CHAPTER FIVE
Making Sense of ‘Fear’ and the Media: Two Interviews in Detail

5.1 Introduction
This chapter focuses on two interviews, G-XII and UK-XIV, in order to exemplify the complexities of the kinds of ‘fear’ talk generated for this thesis, and to open up a range of issues and dimensions in participants’ talk, which will be interrogated in the subsequent analytic chapters. Emphasis thus lies on detail rather than overall patterns, though some wider conclusions are made. The two interviews were conducted with the parent generation of the Auer and Anderson families. They were chosen for detailed analysis because they constitute particularly rich and multi-faceted exemplifications of the remaining corpus of material. I begin with the discussion of Celia and Edwin’s talk (UK-XIV). For reasons of space, an abbreviated version of their interview portrait, including some contextual information, can be found below. The relevant interview table has been made available in Appendix C (pp. 321-30).

5.2 Celia and Edwin’s Talk
5.2.1 UK-Interview XIV: Portrait
This interview was carried out with Celia (45) and Edwin (47) on 26th July, 2006. It was conducted around the family’s dining table at their home in Aberystwyth and lasted approximately 90 minutes (53 pages of single-spaced transcript). The Andersons had been recruited through snowballing via an already participating family. I gathered from informal conversation that Edwin was employed by a bank, while Celia was working at a local secondary school. In his final questionnaire, Edwin describes himself as a ‘private family person’. His immediate and wider family mean the world to him. Everything he does is based on his desire for his wife and children to have the best possible life he can provide for them. He is a man of high moral values, and he hopes that these will rub off on his children, Matt (19) and Nina (17), and enable them to grow into well-balanced people who will be
universally liked and respected. Celia describes herself as a ‘friendly, outgoing, caring person’. She is a hard worker who likes to please. Her family is the most important thing to her.

Both Celia and Edwin were willing to talk and reflect at length about their viewing, often taking it upon themselves to develop conversation topics further and to even ask their own ‘interview questions’. On the whole, I walked away with the confidence of having enabled the couple to set much of the agenda. One recurrent theme in the interview was Edwin’s description of what he calls his ‘phobias’. Twice considering himself half-jokingly as a ‘sensitive’ or ‘soft’ soul, Edwin particularly refers to his fear of crowds or confined spaces, which he partly puts down to his memory of the news coverage of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster. Celia also considers herself a very ‘emotional person’: Television programmes, even the news, can cause her to cry, and she has one particular ‘phobia’, that of drowning, which made it difficult for her to watch a televised water stunt by David Blaine. The memory of the stunt even initiated some anxiety when Celia went swimming the day after viewing the programme. Interestingly, the David Blaine programme was enjoyed by both participants, yet came with a lot of mixed emotions. The couple describe the programme simultaneously as ‘disturbing’, ‘entertaining’, ‘captivating’, ‘horrid’, ‘horrific’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘incredible’, ‘fantastic’, ‘anxiety-making’, and ‘bizarre’. They were ‘hooked’, ‘scared’, ‘panicking’, and ‘concerned for [Blaine’s] well-being’. And for the main part, they could not tell whether what they were watching was fact or fiction.

Fears about one’s children and grandchildren stood at the forefront of discussion for most participating (grand)parents in this study, though the teenagers also voiced their concerns about the well-being of their families, albeit in somewhat less protective way. Whilst Edwin mainly speaks of his personal fears during this interview, most of Celia’s fears are about her children. The couple also describe some differences in their emotional behaviour in that Celia would speak openly about her fears and worries, while Edwin would often keep them to himself. As such, he is described by the couple as a more introverted person in everyday life,
although this was not particularly evident during the interview. Edwin’s phobias have in the past resulted in panic attacks and fainting fits. Yet it becomes clear through the course of the conversation that his fears constitute something which can ultimately be managed, at least in certain situations. As with many fears and phobias, time is described as a healer in the sense that over time fears become less prevalent, or easier to deal with. This includes both personal fears and the kinds of worries and concerns (or even just heightened levels of consciousness) which Edwin and Celia put down to knowledge gained from media output. For instance, Edwin’s reservations about flying and his tendency to observe fellow passengers for conspicuous behaviour in the aftermath of 9/11 eased off when attacks of that kind ceased to happen. Although he does still not enjoy the prospect of flying, his mind is now less occupied with terrorist threats than with the general risk of dying in a plane crash.

Both are keen viewers of some thrillers and horror films. As discussed below, Celia’s arguments suggest that fear responses underlie certain rules of morality. There are moments when the combination of ‘pleasure’ and ‘fear’ is appropriate and normal, and others when it could be considered as morbid or deviant. Despite their enjoyment of horror suspense, the couple repeatedly refer to their dislike of ‘gratuitous violence’. Edwin and Celia dismiss the ‘blood and gore’ and the ‘violence for violence’s sake’ of such films as Pulp Fiction or Freddy versus Jason, and instead much prefer old-style horror or the kinds of films that suggest rather than blatantly display the horrific. Films are more intense for them if they are not too graphic. They like it when a film shocks or startles them, or makes them jump. What they object to is seemingly unnecessary violence of which, they argue, there is far too much on film and television these days. The distinction between ‘these days’ and the past forms a recurrent reference in the couple’s ongoing narratives of change; change in media material from wholesome to trivial, change in audience expectations, change in the meanings of objects (e.g. the knife), and change in the meanings of childhood. Throughout the interview, the couple display a
concern with media effects, which is bound up in complicated considerations of ‘reality’.

In articulating their worries, Ed and Celia draw upon stories and issues they have encountered in the media, and in parts it seems that the media play a crucial role in creating their anxieties. Yet, as the discussion of past and present turns into an organising discourse, a construction of a (not always unambiguous) worldview, it is also possible to read these participants’ use of media material as a way of strengthening their main argument (i.e. societal change), through factual evidence derived from newspaper reports and other authoritative sources. The couple mostly agree that things have changed, and they can see some of the consequences of this. There is less certainty as to why and how things have changed. Interestingly, and this is mirrored by the interview with Celia’s parents and other parents and grandparents in this study, the couple sometimes take the force out of their relatively grim argument by referring to their age and to the fact that their parents used to say the same thing. Here, being pessimistic (or ‘fearful’) is constructed as a by-product of getting older, and as something participants felt the need to ridicule in this context.

Prompted to speak about news reports which had bothered the couple in the past, they focus particularly on the kinds of images that have stayed with them over time. There is some bewilderment about the fact that these images were caught on camera in the first place. Regarding incidents in Northern Ireland and the Jamie Bulger case, in particular, Celia’s comments show some negotiation of what it means – or should mean – to be human. Again this seems related to the couple’s image of the world as a whole. While acknowledging that their knowledge and memory of the events might derive from a rise and change in reporting, they begin to describe the incidents as signs of the time, as indicators of a worsening world.

Both Celia and Edwin point out that my study made them ‘dwell’ on things more than they would otherwise have done. In the course of everyday life, they say, they often file the things away that disturb or upset them. They also became more conscious of the fact that ‘real’ stories (news, documentaries, dramas based on
actual events) scared and stayed with them a lot more than any purely fictitious work, though especially Celia points out that ‘some fiction does [scare and] get to [her]’, possibly because of a feeling that it might mirror life. Their emotional involvement with upsetting or disturbing material was often one of empathetic imagination in which they put themselves into the situation of people on screen and imagined how they would feel in their place. This is particularly evident in their discussion of stories that involve some kind of family tragedy. Especially Celia puts emphasis on her role as a mother and the kinds of emotional consequences entailed in having and ‘fearing’ for children. ‘What if… it happened to them?’ is a recurrent question and interpretive framework.

5.2.2 Topics and Discourses

The interview table reflects the couple’s preoccupation with ‘reality dimensions’ (RD) and media violence (mostly as part of talk about ‘media content’ (MC), but also about ‘media impact’ (MI)). In order to illustrate the active thought and argumentation processes that have transpired in the interview, it is necessary to scrutinise a number of passages for the discursive strategies employed. Some of these passages are lengthy and have been broken down into shorter excerpts. The following three excerpts, for instance, constitute one continuous stretch of talk (Table UK-XIV, section #1, p. 321-3).³

K: You mentioned it with films that you quite enjoy thrillers, and you mention it with, with TV as well, erm… You wrote, for example, that you find’…, you quite like the suspense..
C: Hmm...
K: … The drama and the adrenaline rush. And that it’s exciting and although scary it’s something you’re prepared for..
C: Yeah.
K: So in that way you find it satisfying… Can you say a bit more about what you like about mystery and… thrillers?
C: [high-pitched] I’ve always liked, I’ve always liked the, the scary bits, but when you know it’s scary but it’s… it’s not real. So, an’…, an’ you can… accept the scariness of it because it’s… it’s just happening on the TV screen, it’s not… real. […] So that,, otherwise you sound awful, [laughing] if you enjoy
being scared, you know, it sounds really… [pause] But because it’s not real… then it, it’s… [laughing] it’s okay to derive pleasure from it, I suppose.

Celia constructs her pleasure as something dispositional – she has always liked the scary bits. Yet at the same time, she qualifies her gratification as related to the kind of harmless material that is created to be entertaining and, as such, is not directly linked to real life. It is ‘just’ happening in the world of television, and television’s purpose is to divert. It is clear from Celia’s talk that scariness in itself is not automatically a positive, enjoyable, or ‘likeable’ experience, and that her response could in fact be seen as ‘awful’ or illegitimate in other contexts and in the eyes of peers. The acceptability of televised scariness is reflected in Edwin’s mention of ‘tolerance’ towards media material:

E: Yo’, your tolerance does grow, mind, I have to say, over the years, cos when we when… when we were younger things like..
C: [gasps] ‘Friday the 13th’!
E: … ‘The Werewolf’ and… ‘Dracula’, and all those sort of things were the scary things..
C: Yeah…
E: … when they went out, they’re almost laughable now. It’s all mo’… it’s all moved on a pace [laughs] since then.
K: Yeah…
E: … You’ve just come to accept it more as, as time goes on, you accept and tolerate..
C: And we expect…
E: … [indist.]
C: … more, sort of… we expect more of a storyline now than years ago, where it was just… you know, ‘Dracula’ was scary, whereas now..
E: ‘Frankenstein’ was there as well…
C: … But you’ve gotta have, you know, bigger and better stories, haven’t you… to, to make them plausible or to hold your attention, I suppose.
K: Yeah… what, what kind of… How, how do you think the storylines have changed?
C: Th’, the…
E: … They’ve become more complex, I think. […] Whether that means…, cos pe’… cos people are… a bit cleverer now, and they can [laughs] they can cope with them and understand them a bit more, I don’t know. Cos years ago they used to be much more simplistic, didn’t they?
C: Hmm.
E: I think.
C: Yes, they were, *definitely*.
E: The plots were very... very thin..
C: And the special effects were no’... nothing like... they are today, I mean they... But I, I [stretched] suspect we’ve all become better at recognising that these things that look very real... but they’re not, we know... [quickly] No, it used to be like cartoons, [stretched] cartoons are gratuitous, aren’t they, *really*, if you think about it. But as kids, you’re brought up with it, and nobody gets hurt. They’re cartoon characters, nobody ever dies, they look like they died, and they’re up again doing... And I think that’s how it’s moved on with... with... horror sort of things and... [...] We’ll all accept more now, don’t we?

This stretch of talk is exemplary of the kinds of joint narratives Edwin and Celia construct for much of the conversation. Both speak with a sense of authority, having witnessed and lived through the changes in media output and audience expectations. Yet there is almost a contradiction in their positioning towards these developments, as they move between a discourse of putting up with more scary material and the demand on modern storylines to keep their attention. Their talk implies a notion of ‘desensitisation’ in that storylines need to be more demanding and complex to also be ‘scary’.

One particularly interesting aspect of this stretch of talk is the way in which films like *Friday the 13th*, *The Werewolf*, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* come to stand for a very specific, almost universally recognisable kind of film – formerly scary, perhaps shocking, now dated and ‘almost laughable’. There is a real condensation and simplification of horror film history taking place in this talk, with a 1980s slasher film (which at the time of its release was denounced by critics for its gratuitous and immoral elements) put alongside 1930s Hollywood classics (or their various Hammer reincarnations from the 1950s onwards). Used in this way, they serve as what could be called ‘cultural measures’, albeit rather broad and ambiguous ones. Their employment can be compared to a recent conceptualisation of ‘modalities of perception’, as put forward by Barker et al. in their introductory chapter to *Watching The Lord of the Rings – Tolkien’s World Audiences* (2008). Concerned with the ways in which participants relate the world(s) of fiction, in this case Middle Earth, to their own worlds and thus ‘attach a kind of reality’ to Peter Jackson’s *The Return of the King*,...
the authors move away from a mere distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ and draw attention to four aspects or modalities of reality/fiction interrelations: the degree to which participants attach ‘reality’ to their responses, the kind of criteria they measure against, in which context they do so, and to what salience or significance (2008: 12f, original italics). It is in the second layer of modality that I see a relevance to specific films being used as cultural measures or categories. Although ‘reality’ issues are not directly made relevant in Edwin’s talk about Dracula and Friday the 13th, this stretch of the conversation is firmly embedded within negotiations of ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’, as can be seen in Celia’s return to distinguishing between things that ‘look real’ but are not. It is here that some important thought processes transpire in the talk, and Celia employs a second cultural measure, that of cartoons.

