CHAPTER SIX
Locating ‘Fear’ across Nations and Generations

6.1 Introduction
While the previous chapter provided an in-depth analysis of two participant interviews, I here open up the research focus to exploring some themes in the remaining corpus of material. Less emphasis will be placed on detailed discursive investigations and more on the various types and meanings of ‘fear’ that emerged from participants’ talk. Having used the interview tables as tools for accessing the ways in which participants spoke about the emotion and its relationship to film and television, I here include individual interview examples to best illustrate concepts and categorisations, and to demonstrate and discuss interconnections. This chapter is an attempt to manage the diversity of gathered responses. As outlined in Chapter Four, one of the problems I encountered when dealing with the material was the lack of grand overall patterns, with the exception of questions of ‘reality’ and tensions between personal and social discourses of fear, which will be addressed in the subsequent chapter.

What has begun to transpire in Chapter Five is that the notion of ‘fear’ comes attached with a variety of meanings and connotations for participants. I will begin by outlining some general orientations towards the emotion across interviews. The subsequent section maps, labels and delineates the different kinds of fear that could be identified in viewers’ talk, making use of participants’ own languages but also sorting similar responses into overall categories. An important point of reference in this chapter is Annette Hill’s Shocking Entertainment: Viewer Response to Violent Movies (1997). Hill’s work influenced some of this study’s initial stages of development, particularly guiding the idea that viewers might seek out ‘frightening’ material for the purposes of entertainment. Yet, it was only during the analysis of the research material that I realised the full extent to which our findings concurred. Shocking Entertainment studies the ‘processes’ of viewing violence. Based on qualitative focus group research with 36 participants, it explores why and how
people derive enjoyment and entertainment from violent movies. As such, Hill departs from earlier studies in this area which had investigated causal effects between violent viewing and subsequent behaviour. She focuses on a number of extreme films from the early 1990s (e.g. *Pulp Fiction*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Reservoir Dogs*), then commonly regarded as part of a ‘new brutalism’ (Shelley in Hill, 1997: 11).

Hill’s findings suggest that viewers make strict distinctions between real and mediated violence, and that elements of ‘realism’ often get in the way of viewers’ enjoyment of violent films, meaning that the more removed the representation of violence from real life, the more entertaining it can be. Participants’ relationship with screen characters is less one of identification than one of building a ‘series of character relationships’ in the light of individual experience and imaginative hypothesising (Hill, 1997: 106).1 Further, the author sees key factors of enjoyment in the fact that violent viewing can entail a conscious process of ‘boundary-testing’, a negotiation of personal and social ‘thresholds’ (see below), and thus elements of ‘anticipation’ of and ‘preparation’ for violent scenes. Accordingly, viewers in Hill’s study use a variety of techniques to self-censor their viewing. Finally, for Hill’s participants, viewing violent films is considered as entertaining because it is a social activity; part of the enjoyment lies in monitoring the responses of other viewers.

There are some limitations to Hill’s work, the most significant of which is the fact that she, as she herself puts it, presents ‘raw’ rather than ‘theorised’ data. Although she imposes the notion of ‘portfolios of interpretation’ on her findings, these are not fully defined, and thus this only really serves as a rhetorical device to amalgamate identified concepts. There is no elaboration of who possesses these portfolios, to what extent, and how they might change over the course of a lifetime. Instead, the metaphor is merely used to signify an ‘accumulation of experience’, which seems vague and one-directional (1997: 107). Further, Hill’s distinction between personal and social thresholds only appears to depend on whether taboos were discussed by individuals or explored as a group. In the context of my own study, it seems that there might be more at play here, for instance within the
distinction between more personal and borrowed discourses, or between reflexive and reflective kinds of talk. In addition, while Hill outlines her approach to designing the study and gathering the material, her analytic procedures for identifying emerging themes are less transparent, and her interest in a small range of specific films tells us little about how these films fit into the broader context of participants’ everyday media uses and interpretations.

Importantly, the ‘fears’ and ‘fear factors’ discussed in this chapter are solely based on the interviews collected in the course of this study and do not claim to be exhaustive. Further, the following does not always demarcate distinct ‘emotions’ but partly overlapping phenomena across fear dimensions. In designing this study, a working distinction was made between welcome and unwelcome responses to film and television. This distinction was confirmed and reinforced in participants’ talk. Largely positive and largely negative responses thus provide two overarching, organising categories in this chapter, though it is important to point out that there are responses which cannot in any straightforward way be allocated to either of these poles. Whether responses were welcome or unwelcome was also a wholly subjective matter; the same sort of feeling or sensation was experienced as positive by some and as negative by others.

In making sense of the interviews, I became aware of a number of recurring viewing positions as regards uses of, and responses to, particular media material. Viewers either enjoyed scares and suspense, endured, rejected or resisted them. Similar stances could be observed with regard to ‘violent’ media content, for instance to what participants repeatedly described as ‘blood and gore’. These viewing positions and their consequences are discussed in the light of specific examples. Finally, this chapter considers any national and generational traces apparent in the material, resisting any direct comparative generalisations in consideration of the qualitative nature of this study.
6.2 Conceptualising Fear(s)

Participants’ talk about their emotional responses to film and television contained some striking definitions of and stances towards ‘fear’ as a broad emotion, such as the metaphor of ‘fear’ as ‘addiction’. The younger viewers, in particular, often described fearful viewing as ‘heightened’ or ‘high’ experience which they had to ‘come down from’ (e.g. Olivera, G-VI). Likewise, programmes that were seen to in parts provide thrills to their viewers, such as Buffy, were portrayed as particularly ‘addictive’ (Patrick and Yasmine, UK-X). But there were also other ways in which viewers conceptualised different forms of ‘fear’, whether these related to everyday experiences or viewing situations. Some of these were contradictory. For instance, parts of viewers’ talk conceptualised fear as a fluid and changeable emotion or experience, at least with regard to the media. Like the fans described by Matt Hills in The Pleasures of Horror (2005), young viewers in this study often spoke of fearful reactions to horror or other scary material as instances from the past, as something they had experienced as children – before they realised that what they were watching was in fact unreal (see Chapter Seven).² More recently, getting scared by happenings on screen was something less attainable, though still possible, if certain factors were in place. Participants who felt unaffected by ‘scary’ material usually entertained a notion of desensitisation, which was based on the sense that a growing awareness of film-making conventions inhibited any deeper emotional involvement. Importantly, and in accordance with participants’ use of the term in Annette Hill’s study, this did not imply a lowering of inhibitions or sensitivities towards real-life violence, as sometimes dreaded by media commentators, but a lowering of personal thresholds with regard to depictions of violence on screen (see Hill, 1997: 11f).

At the same time, some fears were described as dispositional and more stable, with Nina, one of the British teenagers, even giving thought to the idea that fears could be shared by family members through genetic codes (both she and her mother shared a fear of heights, UK-XV). Those viewers who presented themselves as easily scared and as avoiding frightening material (e.g. Olivera and Dorothee, G-VI and G-IV), sometimes spoke of themselves as having always been more fearful...
than others, even in everyday life. Thus, fearful dispositions were often measured in relation to other people’s (supposed) fearfulness.

The notion that emotions could be continuations or discontinuations from other family members’ dispositions was particularly common in the German context. Nicole and her 13-year-old daughter, Julia, of the Beck family made this explicit when speaking of ‘taking after one another’ and after Julia’s grandmother. They also constructed these similarities as a gendered discourse, setting themselves in opposition to Nicole’s father, husband and teenage son. Of course, this was not merely an act of construction as expert discourses of gender (and discursive psychologists) would suggest. Their positioning was also inherently reflective, in that Nicole and Julia went through a process of observation and self-recognition in relation to their family’s media practices and engagements. Interestingly, differences between the sexes were embraced by the women as they relied on male members of the family to help them resurface from emotional encounters. Gender divisions were also evident in Monika and Florian’s family, where all female participants – Dorothee, Monika and Irma – individually constructed themselves as emotional beings with fairly low fear thresholds (though Irma’s was relatively high), compared to the men who foremost presented themselves as rational and blasé. Individual incidents could however touch a nerve, as is evident, for instance, in Florian’s discomfort with some horror film material and Helmut’s description of *Das Boot*, which moved him because of his own near involvement with submarines in World War II.

Not surprisingly perhaps, then, the old adage that women are more easily scared than men was a common view amongst participants in this study. Although the issue was only discussed by some of the viewers, those that raised it declared quite unreflectively that women are clearly the ‘weaker sex’ and thus more in touch with their emotions (e.g. Dorothee, G-IV). This view, which was expressed by men and women alike, did not, however, simply consider emotions as signs of weakness, linked to a lack of control or rationality (though in some cases it clearly did). There was also a sense in women’s talk that being in touch with one’s emotions could be a
positive thing and something men needed to work on. Further, girls and women in this study emphasised the importance and pleasure of getting emotionally involved with a film or programme, in some cases arguing that there is no point in watching a film that does not engage them on some sort of emotional level. As an aunt of the Cowie family, Vivian, put it: ‘I think you’ve got to... let a little bit of yourself... go, lower the barriers. I think that’s the whole point, because it is a very safe way of doing that. [...] If you don’t [...] allow yourself to be drawn in, then I don’t think you’re getting the maximum... sort of enjoyment or... whatever it is that you’re getting out of it’ (UK-IX).

Importantly, the gender divide did not always hold up, as Edwin’s discussion of his phobias demonstrates (see Chapter Five). In Germany, too, there were men who described themselves as more emotional than their wives (Georg) and women or girls who distinguished themselves from other, more emotional female relatives (Traude, G-VIII, and Emma, G-III). Traude’s family also provides an example discontinuations between generations of the same sex, with Olivera (15) and her mother sharing low fear thresholds while Traude actively constructed herself as rational and disengaged. It was evident that participants sought to explain their emotional selves by referring to family members. Yet, depending on the kind of viewer they allowed themselves to be – the most obvious binary opposition was between more or less ‘rational’ – they made gender or family relations relevant to differing degrees.

