

‘It is time we went out to meet them’: Empathy and historical distance

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Abstract:

This keynote article considers some methodological aspects of historical audience response. It insists that the sentimental approach of ‘history as rescue’ should be avoided, and examines the usefulness of Paul Bloom’s (2016) concept of empathy and Mark Salber Philips’ (2013) idea of historical distance. I argue that the analysis of audience data should allude to the intensity and rhythm of the response. I compare quantitative and qualitative methods, and suggest that flexibility and inventiveness should be deployed when using both. I raise the issue of the audience’s intellectual and emotional armature, and finally discuss the issue of patterns of memory recall.

Keywords: armature; British cinema audiences; cultural flow; empathy and historical distance; gamekeepers and gamekeepers; history as rescue; intensity and rhythm of audience data and response; memory studies and audience analysis; quantitative versus qualitative methods

In this keynote article, I want to raise some methodological issues about the interpretation of historical audience response. On one level, of course, it looks like a problem which is relatively easily solved. We just need to interrogate the means whereby we have discovered the evidence, and give due cognisance to the randomness of historical survival – to how some materials survive the rubbish skip, or to who was having a bad day when they copied the evidence down. Then it’ll all be fine.

But it’s not as simple as that. For a start, there is the *gatekeeper* issue: all those in charge of the archive, or its curation, have their own loyalties, either institutional or professional. There is also what I want to call the *gamekeeper* issue. What I mean by this is that the person collating the evidence will have their own axe to grind, their own favourite type of bird or gun. I am aware, for example, of my own gender bias in the way I select and interpret textual evidence. With recorded or retrieved memories, it is slightly different, and the gamekeeper issue was dealt with in a subtle way by Annette Kuhn, Daniel Biltereyst and

Philippe Meers in the introduction of their special issue of *Memory Studies* on 'Memories of cinemagoing and film experience' (2017), which was a significant advance in the field.

We need to remind ourselves that the narrative of memories is just that: a narrative. It will often have heroes and heroines, and an intellectual politics hidden deep below the narrative surface. Unless we are wary, our focus and findings will betray too much of ourselves and our desires. And we have to come clean about that. My own research is profoundly affected by my background: female, Marxist, working-class. And by my personality too: easily flattered, and prone to intellectual swashbuckling. That background and personality has, without question, determined my choice of topic and my interpretation of material. I hope I have been able to take account of that throughout my career: but I'm not sure that I have. Nonetheless it is important to stress that our research design and methodology need to be as systematic as possible, and that our documentation should be beyond reproach. This will help to allay the effects of individual bias.

I want to insist that our task – of the recovery and interpretation of audience response from the past – is an act of the historical imagination. And it is crucial too that our own identity and thought-processes be interrogated when we go out to meet the denizens of the past. They are not us, or even like us. Once you 'dig down' into audience taste and its manifestations, you have to recognise the otherness of the past and the people in it, and the fact that even five years in cultural history is a very long time indeed. What is crucial is to **not** engage in a kind of sentimental history – of rescuing or giving a voice to those poor benighted souls who did not have our advantages or the benefit of our hindsight. I was thinking of E. P. Thompson (my tutor for my first PhD) and his evocation of the people to whom he sought to give a voice:

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded followers of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying ... But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were the casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties (1963: 12).

This is *history as rescue*, in which the historian is a sort of moral witness. We must avoid it at all costs. In our own field, we need to recall that the typists and factory workers who consumed the films had considerable visual literacy. They had complex choices to make, and we need to understand their lives if we can. It was they, after all, who were the crucial intermediaries in the bargain between capital and culture. Without them as partners, the whole transaction was meaningless. We do not need to give them a voice: they had one already. We just need to put that voice into an accessible form.

