned him as a storyteller, not as a graphic creator, even though he worked as an illustrator himself. He created sketches, cover designs, and soon illustrations for his books, starting with *The Thief of Always* in 1992, in addition to abundant preliminary visuals for his movies. In her 1996 study on King, Anne Rice, and Barker, Linda Badley notes: 'For Barker, writing seems to be another kind of iconography, and he refuses to make distinctions between painters like Goya and Bosch and 'visionary'

writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges' (74–75); Cocteau and Blake also feature among the influences claimed by Barker or identified by scholars (Costorphine).

The comics industry was well aware of this side of Barker's work, and interviews with Barker in comics outlets (in *Marvel Age*, in *The Comics Journal*, in *Greed*), frequently reproduced examples of his artworks; so did *Taboo* #1 and 2 and the mixed-media anthology *Fly in my eye* (Arcane, 1988). More significantly, Eclipse produced two hefty Barker artbooks in 1990 and 1993, which helped consolidate his reputation as a visual artist beyond the comics world. His graphic production was thus recognized, even then, not a mere by-product, but a functional part of his distinct approach to his art, and a key element of the effectiveness of his brand of horror either in his sketches or when mediated on the movie screen. For instance, the success of his breakthrough films, *Hellraiser* and *Hellbound*, can be attributed to a large extent to their unusual imagery of horror, building on a refined S&M design, by contrast with grubby brutes of the then-popular North-American slashers. Though his graphic imagination was seen by some reviewers as seeped in gratuitous excesses, scholars have pointed out that Barker uses 'the body, and bodily horror, in order to question the unity of the self' (Costorphine 44), always dialectically connecting the spectacular to the psychological stakes of his tales.

The emphasis on the spectacular was retained for the comics versions of his work. Most stories in *Tapping the Vein* and *Hellraiser* are extremely verbose, even when they are not direct adaptations – Neil Gaiman disparagingly described them as 'a classics illustrated approach' (Gaiman and Barker 367) –, but they very often hinge on shocking and disturbing images, from the reveal of the godlike cannibal pig in 'Pig Blood Blues' (Scott Hampton, *Tapping the Vein* #1) to the self-mutilated face of the cenobite in 'The Canons of Pain' (John Bolton, *Hellraiser* #1) (cf. Perron for a sustained analysis of the role of these reveals in two of the Eclipse adaptations). However, these images in no way try to imitate Barker's style. Even expressionist artists working on the title, such as Ted McKeever or Bill Sienkiewicz merely appear intent on furthering their idiosyncrasies, which happen to be closer to Barker's than those of more sedate illustrators. In any case, these expressionist representations were used mostly as single illustrations in *Hellraiser*, and are distinctly in a minority when it comes to the comics themselves.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that Barker's graphic work was ever considered useful to the Epic and Eclipse adaptations, even as his words were nearly fetishized. Fred Burke, who edited *Tapping the Vein* at Eclipse, made this obsession with fidelity to the *words* explicit in 1989: 'We are remaining very, very truthful to the original material and are having as many direct quotations as possible. We don't feel it necessary to cut out all of Clive's wonderful descriptions in order to just draw them on the page' (Nicoll 24). It is not clear that Barker would have had the time or inclination to actually draw a *Hellraiser* story, but it does not explain why the comic books under examination never even included his art, on the cover or in spot illustrations; the closest thing to a Barker-drawn comic is probably the lone illustration he did for the *Sandman* trading cards in 1994. This neat segregation of the writer and filmmaker on the one hand, and the visual artist on the other should be read as deliberate strategy to create a medium-specific version of the Barker brand.

For his part, Barker appeared initially keen to mention some of the artists who worked on the book, especially his friend John Bolton and P. Craig Russell. However,

in later interviews broaching his work in comics, he systematically failed to mention or singularize any of the graphic contributors, while being willing to expound on his own practice. This conspicuous silence suggests at least a wariness or a distance towards this dominant painterly style, but also a degree of resignation mixed with confidence in the strength of his work. He appears to have anticipated this situation as early as 1988, at a time when the comics projects were getting started:

Being thoroughly fucked over as a creator by people who really didn't give a toss for what I did or could do or whatever else, it was sort of educative in my dealing with other people. You're working with people you like and trust and therefore you let them do it. You hope that things are going to go well and of course *none* of these people are going to set out to write a bad comic. [...] But finally, let them all make of it what they will, the story will be the story will be the story [sic]. Nobody's touching my story. Nobody's going to burn every copy of the story so the only thing that will ever exist will be this comics version. (Gaiman and Barker 373-4)

There is little evidence that Barker appreciated the comics adaptations – with a few exceptions – but he appeared content to let them exist, making his work and name discoverable by new readers and never threatening his prose work.