That, generally speaking, fears (and fear thresholds) were considered by some to vary between generations is visible in the following exchange between Celia and Edwin’s offspring, Matt and Nina (UK-XV), in which they discuss differences between their own fear potential in relation to films and that of their parents and grandparents:

N: We were talking about it last night, actually, weren’t we? About [...] like, the kind of films that... like, I think, well, in the olden days films that used to scare them, which we watch now, and we’re just like, like ‘The Exorcist’, she said..

M: [amused] Boring...
Matt and Nina’s talk is clearly performative, in that the teenagers jointly and actively construct themselves as fearless and experienced viewers, having adjusted to an increasingly scary diet of films over the years. In fact, during a different stretch of conversation, the teenagers speak of their own fearfulness as children and of its exponential decline in relation to their rising media literacy skills. At the same time, their talk displays a particular notion of ‘fear’ that is not just reducible to discursive construction but hints towards the ways in which the teenagers make sense of the world. To some degree, their view corresponds to that of their parents, Edwin and Celia (Chapter Five), whose talk was dominated by notions of change and concepts of ‘the olden days’. Like their parents, Matt and Nina advocate the idea that media material is getting increasingly scary and has to, in order to cater for the growing expectations of its audiences. This change is described as relatively constant, one-dimensional and as overriding particularities regarding genres, subject matters, and so on. The teenagers also make a link between changes in media material and changes in society, though at this point they merely discuss one as a reflection of the other.

The consequences of their thought experiment are particularly interesting, not least because they somewhat contradict their parents’ views. Whereas Edwin
had worried about children who ‘entered’ or were confronted with the world of film and television at an extreme (in his line of argument, at a stage of heightened media violence) and who thus missed any sense of historical progression and context, his children entertain the idea that it is their parents and grandparents who are more ‘affected’ by contemporary output, because they are used to material that is much less intense. Clearly, parents and teenagers agree on the fact that media material and society have changed, but they equally present the other group as existing in a time bubble and, therefore, see each other as unable to take such changes into account.

This conceptualisation of fear as something other generations are less able to deal with surfaced in a number of interviews in this study. Matt and Nina’s talk again mirrors findings from Annette Hill’s *Shocking Entertainment* which suggests that younger generations consider their elders to be less ‘equipped’ to deal with some media material, in this case the particularly ‘graphic’ representations of violence depicted in Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (Hill, 1997: 29). Likewise, young children commonly stood for the most vulnerable section of the audience, as will be further discussed below. It generally became evident through the course of this study that certain media material – violence, action, special effects, soaps and *Big Brother*, in particular – created a generation gap between participants, in which members of each age group drew distinctions between their and other generations’ media uses and interpretations. Often this involved parents being dismissive of their children’s media consumption, much for the reasons outlined by Celia and Edwin, that is, today’s lack of ‘wholesome’ media material. The grandparents in this study were less dismissive but admitted to not always seeing the attraction of certain ‘younger’ content (my term). Teenagers not only considered their elders as less equipped to deal with some films or programmes, they also often found their parents’ and grandparents’ viewing choices boring to the extreme. This included Krimis in Germany, but also the news and nature programmes across both countries. With regard to fear-related responses, this meant that ‘fear’ itself was bound up with conceptions of the nature and acceptability of media material in relation to the competences of groups of viewers.
As will become clear in the section on ‘safe fear’ below, there was a sense in some participants’ talk that fear was part of life and, as such, was a healthy emotion to experience, within limits. Parents and teenagers, in particular, considered watching a frightening film or programme as a safe way of encountering the emotion without having to live through real threats or consequences (compare Hill, 1997: 79). A counter-discourse saw the creation of fear in viewers more negatively as ‘big business’, linking it to shocking the audience with cruelties and violence, which was considered exploitative and as playing up to other viewers’ seeming needs for more, that is, for bigger, better and scarier stories (Edwin, UK-XIV; Dorothee, G-IV; Owain, XVIII).

In general, there was a notion that mediated fears can and should usually be managed and controlled, at least if stories (for instance, on the news) did not imply an immediate threat to oneself or people close to the family. It was regarded as weak, destructive and unwise to unnecessarily ‘dwell on’ fears or worries. Instead, concerns raised by the media should be digested and filed away, so one could get on with the issues that really impacted on individuals’ lives. Comments about the dangers of ‘letting oneself’ get too worried by fact or fiction implied that participants considered there to be some agency in the matter. At the same time, there was an acknowledgement that fears and worries might get worse (and thus harder to deal with) when becoming a parent (or grandparent), because there was someone else to be concerned for.

Asked whether and how participants conceived of differences between ‘real-life’ fear and that experienced in front of the screen, participants made the following points relevant:

1. Real-life fears and worries are much more important to people than those experienced in front of the screen, because TV is just a ‘transitory’ experience (Owain, great uncle, UK-XVIII).
2. Real-life fears are more scary than mediated ones, but in real life one can do something about them, i.e. one has more agency over one’s own situation,
than over the happenings on screen. Uma and Glenys (parents, UK-XIII) also reasoned that one was less likely to dwell on real-life fears and more likely to take action.

3. Conversely, it was discussed (e.g. by teenagers Doro (G-IV), Patrick and Yasmine (UK-X)) that there is agency in front of the screen, because all one needs to do is switch off the TV or leave the cinema. Real-life fears cannot be switched off; they need to be dealt with.

4. Real-life fears relate to the self, while mediated fears concern others, such as in the case of empathy.

5. Mediated fears are temporary (sometimes just split seconds, e.g. fright and shocks), though they might resurface in nightmares. Real-life fears persist, occupy the mind for longer, affect deeply, and need to be resolved. (Nina describes media fears as ‘exciting’ rather than ‘petrifying’ fear, UK-XV).

6. Real fears are accompanied by rushes of adrenaline which are unpleasant, and they engage more senses, such as smell and taste.

7. Interestingly, though only voiced once in isolation, emotional responses to films were seen to be ‘laid out’ for the viewer, whereas in real life one has to think and make decisions about one’s emotions (Olivera, 13, G-VI).

Other distinctions will be discussed below as they play important factors in the pleasures or displeasures of ‘fear’.

The above demonstrates that the viewers in this study were largely reflective about fear as an emotion and as a response to film or television. There were of course different degrees of reflection, as well as exceptions to the rule. One German mother for instance asserted that ‘fear’ was something one had, not something one analysed (Claudia, G-III). Yet, participants generally had a concept of what ‘fear’ meant to them and others, and, partly, their notions of fear could be contradictory, reinforcing the fluidity and complexity of the phenomenon. As has begun to transpire in Chapter Five and will further be illustrated by this and the subsequent chapter, participants’ concepts of fear were always bound up with both ‘folk’
theories of emotions as well as the nature and workings of the media. It is partly the aim of these analytic chapters to draw out these theories and concepts. In the following, I discuss the multifaceted nature of ‘fear’ as evident in participants’ (experiential) differentiations and viewers’ need to explain and account for particular kinds of fear within different contexts.

6.3 Fear Dimensions
Of all the ‘fears’ that were made relevant in participants’ talk the broadest distinction possible is that between pleasurable and unwanted fearful responses to the screen. Monika’s description of personal thresholds and Celia and Edwin’s mixed emotions towards See No Evil (which they watched with horror but still felt compelled to view to the end) only constitute two illustrations of how slippery the notions of positive and negative responses to the screen can be. Yet, despite the obvious risk of oversimplifying issues, participants’ elaborations on viewing tastes and preferences were so pronounced that a distinction between broadly welcome and unwelcome experiences makes sense for the purposes of this chapter. Importantly, as indicated before, I have aimed to abstain from preconceptualising the valence of viewers’ experiences and instead deduced from viewers’ talk whether their emotions were pleasurable or not, or whether feelings were indeed mixed, changeable, or dependent on context. I begin with what I have broadly termed ‘scary pleasures’.

6.3.1 Scary Pleasures
6.3.1.1 Why and When Fears are Welcome
A variety of films and programmes were made relevant by participants as particularly enjoyable forms of ‘scares’, or as having some sort of scare ‘potential’. These ranged from media material that included just a few fear-related elements to films and programmes which had the creation of ‘fear’ as their main purpose. As a result, the meanings and consequences of these scares differed, as did the nature and grounds of the ‘pleasures’ participants derived from them. Perhaps
unsurprisingly, the broad genres these viewers most associated with scary pleasures were crime series, action thrillers and horror films (some of which had emerged as conversation points in Chapter Five, though were not exclusively enjoyed by the couples).

Crime stories or murder mysteries (German: ‘Krimis’) were described by their viewers (usually mothers and grandmothers) as suspenseful, sometimes tense, and engaging. They were associated with some fright reactions, but for the main part they provided intelligent entertainment for viewers who enjoyed their ‘who dunnit’ puzzle solving element. Anja, the Beck family’s aunt (G-II), explained that these viewing experiences were at once relaxing and stimulating for her, since they encouraged her to think but did not require any ‘heavy-going’ (‘schwergängig’) or ‘pondering’ (fig. ‘grüblerisch’) thought. Accordingly, crime stories were rarely linked to real-life contemporary issues (Monika and Florian’s talk about the video game murders constituting a notable exception). On the whole, crime stories seemed to almost exist in a vacuum.

