Much of my recent work, across many periods and types of visual material, has encountered the problem of understanding the diversity of audiences’ experience. I am repeatedly struck by the relative lack of interest that film and media scholars have taken in looking for evidence other than press reviews and subjective interpretations; and my most recent edited book brought together many contemporary methodologies for discovering and evaluating audience response, as well as exploring resistance to such inquiry (Audiences: defining and researching screen entertainment reception, Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

In this presentation, I offer two thumbnail sketches of how an audience-centred approach might illuminate both historic media reception – such as the representation of the Anglo-Boer war in London in 1899 – and a contemporary mass-media phenomenon, James Cameron’s Avatar (2009), the highest-grossing film of all time.

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