Empathy

At first I thought that all that was needed to be a good historian of taste was a sense of empathy. This is the ability of *Mitfühling* – of fellow-feeling. I thought that if you entered into the mental world of respondents or audiences, it would give your research a sort of moral rationale. But this is nonsense. I found Paul Bloom's *Against Empathy: the case for Rational Compassion* (2016) a very useful corrective. He argues that a sort of **cognitive empathy** has become fashionable in social interactions, where it can lead to sloppy thinking and sentimentality. Empathy can, he argues, simply be a short-cut to self-validation and self-praise; it's not a desire for the other person's perspective, but a desire to approve of your own. And that made me wonder whether there isn't, in some forms of audience analysis, a sort of **aesthetic empathy** going on, which runs counter to historical enquiry. We need to avoid over-identifying with the point of view of the speakers from the past. One way to do that, when looking at interviews or surviving utterances from past audiences, is to give compensating weight to those which don't accord with our own world-view. But it's more sensible and productive to employ a sort of dialectical movement between 'being there' and 'not being there': a kind of *fort/da*, if you like. What I mean by that is that we can get interesting results if we allow our attention to swing quite violently from being absolutely *inside* the period, to being absolutely *outside* it. We can take the evidence empathetically on its own terms, and then broadly in an historical sweep. She is a typist with certain skills and desires: she is also someone whose discourse is framed by her profession, gender, ideological formation and cultural capital. It is unhelpful if we are too close to her, and also if we are too far away. The specific historical context is all.

Historical distance

That brings me to the issue of **historical distance**. Of course, if we want to understand the past, we cannot avoid thinking about the pacts undertaken by the people who lived there. Because of the historically precise location of cinema, the audience responses we garner are broadly post 1900. So it *seems* close in time. But it isn't. It is as far away as the pyramids. And this holds good for audience research about the 1970s as well as about much earlier periods. Mark Salber Phillips, in his masterly *On Historical Distance* (2013), talks about the way in which historical objects or texts accrue a sort of solidity through familiarity and repetition. He suggests four terms of analysis - *form*, *affect*, *summoning* and *understanding* - which might help us to deal with historical phenomena, and help us to distinguish between them. He argues that:

form means the structuring discourses of the text in question

affect means the emotional repertoire invoked by the text

summoning means the mode of address – what might be called interpellation

understanding means the conceptual hinterland which the text alludes to, albeit indirectly.

These are efficacious as a method of assessing the significance and historical determinants of cultural texts. But will they suffice as a means of thinking about the tastes and responses of the past? They will indeed, if we are happy to think about taste-communities as texts. But I'm not: I don't think that linguistic or even structuralist models will help us in this case. The psyche may well, I suppose, be structured like a language: but a taste-community is structured around things like geographical location, employment patterns, educational attainment, gender, and the proportions of class fractions. And **cultural need**. Let us not forget that. What I mean is that cultural texts (film texts, in our case) feed social hungers. They provide both stimulus and support. In a poor community, to choose a film meant that you went without a sandwich. So the film performed a vital function. It encouraged you, for the space of a few hours, to think not about your stomach or your worries, but about your heart and mind. And the visual style and the narrative structure of the film are a vital determinant of audience choice and the intensity of its pleasures.

So leisure consumption is an activity rather than a text. Although its traces may have historically-specific forms of expression and modes of address, we have to see them as fluid, temporary traces of a cultural interaction. Activities require specific types of analysis, ones which are dynamic and not static. What might be helpful is to think of the activity of film response in the following terms: **intensity** and **rhythm**. I offer these terms up speculatively and modestly, but they might have a bit of mileage. Audience utterances might become, at specific junctures, more highly coloured and emphatic, and the rhythm of repetition might become more leisurely or more staccato. And we need to speculate as to why that might be.

Intensity By this I mean *frequency of iteration*. When we are looking at patterns of audience attendance, we need to be alert to those patterns of ebb and flow which cannot be totally explained by the instinct of canny exhibitors. What is the proportion of peaks to troughs? How extreme or gradual is the shift? And audiences can be attracted to films in themselves (the pull factor), but they can also be driven by a feeling of repulsion towards the alternatives that are offered elsewhere (the push factor). Such factors must enter into the consideration of attendance or booking figures. Love for certain film texts can be stimulated by a hatred for other ones. So we need to look at the whole spread of availability of films when we have a run of figures, and that means, as I found in my work on Portsmouth's Regent cinema, ploughing through the film listings of every single week. That can be onerous and tedious, but crucial in the long run.

Rhythm. When we peruse the patterns of takings, how often do certain genres peak and trough, and is there a seasonal or political reason for it? Are there political events which might have an influence? I do not want to suggest that we can lay the patterns of film taste on top of a sketch of political events (like a tracing laid on top of a map). Rather, we will see a rhythm of delay and satiety. The bigger the political event, perhaps, the shorter the delay. I have talked about the audience's *needs*: we also ought to talk about its *moods*. I am aware that it is problematical to try to quantify emotions, but someone has to. And anyway,

moods make money. The Gainsborough melodramas are a case in point. I have written at length on these, and it seems to me that the costume films were profitable because their overall mood (pleasure-seeking, reckless, irreverent) chimed in with the audience's desires. The films allowed or encouraged their viewers to contemplate pleasure without feeling abashed. And, probably, that whole complex interaction of moods was partially a consequence of the ideological settlement of the post-war period.