Her comments are complicated. She acknowledges that the arrival of more sophisticated special effects has meant that things now look more real and are more convincing, whereas old-style horror films have the same properties as cartoons in that they are so obviously unreal. Yet at the same time, there is a level on which even cartoons have you thinking someone is dead – ‘they look like they died’ – only to then make use of cartoon-world conventions by which characters survive otherwise fatal incidents. Celia links growing up with cartoons and getting to know these conventions to audiences’ understanding of modern day horror effects; even if something looks real, we know it is just an effect, and this is important for aforementioned enjoyment (of ‘scariness’). What complicates her argument is the reference to ‘gratuitous’ violence, something she would not usually endorse but which is again ‘acceptable’ within the parameters of cartoons. In a complicated way, then, Celia problematises modern-day thrillers and horror films because they can come close to real life, yet takes the force out of this argument by suggesting that we still recognise them as fiction and thus accept more than we otherwise would. Old-style horror has lost its initial ‘scariness’, because we are now accustomed to a different level of story-telling and to new technologies. A very clear and important distinction between reality and fiction is given in the third stretch of talk:
E: But it’s just like you said, the reality is you know it’s not real... It’s all makebelieve, and you know the person didn’t die, you know the person wasn’t really [laughing] injured.

C: That’s why the programme about the Moors murders was far more... real, cos you knew that was based on reality, and that did actually happen, and that... I suppose we make the differentiation between reality and... [pause] and fiction, I suppose.

K: Yeah... What was it about the Moors... programme that... really bothered you? ... Was it the way it was being portrayed or the... the story itself?

E: Well, I think the fact tha’, tha’, that individuals could behave in that way, to be honest with you. That there were people out there, [quickly] there are probably out the’, people out there now!... Behaving like that...

C: ... And that the woman herself, Myra Hindley, appeared... so normal on, on screen. You know, she was a loving sister and a daughter and a... a loving aunt and, and... she could... be this.

E: And she accepted it all.

C: Hmm.

E: It’s incredible. Absolutely incredible.

C: And I suppose because we remember it from the new’, although it, it’s really back in... you know, we were brought up hearing the Moors murderers and, err... and to have it portrayed like that is..

E: And it was the, the poor old parents whose child never got found, that was the other one, and to this day hasn’t been found. And she went to her grave... not knowing where her son... was buried.

C: And as parents you can...

E: ... And you think to yourself, what if..., well, we did, didn’t we?

C: Hmm.

E: You know, if that was us! In that pos’, in that situation with one of our children, how would we feel?... And you feel desperate! You know, and then you think to yourself, well yeah, it did happen... And those people went through all of that. [...] And it’s quite... whereas if that had been a video that we got from the Pier [local video shop]... with some, you know, fictitious event, it wouldn’t...

C: ... It wouldn’t have the same impact...

E: ... It wouldn’t have the same effect.

This is, then, where this stretch of conversation ends, at the conclusion that a fictitious story would not have the same impact on Edwin and Celia as any reality-related, ‘incredible’ story such as that of the Moors murders. As soon as something ‘scary’ or ‘bothering’ is evidently based on real life, there is little room for enjoyment. Interestingly, the couple do not go into detail here as to what the Moors murders were about. They neither discuss their real-life dimensions, nor do they
describe what exactly happened in the docu-drama referred to (See No Evil). The actual details of the events, the fact that the story was about child murders in the 1960s, are assumed to be common knowledge, part of a shared culture. Having the story portrayed on television, having one’s notion of the events filled with images and character presentations, added a level of engagement with the incidents that the couple had not previously encountered. And, as such, it sparked a number of thoughts and emotional responses.

One such emotional response is that of a level of empathy, accompanied by the ‘what if...’ element, a process of putting oneself into the position of characters on screen, in this case the people who we know have lived through the events. Celia constructs herself as inhabiting a mental space that is particularly close to that of the distressed parents; as a parent herself, she finds it easy to imagine what the Moors parents would have gone through. Note the references to Myra Hindley as an apparently loving family person who could ‘be this’. There is a sense of transformation, if nothing else, from somebody human (a loving family person, like Celia herself) to something else, someone evil and inhumane. Empathy, of course, is an emotion much associated with human virtue. It is by siding with the Moors parents that Celia and Edwin distance themselves from any of the inhumane actions they have had to witness on screen.

The ‘what if...’ approach thus links the fictionalised, though ‘real’, story to what could be called the parents’ real-life emotional imagination. Edwin’s present-tense expression of despair attaches an additional sense of immediacy to his responses. Knowing that people have gone through what Edwin and Celia can only describe as ‘incredible’ events, makes it plausible that people like the Moors murders are probably ‘out there now’. The way in which Celia and Edwin leave sentences unfinished in this stretch of talk (‘she could be this..’, ‘to have it portrayed like that is..’, ‘and it’s quite..’) either hints at their inability or their discomfort to fully articulate their responses.

Throughout the conversation, however, the boundaries between real life and fiction, make-believe and stories based on reality, become increasingly blurred.
Below, Edwin and Celia make sense of the relationship between the ‘real’ world and that on film or television (see #9, p. 327f). Asked what the one or two key differences were between the world as portrayed on film and TV and the world we live in, Celia pauses, and then replies:

C: The world we live in is violent and it is destructive and it… there are horrors in it… But we’re protected from it living where we do, aren’t we, don’t we? We are… we know it goes on. But again it’s, it’s a bit similar, I suppose, to the films, because we are where we are. We live where we do. Although we know it’s real… [pause] we are very protected from it, aren’t we?

The violence or horrors of the world outside the ‘safe haven of Aberystwyth’ (my words) are likened with violent or horrific incidences in films. In both cases, ‘realness’ derives from ‘plausibility’ – some fictional horror may be possible in real life, and some horror does happen and gets reported in real life. In both cases, Celia and Edwin are only loosely connected to them, either through the news (docudramas and documentaries) or their imagination. If one was to link horror and violence back to potential fearfulness, then Celia’s sense of geography is particularly important. Following Celia’s comments, Edwin begins to entertain the idea of the media’s possible impact on real life, which leads him to consider a general decline of society:

E: I think probably the… TV and programmes we’ve got now… that actually… [pause] creates… some of the… culture that we have… today! The way they portray things on telly actually has a…
C: … Fiction, you mean, the fiction…
E: … has an… yeah, actually has an influence on the way people lead their normal day-to-day lives… People watching all these things on TV..
C: It’s almost become [laughing] self-fulfilling then.
E: Yeah… cos… years and years ago when TV first came on board… it was all… fun, and it was informative, and… you know…
C: … Wholesome [chuckles],
E: Yeah… and it, and it helped to develop people… whereas now… the TV that we’re shown, or, funny, we were saying this the other night, weren’t we, in terms of the types of programming that are on TV now. […] The informative programmes and news programmes, the cultural programmes… they’re all falling by the way side. All the stuff on TV now… is…
C: ... reality stuff...
E: ... it’s reality, and it’s trivia, and it’s... it’s sex, violence, it’s... all that...
C: ... Swearing and... Used to have the watershed, didn’t they? Nine o’clock...
E: ... Yeah...
K: ... Hmm...
E: ...Yeah.
C: And, and now what kids watch... you know, their, even their, their own TV programmes have got...
E: It’s all gone out of balance now. And... as a result of that, stuff that’s on TV now, we’re seeing it more and more in... general day-to-day life!... Well, it’s not by accident... you know. TV, generally, has be’, has become... well, it’s big business anyway. [...] You know, you want people to watch your programmes... So you put on TV what you think people wanna watch. [...] Erm, and...
C: ... So does reality reflect what we’ve watched on TV, or is it... the other way round?
[long pause]
E: Don’t know, I suppose it depends where... again, what part of the country you live in, I suppose... Cos... wherever you live... and wherever y’... you’re used to, in your normal day-to-day life... Half the stuff that is on TV, you’ll never ever come into contact with in your life... If you didn’t see it on TV... you would never confront it... Like here, if you didn’t have a telly, half the stuff that goes on outside in the rest of the world, you’d never come into contact with.
C: Yeah.
E: But because you see it all on TV, some of that then gets replicated in our... community.
C: Hmm.
E: I don’t know. [long pause] TV has developed, and it is different now...
C: ... And there are fewer differences now...
E: ...[indist.]
C: ... aren’t there, between... TV... horror and... reality.

Celia starts off by being inquisitive, tentative, and somewhat self-doubting in her questions and statements, leaving Edwin to recount the status quo as he sees it, though he, too, is thinking out loud rather than providing solid views. Celia’s quiet laughter indicates that she is not entirely convinced by their mutually constructed argument, and that perhaps she worries about coming across as too conservative (note her chuckles when describing past TV output as more ‘wholesome’). It is towards the end of this stretch of talk that the couple return to some form of joint narrative as Celia, gradually won over by Edwin’s elaborations, begins to join in the
general discourse of change and media effects. Still, it is Celia who questions the direction of causal effects of changes in media output and reality. Edwin’s explanation for the media’s impact on society is based on a cynical appropriation of television as big business rather than what it used to be, an educational tool. The couple make seemingly self-evident links between that and the change of output towards reality programming, trivia, sex, violence, and swearing. Celia’s reference to the disappearing watershed particularly hints towards the need to protect children from harmful content, thus seemingly forming part of the discourses she adopts as a parent. Her final statement, that there are fewer differences now between horror and reality, problematises the boundaries between fiction and the real world and, thus, by extension, her enjoyment of some horror and thrillers. The distinctions between reality and fiction begin to collapse.

The couple’s talk resembles a seemingly universal public discourse of change and decline as, for instance, identified in numerous writings by Geoffrey Pearson (see Pearson, 1983; 1984; or his more recent article in The Guardian, 2006). The author traces talk about falling standards, juvenile delinquency and memories of better days gone by as far back as the 1800s, demonstrating how societal decline has historically been linked to various forms of popular entertainment, from 19th Century Penny Dreadfuls to the introduction of cinema and radio, the music halls of the 1950s, or the video nasties of the 1980s (see also Barker, 1884; Egan, 2007; Petley, 2001). For Edwin, television is identified as such a source of influence, as are video games and the internet in other parts of the conversation. Yet, his argument is somewhat contradictory here. Wanting to validate the discourses of change and media effects, he proposes that media content gets ‘replicated in [their] community’ at the same time as arguing that the couple are removed from everyday horrors by living in a place like Aberystwyth. Their everyday experience, how they feel about living in Aberystwyth, thus differs from, and complicates, their general view of media and society.

In the following excerpt, the couple’s concern with media effects continues to problematise other statements. Initially, Celia again prefers there to be clear and
obvious differences between the real world and that on film and television. Thereafter, the couple’s arguments become more complicated (#10, p. 328f). Again, a longer and complex section is cut down into smaller passages for analysis:

K: How important, would you say, is it to you that... whether there are differences or similarities between... the real world and the world on film and TV?
C: I prefer it to be big a difference!... [pause] I prefer it to be obvious where reality is and where... you know, this is just... fiction, and this is fact.
E: I quite happily see TV being... completely different to normal day-to-day life... as long as it was on... [pause] the, the, the non-harmful things, if you like... So I quite happily watch programmes where you see people that... have made millions and millions of pounds, and they live a... million, you know, million dollar life style and what have ya..
K: Right...
E: ... and watch stuff like that, cos it’s not harmful to anybody... But to watch TV and see lots and lots of violence and... and that sort of thi’... that just doesn’t appeal to me in any shape or form.
C: So what is it? S’., s’., but, but... we can accept the difference between... we can watch... horror on TV and know it’s... horror on TV... [pause] We know it’s just., cos we said it doesn’t affect us so much, does it?... But fictitious stuff doesn’t affect you as much as the real stuff, so... [long pause] Doesn’t everybody feel like that?

My question is purposefully open, and Celia responds with a statement of personal preferences, specifically with a rejection of reality-close programmes and an inclination towards material that is detached from reality. Yet her comment immediately moves into a different direction and towards the significance of being aware of the boundaries between fact and fiction. The ‘just’ before fiction again indicates that fiction is deemed less important than fact, perhaps less moving or distressing. Her subsequent contemplation on audiences’ abilities to accept ‘horror on TV’ as ‘horror on TV’ turns what sounds like a personal preference into a concern about fellow viewers. Others’ abilities to draw lines between reality and fiction are questioned, not her own.

