Audiences Talking ‘Fear’: 
A Qualitative Investigation

Kerstin Leder

Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies
Aberystwyth University

February 2009

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Aberystwyth University.
DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed

Date

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction are clearly marked in (a) footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed

Date

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed

Date
Details of the Work
I would like to deposit the following item in the digital repository maintained by the Aberystwyth University, or any other authorized for use by Aberystwyth University:

‘Audiences Talking “Fear”: A Qualitative Investigation’

This item is a product of my own research endeavours and is covered by the agreement below in which the item is referred to as “the Work”. It is identical in content to that deposited in the Library.

Non-exclusive Rights
Rights granted to the digital repository through this agreement are entirely non-exclusive. I am free to publish the Work in its present version or future version elsewhere. I agree that the University of Aberystwyth may electronically store, copy or translate the Work to any approved medium or format for the purpose of future preservation and accessibility. Aberystwyth University is not under any obligation to reproduce or display the Work in the same formats or resolutions in which it was originally deposited.

AU Digital Repository
I understand that work deposited in the digital repository will be accessible to a wide variety of people and institutions, including automated agents and search engines via the World Wide Web. I understand that once the Work is deposited, metadata will be incorporated into public access catalogues.

I agree as follows:

♦ That I am the author or have the authority of the author/s to make this agreement and do hereby give Aberystwyth University the right to make available the Work in the way described above.
♦ That the electronic copy of the Work deposited in the digital repository and covered by this agreement, is identical in content to the paper copy of the Work deposited in the Library of Aberystwyth University.
♦ That I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the Work is original, and to the best of my knowledge, does not breach any laws including those relating to defamation, libel and copyright.
♦ That I have, in instances where the intellectual property of other authors or copyright holders is included in the Work, gained explicit permission for the inclusion of that material in the Work, and in the electronic form of the Work as accessed through the open access digital repository, or that I have identified that material for which adequate permission has not been obtained and which will be inaccessible via the digital repository.
♦ That Aberystwyth University does not hold any obligation to take legal action on behalf of the Depositor, or other right holders, in the event of a breach of intellectual property rights, or any other right, in the material deposited.
♦ That I undertake to indemnify the University of Aberystwyth against all action, suits, proceedings, claims, demands and costs occasioned by the University in consequence of any breach of this agreement.

Signature: Kerstin Leder Date: 23 July 2009
Summary:

This thesis presents the processes and outcomes of a cross-national and cross-generational audience study of the varying roles of film and television in relation to people’s fearful perceptions of the world. As well as dealing with viewers’ ‘fright’ responses to individual films or programmes, the thesis provides a detailed critique of Gerbner et al.’s Cultivation Analysis and responds to current generalised discourses of a ‘culture of fear’ and the media’s role within it. The study is based on qualitative material gathered from nine three-generational families in Germany and the UK. Research tools included longitudinal viewing diaries, open-ended questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with participants from 9 to 80 years of age. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically and discursively, with particular attention towards the kinds of ‘fear’ participants made relevant in their talk, as well as the nature and significance of wider socio-cultural processes.

The material discussed in this study suggests that media-related fears are manifold and contain experiential and consequential differences. Importantly, they have to be understood in relation to viewers’ sense of life history, their theories of the media, and their understanding of themselves as emotional beings. Participants in this study inhabited different viewing positions as members of physical and/or ‘imagined’ audiences, which impacted on their interpretive stances towards a range of media material. As a result, ‘fear’ emerged as a fluid and complex concept, and one which contained both personal and social dimensions. These findings directly challenge the assumptions which underlie Cultivation Analysis and related studies on ‘fear cultures’, particularly as regards the centrality of the media text (including its representations of violence), the determinism of socio-demographic variables, and the model of ‘fear’ as singular, negative, cumulative, and intensely privatised.