Quantitative Methods

The above explanatory models, *Intensity* and *Rhythm*, are only really useful when analysing quantitative material. So we now need to remind ourselves of the traditional distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. We are all familiar with them. Work based on the former will analyse numbers: attendance figures, booking patterns. Work based on the latter will analyse utterances: letters, interviews, survey responses. It has sometimes been suggested that the rigour demanded by mathematical evidence is of necessity more severe than that required by verbal evidence. That is not so. It is important to be flexible and inventive when interpreting figures, as I shall show. And we need to be able to group utterances together in a sober manner, and to categorise them by type. Actually the skills required to decode quantitative and qualitative data are the same: flexibility, imagination and a proclivity for patterns.

Lists of attendance figures often seem intractable. We all know that they do not provide an infallible guide to taste, since it is managers and distributors who make the first selection. Nonetheless we have to invent categories, in order to make meaning. That was the first problem I was faced with when I found the huge cache of attendance figures for the Regent Cinema in Portsmouth. It was a big wodge of figures, and I had to make sense of it somehow (quite difficult if you are innumerate). I was very surprised when the following sentences in my *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* piece on the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth in the 1930s attracted no critiques:

In order to progress our analysis, we need a more refined categorisation of the attendance figures. I have no evidence about what the Regent's managers thought constituted a 'hit', but I propose to categorise as a 'runaway hit' anything over 25,000. Let us call anything a 'major success' if it was over 19,000. A 'medium success' can be anything over 15,000, while 'run-of-the-mill' fare can be anything over 10,000. Let us say that a 'total flop' was anything under 10,000 (Harper 2004: 570).

I fully expected someone to squeal 'no, let's NOT say that, actually'. But they didn't. My categorisations seemed to be accepted with a degree of relief. They were what I built the whole edifice on: but they were based on instinct and common sense, rather than on any mathematical model. And that was not because I had none to hand, since I am married to a mathematician and could easily have pressed him into service. No, we don't necessarily

need models of mathematical probity or pie-charts to make sense of attendance figures: we need a sense of what model might work. And that model must be fully grounded in observations, and appropriate to them.

So we need to be flexible and imaginative when faced by rows of figures. Besides categorising them, and considering their **intensity** and **rhythm** (as above), we might perhaps think about the audience's **armature**. I examined the usefulness of this term in my acceptance lecture for my British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS) award, but then I used it to refer to film texts. The **armature**, I argued, was the structure hidden beneath the surface of the work of art: the wood or metal, as it were, that permits it to stand and gives it strength. It is a set of politico-social attitudes which inhere in the text. I want to propose now that a specific armature inheres in audiences too: a set of shared values, a range of attitudes about culture and society. Armature is the irreducible criterion that the group lives by. A set of popularity figures, if carefully interpreted, can give us unparalleled access to the audience's mindscape. Intellectual history resides in lists as well as in objects or cultural texts.

Another thing that quantitative evidence can give us is a sense of **cultural flow**. This is something which qualitative evidence cannot provide. If the listings are broad enough in time, the historian can ascertain changes not just in provision but in taste. There is a sort of 'bunching', or a drag-and-bustle, in popularity figures sometimes – when similar types of film will do well for a short time, and then not at all. An example of this is the 'bad woman' cycle which enjoyed an intense but brief success in Portsmouth in 1948. They performed a number of cultural tasks: *Schadenfreude*, prurience, revenge, regret. A cycle that has such a complex function rarely lasts for long. And we need to take account, too, of the alacrity with which novelty is welcomed, and the length of time it lasts, as compared with less challenging and more comforting films. Attendance figures can help us to ascertain this. They will show the bedrock, old-style favourites, and help us to understand patterns of cultural nostalgia.