Viewers enjoyed the fact that they provided self-contained stories at the end of which there was a resolution, the catching of the perpetrator. Importantly, these programmes (were enjoyed when they) were not too graphic in their depiction of violence, to the extent that participants sometimes ‘forgot’ that they dealt with killings and murders. Deirdre, a keen crime viewer in her 60s (UK-XIX), for instance, repeatedly asserted that she did not enjoy watching anything ‘murderous’, only to realise that her favourite crime stories were necessarily based on murders. Viewers were on the whole more concerned with character depictions and the process of crime investigations than they were with the underlying subject matter, which is of course important in the light of content analyses, such as those employed by cultivation analysts, which put considerable emphasis on the number of killings presented on screen. Having said this, it is dangerous to lump all crime series into one category. Some will include more ‘explicit’ violence, such as fist fights and similarly action-driven elements. Although participants did not always name the murder mysteries they watched, the ones mentioned were less action-
orientated and more focused on character development and puzzle-solving (for instance, Tatort, Der Alte, Ein Fall für Zwei and American imports, such as Columbo, and Murder She Wrote in Germany; Poirot and Midsomer Murders in the UK, to give just some examples).4

‘Suspense’ was a key word employed in crime story conversations, as was ‘excitement’. The latter was also most commonly used in regard to counter terrorism thriller series, such as Spooks and 24, which were enjoyed by a number of parents and teenagers, particularly in the UK. These were only ‘scary’ when viewers thought through their real-life relevance and possible wider implications, which often seemed a result of my interview questions, rather than an everyday occurrence (see Chapter Seven). Their enjoyment was based on the programmes’ ability to ‘grip’ and ‘engage’ viewers. A similarly ‘gripping’ engagement dominates Glenys’ engagement with Doctor Who, which she described not in terms of a ‘real kind of hiding behind the sofa kind of… being frightened’, but as a ‘sitting on the edge of [her] seat… kind of stuff’ (mother, UK-XIII).5 In Glenys’ family, Doctor Who constituted a conversation topic across two generations, mothers and daughter. The family for instance discussed the differences between the ‘old’ Doctor Who, which the parents had grown up with, and its modern-day reincarnation. To Uma, the new series is more gripping and has her as much ‘on the edge of the seat’ as had been the case with Glenys and the ‘old’ Doctors:

U: It actually is the modern series that does that to me.
Z: Yeah…
U: … it’s kind of..
G: Doesn’t do it to me at all…
U: … It grips…, it really grips [indist.]
Z: … and when, erm… it leaves it when Rose is about to die..
U: She doesn’t die, though…
Z: … and it… yeah, but..
[laughter]
Z: [annoyed] [stretched] Oh, I hate it when you do that!
[laughter]
Z: It’s like… and then it… ends, and it’s like – [stretched] no! And you’ve got to wait a whole week til the next series.
Uma used to hate *Doctor Who* as a child and now wonders whether the figure and writing of Russel T. Davies have ‘brought it into something more recognisable’ for her. Glenys, on the other hand, does not find a way into the new *Who* at all. Interestingly, there is an age gap between the couple and, to an extent, they put Glenys’ enjoyment of *Doctor Who* as a child down to her younger age. Conversely, Uma’s current enjoyment of the current series is linked to an intellectual engagement with its writing in relation to her life situation. Elsewhere, the couple reason that their 12-year-old daughter, Zara, would not find much pleasure in episodes from the past, because she is used to a different, faster type of story-telling. Here, changes of media material over time are thus elaborated as both a generational discourse (similarly to that employed by Celia and Edwin) and as personal likes and dislikes in relation to one’s life stages or expectations. Zara herself relates the aforementioned suspense to the tension built up through cliffhangers, in this case Rose’s fate, which was in fact only resolved after months. The short exchange above of course illustrates an interesting dynamic between Zara allowing herself to live through Rose’s apparent death and Uma’s playful reminder that word of mouth and teasers had already announced Rose’s mysterious return, hinting to the constructedness of the programme.

Films like Hitchcock ‘classics’, *Jaws* and *Fatal Attraction*, though textually very different and deriving from up to five decades of film history, were mentioned for the power and enjoyment of their startle effects, for instance the shock in response to Glenn Close’s abrupt sit-up in the bathtub after having seemingly been drowned by Michael Douglas’ character (Jim, grandfather, UK-XVI). Such startle effects, frights and jumps were also made relevant to viewers’ enjoyment of a variety of horror films. In addition, horror films were often sought out and enjoyed for their ‘blood and gore’ element (the existence of which was enough for other viewers *not* to engage with films of that kind, see below). Further, they provided entertainment that was based on the relationship between tension and relief, laughter and screaming, and, most importantly perhaps, some viewers derived great pleasure from watching such films in groups. A dominant view amongst
participants was that horror films were produced for group entertainment, and that individual viewings were too scary, or morally flawed and plain wrong. Parents and grandparents variously commented that they could not imagine being friends with anyone who watched horror films on their own (e.g. Claudia, G-III), or that horror viewers were probably not ‘peace-loving’ people like themselves (e.g. Traude, G-VIII). So there was clearly a sense of viewing choices as distinctions from other, less like-minded people, again reinforcing the notion that viewers watched, or chose not to watch, with ‘imagined’ groups of audiences in mind.

Teenagers in both countries were more accustomed to the idea of watching horror films (though most of the German girls, plus Zara from the UK, avoided them for reasons of low fear thresholds or a dislike of ‘blood and gore’). Even horror enthusiasts were keen to point out that they would not watch such films on their own. One 9-year-old participant repeatedly described his favourite horror film, The Shining, as ‘the scariest film in the UK’, recounting a number of instances that highlighted just how scary it was. In the following, Patrick and his older sister, Yasmine, explain why they much prefer watching horror in a group:

Y: I like horror films more [amused] when I’m with my friends and we basically get very hyper and stuff, and then we [stretched] scream every time something happens. And like,, erm, I like... I don’t know, it’s more fun when... you’re with your friends cos...

[pause]
P: Yeah.
Y: .. [laughing] You’re quite hyper, and then you squeak.
K: Hm, right, so you wouldn’t really watch it on your own or do..
P: Well... no, I wouldn’t want to...
Y: ... I probably wouldn’t sit in a dark room on my own [chuckles].
P: .. at ten o’clock at night watching it.
K: [chuckles]
P: It has to... it, it’s... ‘The Shining’ is very scary... You... I, I would never watch it at ten o’clock at night on my own.

[...]
Y: ... I don’t know... it’s like, e’... some people couldn’t watch... just sit in the room and watch it, they [prefer if??] you’re with other people, friends or something..
P: You ca’... you ca’...
Y: ... cos...
Patrick and Yasmine jointly paint an interesting contrast here between enjoyable and less bearable viewing contexts. The first builds on the performative element of social viewing, the fact that screaming is part of the fun but also, as Patrick’s final comment suggests, of covering up possible fright reactions. The game of viewing horror does not on the surface allow for ‘genuine’ emotions but for an acting-out (and monitoring) of (others’) responses. At the same time, the teenagers’ references to ‘talking at the scary bits’ and screaming while pretending ‘it’s on purpose’ hint towards both forms of coping strategies (and thus the existence of ‘genuine’ emotional responses to the screen) and to means of keeping it cool in front of peers.6

Patrick and Yasmine’s description of the ‘private’ viewing context is almost formulaic; the worst possible viewing situation entails being alone, in a dark room, at ten o’clock at night, with night time seemingly adding to the fear factor. Bad things happen at night (at least in films they do, see Julia, G-V), and things seem scarier, perhaps because one’s imagination is more likely to wander. The teenagers’ talk also implies that the private viewing context is more passive, as one ‘just sit[s] in the room and watch[es]’ instead of jumping about, being hyper, squeaking and screaming. Here, watching by oneself appears dangerous because there is no protective shield of peer performance.

The above not only confirms previous studies on the importance of approaching horror viewing as social phenomenon (as discussed in Chapter Two), it also seems to demarcate a distinction between the teenagers’ sense of private and public realms of ‘fear’. In both viewing contexts, there are elements of the private, of personal felt responses, some of which seem out of their control. Yet, while the social occasion is marked by action and distraction, solitary viewing implies for the
teenagers that emotions are almost unfiltered, and thus more powerful and ‘scary’. This unfiltered experience is one Patrick and Yasmine tend to avoid (though they play this down, arguing that watching with friends is just ‘more fun’). Quite the opposite is the case with viewers who, like Matt and Nina above, maintain they rarely experience such powerful sensations anymore. Here, ‘fear’ turns into an achievement.

Clearly, Patrick and Yasmine seek out horror films because they are scary and risky. They enjoy the hyped-up feeling they derive from group viewing and, as such, horror films are entertaining and ‘successful’ when they manage to provide these thrills (even more successful, it seems, when one’s ‘personal’ fears can be hidden or disguised from others). Beyond this, however, there was also a sense in participants’ talk that real ‘fearful’ responses (perhaps of the kind avoided by Yasmine and Patrick) were a rarity and thus particularly desired. Matt and Nina report having seen so many horror films in the past that it is ‘pretty hard to shock [them]’; only rarely will a film take them by surprise, and it is those occasions that are most memorable. As Nina recounts:

N: [T]here was one, I think ‘The Wrong Turn’, that was quite good, it was… it wasn’t actually like… have you seen that one? It’s not, doesn’t… it’s not actually really quite life-like, but… cos they just keep driving around the road […] and then they can’t come off it. But… the way they did it was like a normal family… in like a normal car. That one was quite good, I liked that one… [pause] It was… just more realistic. And ‘The Hole’ I liked, it’s more of a thriller, not a scary film. But, to me, it was more of a horror film cos it’s like… [pause] it made me feel tense and… scared myself, what was gonna happen.

The issue of ‘realism’ will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven. Suffice to say here that it constituted an important fear factor for the teenagers who felt more ‘affected’ by a film if it was set within a realistic context and could thus theoretically happen to real people in real life. At the same time, the ‘fear’ described by Nina in this excerpt can again be ascribed to the broad category of suspense; it is based on tension and anticipation. ⁸
Participants’ talk about fear as achievement was often marked by a comparison with past fearful encounters, and particularly with those which respondents had either experienced when they were young, or which they generally associated with children and childhood. As mentioned above, participants entertained a notion of desensitisation, or at least of getting used to certain media material, caused by an increase in media literacy skills or by getting older. Having discussed a change in media output over the last twenty years, for instance from relatively harmless material to more brutal representations of violence, Anja (aunt, G-II) initially suggests that society’s acceptance levels have grown accordingly (compare Edwin’s comments on ‘accepting more’, Chapter Five). Yet, Anja almost immediately retracts or at least problematises her claims when she remembers her niece’s fearful responses to Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone. Julia was twelve at the time of viewing and unable to watch the film on her own. Anja herself had enjoyed it and had found it ‘exciting’, ‘a bit creepy’, but ‘normal’ (G-II). Her niece, however, got particularly scared and had nightmares as the result of one specific scene, in which Lord Voldemort’s face appeared on the back of Professor Quirrell’s head. This memory leads Anja to revisit her initial statement, reasoning that children still appear to have a much ‘fresher’ threshold, and that she has lost the ability to see films through their eyes. (The tension between Anja’s sense of media and society as a whole and her personal family experience is notable.)