Edwin’s comments follow a slightly different, though related path. He also initially appears to answer my question but employs both a reformulation of ‘reality’, as it is transformed into his own reality or ‘normal day-to-day life’ (people
who live the million-dollar life style exist, but Edwin’s reality does not reflect theirs), and a further condition to his argument: He points out that he ‘quite happily’ watches television that is different from everyday life, as long as it is not ‘harmful’. If one was to follow Edwin’s line of argument to a logical conclusion, then representations of violence that are particularly removed from real (anyone’s everyday) life, are considered harmful. This goes along with the couple’s dislike of graphic and ‘gratuitous violence’ (see #7, p. 327), and their preference for more subtle, almost invisible representations of violence that are relevant to given narratives. This, then, is not so much a matter of reality versus fiction as it is a question of the style and nature of the violence depicted on screen.

Edwin and Celia’s responses are clearly caught up in earlier stretches of conversation. They are less concerned with personal preferences towards differences and similarities between media and real life, and more with consequences and impacts. Thus, the participants explore how they or others might be ‘affected’ by what they see on screen, or how TV might affect their everyday lives.

Returning to a cruder distinction between material that is based on fact and purely fictitious films or programmes, Celia again suggests that fiction affects her (and Edwin) less than the ‘real stuff’. With some uncertainty, she entertains the idea that others might be just as capable of distinguishing between real and mediated ‘horrors’ (and violence). It is here that Edwin takes on the role of the respondent to her questions:

E: I don’t know, cos we, we can say that because we’ve grown up with two sides of it... We’ve grown up with it... Children now... start off with it... at this high level... We started off at a much lower level, so we’ve sort of... grown up with it, and we’ve got an opinion as to whether it’s... better or worse now than it used to be... But kids coming into it now... that’s what they know, that’s their starting point. [pause] They don’t know that it used to be... a lot less... heavy television, it used to be a lot more light-hearted... [pause] All they can do is look what’s on now.

C: Hmm.

E: So it’s not a strict comparison, I don’t think.

[pause]
K: But things like the, the hospital programmes, for example, you mention, that is, that is very close to real... life...
C: ... Yeah... Hmm...
K: ... again, on the other hand, isn’t it?
C: Hmm.
E: Yeah, I don’t think that would... [pause] cause anybody real... harm, or effect, I can’t imagine people’s... feelings on it differing greatly now... to whether you saw it now, or whether you saw it twenty years ago... I don’t think. I think people who wa’,... people who watched... ‘Casualty’ or ‘Holby City’ twenty years ago would probably feel the same way then... as we do about it now. In terms of ooh... [indist.] blood.
C: And moral dilemmas.
E: Yeah.
K: Hmm.
E: Cos that is..., well, I’d never say it’s real life, or not as realistic as real life, I know, but... erm... But, no, I don’t think people would... see it any different now as to how they do... did twenty years ago.
K: Hmm... [long pause] Yeah, I just mean cos you, cos you were both saying you’d rather have a big difference between what is shown...
C: ... Hmm...
K: ... on... as long as it’s not... [pause] violence, I suppose.
E: Yeah, you’ll have got that message across from me, I..., it’s the violent thing I..., that I... that I have real difficulty with.
K: Watching, hmm...
C: ... Hmm...
E: ... On TV, I have real difficulty with that... Err... cos as I far as I..., there’s actually no need for it... [laughs] For half the s’..., half the violence you see on TV there’s absolutely... no need for it.
C: And the [stretched] swearing as well, you know...
E: ... Yeah...
C: ... some of the shows, these reality shows, they’re just bleepin’ everything out all the time, because they...

[pause]
K: [amused] But then again it’s meant to be reality.
C: I know, I know.
K: [laughs]...
C: ... Yeah, [laughing] we’re just contradicting ourselves really, then, aren’t we?...
K: ... Yeah, I don’t know, that’s..
C: Hmm...
E: ... Yeah, but that’s the point, you see. Time moves on, doesn’t it? Reality moves on. What’s, what’s real now..
C: That is real, people do swear...
E: ... would not... would not have been real twenty years ago... Things have happened in the meantime... to change people... to make it become reality. And a lot of that is down to television.

The above constitutes less a joint narrative and more a conceptual exploration of media effects, in which Celia mostly queries her own beliefs whilst Edwin tries to provide logical answers to her questions. Both participants obviously deal with a complicated and contested subject matter, and much of their talk again involves them ‘talking out loud’. Edwin employs a framework of media effects that considers the ‘level’ of television violence to have steadily increased over the years. Audiences’ point of entry will determine what they consider the norm, which suggests that today’s young people miss the historical context to be able to critically distance themselves from the screen. They do not, in Edwin’s view, have the former ‘light-hearted’ comparison to today’s ‘heavy’ television. As such, children are seen to almost live in a bubble, without any notion of days (or films and programmes) gone by. Interestingly, his own children, Matt and Nina, take the opposite view, considering their parents and grandparents as more easily affected (‘scared’) and as less able to deal with specific media material (cf. Chapter Six).

At this point, we begin to talk at cross purposes. My challenge of Celia and Edwin’s comments in the light of a, to me, reality-close programme like Holby City is based on their initial voicing of preferences for reality-removed programming; I ask for clarity about what seems like a contradiction. Edwin, on the other hand, is still concerned with media effects and the explicitness or pertinence of ‘violence’. To him, hospital programmes have not changed much over the years, and so people’s responses to them are equally unaltered. Accordingly, they constitute an exception to his rule of changes in media output. Yet his explanation is not unambiguous: ‘I’d never say it’s real life, or not as realistic as real life, I know, but... erm... But, no, I don’t think people would... see it any different now as to how they do..., did twenty years ago.’ What I propose he intends to say here is that he believes hospital programmes to be closer to real life than other aforementioned programmes (e.g. Pulp Fiction and Freddy vs. Jason), while he is clearly keen to demonstrate an
awareness of their constructedness. By implication, their violence content has remained unchanged over the years and, although they might contain some form of blood and violence, they are of the less harmful kind (because they form part of the narrative and, as Celia suggests, address moral dilemmas or messages).

Edwin’s comments about the redundancy of most television violence again lead Celia to extend the discussion to other unwelcome developments, in this case the amount of swearing taking place in reality TV programmes. Instead of constructing a possible argument against the ‘reality’ of ‘reality TV’, as could have been expected in the light of Edwin’s comments on hospital programmes, he objects to the notion of a possible contradiction, and instead validates his effects theory: Time and reality move on, things change, people change; and much of that is down to television. In the light of his earlier comments, however, he identifies Celia and himself as critical observers of these developments. Although they now accept more ‘scariness’, as mentioned above, they – like the hospital programmes – have personally remained untouched by media and society’s changes.

Importantly, the distinction between reality and fiction does not hold for the couple. At least it is impossible to retain such gross generalisations as Celia’s preference for a ‘big difference between the real world and that of television’. These questions of the boundaries between fact and fiction are inevitably entwined with worries about other viewers, which are themselves bound up with specific kinds of media violence. It is puzzling that Edwin argues against violence that, in its style or nature, is far removed from real life. Although these views are well-known – people in the public eye have often worried about the abstractness of violence, as well as the question of whether impressionable viewers are prone to living out fantasies in real life – they go against Celia’s comments at the beginning of the interview, in which she insists on the enjoyment of programmes that are clearly ‘unreal’. It is easier for her to deal with scary material if she can draw a distinction rather than a relation to real life.
In a subsequent section (#11, p. 329), this is initially reinforced as Celia argues that fiction can still ‘scare’ her, because it can mirror real life. My provocation to the couple considers film and TV’s entertaining properties:

K: ... [...] some people I spoke to... erm, mentioned that they find film and TV is just entertainment really, and... so any fearful responses are completely unfounded.
C: [unsure] Hmm...
K: ... Would you... agree, or rather disagree with that?
C: No, I would disagree, I can understand saying that, and that is a... a grown up and mature and sensible thing to say, and I’m sure [Matt] would... probably say that. Erm... [pause] but no, things do scare me.
E: Yeah, I., well, it depends again what programme he’s talking about. I would assume the people that have said that don’t watch the news then. [...] Err, cos I can’t see how you can [pass??] the news as entertainment. [...] With the stuff that’s on there... Some part of it, I suppose, but..
K: Hmm, I’m probably being very general, but..., they probably qualified with news as well, but generally they, they thought... that..
C: [quickly] But some fiction does... get to you! And I suppose because you feel it mirrors real life... I assume... [pause] So that’s why you would fi’,... I would find it fearful because I would relate it to... real issues probably.

Edwin and Celia initially go along with my challenging prompt to consider entertainment and emotional involvement as binary oppositions. Edwin’s comments demarcate the news from entertainment, which raises a number of issues related to news consumption. It could be read as a conceptualisation of news as information versus news as entertainment. Or it might suggest that bad news, in particular, is emotionally engaging, and ought to be, in the sense that something must be wrong with people who are untouched by what happens in the world. Celia clearly distances herself from what she describes as a ‘sensible’, ‘mature’ and ‘grown-up’ way of approaching film/TV as entertainment, at the same time acknowledging that position as inhabited by her son. Fiction matters because it is created against the backdrop of reality; it can ‘mirror’ life or can be read as such, and so it involves a form of emotional sense-making that Celia does not fully detach herself from. Real emotions are evoked or touched upon as Celia imagines the fictional content to be feasible in real life, not only in her life but, presumably, also
in the lives of people like her. As the discursive moves across the previous interview excerpts demonstrate, boundaries between reality and fiction are not only more complicated than initially stated, they also involve considerations beyond one’s individual interpretative strategies. Edwin and Celia’s concern with imagined audiences (IA), that is, like-minded people on the one hand and those who they construct as ‘the other’ (e.g. young people), repeatedly invades any personal discourses of meaning-making or emotional engagement. So do related discourses about media and societal changes.

Above, I considered a contradiction between Edwin and Celia’s everyday experience and their general theories of societal decline and media effects. In a final section, I now discuss some similarly contradictory statements because of what they can tell us about the role ‘common sense’ plays in the couple’s talk (#4, p. 324-6). This part of the conversation follows a lengthy and increasingly gloomy discussion of news reports and particular real-life events, such as the Moors murders, the Hillsborough crush, the murder of Jamie Bulger, and the open-view killing of police officers in Northern Ireland. There is a particular focus on the ability of human beings to inflict pain and suffering on others, which leads to Celia’s negotiations of the notion of humanity per se. She then queries whether these things have always been going on and the reporting has changed – in other words increased – or whether society is indeed in decline. Edwin further entertains the notion of change in relation to media effects, and he particularly blames computers, the internet, play station games and general media violence for a worsening world. These media forms are not only condemned for their (textual) content but also for the ways in which they are being used and abused. All of them are associated with a decreased control over young people, as children make use of them in the comforts of their own bedroom. The worsening society and the notion of change thus go along with the idea of a lost childhood (#4, p. 324-6):

E: It is a different world now, though. There was a piece in the paper yesterday saying about... saying that children... [pause] do you know what ages? [long pause] Twelve upwards, I think. They, they don’t have a child’...
don’t have a recollection of a childhood... there’s a, there’s a section of their
life... missing, they’re almost going from... eleven, twelve... straight to
adulthood, without any period in between where they grow to become
adults..

K: Hmm...
E: ... They’re becoming adults... far too young...
C: ... They think they are now...
E: ... with no experience of anything... to take into adulthood... And when
they become adults... they haven’t got a clue!