This study contributes to knowledge in the fields of media and communication studies, film studies, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies audience research.
## CONTENTS

**Volume One**

*Acknowledgements*  

1 Introduction: An Interest in Media-Related Fears and Anxieties  

2 ‘Fear’ and the Media: A Common but Complex Theme  
   2.1 Introduction  
   2.2 Fear Perceptions  
   2.2.1 The Cultivation of Fear: Some Context  
   2.2.2 The Power of Symbols: Project Design and Theoretical Assumptions  
   2.2.3 The Violence Profiles: ‘Fear’ as Cultivation Outcome  
   2.2.4 Gerbner’s Critics  
   2.2.5 A Simple Concept of ‘Fear’  
   2.2.6 Culture(s) of Fear  
   2.2.7 Fear of Crime  
   2.3 Fright Reactions  
   2.3.1 Fear and Film: The Case of Horror  
   2.3.2 Fear as Distress  
   2.3.3 (Actively and Discursively) Performing Fears and Anxieties  
   2.4 Mapping Emotional Responses to Film and Television  
   2.5 Conclusion  
   *Notes*  

3 Theoretical Framework: ‘Fear’ as Emotion and Discourse  
   3.1 Introduction  
   3.2 Emotions  
   3.3 Theoretical Points of Departure  
   3.3.1 Discursive Psychology and Emotion Discourse  
   3.3.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis  
   3.3.3 Points of Incorporation  
   3.4 Conclusion  
   *Notes*  

4 Conducting the Research: A Methodological Account  
   4.1 Introduction  
   4.2 In the Beginning…  
   4.3 Gathering Material  
   4.3.1 Research Tools: Diaries and Open-Ended Questionnaires  
   4.3.2 Research Tools: Semi-Structured Interviews  
   4.3.3 The Search for Participants and its Impact on Research Tools  
   4.3.4 The Cross-National Aspect: Translation Issues and Comparability  

*Acknowledgements*  

1 Introduction: An Interest in Media-Related Fears and Anxieties  

2 ‘Fear’ and the Media: A Common but Complex Theme  
   2.1 Introduction  
   2.2 Fear Perceptions  
   2.2.1 The Cultivation of Fear: Some Context  
   2.2.2 The Power of Symbols: Project Design and Theoretical Assumptions  
   2.2.3 The Violence Profiles: ‘Fear’ as Cultivation Outcome  
   2.2.4 Gerbner’s Critics  
   2.2.5 A Simple Concept of ‘Fear’  
   2.2.6 Culture(s) of Fear  
   2.2.7 Fear of Crime  
   2.3 Fright Reactions  
   2.3.1 Fear and Film: The Case of Horror  
   2.3.2 Fear as Distress  
   2.3.3 (Actively and Discursively) Performing Fears and Anxieties  
   2.4 Mapping Emotional Responses to Film and Television  
   2.5 Conclusion  
   *Notes*  

3 Theoretical Framework: ‘Fear’ as Emotion and Discourse  
   3.1 Introduction  
   3.2 Emotions  
   3.3 Theoretical Points of Departure  
   3.3.1 Discursive Psychology and Emotion Discourse  
   3.3.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis  
   3.3.3 Points of Incorporation  
   3.4 Conclusion  
   *Notes*  

4 Conducting the Research: A Methodological Account  
   4.1 Introduction  
   4.2 In the Beginning…  
   4.3 Gathering Material  
   4.3.1 Research Tools: Diaries and Open-Ended Questionnaires  
   4.3.2 Research Tools: Semi-Structured Interviews  
   4.3.3 The Search for Participants and its Impact on Research Tools  
   4.3.4 The Cross-National Aspect: Translation Issues and Comparability
4.4 The Analysis
4.4.1 Revisiting UK-XIV in Transcript Form
4.5 Conclusion
Notes