A participant who feels she has very much retained ‘child-like’ (‘not childish’, she stresses) qualities of suspending disbelief and watching films as though they are happening and as though she is there, is Vivian (aunt, UK-IX). She explains that when she watches something she ‘lose[s] [herself] completely in it’, which she puts down to her ability to be as ‘credulous’ as children can be; ‘they believe things’, she says, ‘that adults wouldn’t necessarily believe... as such’. Her comments largely refer to her enjoyment of fantasy and stories of the paranormal, which require viewers to be especially ‘open-minded’. Yet, again, there is a sense that emotional ‘depth’ (my word) is most easily achieved during childhood; thereafter, it demands viewers’ conscious and active effort to ‘lower barriers’
(Vivian’s words) and to allow oneself to respond emotionally, or fearfully, to the screen.

6.3.1.2 ‘Fearful and Safe’

In *Shocking Entertainment*, Annette Hill observes that ‘fictional violence can signify a safe environment where high degrees of emotional involvement can be experienced, secure in the knowledge that this will have little effect on real life experience’ (1997: 79). For some participants in her study, violent movies allowed ‘room for physical/emotional responses and character relationships which would be too painful to experience in real life’ (ibid). Elsewhere the researcher employs a similar concept of ‘safe emotion’, particularly ‘fear’, in relation to British viewers’ involvement in reality programming, such as *999* and *Children’s Hospital*. Responding to criticism which at the time denounced reality TV as melodramatic, sensationalist and voyeuristic, Hill demonstrates that viewers’ engagement with these programmes is one of tension and relief (see above), in which they ‘enjoy the drama of watching real and potentially tragic events portrayed on television, but they do so with the prior knowledge that the [people] depicted on screen are in the safe hands of dedicated and caring professionals’ (Hill, 2000: 209). As such, safety is not only part of the viewing experience (in the BBC-related assumption that there will be a happy end), it is also in the overall life-affirming ‘messages’ viewers take away from the programmes. They are life-affirming, firstly, because they can serve as a reminder of one’s own fortunate situation and, secondly, because they suggest that there are people out there who can help, should one get into trouble.

Similar notions of ‘safe fear’ could be observed in the material gathered for this study. The ‘safety’ largely derived from five textual and contextual sources. Some of these reflect Hill’s findings, but I would like to add others. Firstly, there was always the knowledge that what was seen was a film, and with this came a range of modality judgements (see also Chapter Seven). Emotions were thus experienced *like* the real emotion, but in an ‘attenuated’ way (Vivian, UK-IX). Secondly, viewers relied on their knowledge of certain filmic conventions for their
safe enjoyment of films, for instance the high probability of happy endings. Thirdly, there were particularly safe viewing contexts; just like peer performance could function as a protective shield, the presence of certain people (e.g. one’s parents or other guardians) significantly contributed to feeling ‘safe’. The ability to switch off the TV or leave the cinema meant that respondents had ultimate control over the situation, again offering an important safety factor. And finally, there was a sense that stories were on film and TV precisely because they were out of the ordinary. In a curious way, this knowledge could add to participants’ sense of safety in the real world. As Yasmine puts it in a discussion of incidents depicted on 24, ‘they have to make videos about it, because... it doesn’t actually happen’, at least not all the time and not in her country (UK-X). This, of course, provides a direct challenge to the notion that viewers unambiguously transfer their knowledge of the television world into real-life fearful perceptions (I will return to this issue in Chapter Seven).

Vivian’s description of feeling ‘fearful and safe’ nicely illustrates the dynamics viewers saw at play. Although, in relation to other viewers in this study, the extent to which Vivian allowed herself to engage emotionally with films seemed extraordinary, her safety-related comments are typical of other respondents’ talk:

V:  [T]his part of my consciousness knows that it is just a film... [...] [pause] in reality, but... at the same time I can... almost kind of un’... unhitch, disengage from that and still... wallow in the fear. I, I suppose it’s a kind of safe fear, because you know... that at any moment, if you wanted to, you could just get up and walk away, you could turn the TV off, you could... [...] You know, if you’re in the cinema, you can get up and go, or something like that, so although, you know what I mean, there, there’s always... it’s kind of, it’s, it’s erm... [pause] it, it’s, it’s experiencing that feeling... the emotional bit without the danger. [...] [pause] And that’s... kind of, that’s the positive side of... that kind of fear. [...] You know, it’s almost as if... there is something in me, and I’m sure tha’... I mean, that’s why humans take risks, isn’t it? Because they’ve got that desire to do something that frightens them, but th’... they kind of like it at the same time.

The emotion Vivian experiences is ‘enough like real life to [...] stimulate feeling... and reaction, but it’s not... so much like real life that it’s unbearable’. Vivian goes on to explain that there are some things in films, particularly ‘really violent ones’, that
she would not want to be part of life (compare Hill, 1997). In a sense, it is ‘nice to have them… contained in a little box, or on the big screen’, rather than having them come into daily life. As indicated in the beginning of this chapter, participants often considered ‘fear’ a natural part of the human psyche – ‘that’s why humans take risks’ – but there were fine lines between pleasure and agony.

An important point, which seems largely missing from Hill’s account, was the sense that feelings of ‘safety’ could change throughout a person’s life time. This is, for instance, evident in Sonia’s discussion of her shifting stance towards horror films:

S: I guess I watched them in a safe environment, apart from anything else, my dad and uncle [Name] were there, you know, so err… the world could have come and got me, and I’d have been safe, you know, so.., cos I was only… oh, I don’t know how old I was – teens. And erm… and I loved… I loved the blood and the gore… and then once I started… to be interested in sort of, err… [pause] tentatively film-making and, and actually got a little bit involved in the process of it… erm… in my late teens… I kind of… I liked analysing it, how they would do it. What did they use, like, there’s a horrible scene in ‘Last.’, ‘Last House on the Left’ where someone’s kind of disemboweled… in the woods, I mean, it’s a long time since I’ve seen it, but… I kind of remember that bit… erm… and then I, I, I wanted to work out… how that happened, what they’d, what they used, how did they make that, what did they do to create it, you know? I’m sure it’s some dead pig or something that they used, you know, but it… that was kind of interesting. But I do’. I. [breathes out] I mean, I, I watched… one of the ‘Blade’ films with you! and liked it, and we enjoyed it… but it’s a bit like the ‘Star Wars’ films, there’s so many, there’s only so many kind of… [pause] battles or… stabbings or vampire fights you can watch before it’s like… Yeah, I’ve seen that, I want something more, and I, I prefer… [pause] depth and… an interest… but then having said that, I love musical films… So… there’s no real depth or interest in there, but they are a completely different genre… and, and I would far sooner sit down and watch… ‘High Society’ than any zombie film… any day… But then they’re feel-good factors and they’re switch-off films and… you just watch those with pleasure and joy… you know, so that, that’s kind of made [indist.], I’m getting old. [laughs]

Sonia describes her changing taste as a context-dependent progression from enjoying the ‘blood and gore’ while watching within a safe environment, via a practical interest in special effects (and thus perhaps an active distancing from the
happenings on screen) in her later teens, to a dislike of or indifference towards the broad genre in more recent adulthood. Her hesitation and reformulation towards the end of this excerpt are telling. She conceptualises zombie films (and anything she associates with extended fight or battle scenes) as lacking depth and interest. As such, she describes them as somewhat superficial entertainment. This in itself is not enough for her to dismiss the genre; she very much enjoys the superficial entertainment offered by musicals. The difference is that horror/zombie films do not encompass preferred purposes and consequences. They are enjoyed in her son’s company (not least, perhaps, because these quality times of watching with her son have become fewer and far between), but they do not add to the same sense of well-being and relaxation, joy and pleasure, which Sonia associates with watching musicals. As in the case of Monika’s viewing choices, Sonia makes ‘uses and gratifications’ relevant in her talk (see Chapter Two), though these are less a result of inherent psychological traits and more of her sense of emotional self in specific life situations. In the light of the above (and other participants’ functionalist emotion talk), rather than considering ‘needs’ as given and static psychological attributes within an undertheorised area of U&G research, it may be constructive to approach them as interpretative frameworks which come into play as Sonia lives out perceiving herself as ‘emotional self’, with an emotional life history.

Interestingly, Sonia somewhat mocks her change of taste and preferences by concluding that it is probably just ‘old age’ that has impacted on her choices and requirements. Yet, I would argue that precisely this final remark is loaded with meaning. Although the issue is not directly made relevant here, there are other sections in the interview in which Sonia notes that one’s responses to the media change when becoming a parent. This is, for instance, the case with her reference to the killing of Damilola Taylor (which her 14-year-old son, Ian, had found particularly memorable):

S: I think it’s worse once you’ve had children... when you hear about horrid things that happen to kids... And he’s always accusing me... of being over-
protective... you know, he’s bigger than me now, but he’s still my baby, and I’m still responsible for him...

It would be wrong to lump Sonia’s responses to horror films together with her negotiation of the news, and I run the risk of over-speculating. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that the pressures of (single) parenthood, of having particular responsibilities as the family’s sole breadwinner and as the person who wants to do a good job at raising and looking after their son, have impacted on the requirements Sonia has towards her encounters with the media. This is not to suggest that she used to always be ‘carefree’ as a young teenager, but the idealised picture she paints of feeling safe in the company of her father and uncle, even if the world was to come and get her, sits in stark contrast to herself as the protector of her own small family. Her personal viewing choices can be considered as comfort choices in that respect, which also leads me to a different ‘pleasure’, that of escaping from the chores and pressures of everyday life.