Though it seemed to satisfy both parties, the comics industry's choice to ignore Barker's visual output and replace it with a different graphic register warrants further inquiries. After all, being consistent with Barker's vision would presumably have helped translate his success in comics. The choice of establishing that graphic register needs to be understood as a process of incorporation of his brand into existing practices, rather than the creation of a distinct Barker niche. It aimed at articulating two distinct 'architexts': the Barker adaptation network on the one hand and the quasi-genre of 1980s painted comics for adults on the other.

A Visual Distinction

Indeed, having readily embraced Barker the comics industry sought to inscribe his work within existing trends and publishing practices. I have already mentioned the so-called British invasion as one of these defining trends. Following the work of Alan Moore in the 1980s, American comics publishers sought the collaboration of British writers, whose distinct take on popular genres could revitalize these. This often took the form of referential, thoughtful, and political horror, navigating Britishness and an American subject: horror precisely of the kind practiced by Barker in his early fiction (and on full display in the movie *Candyman*, 1992).

Barker's rise to fame preceded the Invasion by a matter of months, and many of the writers associated with that movement quoted him as a direct influence, while, conversely, he professed to be a fan of Alan Moore's writing. Furthermore, several points of direct contact exist: Neil Gaiman interviewed Barker in 1988, just as he was becoming a comic

writer, before using a Barker analogue in *Sandman* #17 (1990); Moore himself had one character read a volume of the *Books of Blood* in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #44 (1986); the DC series *Hellblazer* was to be named *Hellraiser* until Barker's movie came out, etc. Most of the British Invasion had taken hold at DC comics, though Moore, Gaiman and the others also worked for other publishers. Securing the collaboration of Barker was probably a way for Eclipse and Marvel not only to reap the benefits of the movement but also to employ one of its key inspirators. This, however, did not require a specific investment in a distinct style, for although the painterly style in North-American comics is used in at least two major works from the British invasion – Dave McKean and Neil Gaiman's *Black Orchid* (1987) and Dave McKean and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* (1989) – and on many covers, where it was editorially mandated (Bolland and Pruett 228–29), it is not specifically associated with the movement. Instead, that style had emerged gradually since the late 1970s as the result of specific cultural, financial and technological factors. It had become over time a specific mode of distinction – in the Bourdieusian sense – which could benefit from the association with Barker but was also an efficient way to market these adaptations and extensions.

The precondition for the existence of this style was a context in which comics could move up the technological and economic scale. Until the late 1970s, most comics were printed on cheap paper, using a constraining four-color process, with very few exceptions (the color pages in Warren's magazines, the comics in *Playboy*, etc.). The shift to better paper stock and better colour reproduction first took place in magazines such as *Heavy Metal* – which Barker read 'reverentially' (Cherry, "Straight" 13) – and Marvel's *Epic Illustrated* before becoming a distinctive feature and a selling point for many early of graphic novels (Labarre, *Heavy Metal*); colourist Steve Oliff, who worked on the Marvel Graphic Novel line, specifically mentions the 'flat, ugly colors' of traditional comics as something he was trying to get away from (Clarke 203). In the late 1980s, this technology was still expensive and of limited use, though the shift to higher quality paper and printing techniques in regular comic books happened soon afterwards, in the early 1990s. Tellingly, the technology was the most distinctive aspect of DC Comics' 'Prestige format' when it launched in the mid-1980s. Better paper did not imply a painterly style, but it enabled it.

Furthermore, certainly in part because they were suited to the reproduction of flesh tones and soft volumes, painted comics (and other proximate techniques) came to connote adult content. Both *Heavy Metal* and *Epic Illustrated* had been marketed as adult publications, which mostly meant a lot of acceptable nudity and graphic violence. Their exceptional technology came to be associated with an exceptional type of content – exceptional in the sense that it was associated with accomplished artists, but also in that it far exceeded the limits set by the Comics Code.⁵ In the mid-1980s, the Marvel Graphic Novel line did not rely as much on nudity, but it did maintain a close connection between

5 The so-called Comics Code was devised in 1954 and offered strict self-censorship rules for comic book publishers, in a bid to counteract the effect of the public campaigns against the medium. The Code banned content of a horrific, sexual, and otherwise transgressive nature. It was revised in 1971 and 1989 but still offered significant constraints to publishers willing to adhere to these rules: comics magazines such as *Mad* or *Creepy* and comics publishers selling exclusively through the Direct Market had no incentive to do so. (Nyberg)

a painterly style, enabled by new printing technology, and ‘what could be termed, for lack of a better term, ‘adult’ content’ (Clarke 203).