5 Making Sense of ‘Fear’ and the Media: Two Interviews in Detail
5.1 Introduction
5.2 Celia and Edwin’s Talk
5.2.1 UK-Interview XIV: Portrait
5.2.2 Topics and Discourses
5.3 Monika and Florian’s Talk
5.3.1 G-Interview XII: Portrait
5.3.2 Topics and Discourses
5.4 Conclusion
Notes

6 Locating ‘Fear’ across Nations and Generations
6.1 Introduction
6.2 Conceptualising Fear(s)
6.3 Fear Dimensions
6.3.1 Scary Pleasures
6.3.1.1 Why and When Fears are Welcome
6.3.1.2 ‘Fearful and Safe’
6.3.1.3 Media as Distraction from Fears or Worries
6.3.2 Fear as Displeasure
6.3.2.1 Fear Dimensions: Shock, Upset, Disturbance, Disgust and Discomfort
6.3.2.2 Worries and Concerns: Fear as ‘Effect’
6.4 Viewing Positions
6.4.1 Rejection
6.4.2 Resistance
6.4.3 Endurance
6.5 National and Generational Traces
6.5.1 National Traces
6.5.2 Generational Traces
6.6 Conclusion
Notes

7 Modalities of ‘Fear’: Reality Dimensions as Complex Moderating Factors
7.1 Introduction
7.2 Modality Judgements
7.3 Comparing Two ‘Worlds’
7.3.1 Overall Patterns and Criteria
7.3.2 Factuality
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.3.3</td>
<td>Emotional Involvement</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Reality Dimensions and Emotional Consequences</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Case Studies</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5.1</td>
<td>The Unknown Known: Negotiations of Humanity</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5.2</td>
<td>The Unknown Unknown: Considerations of the Supernatural</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Conclusion: Towards an Understanding of ‘Fear’ in Context</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Main Findings</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Reflections and More Questions</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References

**Volume Two**

(Appendices)

| A       | Background Information Germany                             | 308  |
| B       | Research Tools and Transcription Code                      | 311  |
| C       | Interview Tables                                          | 316  |
| D       | Interview Summaries                                       | 417  |
| E       | German Excerpts per Chapter                               | 477  |
| F       | Filmography and Television References                     | 488  |
This research was co-funded by the AHRC and a UWA doctoral studentship award. I owe special thanks to Martin Barker and Kate Egan for challenging and encouraging me along the way, as well as to Ernest Mathijs who supervised some of the early stages of this thesis.

A number of people played an important role in the recruitment of participants; Ilse and Helmut Ginsberg, and my mother, Gabriele Leder, require special mentions. I am indebted to Ceris Medhurst-Jones, Kath Williams, Jamie Medhurst, Nick Strong, Dorian Jones, Catrin Davies, Glenys Hartnell, Caz Tricks, Merris Griffiths and Tom O’Malley for their general encouragement and support, as well as for help with translations and recording equipment. Thanks also to Judith Barker for creating access to Aberystwyth’s Medical Library catalogues.

My friends have been sources of inspiration and support. Special thanks to Jiska Engelbert, Lauren Anderson, Kate Egan, Tim Noble, Sarah and Alex Martindale, Lisa Richards, Stephanie Jones, Jamie Sexton, Giselle Bosse, Katrin Biedermann, Bianca Snella, Dennis Göttel, Dinesh Narayan, Peter Stevenson, Andrew Falconer, Scarlett Lloyd-Davis, Holly Malyon, and Hannah Maskell.

I would not have studied in Wales, was it not for my ‘pen-friend’, Ruth Hegarty. I am thankful for your friendship, now and always.

I am grateful for the love and support of Jackie and Keith Mackley, Miriam and Ryan Storey, Ruby and Jim Wiles, Lola, Marion and Bob Wingrove, and the Andersons. My love and special thanks go to my parents, Gabriele and Hans-Werner Leder, to Alexander Leder and Scott Brown, as well as the rest of my family, present and gone. This thesis would not have been written without the support of James Mackley.

Finally, I thank all participating families in Germany and the UK for sharing their thoughts and ‘fears’ with me.