6.3.1.3 Media as Distraction from Fears or Worries
This is, of course, not strictly speaking a ‘scary pleasure’, because it does not have to involve fear-related media material at all. Yet, when speaking to participants in this study, it transpired that they made use of media material in two ways, either in order to distract themselves from other films or programmes by switching channels, or to momentarily ‘escape’ from certain pressures of everyday life. I will discuss the former tactic of changing channels and seeking out entertainment for ‘easy viewing’ in the section on viewers as ‘rejecters’ below. Here, I briefly address the notion of escape, or of what I would call ‘timeouts’.

The term ‘escapism’ was often used derogatorily by early media and communication scholars out of a concern with the assumed ‘passivity’ of escapist media engagement, linked to an inability to deal with real life and, by extension, to social withdrawal. More recently, it has been noted that ‘escapism’ is a vague and overused concept, and that it can mean anything from relaxation or the passing of time, to character involvement and/or a flight from reality, whatever the latter may
encompass (see McQuail, 2002). By exchanging the term with the notion of ‘timeouts’, I seek to underline the momentary and purposeful nature of the phenomenon, as it emerged in the context of this study. Viewers knew that some problems or worries had to be dealt with and, as such, they only used media material as a delaying tactic or breather from these concerns. Sometimes they simply wanted their heads filled with other thoughts; films and programmes could help take their mind off things. An example and mixture of the above is Patrick and Yasmine’s discussion of differences between the real world and that presented on film and television:

Y: I like it when there’s differences, because you can kind of go into another world sometimes when you like... you don’t wanna be in this one... Well, you know, sort of like...

[...]
P: ... I also like that... Say, if you get sick of this world, you can just turn on the TV and look at... [pause] to another one. [...] That’s why I like cartoons sometimes... because, erm... err, if I’m worried about something or distressed, cartoons just take my mind off it. [...] I’m in a... I’m in a whole other world.

Y: Yeah.

K: Can you remember when, when you did that, when you were thinking about..., you know, you were worried about something and you...

P: [breathes in]

K: ... c’, consciously sat down and...

P: ... Well...

K: ... started watching...

P: ... Erm...

K: ... something, cos...

Y: Usually exams... cos...

P: ... Yeah...

Y: ... every summer about May I have... May, June, I have like this whole block of like three weeks where I have nothing but exams in different subjects and... [pause] it’s really kind of annoying, and I just get so annoyed with revision sometimes, I just go watch television.

P: Yeah.

K: Hm.

[pause]

P: And, erm, what usually, sometimes when I’m worried about school ‘n if I’m gonna get into trouble... erm, I just take my mind of it by watching TV!

K: Right... and that helps usually.
Patrick and Yasmine clearly describe avoidance tactics here, some of which might spark concern in parents and teachers (considering their apparent impact on revision time...). Yet, as argued above, the teenagers seem to largely describe momentary ‘timeouts’, moments when they feel sick, annoyed or anxious about parts of their lives, and they want to think about something else. Although Patrick initially seems at a loss to provide concrete examples, and their subsequent illustrations are semi-hypothetical, the siblings evidently share an understanding of this purposeful engagement with ‘a whole other world’. Their worries relate to local issues, to school and to personal relationships (which are, along with concerns for the well-being of family members, two of the issues that were most commonly raised by teenagers in this study). The teenagers’ methods of media distraction can again be linked to theories of uses and gratifications. Yet, interestingly, except for Patrick’s mention of cartoons, which in his view are so evidently removed from real life, there does not seem to be a preference for specific media material, nor do the teenagers describe the achievement of particular mood changes. Anything will do, it seems, as long as it is different.

Not quite a distraction from real life but a way of dealing with it is the notion of the media’s cathartic properties. This thought was particularly entertained by Sonia (UK-XVII). In response to her son’s dismay at fictional representations of 9/11, something which he felt strongly might disturb or hurt affected people, she pointed out that stories help us understand and make sense of the world; a film about such events might help people come to terms with their experiences.

To summarise, then, before moving on to the next section, here are some of the points relevant to ‘scary pleasures’:
• ‘Fear’ could be enjoyed in the form of thrills and suspense, startle and fright reactions, and a mixture of tension and relief, particularly in relation to crime stories, thrillers and horror films.
• Horror films were most ‘pleasurable’ when experienced in a group.
• There was a sense of private and social dimensions to these experiences, with group viewing taking away some of the force of otherwise ‘too scary’ scares.
• Viewers who enjoyed ‘scary’ entertainment did so within ‘safe’ contexts and the ‘safe’ knowledge or hope (compare Lothar Mikos’ notion of the ‘viewing contract’, 2001: 249-58) that what they were watching was ‘unreal’ and would conventionally end happily.
• Notions of ‘safety’ could change through a person’s lifetime depending on life situations and viewing contexts.
• The media was conceived by participants both as escape (‘timeout’) and as therapeutic storyteller.

Next, I attend to some of the less welcome responses or uses of the media which were made relevant in the gathered material.

6.3.2 Fear as Displeasure
In a sense, the above section on ‘scary pleasures’ contains few surprises, though I hope to have highlighted some important details, for instance the relevance of changing life situations to participants’ concepts of scary pleasures. Viewers in this study were just as likely, if not more inclined, to recount ‘negative’ fearful encounters with the media. Two broad forms of media content emerged as particularly contentious in participants’ talk, in the sense that viewers felt they had to position themselves towards them. These were forms of media violence, most often referred to as ‘gratuitous’ or ‘blood and gore’, and media material that would instil strong emotional responses like scares, tension or suspense. Thus, for some, the pleasures identified above were just the very elements that added to
participants’ displeasures. This section concerns itself with the issues that were at stake for participants who actively distanced themselves from certain kinds of entertainment.

Importantly, although participants constructed (or narrated) themselves as more or less emotional beings, the experience of ‘fear’ in the strongest and simplest sense of the word was largely denied by participants across the board. It was reserved for ‘real-life’ emotions, rather than those experienced in front of the screen. However, some participants acknowledged that things had the potential of evoking emotions as strong as ‘real’ fear, and it is for that reason that they avoided engaging with material which they anticipated to function accordingly. Monika’s preconception of films like *Jurassic Park*, which, as I suggested in Chapter Five, worked as a cultural and emotional measure for her, is mirrored in other examples of talk. For Sonia, for instance, one unknown but nevertheless avoided film is *The Blair Witch Project*:

S: You’ve got things like, erm... ‘The Blair Witch Project’, which I’ve never watched and I have no desire to watch, cos I think that would scare me, because you don’t actually see anything... you know, and, and it’s that... I mean, I don’t know, cos I haven’t seen it, but it’s kind of like... that notion of a reality... so it, it wouldn’t appeal to me, cos I won’t, I won’t watch things that I... think might disturb me. I mean, there are things that disturb me... emotionally, cos they’re terribly sad, I won’t watch anything about children getting hurt or anything like that.

Sonia does not disclose a lot of information here, so it is difficult to identify just what kind of knowledge of *The Blair Witch Project* she possesses. However, she is clearly aware of the invisibility of the ‘monster’, which, in her mind, raises the fear potential. Further, her comments suggest an awareness of the reality claim of the film (which of course is best known for an extensive publicity stunt that alleged it to be a documentary rather than a work of fiction). It is the ‘closeness’ to reality that she envisages as ‘disturbingly’ frightening in a similar way as films in which children are hurt can be ‘disturbingly’ sad. Both evoke strong emotions that seem to impact on the way she relates to life, and it is this connection Sonia is keen to
avoid. The issue of ‘realism’ and ‘reality’ thus again resurfaces as especially pertinent, and Sonia’s role as a mother is made relevant.

Other examples of films as unknown entities and no-go areas were Silence of the Lambs (e.g. Rita, G-VII) and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Vivian, UK-IX). Such films clearly went beyond personal ‘thresholds’, but these thresholds were largely based on imaginary content as ‘built up’ through hearsay and brief encounters with individual scenes. Vivian, for instance, ‘cannot imagine… why anybody would want to watch… something like “The Texas Chainsaw Massacre”’. Again, she does not provide details; yet, her previous comments about unnecessarily high levels of violence in some films suggest that she imagines explicit bloodshed and, as a result, finds herself ‘physically’ incapable of sitting through the film. Similarly, Rita finds The Silence of the Lambs awful (‘furchtbar’) to the extreme:

R: I’ve only once seen clips, and they were enough already… and I would [stretched] never watch the film. [...] Because… it… yes… [pause] it really generates such fears in me… erm, that I would never watch the film, and I have never seen it, only ever excerpts. [...] and just from stories… and that’s already enough for me. [...] Cos I think, you don’t have to additionally inflict random [’irgendwelche’] fears onto yourself. I mean, I believe I’m more the kind of person who can’t bear anything like that. Others might tuck it away easily, but… for me, I’d have nightmares.

It is perhaps because of the very nature of the ‘reaction’ to such unknown entities that the participants remain vague about the exact content they want to avoid. This is also interesting because it suggests that they expect me as a fellow viewer or non-viewer to understand, precisely because they assume a culturally shared notion of a film like The Silence of the Lambs. Rita is slightly more articulate about her anticipated response. Watching the film would lead to fears and nightmares. These fears are in addition to those experienced in everyday life, which in Rita’s case manifest themselves as worries about her (at the time failing or failed) marriage and the future and well-being of her children. Her preferred evening viewing consists of stark opposites, namely of romantic comedies and other light entertainment. As she asserts, happy endings are extremely important to her, because she experiences
them as positive and is then able to go to bed with positive thoughts on her mind. (The comparably 'happy' ending of Jodie Foster's endeavour is either unknown or overshadowed by the strength of negative thoughts and images.) Important in this and the other women's account is that, firstly, like Monika, the participants have a 'physical' or embodied sense of self and their 'thresholds', if you like. They can't 'physically sit through' such films, they can't 'bear' them. Secondly, they have (culturally shared) expectations of specific media material – some from hearsay, some from previous experience – and they assign specific purposes to their viewing. Thirdly, these purposes are intrinsically linked to their life situations, to responsibilities and everyday concerns, which are more readily linked to the private rather than the public sphere.