This close association between adult content and painted comics was exacerbated by the price of the technology and by the sheer amount of labour which it necessitated, resulting in a high price point, which meant that these comics and graphic novels appealed to committed buyers, i.e. adults. As a result, both *Tapping the Vein* and *Hellraiser* were expensive books, at \$7 and \$5 respectively, when a regular comic book cost about \$1.

These factors meant that painted comics generated a distinct horizon of expectation, on the intersection between quality and adult themes. In the mid-1980s, Marvel in particular had started to leverage these expectations actively, employing a stable of talented artists among whom John J. Muth, Kent Williams, and Bill Sienkiewicz – all three appear in *Hellraiser* – to produce painted works likely to appeal to an adult readership, blurring the line between artist-led comics and licensed properties. The list includes *Dracula - A Symphony in Moonlight and Nightmares* (1986); *Daredevil: Love and War* (1986); *Elektra Assassin* (1986-1987), *Moonshadow* (1985-87) or *Havok & Wolverine - Meltdown* (1988-1989). The latter two are mentioned in *Hellraiser* #2, along with Akira and the Moebius library, as examples of the ‘high standard’ of the Epic line, and *Havok & Wolverine* is also mentioned as an example in the ‘concept and guidelines’ document for the *Hellraiser* comics. These painted comics, which offered a recognizable type of content for specific readers had thus become a quasi-genre unto themselves (Labarre, *Understanding Genres in Comics* 129–45), though published in collections which also included more traditional graphic approaches.

Opting for this painterly style for the Clive Barker comics inscribed them into this putative genre, offering a familiar framing to comics readers and reinforcing an existing publishing strategy. These comics mostly look as if they had been pulled from the pages of *Epic Illustrated* in part because Eclipse and Epic worked from an established pool of talents, but also because they were produced within a certain system of differences and resemblances which constrained their looks. Just as Barker had been made both familiar and outstanding in horror publishing through the forced references to Stephen King, he was made both familiar and outstanding in horror comics through his insertion into the *Epic/Epic Illustrated* lineage.

While *Nightbreed* maintained the same pictorial system (1990-1993), the comics in the Razorline Barkerverse (1991-1993) reverted to standard comic book production, with a standard price tag. Once acculturated in the field of comics, the Barker brand apparently failed to justify the continuing use of an expensive and distinctive style; if anything, the Razorline comics look a lot like titles published by Vertigo, the DC label which became largely synonymous with the British invasion after 1993 and helped bring the ‘illicit thrills’ of horror comic close to respectability (Licari-Guillaume). Painted comics, for their parts, retained their symbolic function even at Marvel, as demonstrated by the success of the nostalgic mini-series *Marvels*, painted by Alex Ross and published in 1994.

Conclusion

All adaptations are to a large extent processes of cultural reframing, whereby a work is transposed not only from a medium to another but also from a cultural context to another. Both *Tapping the Vein* and Epic's *Hellraiser* were published at a very specific time in comics history, and they function as hybrids between the graphic novel format and serial comic books, as overt attempts to balance singularity and seriality, uniqueness and mass-appeal, shock and marketability, adaptation and medium-specificity.

Both Eclipse and Epic undoubtedly hoped to leverage the fame Barker had accrued both in literature and in the movies. Yet, even as they frequently celebrated his visual work, they chose to inscribe these adaptations into an existing paradigm: a system of value which had come into being over the course of the 1980s and which was in full force when the Barker projects were undertaken. This was accomplished through the cultivation of a consistent graphic style, which served to inscribe the Barker adaptations – part of an emerging network – into recognizable and marketable architexts, which remarkably developed over two distinct publishers. Though Barker did not disavow these projects, they came to form a distinct appendage in the Barker brand, mostly removed from the author's work and reluctant to embrace his transition towards non-horror fiction.

These comics thus point to the necessity of defining style at the individual level, but also as a shared token of identification, which serves as a quasi-generic marker, even outside of acknowledged 'house styles'. They demonstrate the role that such broad stylistic choices play in framing reception – in this case as nearly explicit markers for adulthood and ambition – but also in the negotiation of comics' place in a transmedia ecosystem.

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