K: In...
E: ... And I, I think that’s right.
K: In which way do they becom’.., beca’.., because of.., pressures are... [unsure]
higher at an early age or... Why would they... [quietly] become adults so
quickly?
E: Well, I think, well.. for example... sex... you know. Kids these days, young
girls, are having sex at ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen years of age.
C: Yeah. Certainly by thirteen...
E: ... Which, to be fair... you know, it’s an adult experience, and yet children
are doing it. Erm..
C: And they believe, they think when they get to that secondary school, they
think they’re... grown-up, they think ‘now, this is it’, they’re... and not to...,
[baffled] [Nina] used to tell us, when she was thirteen, fourteen... fifteen,
‘I’m not a child anymore! ’ Well, actually, yes you [stretched] are.
K: [chuckles]
C: But they don’t play with do’.., they don’t play... children’s games... at
eleven and twelve anymore like... [quietly] we used to...
E: ... No, they’ve all got access to internet, you know, unless you’ve actually
got parental controls on there... they’re seeing things that we would never have
seen... when we were children... until we were older... But they’re
seeing them much, much sooner now.
C: And even TV programmes... The [stretched] swearing that, I mean, children
swe’.., I work at school... and kids at eleven, twelve and thirteen swear
without even... thinking about it. [quieter] You know, yes, we used to swear,
perhaps, when we were kids, but you’d never swear in front of an adult...
Ever, you know, you’d make sure... And they don’t even know they’re
doing it!... You’d be passing... the headmaster can be passing them, and they
can be effing and blinding, because they don’t... realise! It’s not... the same
anymore, it’s just vocabulary.
E: No, and everything is too easy for them these days. I mean, you see kids
these days buying cars... as soon as they’re eighteen... they, they learn to
drive... they’ve got cars. And that’s... and years ago, it used to happen years
ago... But it was, it was...
C: ... Very few...
E: ... very, very odd, if someone did do that. It would be the exception to the
rule. These days...
C: ... Very rich...
E: ... when they get to eighteen, it’s a case of ‘Mum! – Can I have a car, please?’... And, and it happens [stretched] all the time!
C: [quietly] Ours haven’t got cars.
[pause]
E: No, but that’s, that’s your...
C: ... [loudly] They expect *everything* on a plate, they want it all, they, you know, seventeen...
E: ... and they’re getting all...
C: ... they learn to drive...
E: ... to university...
C: ... and they get a car, you know?...
E: ... They get it all too early without having to put any real effort into getting it... And that’s regardless whether people are on... good incomes or whatever, the people on, you know, struggling on benefits, some or other... feel that they *have* to ... provide these things for children... Telephones, computers...
C: ... Mobile phones...
E: ... mobile phones...
C: ... Computer play-stations... They *all* have them now, they all have videos in their rooms... the, the kids *under eleven* have got mobile phones... It’s just, it’s just... changed...
E: ... And the kids that haven’t got them... you know, they feel that... they, they’ve got to have ‘em.
C: And they put pressure on their parents... to make them.
E: Yeah, and if they can’t get it, they go up the street, and they’ll, they’ll nick it themselves, you know, they’ll nick someone else’s mobile phone, you know.
C: Or they’d be so different, they’d be *bullied* because of it... So the parents give in.
E: The biggest crime... reported crime now is... mobile phone theft. [pause] Fact!... All the people that are doing that are youngsters..
K: Hmm...
E: ... It’s not people my age going round nicking mobile phones...
K: ... [chuckles]...
E: ... it’s the kids that are going round nicking them because... either they wanna flog ‘em, move ‘em on for a couple of quid, [stretched] or they haven’t got one... So they’ll pinch somebody else’s... [pause] So kids of that age... twelve to eighteen, are doing things these days, which really they shouldn’t be doing. They should be out in the park playing football, or... you know, down the river swimming or... that sort of thing, but they’re not!
C: Because I think kids today, they’ll have lost that sense of freedom. Parents don’t... I mean, parents don’t allow their kids to go out all day... you know, at ten, eleven and, you know, to go out... down the river playing because... again, that’s the reverse side of it. We’ve, we *protect* them so much... from paedophiles and... people who’re gonna be... [now mom’s??] will be sitting
them in front of… TV screens and computer screens instead… And, and, and think they’re safer. [pause] And they’re not.

Edwin’s romantic and idealised image of childhood is particularly noticeable here, whilst the vision of sexually active teenagers stands in gross contrast to the image Edwin seeks to preserve. The couple’s talk about teenage sex is caught up with discussions of inappropriate material on the internet. Both Edwin and Celia do a lot of discursive business in setting oppositions between past and present, their own swearing and that of children today, as well as distinctions between their own children and young people in general. The latter is not a clear-cut opposition. Nina is at once an example of those children who grow up too fast (or are under the impression they are adults when, in fact, they are still children), and on the other hand an exception to the general rule – neither Matt nor Nina belong to that group of youngsters whose 18th-birthday presents included cars. Interestingly, Celia and Edwin also excuse other parents’ behaviour in arguing that the pressures and stakes are so high that their children will suffer if they cannot keep up with the material progress of peers.

Different forms of the media are seen as sources of knowledge, and ones that seem to both inform and reaffirm opinions and beliefs. The loss-of-childhood story was in the papers only yesterday, which underlines the topicality of Edwin’s argument. Likewise, mobile phone theft is the ‘biggest reported crime’ (my italics); presumably, this knowledge equally derives from newspapers, radio, or television. Yet at the same time, different media are also constructed as problematic because they, firstly, change children’s patterns of everyday life, secondly, enable access to formerly hidden material and, thirdly, do so at the same time as they reduce parents’ control over new gadgets, and thus over their children as well.

This loss of control over children is, however, ultimately contradicted by Celia’s flipside argument that children cannot roam in the wild and down the river anymore because parents lock them up for fear of paedophiles or other potential threats. Suddenly, the very young people who a moment ago seemed to have more liberties than any generation before them, who were spoiled and criminal and out of
control, change into overly controlled and safeguarded individuals. The contradiction is somewhat managed by Celia’s conclusion that parents only think children are safer at home, when really they are not. Yet, what is apparent in the couple’s negotiations of childhood, is a notion of contradictory ‘lived ideologies’ or, as Michael Billig has also put it, the ‘dilemmatic’ nature of common sense (see Billig et al., 1988; Billig 1991; 1996). Billig has been leading in the field of social psychology in attending to the visibility of ‘thought’ in people’s talk, and especially in their argumentation. Common sense, he argues, is a popular rhetorical device, but it is fraught with contradictions. This is, as Nigel Edley has illustrated, noticeable in some common adages. Society tells us at once to ‘look before we leap’ and that ‘he who hesitates is lost’; we know that ‘many hands make light work’ but are equally reminded that ‘too many cooks spoil the broth’; while ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder’, someone who is ‘out of sight’ is also ‘out of mind’ (see Edley, 2001: 203). Billig and colleagues highlight that both people’s personality and society as a whole contain within them contradictory themes and structures, and that they need to be approached as such. People constantly have to ‘grapple’ and ‘struggle’ with issues because they are rarely clear-cut and do not hold any ready-formed solutions (Billig et al., 1988: 162). As the researchers put it, ‘in everyday thought the individual is a lay philosopher, not a marionette dancing to the desires of a great design’ (ibid: 163).

Billig et al.’s concern is with the nature and power of ideology here and, further, the researchers critique strands of social psychology which had hitherto dealt with attitudes as though they were firm views or perceptions of the world. The fact that their concept of ‘ideological dilemmas’ is so clearly illustrated in Celia and Edwin’s talk not only underlines the insufficiencies of Gerbner et al.’s approach to viewers’ perceptions of the world, it also highlights the media’s diffuse and slippery role in fuelling and challenging the couple’s competing world views. In fact, throughout the interview, their talk shows the workings of conflicting discourses, which is why, at times, their arguments seem to contradict each other. In essence, this does not negate Gerbner et al.’s conviction that television’s main power rests on
a reinforcement of the status quo, rather than on change. However, the cultivation researchers’ focus on fear, and particularly their suggestion that television functions to increase (a singular) fear in viewers, is rendered more problematic, as it seems that television’s ‘master text’ does not, in fact, provide any clear but instead contradictory lessons of the ways of the world. Just as critics would find fault with Stuart Hall’s notion of ‘preferred readings’ in relation to individual media texts (see Chapter Two), the different stories told across the medium of television can be equally ambiguous or contradictory.

Much of the above discussion seems to diverge from an identification of distinct fears or worries, as Celia and Edwin engage in what seems an inescapable discourse of media effects (compare Buckingham, 1996). Film and television, themselves, turn into ‘objects of fear’, as their impact on vulnerable viewers (e.g. children) or society as a whole is discussed. In fact, to some degree, the couple construct similar kinds of arguments to those identified by Barker and Brooks in their discussion of ‘Dredd refusers’, different sets of people who decided for themselves that they did not want to watch a certain kind of movie, in this case the film Judge Dredd (Barker and Brooks, 1998: 292-98). Although not all criteria match, there is clearly an overlap in the distaste for and avoidance of ‘gratuitous violence’, the distinction between ‘us’ (the respondents) and ‘them’ (those audiences who enjoy and find ‘cheap thrills’ in mindless violence, sex, and swearing), the positioning of certain films as ‘symptoms’ of a worsening (in the Dredd case, an Americanised) society, a suspicion towards anything new or modern, and a nostalgic, idealised view of the past (ibid). As in the case of the Dredd refusers, Edwin and Celia’s conceptualisation of ‘reality’ is not value-free. It is ‘not [just] a descriptive criterion’ but a selective view of the world (Barker and Brooks, 1998: 296).

It is noticeable that Celia and Edwin’s local ‘realities’ diverge from their wider sense of the world, which highlights the discrepancy between perceived threats and one’s own (safer) life situations. Discursively speaking, the worries that transpire in Celia and Edwin’s talk are also always the observations one might
expect from an informed and experienced couple who can demonstrate a critical assessment of the state of society today. At the same time, there are other layers of talk which can perhaps more readily be identified as ‘personal’ discourses, such as Edwin’s discussion of his phobias or Celia’s enjoyment of suspense and startle effects. Their notion of the changeability of ‘scary’ material seems at once caught up in their overriding discourses of change and, simultaneously, constitutes a felt (or organising) phenomenon.

A concept which was tentatively introduced in the above analysis is that of ‘real-life emotional imagination’, which can be linked to Carroll’s ‘thought theory’ (1990), as discussed in Chapter Two, as well as Buckingham’s discussion of ‘acts of imagination’ (1996: 106ff, 155ff; see also Chapter Seven of this thesis). Carroll’s theory maintains that viewers respond fearfully to horror, not because they believe the monster to be real but because they entertain the possibility that something like it might exist in reality. While this is a specific example, in that it relates to general uncertainties about the supernatural, Buckingham takes the argument further by illustrating how children link fictional events to their own life situations by acknowledging their general possibility; watching a character lose their parent evokes an emotional response because the same is (theoretically) possible in the child’s own life. Celia and Edwin’s talk displays similar features, both with regard to factual and fictional material. The parents empathise with the characters on screen because, as parents, they imagine how they might feel if something like the Moors murders happened to their children. Yet, even with things that have not yet become reality, the link to real life is made, and if not to one’s own life then to that of (known or imagined) ‘like-minded people’ (i.e. people who share some of their values and views). In some ways, the disbelief at real-life horrors and, as such, the encounters with the dark side of the human psyche which are associated with them reinforce the sense that similarly awful occurrences are by all means feasible.

Finally, what is visible in Edwin and Celia’s talk is the notion that media material can trigger or touch on some fears in participants. Edwin makes direct links between his phobia of crowded places and his experience of watching the
Hillsborough crush. Celia’s fear of drowning, though described as somewhat dispositional, was reported to have been heightened by watching David Blaine’s water stunt (in which the illusionist almost drowned). Likewise, the couple discuss the impact 9/11 had on their thoughts and behaviour in airport waiting lounges (though Celia laughs at some of Edwin’s concerns). So, while there are a number of ‘impacts’ Celia and Edwin distance themselves from, they acknowledge that the media can influence them to a degree. Some of this ‘influence’ is manageable and changes with the passing of time.

Next, I turn to the interview’s German ‘cross-match’, my conversation with Monika (49) and Florian (53) of the Auer family. There are obvious socio-demographic connection points between the Auers and the Andersons. Florian, like Edwin, works in the financial sector, and Monika, like Celia, works within education, though in this case as a primary school teacher. Their teenage children are of a similar age as Celia and Edwin’s, and my conversation with Monika’s parents in many ways resembled that with Celia’s parents. However, for reasons outlined in the previous chapter, the families do not stand for other families of the same set-up or origin, and so the study does not allow a strict comparison along representative dimensions. The kind of comparison the material does allow relates to the ways in which the couples present themselves as ‘fearful’ viewers, or the issues, concerns and emotions they make relevant in specific contexts. Again, I begin with an abbreviated summary of the interview (see Appendix D, pp. 446-50).

5.3 Monika and Florian’s Talk

5.3.1 G-Interview XII: Portrait

This interview was conducted on 9 November 2005 at the family’s house in Brühl (near Heidelberg) and lasted approximately one hour (resulting in 29 single-spaced pages of transcript). While Monika’s reflective talk initially dominated the conversation, Florian began to open up soon after, and it turned into an on the whole well-balanced discussion. Interestingly, the couple’s talk was not necessarily one that sought consensus as had been the case with some of the other interviews.
including Edwin and Celia’s talk). Instead, Florian and Monika often described their differences in response or opinion regarding various issues, such as the relationship between film/TV and reality, or the emotional engagement they sought and experienced with regard to the media.

Television is clearly a secondary pastime for Florian, and one that often yields to other (mainly work) commitments. Sports and documentaries constitute the only programmes he more or less actively seeks out. Whereas Monika always needs a ‘human reference’ (‘menschlichen Bezug’) when watching documentaries, some kind of idea of individual fates and histories, Florian watches anything that topically catches his interest (e.g. recent history), no matter how ‘theoretical’ it may be. Other viewing experiences are often restricted to engaging with parts of a narrative when sharing the room with a family member. He mostly receives his news from the internet (e.g. Spiegel Online and FAZ.net), and his last visit to the cinema goes back years.