There is other material participants avoided because it instilled discomfort or disgust in them; some of this is discussed below. Yet, as mentioned before, there were also moments of 'suspense' which some viewers considered unbearable. Zara (teenager, UK-XIII), for instance, recounted hating the scenes in murder mysteries when characters enter the house with the (viewer's) knowledge that someone else is hiding inside; interestingly, Zara finds such programmes both boring and unbearably suspenseful at the same time, which could suggest a distinction in her mind between intellectual and emotional engagements. There is no interest in storylines or character fates, and so these elements fail to stimulate her. Yet, the programmes' suspenseful conventions still trigger some form of physical response, which she prefers to avoid.

Two grandmothers, Irma (G-XVIII) and Deirdre (UK-XIX), also provide typical examples of when tension and suspense exceed their preferences. It's not 'fear' ('Angst'), as Irma points out, but 'tension' or 'suspense' ('Spannung'), which stirs her up inside, again a felt, bodily reference. As Irma recounts in relation to Das Boot, 'it was... interesting, but for me that was... err, will they get out? It..., they we...', of course they sank then and, and... that, that... stirs me up... a bit'. The film was watched, or endured, partly because Irma's husband felt a strong connection to the movie. Deirdre's example relates to pursuits of characters:
D: If in a film where someone’s being followed, a... a woman or even a man, I think, followed by..., you know, and err, err a lot of the film is taken up about it... following somebody and stalking them, and then actually the murder happens... you know... I., and it’s just all that build-me-up and think, oh, I can’t watch that anymore.

It is the anticipation of attacks or of characters dying in different circumstances, the hunch but simultaneous uncertainty over the outcome, that participants like Irma and Deirdre describe as agonising and unwanted. Deirdre’s final comment hints towards her former ability to endure (and perhaps enjoy) such viewing experiences, but it is clearly an emotional state she is not prepared to tolerate anymore, despite her (and Irma’s) general love for murder mysteries of the puzzle-solving kind. When speaking of these moments, participants’ talk often stagnated, and they gasped for breath as though they were reliving the viewing situation. Suspense talk of that kind, whether the tension was enjoyed or not, was often related to reflexive, bodily responses, rather than any wider reflections about the state of the world.

6.3.2.1 Fear Dimensions: Shock, Upset, Disturbance, Disgust and Discomfort

As mentioned before, ‘fear’ as an isolated phenomenon was difficult to locate in viewers’ talk. Instead, participants made a number of experiential distinctions between ‘fear-related’ responses. For instance, they were likely to report having felt shocked, upset or disturbed by specific material. Sometimes these feelings coincided with each other, which is why I jointly discuss them here.

Above, I mentioned Sonia’s avoidance of ‘disturbing’ material (with the exception of shocking but clever twists, see Footnote 12). She used the same term in relation to films like Cry Freedom (based on the story of Steve Biko in apartheid South Africa). Some of her unease, as Chapter Seven suggests, is linked to a negotiation of humanity, a sense that such films reinforce the notion of people ‘out there’ doing terrible things. Finding something ‘disturbing’ often meant that films or programmes went against a person’s worldview, or against their preferred version of the world. They rocked the boat, so to speak. Another example of this is Anja’s
experience of *The Sixth Sense* (also discussed in Chapter Seven), as well as Vivian’s memory of *Blade Runner* which presented the kinds of dark visions of the future that she found quite frightening, not in the ‘immediately scared’, but in the ‘disturbing’ sense. While ‘disturbing’ could mean unwanted, Vivian’s *Blade Runner* experience was an example of ‘disturbing’ but *intriguing* entertainment. The film as a whole was deemed enjoyable to a degree, and thus her response was not automatically one of displeasure. Thus, participants were at times willing to endure frightening moments for the sake of widening their horizons, appreciating good film-making, or because they felt a film was culturally relevant (e.g. *See No Evil* or *Cry Freedom*).

It was the news that repeatedly received a mention in relation to shocking and upsetting responses. Often, participants pointed out they were not scared for themselves but for those involved in particular incidents. The events of September 11th stood out in both countries as shocking and upsetting, though there were differences in the level of involvement (and, interestingly, teenagers were sometimes too young to meaningfully remember their responses to the events at the time!). Deirdre described 9/11 as ‘the scariest thing’, as horrible, horrendous and awful to think about. Yet, there was no fear for herself with respect to similar situations; her view was that she has led a long life, and ‘if it’s going to happen, there’s nothing you can do about it’. The theme running through talk about the news is that reports have to be negotiated in relation to one’s life situation. Exceptions of this general rule will be discussed below (see 6.3.2.2).

Closely related to the above were feelings of disgust or general discomfort in relation to the media. Dorothee (G-IV) avoided watching programmes like *The X-Files* because of the ‘weird faces’ (‘komisch’), the ‘weird colours’, the generally creepy atmosphere created by the style of ‘weird music’, and the dark lighting. Her description of the music as cue for events (‘when you hear the music and you know something’s gonna happen’) again suggests a discomfort with suspense. Although she does not go into detail, her facial expression at the time suggests that she found the aliens both visually and conceptually unpleasant, suggesting an element of disgust. Further, she does not want to deal with the very idea of aliens and
monsters. Just the thought of them is ‘terribly’ unsettling. Some of the teenage girls across countries were also uneasy with representations of ghosts and particular characters and storylines in *Doctor Who*, including cat nuns and werewolves (Yasmine and Zara), as well as with any depictions of dead bodies, whether in relation to fictional or factual material (e.g. Olivera and Wiebke).

For a number of viewers in this study, gore was a particularly ‘disgusting’ element, partly because of its visual impact but also because it stood for something else, for instance for the bad in people (because things like that might happen in real life) or for commerce (because things like that are *shown*). Georg, a German grandfather (G-X), felt anger and disgust when watching *Downfall*, a film which touched him very personally because of his family’s experience of war (see ‘cultural traces’ below). The kind of disgust was, however, not directed at the filmmakers but at the insanity and pointlessness of war. Disgust, then, was used as much in relation to (physical) responses of repulsion to visual content as it was made relevant with respect to moral issues, such as participants’ concept of the media as entertainment industry and/or particularly ‘disgusting’ (infuriating) subject matters.

### 6.3.2.2 Worries and Concerns: Fear as ‘Effect’

Finally, there were of course moments when ‘fear’ or worries and concerns were conceptualised by viewers as direct results of their media engagement. Edwin and Celia’s discussion of personal phobias was perhaps the strongest example of this. Apart from that, viewers in this study reported isolated incidents that, for whatever reasons, struck a chord with them. That this could very much depend on contextual circumstances is, for example, evident in Vivian’s description of reacting with ‘sudden paranoia’ to a televised discussion of the threat of bird flu. As will be discussed in Chapter Seven, it was due to the kind of programme and the time it was aired that Vivian reasoned there might be a real threat.

Parents’ diaries occasionally included worries in response to such programmes as *House of Tiny Tearaways* (e.g. Uma, UK-XIII). The ‘fear’ was that one’s children might start showing signs of disturbance akin to those portrayed on
TV and, consequently, that one’s children or one’s parenting skills might be revealed as ‘inadequate’. Such worries were, however, short-lived and negotiated by participants in the course of the interviews when other family members chipped in and argued that such programmes represented extreme cases.

A rarity in the context of this study was Zara’s (13, UK-XIII) recurrent fright reaction to individual news reports or fiction with reality-related implications, such as The Day after Tomorrow. The latter had initially instilled a real concern and worry about the effects of global warming. Since watching, Zara had changed her stance towards the film, arguing that its dramaturgical exaggerations got in the way of her taking the film seriously. This was only one example of participants’ change of stance towards a film or programme, which happened over the course of time, and sometimes between filling in the viewing ledgers and talking to me in the interview. A memorable response to news reports was Zara’s ‘panic’ after hearing about a possible meteor threat as reported on Newsround. At the time, she was ‘paralytic with fear’ (her mother’s words) and sought comfort from her parents who explained that the chance of a meteor really hitting earth was minimal. During the interview, the family discussed the fact that Zara still worried about certain news (e.g. with regard to the Iraq war), but many responses were put down to young age and a relative unfamiliarity with media conventions. In fact, Glenys provides her own example of being ‘rigid with fear’ as a child when hearing of the first cruise missiles being transported to Greenham Common. At the time, she thought the world was going to end. With increasing age, the parents argue, viewers learn to scrutinise the news for the acuteness of particular risk messages.

6.4 Viewing Positions

As mentioned before, it was possible to detect four viewing positions in participants’ talk: resistance, rejection, endurance and enjoyment. Of course, these are only analytic distinctions. In the context of everyday media encounters, and in the course of one’s lifetime, viewers can move between and alter these positions. Yet, in the case of this study, participants tended to take relatively strict stances
towards particular material, and each stance came attached with a number of connotations. These viewing positions are already implied and bound up in the discussion of pleasures and displeasures above. In fact, the issue of enjoyment has featured at length and will not be further discussed here. The following is a brief summary of overall observations.

6.4.1 Rejection

Viewers in this study rejected films or programmes for various reasons. To summarise, rejection was often based on an avoidance of ‘bad’ thoughts or images, and viewers actively chose media material to influence their general sentiment. Deirdre, for example, switched channels when she came across anything ‘nasty’, both in terms of fact and fiction. There was a sense that the world was bad enough and that one did not have to dwell on things or create and experience unnecessary fears or worries. Further, media material was avoided when participants were suspicious of, firstly, the kinds of audiences attracted to such films and programmes or, secondly, the purposes of certain forms of entertainment (e.g. the use of violence for the purpose of maximum profit). Rejection happened across nations and generations, and while some similarities could be identified across members of the same family (e.g. the Andersons), rejection was foremost made relevant on individual terms. In the case of this study, the rejection of violence for moral reasons was a dominant discourse in parents’ and grandparents’ talk, though some of the teenage girls also avoided ‘blood and gore’ (e.g. Zara, Dorothee, Julia).