Qualitative methods

Let us now turn to these for a comparison. Qualitative materials are the traces and fragments of utterances of audience response that happen to survive. The writing of female scholars Jackie Stacey in *Star Gazing* (1993) and Annette Kuhn in *An Everyday Magic* (2002) laid the ground for work of this type, of course. They gather memories and scraps of paper. Besides interviews and Mass-Observation documents, there are rich pickings in the letter pages of film journals such as *Film Weekly* and *Picturegoer*, and in J. P. Mayer's *British Films and Their Audiences* (1946). Other evidence can be gleaned from diaries, novels and autobiographies of the period. The issue of oral history methodologies and contemporary source materials is very usefully raised by Melvyn Stokes and Matthew Jones in the special issue of *Memory Studies* on 'Memories of cinemagoing and film experience' (2017).

What are the most fruitful methods of analysis for this type of material? It seems to me that when looking at written or oral evidence, we have to consider first what lies *beyond*

the margins of the text. With a filmed interview, we have to look at the way the subject sits and uses their gaze. With a purely oral interview, we have to assess the importance of little coughs and laughs which punctuate and sometimes contradict the verbal stream. For example, Richard Farmer conducted an interview with my mother in 2010, some 5 years before she died, on her film tastes during the war. Some of her utterances were transcribed as follows:

I would travel to London on my own [when she was 8] and my parents would meet me on the train. And then when it was their half day, my father would perhaps walk round Kensington and there was a big shop and I remember my father saying, look, one day we shall all have one of those. It was a television set ... and it was a source of great wonder to me ... now everyone's got a big box of their own and they can show old films ... but then, the cinema was the place to go, it was warm and cosy and you'd got friends round you, always.

In the sound version, this utterance is interspersed with little self-deprecating coughs and laughs. It is clear that the cinema was, for her, a paradise of company and warmth, all the more intensely experienced because she had a wretched home background. The more you know about the person, the more you can interpret the evidence, and so that puts me in a privileged position as an historical interpreter. In another extract, she talks about the working-class in films:

There was only one thing I used to think about British films. Perhaps in *In Which We Serve* and *Mrs Miniver*, they made the working class look stupid you know, and me coming from a very working class background, I sort of thought well, we've got a radio and that sort of thing. We felt slighted a little bit ... Look at Jack Warner. He was in several films and he always made me think well, we're only working class but we don't live in a shambles like that, you know.

Here the cinema becomes associated with a whole set of ideas about class fractions: the 'respectable' working class are foremost in the hierarchy. And a sort of nervous defensiveness and indignant pride runs through the whole discussion, like the word 'Skegness' through a stick of rock. It is clear that in this case, cinematic taste is deeply embedded in notions of class identity and status. That was her armature. That I know for sure, because she was my mother; but in other surviving evidence, where you don't have the personal knowledge, you have to be prepared to undertake guesswork and make speculations and extrapolations about the mental hinterland of the subject. And (to repeat) of course you have to use methods of analysis appropriate to the medium of discourse. As

Alessandro Portelli reminds us (2018), the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee is complex, subtle and unpredictable, and that has to be taken into account.

Consider the piece I wrote on weeping in the cinema with Vincent Porter, in *Screen* in Summer 1996. This was an analysis of a survey of 318 people undertaken by Mass-Observation in 1950, asking what made people cry in the cinema. What was clear was that there was a huge chasm between male and female taste. Of greater interest, because not so predictable, was the marked difference between the film taste and emotional resources of different class fractions. The lower-middle-class were more suspicious, and more narrow in their frame of reference, than the working class or the upper-middle-class. The sentence structures and frames of reference of the varying class fractions were utterly at variance with each other. For example, a twenty-six-year-old draughtsman writes thus:

To me, crying should be a genuine, almost sacred, expression of grief, and not at the beck-and-call of every second-rate artist who is unable to excite the interests of the audience in any other way ... when I cry, I feel like a cow licking a dummy calf, or the hen sitting on dummy eggs (Harper and Porter 1996: 155).

Notice how the whole analysis is shot through with reproductive imagery (the calf, the eggs), and anger. He is cross and defensive. A lot of men in his class fraction write in just the same way. A thirty-year old male customs officer writes thus:

Yes, strangely enough I do occasionally drop a tear in the pictures. When I realise it, of course, I stop ... it is always towards the end (no doubt clever cutting on behalf of the producer). I shall watch out in future (ibid: 156).