Florian’s talk often displays a critical, savvy view of the media, and he describes himself as more ‘rational’ than his wife – in general, but also in response to the screen. One example of this is his recurrent reference to the construction and purposes of storylines. Florian generally considers life to be portrayed as more positive on film and television, with the exception of the news which, for him, primarily focuses on negative aspects of life. Positive portrayals of certain issues, such as the optimistic depiction of so-called Ich-AGs on television, are seen to serve specific purposes, in this case to give audiences an incentive to start up their own businesses. Florian not only refers to the function of these representations but also implies that someone (television companies, or by extension the state) would benefit from them. As regards other reality factors, he points out that a lot of programmes lack child characters and, as a result, appear removed from (his) reality. Story content and character appearance, he argues, depend on the target audience.

Three issues are identified by Florian as provoking fears in everyday life. These are, firstly, worries about his health, which are not further specified and do
not seem acute and, secondly, fears about possible redundancy and subsequent unemployment. Working in a competitive and ever-changing environment in the financial sector, Florian is aware of constant threats to his workplace, regardless of his own efforts or abilities. In recent years, he has seen otherwise talented colleagues lose their jobs due to general departmental closures, and he is aware that things can change from one moment to the next. Thirdly, and this relates to the above but is less clearly formulated, Florian thinks about the repercussions of bad health or job loss, anticipating an impact on his social network and strains on his family.

Florian entertains the idea that information on television could theoretically evoke ‘worries’ (‘Sorgen’), for instance regarding the (then ongoing) German elections and possible changes in people’s financial situations, or if something happened in one of the nearby nuclear power stations, Biblis or Philipsburg. Yet, both Monika and Florian argue they have never been close enough to anything that might have worried them. ‘Fears’ or ‘anxieties’ (‘Ängste’) are a more likely response in Florian’s view, and one that he has evidently experienced before. This occurs mainly if a film is particularly captivating and triggers ‘associations’ to real-life incidents, such as an illness or death in the couple’s circle of friends and acquaintances. As he explains:

F: And then there are analogies, then you have associations, when… you see something in a film where you think, God, that’s right, that could happen too, but… err… well, not because of the film itself, but usually something has to have happened outside somewhere, or in reality, to then be reminded of those thoughts by the film.\textsuperscript{16}

Florian rejects the possibility that films can provoke fears independently of the outside world (which seems different to Celia and Edwin’s more general ‘what if...’ thought processes). To him, there has to be some kind of associating link to one’s life in order to have any kind of meaningful impact on the self.

Florian generally avoids watching horror films, particularly if ‘scenes of violence’ (‘Gewaltszenen’) are too ‘extensive’ (fig. ‘ausschweifend’) or unmotivated.\textsuperscript{17} He further dislikes them if they display technical insufficiencies or,
by contrast, if they are created in such a way that they get too close to the bone. He does not see any point in watching people getting physically or psychologically hurt. You would not want for anything like that to happen in reality, he argues; watching it on screen seems like a waste of time.

Monika describes herself as a ‘Krimitante’ (female term for a keen viewer of murder mysteries/crime dramas) and has been a fan of ‘Krimis’ since she was young, with her first memory of crime stories dating back to the 70s television series Der Kommissar. Despite having been a fearful child and having lain awake after watching the programme, she was almost compulsively drawn to the genre. To Monika, Krimi-viewing is a natural part of her personality (‘das ist so einfach in mir drin’). The emotional response she most commonly associates with her consumption of Krimis is ‘Spannung’ (‘tension’, which can also be translated as ‘suspense’, though Monika speaks of an ‘inner’ feeling here, which might also mean ‘excitement’). This tension can almost be unbearable, especially in the case of some British and Scandinavian crime dramas. It sometimes happens that Monika temporarily changes channels if she feels that she has reached her limits, or when she expects shots of dead bodies. She still has to watch the programme to the end, perhaps – or so she assumes – because she longs for some conclusion, for the offender to be caught. Although it is always in the back of her mind that a case will be solved and situations will go back to normal, this moment of relief is particularly important to her.

Monika does not consider the tension she experiences as a negative emotion, but later insists not to find it pleasurable either. This prompts the couple to briefly touch on masochistic viewing tendencies, with Florian concluding that she would not watch Krimis if she did not enjoy their suspense. Monika compares her engagement with the programmes to her then real-life commitment as a member of a court case jury. The court case occupied her mind in a similar way, and she had to always actively ‘surface’ from within that world and, through family life, find back to herself and a sense of normality. It did not as such burden her (‘belastend’), but it occupied her thoughts and feelings (‘beschaeftigt’). The tension experienced during
crime dramas and murder mysteries, Monika argues, usually subsides after watching. Monika avoids horror films because, unlike most Krimis, they instil ‘fear’ in her and exceed the amount of tension, excitement or suspense she feels comfortable with. There is, however, clearly a hierarchy for her as regards the parameters of bearable suspense, with ‘well-made’ horror classics fairing higher in her estimation and willingness to endure than other films (see, e.g., her discussion of Jurassic Park below).

Monika describes herself as a generally positive-thinking person with a positive attitude towards other people. Although she does not as such have worries that go beyond everyday concerns (e.g. about her children), she sometimes enjoys programmes that present the world as something of a nicer place, admitting to seeking out ‘shallow’ (‘seicht’) material in the attempt to switch off from everyday chores. At the same time, there are moments when these programmes fail to satisfy her needs, or when they are too pretty and too unrealistic to engage her. Much of Monika’s talk can be linked to the uses and gratifications model of audience engagement, as discussed in Chapter Two. Although this approach has been criticised for some conceptual limitations, the notion that Monika seeks a particular emotional outcome in her viewing, be it suspenseful or relaxing, is evident. Interestingly, as is shown below, her conception of certain media materials prevents her from watching specific films or programmes because she expects them to have reverse effects. This is an area of investigation which has remained under-researched within uses and gratifications work since U&G has centred on the films and programmes that are actively sought out.

News stories do not generally worry Monika, though they can touch her (e.g. news about the war in Iraq or the earthquake in Kashmir). Her assumption is that if something on television worried her, she would not watch it in the first place. There is, however, a notion that worries can occur in the aftermath of certain mediated events, and after some reflection. This was the case for both Florian and Monika after 9/11 when the initial shock and disbelief (and the sense of relief that what had happened had gone on in a far-away country) was transformed into concerns about
the possible beginning of a large-scale religious war. The events surrounding September 11th, 2001, were then linked to moments in history when Muslims had tried to conquer the West (Spain in the 700s, Vienna in the 1600s), and the couple began to wonder whether history was going to repeat itself. The older one gets, Monika argues, the more such initial thoughts turn into worries about what else might still be in store.

5.3.2 Topics and Discourses

G-XII's interview table resembles a more visual representation of the above interview summary (see Appendix C, pp. 330-4). While it does not as such reveal any surprises, it usefully illustrates a number of interconnections, again outlining the particular emotions that were made relevant in relation to specific media material (e.g. Monika’s ‘fearful’ responses to horror or when viewing Krimis as a child). There are a range of issues or kinds of discourses that emerge from both the interview summary and the table. These are, firstly, ‘fear dimensions’ (FD) and other kinds of ‘media engagement’ (ME), particularly in terms of fear ‘thresholds’ (see below) and specific differentiations between emotional responses. Secondly, there are again negotiations of reality boundaries and their significances (‘reality dimensions’, RD). And thirdly, ‘media impacts’ (MI) play a role in some of the talk at stake; here, they are considered in relation to impacts on the self as well as on others (‘imagined audiences’, IA). In the following, I explore these broad categories of talk and specific discursive strategies in the light of a number of sections from Monika and Florian’s interview. The first excerpt begins with the kind of talk that discloses fear dimensions and thresholds but moves on to discussions of real-life relevance. It derives from the early stages of the interview, in which the couple talk about one very lurid crime story. The programme contained some particularly gruesome murders, all based on biblical killings. One victim was, for instance, reported to have had his skin pulled off alive (see #1, p. 330):

F: And everyone died like the... apostle also, err, died, in the same kind of way...
M: ... kind of way [...] yeah? ... And that was... I found that extremely lurid and nevertheless so exciting ['suspenseful'] again [...] that I, I've really [hesitantly] always... when I thou'..., now there's a dead body, I'll have to switch over, cos I can't bear watching that then [...] cos that then is, then has, and then [breathes in] for a few seconds, then [I] can'..., if it was still on, I switched over aga', always just so... reduce the excitement [tension] a bit [...] so that I can continue watching again then.

K: Yeah. [pause] And what kind of feelings were they that you had... especially now with regard to such... with that, erm... episode tha'?

M: [long pause] I really just develop feelings into the direction that I think, my God, hopefully, yeah, I will never experience that, [hopefully] is it really just a film and I will never experience that, or also... not just me, personally, but also other people, in my surroundings, or hopefully I'll never hear of anything like that happening in reality. [...] That's the thing that, yes, where I always think let it really just be a film, and don't let there be anyone in the world who would take this and try and implement it in reality. Apart from that, emotions... other emotions... I actually feel more of a tension. [...] I don't have negative emotions [...] in that sense, I also always just think, my God, what if that happened in reality, what kind of human being would that be? What problems do they have? What must [...] they think? And so on..

Monika’s talk interestingly suggests two modes of engagement here. Initially, there is a real sense of a tense and dynamic (almost interactive) viewing situation, with Monika holding on to her remote control and constantly moving between involvement and avoidance. There is no real discussion of the nature of unwanted material, only a reference to dead bodies and the explanation that some moments are unbearable in the extreme. While it seems plausible from her description that certain images play a role in evoking emotional responses, such as ‘disgust’, Monika exclusively accounts for her engagement along levels of bearable (just about enjoyable) and unbearable (avoided) excitement or suspense. Yet these moments when Monika has to switch channels do not put her off altogether. There is still enough interest in the general storyline and the general engagement with the programme for her to return to it and find out how the story progresses as well as, importantly, how it ends. This is interesting if compared with Celia and Edwin who often avoid entire programmes due to unwanted elements. Monika’s stance more readily reflects Noël Carroll’s (1990) notion that curiosity keeps viewers interested in a film, despite the frightening and repulsive bits, though of course the author does
not account for ‘switching channels’. As mentioned before, Monika prefers to watch crime stories to the end; the catching of the perpetrator offers her much-needed relief from the tension and excitement that has built up throughout her encounter. Her self-monitoring and self-censoring of media material function to reduce some of the suspense and excitement. In Shocking Entertainment (1997), Annette Hill describes similar strategies of negotiating personal ‘thresholds’ as regards viewers’ engagement with violent films (see Chapter Six for a more detailed discussion). Monika clearly sees limits or thresholds to her acceptance of certain images, or to the emotional response she feels she can deal with. Unwanted elements are easily neglected in that sense and do not form an integral part of the storyline, though it is evident that the lead-up to those moments at which excitement becomes unbearable might be part of the interest and enjoyment. Likewise, it is possible to consider pleasures in the activity of dipping in and out of more or less intense levels of emotional engagement.

The second kind of talk seems more detached from the viewing context, yet is still emotionally involved. Above, I have begun to conceive of a notion of ‘real-life emotional imagination’, a process by which Celia and Edwin invested emotional interest in ‘what if...’ scenarios. Monika’s talk in the second part of above excerpt functions across similar lines, whilst being based on what seems to be a purely fictional story. She moves from hoping she will never experience anything as gruesome as the apostle killings herself, to worrying about friends and family, to concerns about fellow human beings in general. Her hope that she will ‘never hear of anything like that happening in reality’ suggests that there is a line that has not as such been crossed yet (at least not in modern times, and not to her knowledge) but is theoretically ‘crossable’. This then leads her to a passing consideration of possible media effects. Thus, from a concern for her own safety, entertained along hypothetical lines that such events are not entirely implausible, Monika soon moves towards a consideration of others, not only in terms of other potential victims (her friends and family or other people like her and them) but also in terms of those
fellow viewers, or ‘imagined audiences’, who might take what they see on screen and turn it into reality.

At the beginning of this section, I referred to the way in which Monika’s talk pointed to two modes of engagement in terms of relative proximity to the viewing context. This begs some clarification. Although it is impossible to deduce from this example whether the talk follows particular recognisable rules that could be applied to the analysis of other stretches of talk, I would argue that there are clear differences in the kind of talk Monika displays, and that these layers are significant when approaching viewers’ descriptions of emotional engagement. The first section of Monika’s talk, her description of channel hopping and emotion management, seems more fragmented than her discussion of wider thoughts and feelings. She repeats words, hesitates, leaves sentences and words unfinished, and generally talks in a way that seems to put her right back into the viewing context. She describes watching, anticipating a dead body, changing channels, waiting a few seconds, returning to the programme, catching glimpses of the dead body, changing channels again, and so on, until the unwanted scene is over and she can return to watching. Her description seems immediate and in situ. And, importantly perhaps, it portrays her behaviour rather than (or as well as) her emotional engagement within the viewing context.