6.4.2 Resistance

Resistance seemed the most ‘performative’ aspect of participants’ talk, because it involved viewers accounting for their relative ‘fearlessness’ and thus, implicitly, constructing images of media-savvy, rational and strong-minded people. This stance was taken, as mentioned above, by participants who felt they were ‘desensitised’ and thus unaffected by certain material (male participants, and
younger viewers), and this was sometimes bemoaned. At least for some of the teenagers in this study, there was an attraction to being scared and surprised.

There were also viewers who took an extreme stance and suggested that nothing on film or TV was worth getting worked up about. Such positions entailed a very complex understanding of the media in relation to imagined audiences. As such, they will be discussed separately in the subsequent chapter. For some, it even extended to the news and to a notion of ‘fear fatigue’; viewers like Bob (UK-XI) and Bert (G-III) entertained the same discourses of ‘fear cultures’ as the sociologists discussed in Chapter Two, though they varied in their assessment of the situation and tended to blame the gullibility of fellow viewers, rather than the construction of news or other media content.

6.4.3 Endurance
Films and unwanted responses were endured when moments of displeasure were reduced to a minimum, that is, when the overall enjoyment of a film or programme helped to undo unwelcome elements. This was, for instance, the case with some of the teenagers’ enjoyment of Doctor Who. There were moments they felt uncomfortable with (e.g. particularly scary characters or storylines), but they accepted this due to their overall enjoyment of the humour and (pleasurable) excitement. As such, the material gathered for this study partly supports Noël Carroll’s suggestion that viewers tolerate disgusting or scary material out of curiosity, that is, out of an interest in disclosure narratives and, at times, a fascination with the monster (Carroll, 1990: 187). In the case of Doctor Who, one might add viewers’ enthusiasm for individual actors or writers (e.g. David Tennant, Russel T. Davies) and their enjoyment of its humour and ‘cleverness’.

Films were endured when they were watched in the presence of others, and participants gave in to the wishes of others rather than insisting on their own viewing preference. In the case of Olivera (G-VI), group viewing made a film more bearable – not more enjoyable, but endurable. At other times, it seemed that curiosity won over unwanted encounters, in which case participants often regretted
having watched a film (e.g. Anja, G-II, in relation to Anatomie, Sin City, Flatliners, etc.). Viewers consequently decided not to repeat-watch or seek out any sequels to a film.

Finally, films or programmes were endured when they were considered as significant in any way, in the sense that participants felt they had to watch in order to be able to take part in public debate. This was particularly true for stories based on real events, films that had a particularly high reputation (e.g. Hitchcock ‘classics’) and films which had sparked controversy (e.g. Pulp Fiction).

6.5 National and Generational ‘Traces’

As I have indicated before, there are limitations to country- or generation-specific interpretations of the research material gathered for this study. Given the project’s qualitative nature, any observations about the salience or significance of specific media materials, subject matters or emotional stances have to be approached with caution. Yet, while the material does not allow unwarranted generalisations, it is possible to borrow the expression of cultural (or generational) ‘traces’, in order to indicate potential relations to wider interpretative and emotional contexts (Götz et al., 2005). In Media and the Make-Believe Worlds of Children, Maya Götz and colleagues investigate whether children’s drawings of (and talk about their) fantasies ‘reflect a cultural lens through which their fantasy worlds are filtered’ (ibid: 151). The researchers are particularly interested in evidence of any forces or tensions of globalisation in children’s make-believe worlds, and they observe what they describe as ‘glocalized’ processes of mediation, that is, the practice of endowing global texts with meaning relevant to the children’s own situations (ibid: 153ff). The signs the researchers look out for in their participants’ drawings and accounts are references to specific (local or global) places, symbols, icons (e.g. national flags), or events. A similar approach allows me to offer possible contextualisations of participants’ responses along national/generational lines without claiming causal relations or representativeness. Two explanatory frameworks – life history and age – emerge as particularly pertinent.
6.5.1 National Traces

While Britain and Germany share a number of (mainly) American imports, participants in each country drew on distinct cultural references, which were specific to their local media landscapes. In the UK, key cultural references included the two dominant soap operas, *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*, and, in terms of fear potential, *Doctor Who*. They were discussed as shared references, as ‘cultural measures’, if you like. In Germany, the main reference point was the ‘Krimi’ genre, and particularly its German incarnations, such as *Tatort*, *Ein Fall für Zwei*, *Derrick* (a notable German export, which has been sold to over 100 countries worldwide), and *Der Alte*. Their prominent role, predominantly within the viewing schedules of parents and grandparents, is partly explicable through the Krimi’s public status as one of the few entertainment forms that is dominated by German rather than imported products. According to Alan Cornell, Krimis have become a ‘distinctive form of popular entertainment with a firmly rooted place in [German] everyday life’ (Cornell, 1997: 83). This firmly rooted place partly derives from specific Krimi time slots on Germany television, such as the ‘Freitagabendkrimi’ and the ‘Sonntagskrimi’ (Friday and Sunday nights, 8.15pm, on ARD or ZDF). These time slots are usually shared by a number of Krimi series, meaning that most of the longer-running Krimis are not shown on a weekly but roughly on a monthly basis (with the exception of repeats). Although Cornell notes an increasing tendency to follow the ‘action-and-violence model’ of American series (judging, for example, by the growing number of explosions in recent credits, ibid: 102), the participants in this study still made a clear distinction between German and American crime entertainment, voicing their irritation with American action ‘nonsense’ as underlying their general preference for home-grown Krimis (e.g. Traude, Georg). Only a few of the viewers in this study referred to these series’ (particularly *Tatort’s*) tendency to deal with contemporary issues, such as the depiction of Neo-Nazism, conflicts of reunification, illegal immigration, or animal rights, suggesting that they are more interested in the formulaic pattern of Krimis, that is, their focus on ‘who
dunnit’ elements or the psychological peculiarities of the main characters. As Monika’s comments about Scandinavian crime series indicated (G-XII, see Chapter Five), there was also a sense that German Krimis were not quite as suspenseful as their foreign counterparts. They constitute a familiar and reliable source of entertainment, seemingly removed from any ‘real-life’ relevance.

Three subject matters seemed particularly ‘German’, in the sense that they demonstrated participants’ negotiation of – in this case – the news in relation to their own life histories and societal contexts. These were, perhaps unsurprisingly, worries about unemployment, immigration and references to World War II. The first was partly inspired by the then occurring troubles in Paris (October/November 2005), in which young people, often descendants from France’s colonial past, were involved in a series of riots and violent clashes in Parisian suburbs. Participants put the events down to unemployment and a lack of opportunities amongst poorer French communities. The height of unemployment and the large number of immigrants in Germany led viewers in this study to draw parallels between the two countries, and to speak of ‘Zukunftsangst’, or of a fear of what the future might still hold (see, for example, Rita (G-VII), Traude (G-VIII) and Georg (G-XI)).

Particularly the older generations were also likely to draw historical parallels, for instance between the clashes in Paris and similar historic incidents in Chicago (Helmut). Other than that, unemployment was largely discussed in terms of familial worries, with parents and grandparents worrying about the job prospects of their children and grandchildren, which were interwoven with news about job losses and the closing-down of companies and factories. The general consent amongst these older generations was that changes in the ‘Arbeitsmarkt’ (job market) created greater uncertainty, because it was no longer the case that a person stayed employed for life by one and the same company. Although notions of ‘change’ and societal ‘decline’ seemed more prominent in the British context, issues such as job prospects, the future of politics and, to a degree, the development of a more individualistic and aggressive society (Anja, G-II) also emerged as an organising discourse in German participants’ talk. Interestingly, on the whole, there seemed to
be more trust in the media than was the case in the UK (see also Chapter Seven). At least, the media was not automatically made responsible for changes in society, as this was often the case amongst British viewers. It cannot be tested here whether these differences between the countries were anything more than coincidental. Yet, it seems clear that the German participants were on the whole likely to offer judgments about the state of the economy and political considerations when constructing their arguments, whereas the British discourses of change at times appeared more general and less concrete.

Especially the grandparent generation often contextualised their responses to film and television as deriving from experiences of the past, in particular from having grown up in poor households or having been affected by the experiences of war. Georg (grandfather, G-XI) was one of a number of participants who had come to Germany as a refugee, having been displaced from what is known as the Sudetenland (today’s Czech Republic) after the Second World War. Although he was only ten years old at the time and acknowledges that, as a child, he would have had a limited understanding of his situation, the experience seems deeply engrained in Georg’s sense of identity.17 It is these childhood experiences in relation to which Georg develops certain ‘fears’ when he hears of wars around the world (though, interestingly, the Kosovo conflict of the late 1990s was more memorable or notable to him than the current situation in Iraq). His fears, however, seem directed towards others; as Georg explains, he understands the consequences of war and its impact on ordinary people. Yet, as much as he speaks of the anger and despair he feels at high-ranking officers (watching Downfall affected and aggravated him deeply), he also describes war to have taught him about the good in people, for instance in those who took in his family, who provided them with food and clothes. Georg’s story presents only one, though a powerful example of the ways in which a complex sense of identity, shaped by cultural and historical circumstances, guided participants’ use and interpretation of the media. In a similar way, Georg constructed his dislike of horror and ‘gratuitous violence’, as well as his preference
for the representation of positive views of the world (see Chapter Seven), as part of who he is and who he wants to be: a positive-thinking, happy family person.

Within the British context, cultural traces included memorable news events in (mostly living) history, such as the aforementioned Moors murders, the Jamie Bulger case, the killing of Damilola Taylor, as well as some incidents which were not exclusively based around children or murders, such as the Hillsborough crush. The London bombings of July 2005 constituted a recurring subject matter, and although the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 were discussed in both countries, it was only in the British context that participants spoke of worries about friends or family who, at the time of the incidents, had worked, lived or travelled nearby (see Chapter Seven for the significance of physical and imagined ‘geographies’ in people’s talk). Recurrent points of reference were Britain’s apparently growing knife culture and, to some extent, worries about paedophilia, though the latter were sometimes discussed critically as originating from a tabloid-fuelled hysteria (e.g. Bob, father, UK-XI).