Here again we can see that it's not really about the pictures at all. With the male respondents, being moved in the cinema is conflated with notions of the desirability of self-control, and a fear of manipulation. With the females, it has to do with expressing the enjoyment of their own emotional vulnerability. And any linguistic analysis (of syntax, lexis and register) always displays this difference. Male and female respondents in that particular time-frame, 1950, have separate discourses; they are exclusive to their own genders. But as we showed, these are complicated by class fraction. And we have to undertake a thorough discursive analysis to do anything solid at all. That means we have to treat data as material for interpretation: it is never just 'evidence'.

So far, I can tentatively suggest that some historical film responses can be categorised by the type and intensity of emotion. From the evidence of the crying survey, the intensity of response in the women seems to generate a pleasure in *expressivity* for its own sake. They write a lot more than the men, and with considerable *brio* and expressiveness. In the case of the men, the intensity of feeling is not elicited by the film

itself, but by the psychic mechanisms deployed to defend themselves against emotional pain. And this mechanism is *choler*.

Let us return to the historically specific, though. When we analyse surviving audience utterances from any period, we need above all to be sensitive to *idiom*. This is not something superficial: it's just not what happened to be modish at the time. Idiom is a way of signalling whether you are really in the moment or not: whether you are in the Vanguard or the Rearguard of the social and cultural action. And idiom can be gleaned or described through journalism, literature, the language of dress and the body. It is an important criterion when evaluating the nature of audience response. We need to look at the range of cultural quotations with an audience utterance: references to recent events or fashions, and deployments of current slang. We then need to lay those discourses alongside their historical context.

There is something else we need to consider too. And that is the role of the cinema in people's lives, relative to other emotional events. For some time I had been promised the diaries of a Portsmouth lady from the 1930s. She was an avid film-goer, and I knew her family, her profession, her address. Finally I acquired the diaries, and I thought I'd be able to present them triumphantly to the Aberystwyth conference, pulling them out like a rabbit from a hat. Big disappointment. To be sure, the diaries make careful mention of what films she saw, and where and when she saw them. But she says nothing about the films themselves. What she does talk about, at great length, is her feelings for her boyfriend, for her hairstyle, her job, her family. What no-one has done is to try to relate the emotional landscape of the films people liked, to the everyday ebb and flow of their feelings. I would like to try to do that with these diaries. But I might have to be prepared to say something quite unpalatable to film scholars like myself: that actually the films were less important than we hope. And that the rain, or a bad perm, or a loving weekend away, was of far greater significance than the cultural artefacts consumed. But this is gloomy talk.

There remains the issue of memory and forgiveness. Some of the utterances we analyse are made on the spot, as it were: close to the cultural experience. But some are made after the fact, sometimes years later. We need to take that into account, because memory slurs over jagged edges, whether we are remembering films or scenes from our past. It is consolatory. We need to conduct an analysis which is vigilant about memory and social function. In the Crying survey article, Vincent Porter and I noted that one young woman recalled *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (Arthur Crabtree, 1945) in quite a different way from how the film actually was: 'When she died and the husband of one side of her life and her lover of another, stood together, and placed, respectively, a crucifix and a wild rose on her breast, I'm afraid I wept unashamedly' (Harper and Porter 1996: 163). In fact, the film is quite different from this. The husband is in a ratified position inside the house and by the deathbed, and the illicit lover is hidden outside the window. The husband carefully places the crucifix on her chest: the lover, in a last passionate gesture, throws the rose. The respondent has chosen to intensify the film, and to render its morality more loose and permissive. Her memory-work has restructured the film so as to make her feel better about

breaking taboos. Her patterns of recall should be analysed according to her period, gender and class. And of course, as Annette Kuhn reminds us in 'What to do with Cinema Memory' (2011), only then can the issue of the shared subjectivities of the audience be broached at all.

Conclusion

I have insisted on the importance of the socio-historical context for the analysis of audience response, and have suggested that, in the interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative material, we need to be flexible and inventive. I proposed the usefulness of notions like intensity, rhythm, cultural flow and armature for the reading of taste-patterns. I have opened up the issue of memory reconstructions and transformations. In all my proposals, I want to stress that we need to strike a balance between speculation and evidence, and that we should, at all costs, avoid methodological rigidity. That creates a sort of blindness and insensitivity to the complexity of audience response. And, after all, that is what we are here for: to walk out to meet those people from the past who consumed film culture joyfully, regretfully, expectantly. They are us: they are not us. And it is our task to bridge that gap.

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