By contrast, the second section mostly alludes to thoughts and feelings and appears more ‘removed’, for lack of a better term. Although it also includes some struggle and hesitation, it appears more structured, disclosing a thought process that does not seem to emerge from the viewing context itself but from subsequent interpretation. Not only does Monika refer to her ‘developing’ feelings, her reasoning progresses in a logical way from thoughts about the self to her immediate surroundings and wider contexts. Any talk that occurs in an interview situation can of course be problematised as a product of its context, rather than a reflection or representation of a participant’s viewing experience. It is untestable whether Monika entertained these particular thoughts during the viewing context or only thereafter. Yet, the distinction between the two stretches of talk almost appears to be
one between Monika’s more immediate, personal experiences and more external, social, or ‘borrowed’ discourses. As such, it could be argued that the latter stretch of talk illustrates the way in which possible initial responses – perhaps some form of ‘real-life emotional imagination’ – developed post viewing and sedimented in more structured reflections which also employed wider social discourses and languages.

Next, I return to a further discussion of the notion of media impacts (MI) or effects. Again, the couple talk about a particular Krimi, an episode of the German series Tatort.20 This time, their views on the credibility of the storyline are divided, and Florian problematises what he considers a common public discourse of media effects (#2, p. 330f):

K: Erm... And you [to M] wrote there: ‘‘Tatort’’, on 10.7. [laughs]... [...] Erm, exciting Krimi, a young person was the perpetrator. The reasons that made him become a perpetrator were presented [portrayed] well’... erm... with an exclamation mark, which possibly... meant that you really enjoyed it.
M: Yeah.
K: Erm, and [to F] you wrote... ‘The film about a youth who sees himself as an outsider and spends his leisure time with video and computer games that include brutalities [violent acts]. Erm, that he would then act them out in reality was al’., always too artificial [lit. posed]. For me the film thereby followed viewers’ expectations. Although the film was well-done, it didn’t captivate me.’ Erm... there I just wanted to ask for a little bit more ... whether you still remember this, and, and erm...
M: I can’t really remember it that well anymore.
F: Yeah, that was..., I wrote it like that because, because I was also following it in the press, whenever... any incidents happened, I mean, it’s already been a while, but it was also in that [indist.] discussion with regard to Eisenach, that... attack on the school with the twenty deaths, and err [...] then there’s always a huge uproar... in, in the newspaper or generally in the media... this violence... the, or..., these violent films would just, err... provide the groundwork for that. [...] And err, as such th..., for me, the film was created in such a way as to simply confirm that opinion.
K: Yeah... and was it too transparent, or you also...
F: ... Yeah...
K: ... didn’t... you... you also don’t, don’t agree with that, this... argument [lit. thesis], or..
F: [breathes] Don’t know. [breathes out]
K: Hmm... okay...
F: ... I mean, I really am... it’s possible, I haven’t got an opinion about that [...] or no firm opinion.
K: Yeah.
F: That’s been [assumed??] in the past.
M: Hmm.
K: And...
M: ... And I can only vaguely remember it, but I think I remember… that I also, the portrayal or… yeah… the way in which the youth… how he ended up [doing this], to then… live out these… these stories or… these games that he played on video or on the computer, erm… [to live them out] in reality in the first place, and why he ended up there in the first place. Due to his d’…, his family… surroundings, his… problems, all of the things that went on. They’re just things that always and again… of course fascinate me and also occupy [my mind]. […] Fascinate, like , in a, in the sense that they… yeah… always provoke thought in, in me.

My initial reading of Monika and Florian’s diary entries sets a very particular, possibly unfortunate scene for this discussion, not least since Florian’s writing almost – presumably unwittingly – criticises Monika’s relatively positive stance towards the programme. Discursive psychologists could read Monika’s subsequent failure to remember concrete elements of the episode as a discursive effort to take the force out of her initial comments. If approached in this way, Florian’s reservations as regards giving his own opinion on the media effects debate could equally be read as damage control, in the sense that he does not want to problematise his wife’s comments. Yet, it is fruitful to further dismantle the internal logics and implications of the couple’s arguments.

Clearly, their varied orientations towards the programme again suggest different levels of engagement or subsequent interpretation. While Florian acknowledges that the programme was generally well done, he puts down its failure to captivate him to his knowledge of socio-cultural contexts and the programme’s role within these. He recognises that a programme which deals with topical issues is both created and read from particular points of view, and he judges it accordingly. The programme’s artificiality is considered a direct result of the producers’ sense of audience expectations. Florian implicitly acknowledges the relative power of the press and other media in creating and sustaining a particular model of media effects. As he argues, whenever extreme versions of violence occur
in society, ‘there’s always a huge uproar’ and violent films (or games) are held responsible. Interestingly, whilst seemingly problematising the ‘power’ of media violence and distancing himself from what seems to be a dominant and perhaps seldom questioned public discourse of media effects, the ‘power’ of the press in creating this discourse is assumed as a given. Florian eventually refrains from providing a firm view on the media effects debate and somewhat weakens his own critique of the crime programme by failing to provide an alternative viewpoint. What is significant is that he deals with issues arising from the crime story and relates them to the ‘outside’ world and, by doing so, problematises the television programme and people’s engagement therewith.

Monika approaches the programme in a different light, resisting any direct discussion of media effects and assessing it for its ‘human’ value and logic. As is emphasised in both her diary entries and the interview, Monika has a particular interest in the depiction of human relations on screen. Although she only vaguely remembers the Tatort episode, the elements that stick to her mind relate to the portrayal of the social context which made the young gamer commit the crimes. As such, she shifts focus from the games themselves towards familial circumstances, the depiction of which is described as ‘fascinating’, ‘thought-provoking’, and as ‘occupying’ her mind. At the same time, the relevance of the games and their causal relation to the crimes remains implied, as the games were still ‘lived out’. Monika’s link to the outside world is much less defined than Florian’s. Clearly, the fact that she was interested in the story, and that it provoked thought, suggests that parallels to the real world were drawn. Young people and their social contexts are relevant to Monika’s life; she arguably has a professional interest in the reasons that lie behind a young person’s actions. Yet, on its own, this stretch of talk only provides limited scope for wider-reaching analysis. It has to be considered in the light of other instances of reality-related sense-making.

As indicated before, Monika and Florian also discussed their stance towards, and experiences of, horror viewing, with Monika mostly describing similar kinds of fear thresholds as explored in the apostle crime story above. Florian assesses the
genre from various standpoints, and again with an amount of ‘critical distance’. In the following excerpt, he remembers catching glimpses of horror films on television. Again, reality dimensions are made relevant, albeit in passing (see #4, p. 331f):

F: Like, after nine o’clock there was nothing else on ... sometimes. And when you zap through and then... now and again you just get caught somewhere and... then I used to think to myself, you really don’t have to do that to yourself?! ... Err... it’s... well, I’m knitted in a more rational way than my wife. I always say... or often, err... nothing can happen to the main character, there’s another half an hour to go [in the film].

M+K: [laugh]...
F: ...[laughs] When I realise how she’s sitting there. [laughs]...
K: ... Yes [laughs]...
M: ... When I live through it again then, yes [funny??]. No, for me it’s...
F: ... Then I’ll sometimes think, my God – I’m sorry – [chuckles] why do you have to do that to yourself?... Alright, sometimes it’s really...
M: ... [What??]...
F: ... so bad’... well, that you then, some’, it then goes... what... what she said earlier as well, one has to... it is a film, but you also knows that... things happen, and then people... get hurt in their dignity, hurt in their personality, and, like, and really also physically hurt, I mean you don’t actually want to experience that.
K: Hmm.
F: And then [you] have to... and then I ask myself, why should I do that to myself, to then watch something like that.
K: Hmm.
F: And some other, with others, there are scenes, then again, where, where.. where you see, they’re older films, meanwhile, you have to see [consider] that as well... they are so badly done, then again, that you have to laugh about them, almost, so I also think, well, that’s not necessary either.
K: Hmm.
F: That’s... time’s too precious [that’s a waste of time].
K: In the sense that... the blood is too unreal or, or...
F: ... [stretched] Yes, or, or when you... I don’t know, I mean, there are, how do you call it? Tarantula... like, something with a spider, [where you can see how he turned around??], where you then see, oh dear Lord, this is all so bad in terms of...
K: ... The strings everywhere [laughs]...
F: ... Yes [laughs] the mistakes, yeah..

The couple’s diary entries established their general dislike of horror films; here I ask them to further elaborate on this avoidance. Initially, Florian again distances himself
from the kind of emotionality he associates with his wife’s viewing. The overarching tenor of his comments is that he sees ‘no need’ for ‘putting himself (or oneself) through’ watching these programmes. As such, he almost associates horror with some sort of (avoidable and needless) suffering. Yet this ‘suffering’ is situated along a rather broad spectrum, ranging from impatience with outdated film-making techniques to discomfort with potentially unsettling depictions of the human psyche. Beyond his recognition of technical shortcomings, then, and in spite of his dismissal of any form of emotional engagement with horror films, some seem to reach him on an emotional level. Again, the reason for this is partly given in the ‘imagined’ parallels drawn between horrific incidents on screen and their real-life occurrences. The fact that most of these films are fictitious does not mean they are entirely removed from reality; as Florian points out, some cruelties, whether these are psychological or physical, do take place in ‘real’ life. His reasoning as to why this keeps him from watching such incidents on screen is not entirely straightforward and perhaps implies a blurring of boundaries that seems unusual in the light of Florian’s general outlook. It suggests that he either wants to generally avoid unpleasant thoughts or images, or that he does not want to fully engage with the idea of things happening (in Edwin’s terms) ‘out there’.

Yet, there is a danger in overly psychologising Florian’s responses, and I have walked a thin line throughout this chapter. It is important to point out that I am not so much interested in finding out why, psychologically, Florian makes these connections and related viewing decisions, though some tentative speculation may be enlightening. Instead, the main concern is to explore how connections are being made and what these might tell us about participants’ wider conceptualisations of the media and the world around them. In this case, there is a sense that a link between horrific incidents on screen and those in ‘the real world’ is made and that this impacts on Florian’s viewing choices and preferences. There is, to me, a possible wider issue at stake about the places viewers allow themselves to go to in their engagement with fiction. Yet, it is difficult to deduce any of these wider patterns from Florian’s talk here alone, particularly since he continues to construct himself as
a rational, busy and self-controlled viewer. This in itself is a significant move, not least in the light of Monika’s construction of her emotional self. The conversation continues:

K: [pause] And, and how about you?
M: I mean, I just think from… I’ve… except… err, what was it called? … Where…, this famous… erm… [pause] err… [breathes out] oh, is that a horror film? The…
F: … ‘The Birds’...
M: … No, yes, ‘The Birds’ I’ve...
F: … That was a good film, yeah...
M: … seen, but that was still, yeah, that was for me…, that’s like on the limit, that film. I mean, I’ve enjoyed watching Hitchcock, and they were the kinds of… the films, where als’…, where I also often, where there was a lot of suspense… and where I also always wanted to see the end. [quickly] No, I wasn’t thinking of that one. That… that big... ape which then, onto… in New York..
K: ‘King Kong’...
M: … ‘King Kong’, not ‘Dracula’, I was just [thinking] about the…, I mean, [I] knew...
K: … [indist.]...
M: … I once watched that one, many years ago, and there was…, I then…, but I’d already known in the run-up to that, that’s [obviously] a very well-made film, and it’s… not so lurid, so one can…, I did [unarticulated] well… I watched it, and then that was good for me. But then when I, when those films emerged like ‘Jurassic Park’ and all that, and then I also only ever heard, oh, they’re so extremely lurid, and for me those Krimis are, the ones I talked about earlier on, like those… for me, that’s already, like, the highest limit. […] And… more… more… I don’t want to and… I probably can’t expect of myself, and… everything that goes beyond, and I just have this conception in my mind [lit. for myself] that’s even wor’, that’s even more tension [suspense], that is… that… I can’t even bea’, how shall I even physically bear that? […] Emotionally, that, that… and then I just think, I won’t even do that to myself, I also don’t have the need to t’… to try and… erm, really… to sound out whether I…, whether that’s really true, I say… like, from… from what I’ve heard so far, how exciting [‘suspenseful’] that is… [pause] I think… that will just get too close… then.

Monika’s classification of horror films is interesting here. Steven Spielberg’s Jurassic Park which, according to the Internet Movie Database, was MPAA-rated as PG-13 ‘for intense science fiction terror’, functions for Monika along similar lines as
Quentin Tarantino’s 18-rated *Pulp Fiction* did for Celia and Edwin. Neither of these films is commonly regarded as horror *per se*, though both are known for their ‘violent’ content. The most striking difference between the Andersons’ and Monika’s response is that Monika has never seen *Jurassic Park* before, whereas Edwin and Celia had watched and, as a result, despised *Pulp Fiction*. Spielberg’s film nevertheless functions as some form of (cultural or emotional) measure for Monika, just as *Pulp Fiction* did for the Andersons.22

Hitchcock’s films equally come attached with certain connotations, in this case with a notion of quality as well as extreme suspense, both of which are valued and accepted by Monika. She almost constructs a hierarchy of fear thresholds in relation to particular media material here. Accordingly, and in the light of the interview as a whole, her German ‘Krimis’, though exciting, would be the least suspenseful and thus form the bottom of the hierarchy. They are followed by foreign crime stories, such as the Scandinavian and British programmes that, along with the Hitchcock films, move on the boundaries of bearable tension and excitement. *Jurassic Park* and any films classed in that broad category are at the top of the hierarchy and go beyond the perceived limit of bearable tension or excitement. Though this is not made explicit, the latter kinds of movies do not seem to carry the same connotations of quality as the Hitchcock films or aforementioned foreign crime stories. As such, they might generally be likened with the ‘other’, both in terms of material and the kinds of audiences they attract; they are unfamiliar and untested territory.

Monika has no interest in testing or sounding out boundaries, as other viewers might; for her, there is no appeal in enduring such films. She constructs her emotionality as defining and absolute. Again, there is a sense of not wanting to ‘put oneself’ through the ordeal; particular horror films are not watched, they are ‘done’ to oneself. This differs to Monika’s stance towards Krimi-viewing, in relation to which she still constructs herself as having ultimate (remote) control. Importantly, her specific emphasis on emotional boundaries gets directly linked to ‘physical’
boundaries or limitations, that is, to her embodied sense of self, and contrasts with the rational thought processes that largely build the basis of Florian’s account.

In an attempt to further explore the participants’ concept of horror films, the couple are subsequently asked to elaborate on their definition, as well as on the kinds of viewers they might associate with the broad genre (as they define it). Interestingly, Monika does not initially describe any kind of textual content but instantaneously defines horror by way of her emotional response, in this case a ‘great [‘big’] fear’ and uncertainty over how to endure her ‘enormous’ inner tension. Asked how she recognises a horror film, she initially refers to the genre descriptions in the TV guide, and only thereafter to what she knows about certain films (like *Jurassic Park*) from conversations with others (#4, p. 331f):

_K:_ [H]ow would you describe horror? Or define [it]? ... As in, not a textbook definition or...

_M:_ ... As great [big] fear... Great fear. [...] Yeah. [pause] Great fear, and also an enormous tension in me, of which I don’t know how to... how I shall bear it throughout [lit. for the whole time].

_K:_ And the films themselves, how would you describe horror films? I mean, how do you re’,.., recognise a horror film?

_M:_ Erm, only if it’s written on it23, and then just from some, from other people who’ve told me about it... Right? [...] [I] mean... [breathes] all those ‘Jurassic Park’ films, and they’ve already been on, on TV as well... and... apart from that when I [stretched] see... God, that’s a horror film... or... yeah, creepy film... Although I think horror... is worse than... creep. Creep, I think, is still... a... a, the simpler form, but also... this kind of tension [suspense, excitement], I mean... I don’t need [that], don’t seek [it] out, don’t want to experience [it] either. [...] Right?

_K:_ [to F] And what is horror for you? ... Or what., how would you recognise a horror film?

_F:_ [long pause] When, as I said, when err... [pause] how do they say, when human beings are being pla’..., played with, in a negative sense. [...] That’s a horror film for me.

_K:_ Yeah... I mean, there are people who enjoy... watching horror film and, and, erm... consciously seek them out... What kind of person, do you think, does one have to be to... to... enjoy horror films, or to be able to enjoy them? [pause] [chuckles]

[long pause]

_M:_ I think, it has to at least be a person, I mean... who... [pause] can [stretched] emotionally set limits for himself... if I talk for myself... and also...
[someone who is less likely to] let tension from the outside... g’..., yeah, get to him...

K: ... Hmm.

[long pause]

F: Whereas one has to ask oneself...

M: ... [indist.]

F: ... one has to ask oneself, if someone is... is able to... block it off like that, why... would he even watch it?

[pause]

K: Hmm...

M: ... Yeah, maybe for the purpose of entertainment... Just like I watch my ‘Tatort’ programmes, which... they don’t build up...

F: ... Yeah, I don have any, any idea, [I’ve??] only seen...

M: ... that much tension [suspense] either...

F: ... the question posed in that respect...

M: ... Yeah.

K: Yes... hmm...

M: ... I mean, from my perspective, I don’t watch them because they get too... too emotional [get too close to the bone] and build up too much... tension, that’s why, I think, it can only be watched by people who then... who are in the position to draw a line... to draw a line for themselves.

K: Yeah.

M: So it won’t get too close to them.

Although the Auers have some notion of horror, their ‘thinking-out-loud’ kind of talk in the second part of this excerpt indicates that horror films hardly constitute a regular and naturally-occurring conversation topic for them. Nevertheless, there are some particularly interesting aspects to their talk, some of which are more, others less straightforward.

Let me begin with the former and the question of definition. To Monika, there are differences between horror films and ‘Grusel’ films. ‘Gruselfilme’ have been translated as ‘creepy films’ here but would perhaps fit into the category of the ‘spine-chillers’. They are the films that ‘give you the creeps’, so to speak, and though there might be a fine line between the two within the English-speaking context, Monika makes (experiential or textual) distinctions: horror is ‘worse’, spine-chillers are ‘simpler’. Both, however, contain a level of tension or excitement (the horror film more so than the spine-chiller) that is neither ‘needed’, ‘wanted’ nor ‘sought out’ by the participant. Again, Monika places them into an excitement hierarchy.
As the couple speak of their definition of horror films, they reiterate their reasons for avoiding them. This is where things become more complicated. For Florian, the problem is one of story content; horror entails the (psychological or physical) manipulation of human beings, which to him does not constitute ‘watchable’ material. While his explanation leaves questions open, it at least provides a sense of the criteria he employs for his viewing choices. In contrast, the more Monika speaks of tension and excitement, the less feasible it becomes to successfully explore what is meant by these terms. This is particularly the case since she provides little information as to what her emotional responses are based upon. Before, when talking about the differences between German and foreign crime stories, she spoke of her own puzzlement at why the foreign films evoked stronger emotions in her than their German counterparts. At the time, she wondered whether the differences in tension and suspense resulted from different kinds of cinematographic techniques or direction. Yet, she was unable to more clearly identify the elements that managed to touch her in that way. Her responses are constructed as reflexive (i.e. non-conscious) and somewhat out of her control.

As such, Monika’s talk also centres less on individual episodes of tension and more on her general ability to ‘draw the line’ for herself and not let what she watches get too close to her. This is where Monika and Florian speculate about the kinds of engagement and enjoyment horror audiences take from their viewing. Florian implies that the emotional engagement is part of the enjoyment, or part of the reason why such films are sought out. In his view, there would not be much purpose to watching horror if one did not feel in any way affected by what was watched. Monika, on the other hand, conceives of other audiences as having higher fear thresholds. What is ‘Krimi’ tension to her (bearable or border-line excitement) is horror tension for others. Only in this way can it function as entertainment.

What is perhaps significant in this stretch of talk is the couple’s lack of engagement with horror’s alleged detrimental effects on its audiences. Other than Florian’s brief mention of characters being harmed both physically and psychologically, there is hardly any reference to the discourse of media violence that
had dominated much of Edwin and Celia’s talk about horror films. Even issues of desensitisation that could have cropped up, particularly in this latter part of the conversation, are left unreferenced. The difference in tone between Monika and Florian’s interview on the one hand and that of their British cross-match on the other is intriguing. The latter is, for the main part, bleaker and more pessimistic, drawing particular attention to societal problems and changes for the worse.

Having dealt with fear thresholds, reality dimensions and media impacts in relation to crime stories and horror films, Monika and Florian’s interview consequently moves on to discussions of memorable news events. The terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, constituted just such a memorable event that had affected the couple emotionally and connected with some wider concerns (see #7, p. 333):

K: What kind of thoughts or feelings did you have when you heard about [9/11]?... Or when you followed it up in the news then as well?
M: I mean, even still today when one sees those images... err... it’s still a disbelief, really, how... how humans can get the idea to... to really do something like that!
K: Hmm.
F: The worst thing for me is, when I saw the images, how... people jump out of there.
M: Yeah.
F: Like, the... how they drop down like dolls, right? [...] That is just what., I mean, less how the machine goes in, I mean that’s... even aesthetic in parts, to be fair... How, how it all looks, how [indist.] the... that explosion, err... cloud bursts out [lit. goes up].
K: Hmm... [pause] Like in a film, [indist.] that it just looks like that...
F: ... Yeah, again like in a film, that is, is, is... that’s what, what you now and again see in a film. [...] Like, scenes like that.
K: Yes. And what was it that generally went through your head [during 9/11], also then the days after [the event], or directly in that situation, as you were getting more and more information about it, or erm..
M: We also then always talked about whether that... also in the run-up [to the event], now and again, when we were generally talking about the situation in the world, that we were saying the next war that could happen is a religious war. And then [at the time] we thought whether that was the beginning of it. But then also thought on the other side, with somewhat of a, for me, feeling of relief, thank God this isn’t happening here [lit. at ours], but so far away, initially really [...] in America and not here. Erm, but... yes, that
was in the back of the mind then, we had, it’s now been thousand years since Muslims tried [it] here, the, the religious..., not, I mean the religious wars now, that the Muslims tried to...

F: ... Where was that?...
M: ... A thousand years ago, thousand and something...
F: ... No... [energetically] no...
M: ... When was it? Now he’s...
K: ... Four hundred, the, the, that by Vienna, erm...
F: ... Exactly! What we watched on Sunday...
M: ... Of Vienna, and then there were... Yes, exactly, and when was it in Spain?

[pause]
F: In Spain?
M: Yes, when the Muslims came over and wanted to conquer Spain.
F: They did conquer Spain.
M: Yes, when was that?
F: That was seven hundred...
M: ... That... wasn’t that thousand...
F: ... and something, yes, that was seven hundred.
K: I’m not historically...
F: ... 790...
K: ... not very...
M: ... Yes, I’m not historically well-versed at all – *he* always knows these things. And, erm, I just, I heard something recently, and then I thought, I see, they already tried it a thousand years ago, the Muslims, to come to Western Europe [...] and now thousand years have gone by, now they’re trying again, just in a different kind of way, yes? And, erm, that causes, in general always now and again, thoughts in me, and yes, and also worries, I have to say, meanwhile. With increasing age also worries as to what else might still happen here [at ours, in our country]. [...] Just with rel’..., with religion. Even if I myself am not... not... a very religious person, who [is] very... I., very active in church, I’m not even a member of the church anymore, but... erm... Nevertheless, I do wonder like that... and, err, yeah, and also worry about it.

K: Hmm... And at the time, when you watched reports about the 11th of September... were those feelings that you would describe as fears or worries, or were they different..

F: ... Naa, they were... all...
M: ... Initially just disbelief, initially just mad [and] utter astonishment, that something like that is... even possible, and also bewilderment... and then... yeah, and then of course also, as mentioned before, once this like... this... once you were [one was] able to think again, once you’d... insofar as., realised it, and then also for a start... mentally processed it, what has happen there, when you were able to think on further... then, yeah... the worries. What will happen [lit. how will it continue]?... What... Will it cross over to us?
The distinctions between emotional responses and different degrees of reflectivity over time are almost inevitable in this stretch of talk, due to the kinds of questions I asked. So, for instance, the couple make a distinction between more immediate responses and those that occupied their minds in the weeks and months after the September 11th attacks. Interestingly, Monika describes the change of responses very much as a process, as a gradual realisation of the wider implications of the events. As such, the emotions described during the viewing context are ‘disbelief’, ‘astonishment’, and ‘bewilderment’, before finally moving on to ‘worries’ about possible consequences. At the same time, there are continuities; some images still cause ‘disbelief’ today or stand out as particularly striking (or touching), such as those of people jumping out of windows. There is a real sense that the events initially left the couple stunned and, as is implied in Monika’s talk, unable to think straight; only when they were able to regain ‘consciousness’, or perhaps find some emotional distance from the events, could they evaluate their implications. The feelings of disbelief, astonishment and bewilderment that Monika refers to are seemingly based on her concept of what human beings are capable of. As such, they can be linked to a ‘negotiation of humanity’, or what it means to be human, as identified in Celia’s talk about specific news events (see also Chapter Seven). Here, the comment is only made in passing and sits curiously with Florian’s subsequent description of people falling from the windows as ‘doll-like’ figures. It seems as though the participants have to remind themselves that both the perpetrators and the victims were indeed human beings, and that what seemed surreal was in fact very real.

Monika’s responses are entwined with two particular interpretative frameworks: her senses of geography and of history are made relevant in the discussion, though it becomes clear that neither of them functions as a straightforward concept. Geographically speaking, the mother recounts her sense of relief at knowing that the events happened relatively far away, in distant America. At the same time, her talk discloses a geography that goes beyond spatial proximity and includes affiliations with groups of people. Although Monika speaks of not
being directly affected, she instantaneously makes connections to historical events that suggest a linkage between those people who were harmed or attacked during the New York events and the larger group of people who were implicitly targeted, in this case the Western world or that part of the world in which Christianity constitutes a dominant religion. September 11th is unhesitatingly likened with historical invasions of Western Europe. Accordingly, Monika makes sense of 9/11 as part of a larger pattern of Muslim ‘imperialism’, in which the threat to one’s own country suddenly becomes more real and acute. It is the latter that Monika expresses some concern about, a sudden sense of uncertainty over her own future in the light of what happened in New York. Accordingly, an attack on the United States is both distant and close, depending on the kind of framework participants employ as they move between geographical and emotional proximity. This slight ambiguity of geographical boundaries is reflected in other interviews, in which spatial distance was relativised by participants if they knew of friends or family who had found themselves close to the events (see Chapter Seven).

The fact that Monika employs an historical framework in accounting for her thoughts is important in terms of further disclosing the processes by which she makes sense of 9/11. Yet, its relative vagueness is instructive. As Florian problematises the accuracy of her dates, it becomes clear that they merely take on a symbolic function in Monika’s argument. Dates are not immediately relevant (though the initial suggestion that a pattern was repeating itself in the course of a thousand years seemed loaded with meaning). What is more important to Monika than the accuracy of dates is that Muslims have tried to conquer the Western world before and partly succeeded in doing so. By drawing attention to this historical parallel, she constructs a Muslim force or threat that is largely invisible, faceless, but constantly lurking and able to return. In a sense, the Western world is constructed as passively anticipating attacks. Of course, Monika does not so much provide a firm view as some ever-evolving and changing thought processes here. Likewise she takes the force out of her comments by framing her thoughts and worries as coming and going (albeit perhaps more regularly or intensely with increasing age). Just as
her and her husband had ‘now and again’ discussed the possibility of a religious World War in the run-up to the events of September 11th, these thoughts are not so much described as at the forefront of her mind, but as informing her perception of events as they unfold on the news and thereafter.

Whereas the above constitutes an example of negotiations of particularly memorable news reports, in the following I ask Monika and Florian about the general differences they see between the world as portrayed on film and television and the world we live in. An initial focus lies on the relationship between fiction and ‘reality’, though Florian is quick to clarify my (purposefully open) question and extend it to the world as portrayed on the news (see #8, p. 333):

M: Well, I naturally seek out programmes... which... [breathes out] which are always presented in a nicer way actually than... than that is the case with me, in my world, and [those] where I know the problems will all be solved. [...] Right? Even if I... I don’t as such have a, a troublesome [lit. worrisome] life... erm... I always say I live with entirely normal everyday worries, human, family-related worries, so... thank God we haven’t yet had any big problems in that regard, and still... I’d like to say, I seek... on TV... [phone rings] I often seek out those programmes that... yeah, just present life in a bit of an even nicer way. [...]  
F: Yeah, I would say, I mean, it’s just that... that one has to differentiate a bit, like... how the world is portrayed, like in films or...? How do you mean now?  
K: Yes, I just wanted, I mean, leaving the news out for now...  
F: ... left out, yes...  
K: ... because news are obviously meant to portray the world to some extent. Erm... but like, yeah, in films or in series, erm...  
F: Yeah, as a rule, it is, is presented in a more positive way, I’d say, so it’s...  
K: Hmm... or news as well, if you’d like to include them, but... I mean... are there differences between news and the... the world... in which we live?  
M: No, that’s actually... for me, the news actually reflects the world we live in. [...] That’s such a., I’d put that on one level... right?  
[pause]  
K: Cos...  
F: ... I don’t see it quite like that. [...] Erm... with regard to reality, or if you [one] see[s] how... how the news are constructed, often that’s so, that... it’s unfortunately in a way that ver’., very often then, err... negative, err, things are, they just... get raised, meaning they come first, and then... comes a lot that isn’t somehow... bad, in quotation marks, and... perhaps in the end somehow... some good weather.
K: Yeah, so the positive news don’t [indist.]
F: … the positive news, yeah, that…
K: … make up the news…
F: … they miss out, really.

My question about differences between ‘our world’ and that portrayed on film and television is taken to refer to whether representations of ‘our world’ are on the whole more positive or negative than the couple perceive it to be. This also leads them to again touch on some of television’s purposes. The couple agree that television generally draws a more positive picture of the world; especially Monika actively seeks out programmes in which problems are guaranteed to be solved, because they constitute a welcome distraction and change from her everyday worries. At the same time, she is quick to assert that she has thus far led a relatively safe and protected life, one that was not riddled with ‘big’ worries but by what she calls the ‘normal’ problems and concerns, those that are part of any family’s life.

The couple differ in their estimation of the relationship between the news and ‘real life’. It is Florian who picks up on the openness of my question and who asks me to qualify whether I would include the news in my considerations. Monika understands news programmes to more or less reflect the world we live in. In contrast, Florian takes a more complex view of the news, referring to the way in which it is ‘constructed’. However, this is not a concern about the televised manipulation of facts and events per se (as might be expected from his critical, media-literate viewpoint) but one about the order of news reports. In Florian’s view, the reportage of bad issues or events is put at the beginning of news programmes whilst positive occurrences are dealt with towards the end, if at all. In general, he considers there to be an imbalance between the focus on good and bad news, with the latter dominating and the former missing out.

Considering the implications of Monika and Florian’s evaluation of media/reality intersections initially leaves us with mixed feelings about the world we live in or the elements that find attention on film and television. Life is not as bad as portrayed on the news, at least not for Florian, but it is not as good as fiction
might have us believe either. At the same time, the couple present themselves as on the whole content with the way things are. Similarly to Celia and Edwin’s conversation, their talk hints towards a distinction between personal and local realities as opposed to the ‘world out there’. While Florian’s view suggests that news broadcasters’ emphasis on bad events might make us forget about all the good things in the world, the couple also acknowledge that (everyday) life is not easy or free of worries. The problems they see on a day-to-day basis are, however, small in comparison to their general knowledge of the misfortunes or hardship of others.

5.4 Conclusion
Opening the analysis of material with two in-depth studies can be perilous, because it runs the risk of getting entangled in idiosyncrasies and prefiguring focal points which might not do justice to the remaining body of material. These two interviews are not representative of the rest, but their analysis has been an important exercise for disclosing both the complexities of the media/fear relationship and the intricacies of approaching the topic through people’s talk. An overriding conclusion I draw from this first insight into the material relates to the difficulty of actually locating ‘fear’ in participants’ talk. For instance, when the couples spoke of ‘fear’ as an emotional response to film or television, they often wanted to circumscribe and paraphrase it, by accounting for experiential distinctions (hierarchies even) or by assessing its shades of relevance to one’s own life. On the whole, the concerns raised in the theoretical and methodological sections of this thesis have been mirrored and exemplified in participants’ talk. There were differences and tensions between personal and more ‘borrowed’ discourses of fear, as well as contrasts between relatively immediate emotional responses and those that can be considered as more reflective, or more socially inflected.

Importantly, the two interviews demonstrate that discussions about ‘scary’ or ‘worrying’ media material did not only give rise to descriptions of fearful responses but opened up a range of other concerns for the viewers. Within these, the concept of ‘fear’ came loaded with a variety of meanings. There were questions
about when it was appropriate to be fearful, when fear was frowned upon or when it was mandatory; the couples had an impression of people who allowed themselves to be scared or worried by what they saw on screen, and they either aligned themselves with other viewers or sought to emphasise differences. Further, such issues were bound up with complex negotiations of ‘reality’, the purposes of the media, and its role within society. Participants’ folk theories of the media and its effects constituted an almost inescapable subject, at least within the interviews above. And of course this was one of the ways in which fear (in the form of worries or concerns) transpired in participants’ very evaluations of the world they live in. Simultaneously, inconsistencies in participants’ accounts hinted towards important discrepancies between local realities and such wider views of the world.

In the light of these complexities, turning the analytic focus to the remaining corpus of material is a challenge. In spite of the advantages gained from managing participant interviews through summaries and tables, their sheer diversity makes it difficult to choose amongst the range of themes and issues that emerged as worthy of investigation. I propose to deal with this dilemma by opening up the analysis in the following chapter to a broad consideration of how participants across nations and generations talked about media-related fear – the associations and distinctions they made, the resources they drew upon – in order to map (some of) the meanings participants attached to the concept. Thereafter, I close in on one particularly salient and complicated issue across interviews, that of the relationship between the media and the ‘real’.

1 However, as will become clear through the course of the analysis, their distinction between new and old-style horror, between violent and harmless material, is not as clear-cut and consistent as it seems.
2 This issue will be discussed in more detail below. Celia’s talk generally displays a concern with the ‘good’ in human people and the resultant disbelief at inhumane human behaviour, displayed in the Bulger case and incidents in Northern Ireland.
3 The three people involved are Celia (=C), Edwin (=E), and me, as the interviewer (=K).
4 Similar notions of a monitoring of responses in accordance with social norms or habits are indicated with LD (Legitimacy Dimensions) in the interview tables.
See Chapter Six for a further discussion of ‘desensitisation’.

Interestingly, much film criticism would correlate the increase in action and special effects with a decrease in plot complexity, while Edwin and Celia seem to associate more action with more complex stories, compared to their idea of ‘old-style horror’.

Note that this seems to go beyond Murray Smith’s three-dimensional ‘structure of sympathy’, as discussed in Chapter Two (1995: 82ff). Not only are characters recognised, their actions and feelings accessed and morally evaluated (i.e. recognition, alignment, allegiance). There is a greater degree of personal involvement because Celia recognises her potential self on screen.

Again, this cynical stance is reflected by (older) viewers’ opinions in Healy and Ross, 2002. While Edwin and Celia are close to approaching the study’s age category, it is notable that similar outlooks could also be observed in younger viewers’ talk (see Chapters Six and Seven of this thesis).

Harm, of course, is a problematic concept. Edwin and Celia never quite elaborate on what it might entail.

Edwin’s choice of the term ‘heavy’ is interesting here, since heavy viewing is often linked to intellectually challenging, and thus possibly ‘wholesome’, material. However, in other parts of the talk the couple argues that broadcasting has turned into a reality TV farce, which might more readily be associated with ‘light’ entertainment.

My alteration changes what I understand to be a confusion of words. Unaltered, Edwin’s comments do not seem to make sense.

Partly, of course, Edwin and Celia also draw on personal experience, such as working in school and having first-hand evidence of, amongst other things, the frequency and changed connotations of children’s swearing.

Barker and Brooks also speak of ‘reality’ as a ‘moral version’ of the world, which is partly visible in Celia and Edwin’s talk but, arguably, does not override other versions (1998: 296).

FAZ.net is the online version of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, one of Germany’s broadsheet newspapers.

Ich-AG (short for Ich-Aktiengesellschaft) is a description of companies founded by formerly unemployed people who have been subsidised to start up their own businesses.

The original German passage is available for comparison in Appendix E (pp. 477-85).

Within the British context, participants often referred to violence as ‘gratuitous’. A similarly common expression does not, to my knowledge, exist within German discourses of media violence. Yet, it seems appropriate to use it as a possible translation of ‘unmotivated’.

Der Kommissar was broadcast in Germany between 1969 and 1976 and is commonly regarded as the first genuinely home-grown ‘Krimi’.

For reasons of space, the interviewee’s intersections (‘hmm’) have been edited.

‘Tatort’ is the German word for a crime scene, i.e. the place where a crime has taken place.

Literally, the sentence reads: ‘And when one zaps through and then… now and again one just gets caught somewhere [lit. on there] and… then I used to think to myself, one really doesn’t have to do that to oneself!’ In the German language, ‘man’ (= one, a person) is more commonly and casually used than in the English language where ‘you’ (= du) would be the norm. For the purpose of readability, I employ ‘you’ for both ‘man’ and ‘du’.

Incidentally, Monika’s son had recorded his viewing of Jurassic Park as a child as the only fearful encounter he could remember, an experience Monika would have been aware of. Her concept of the film might have partly developed from this incident, as well as from the general hearsay that suggested the film was ‘extremely lurid’ or gruesome.

Meant is the description in the TV guide, rather than the one on a DVD or video cover.