As the talk about the Parisian troubles and Britain’s ‘knife culture’ demonstrates, contemporary news events made their way into the diaries (and interviews) because they dominated national headlines at the time of the study. Only a few of them, it seems, would take on the same significance as some of the more memorable shared references (e.g. the Jamie Bulger case in Britain). Having said this, it was noticeable that participants used more recent incidents as platforms for listing and discussing previous events, discursively constructing a network of real-life ‘horrors’ (or ‘networks of fear’, see Tudor, 2003). Again, as will be further discussed in Chapter Seven, such conversations often highlighted a discrepancy between participants’ everyday experiences and more abstract views of the world.

6.5.2 Generational Traces

I have already indicated the significance of people’s sense of life history in accounting for their emotional responses to film and television. The dominant way in which issues of generation entered conversations was precisely through life
history, but also through a more general explanatory framework of age, as partly reflected in some of the quotes discussed above (e.g. Matt and Nina’s exchange about *The Exorcist*). What was most striking in participants’ stance towards the age/fear relationship was that it contained a number of apparent paradoxes. Young age was usually associated with heightened fear, particularly but not exclusively with regard to the strength of emotional responses to the media. An example of this is Matt and Nina’s exchange about the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series:

M: ... You can see why young children would be really scared by something like.
N: Yeah, cos they are, yeah...
M: ... ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’.
N: Cos they’re more impressionable, aren’t they?...
M: ... Yeah...
N: ... And they believe more what they see... But as when you get, like, when you get older, you realise that it’s just... [pause] it’s just mindless, isn’t it? It’s not actual... real... life. I think the horrors that are more scary are those that do... kind of portray... like, reflect more real life than like...
M: ... Yeah, that could actually happen.
N: Yeah, than just like ‘Freddy Kruger’, cos you know it could never ever happen.

However, there was also a sense in participants’ talk that fears multiply with increasing age. Age related to responsibilities, such as being a parent or grandparent, having to earn money, and so on. For grandparents, getting older sometimes implied specific vulnerabilities. Rachel and Jim (UK-XVI), for instance, spoke of growing health concerns and of relating to age-specific news, such as a documentary about the maltreatment of some elderly in nursing homes. As Rachel explains:

R: When you’re younger, you don’t sort of, erm... [pause] you know... [struggles] think... too much about that, [quietly] think too much about it, but... you know, it, it, gets, it hits home when you’re older, and then, you know, things like you, you... realise your own mortality and [...] you know, as you’re getting older, and... you know, things like that then, you know and... this business of... you know, the caring for the old people, it’s... you know, that’s err... that’s quite a worrying thing, really..18
The other extreme were grandparents who reported to have stopped worrying (at least for themselves) because they had led a long and happy life. Deirdre was that kind of person (see also Chapter Seven on her responses to terrorism). Yet, seemingly paradoxically, she described herself as a ‘coward’ in real life and, in terms of her viewing preferences, as someone who chooses not to watch anything ‘nasty’ or ‘suspenseful’. Although she takes a relatively relaxed stance towards death itself, she prefers to spend the rest of her life in peace and harmony.

The way in which participants conceptualised fear in relation to life stages or ‘fear phases’ was also evident in Anja’s talk (aunt, in her 40s, G-II). Anja was very reflective about a time in her life when she developed what she called a ‘fear of life’ (‘Lebensangst’), which for some time constituted an existential problem for her. Having identified her emotions as early stages of depression and having realised that her fear of living was really a fear of failure, she began to rid herself actively of such feelings by lowering her expectations towards herself and life in general. The media became relevant when they touched on something in her ‘psyche’ which would unlock wider fears and issues. In the following, Anja describes her changing responses to horror films, an explicit age issue, whilst making some experiential and textual distinctions:

A: Certainly, erm, I think... these days, horror films... would perhaps no longer evoke nightmares in me, [they] used to do that in the past, certainly. And, erm... I mean, it’s, err... I think still the case today as... sure as day follows night [lit. ‘wie das Amen in der Kirche’] that I won’t go into the woods on my own after watching a horror film... which I could... by all means do under different circumstances... But, erm... no, not after a horror film, I mean, in that... in that... situation fear paralyses [and keeps] you from doing just that, or from putting yourself into some kind of dark situation, from getting yourself into dark, dark places, eh-eh, [fig.] not with me.

K: Yes... but that passes again after a while...

A: ... Yeah. [...] Exactly... on the other hand... it, erm, those psychological fears, like the ones that touch more on the psyche.. [...] they are, I think, deeper... I mean, they don’t pass as quickly, they can tend to gnaw... for a while.
There is a lot going on here, not all of which is linked directly to issues of ‘age’, more readily perhaps to concepts of ‘maturity’. Anja makes a distinction here between past and present, between letting horror films instil nightmares and having become more immune to such forms of entertainment. Yet, a basic notion of ‘fear’ remains, which is paralysing and which is linked to a form of imagination, again drawing on formulaic horror scenarios, such as dark and lonely places. This heightened sense of awareness and imagination is temporarily restricted and, as Anja’s final comments suggest, more superficial. What engages the (mature) mind more readily lies deeper, or deeper inside. In the case of the above quote, Anja goes on to recount her response to the film Flatliners, which had evoked existential fears in her (see also Chapter Seven). By linking responses to her psyche, Anja relates them to her sense of identity.

6.6 Conclusion
This chapter has outlined participants’ conceptualisations of media-related fear and drawn out some of the common themes, subject matters and kinds of discourses that emerged from the analysis of interview tables and excerpts. The complexity of responses is both instructive and difficult to present comprehensively within the constraints of the chapter. However, beyond the sheer diversity of participants’ responses, it is possible to discern some overall patterns and processes. The most significant point I want to make is that fear was ‘meaningful’ to participants. This is not surprising, but it is something previous studies have failed to explore in detail. This meaningfulness is manifested in the following ways:

- Participants evaluate emotional responses to the screen as *more or less appropriate* (legitimate), welcome, or expected, and always as part of who they are, and who they are in relation to others.
- Viewers in this study have a sense of (emotional) self, and they experience and account for emotions in relation to their ‘life histories’ and life situations, that is, their sense of progression as individuals.
within the contexts of their personal taste and their responsibilities as members of, interchangeably, the family, the audience (both present and imagined), their generation, or society as a whole.

- As such, they occupy different positions in evaluating and accounting for emotional responses, which explains why responses can be fluid or contradictory (despite some sense of a stable self), and why it is nonsensical to reduce ‘fear’ to a singular phenomenon.

- The multiplicity of fear is also illustrated in viewers’ experiential distinctions, for instance between physical and intellectual engagement with films and programmes, or reflexive and reflective modes of response. This is not to say that these processes can be distinguished ‘scientifically’ (e.g. by dividing body and mind, emotion and cognition), but that they can constitute an explanatory framework in participants’ evaluations of ‘fear’.

- Other explanatory frameworks in making sense of emotional responses include age, being a parent or grandparent, having a particular emotional disposition, and so on.¹⁹

- Importantly, participants not only have a theory of emotions but also one (or several) of how the media ‘works’. They assign functions and purposes to media material; they draw on production processes in situating themselves emotionally; they have a sense of the media as industry, that is, they recognise its purposes beyond their individual response (e.g. in terms of target audiences and profit gain).

Finally, in addition to participants’ sense of themselves, their own or others’ emotions, and of the media, they also contextualise responses in relation to ‘reality’ as they see it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, reality dimensions comprised the most salient component of participants’ making sense of media-related fears. Consequently, the final analytic chapter addresses participants’ modality judgements in relation to emotional meanings and consequences.
This in parts reflects Murray Smith’s (1995) dynamic model of character engagement discussed in Chapter Two, though Hill herself does not make this connection.

It is perhaps of note that Hills describes this as a discourse reserved for fans, whereas the viewers in this study adopted similar views regardless of their level of interest in the genre.

In *The Emotional Self*, Deborah Lupton discusses a relatively recent turn in society’s stance towards the expression of emotion, from an emphasis on rationality and emotional control to a view of emotions as needing to be expressed and listened to (Lupton, 2001).

One British participant also mentioned *The Bill* as a long-running passion, which could perhaps be considered an exception to the rule, since the programme includes more action scenes, such as car chases and fist fights, than the more detective-driven examples given above.

I should point out that Glenys’ use of the popular ‘hiding behind the sofa’ discourse surrounding the ‘classic’ (pre-Eccleston) *Doctor Who* was partly inspired, or introduced, by my preceding interview question. Still, it is interesting that she actively distances herself from this seemingly shared public reference.

It is interesting that Patrick reports to ‘scream’ at the screen himself. This kind of behaviour is usually associated with gendered performance, as briefly discussed in reference to Rhona Berenstein in Chapter Two. Women do the screaming; men protect in order to mask their own terror.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, the teenagers find it difficult to recount the last time they watched a horror film. Horror does not constitute a regular pastime.

Nina’s notion of genre is interesting here. She initially distinguishes between thrillers and ‘scary’ films (the latter presumably – but not evidently – meaning horror films). She describes her response to *The Hole* as having been ‘scared’. However, the tension and anticipation she described towards the end are precisely the kinds of feelings other respondents in the study would associate with thrillers.


Sonia is addressing her teenage son, Ian, here.

The invisible monster is one of the elements participants mentioned as particularly successful device in horror films, with Matt, for instance, arguing that sequels often fail because they tend to reveal the identity and appearance of the perpetrator.

At the same time, there is one particular scene in *Don’t Look Now* which Sonia finds especially disturbing, because it entails a twist that was shocking and frightening. She describes the scene at length in the interview. It is the moment when the presumed little girl in the red coat turns towards Donald Sutherland and is revealed as an old dwarf man who ends up killing Sutherland’s character with a knife. The film, on the whole, was considered ‘fantastic’; Sonia has seen it many times since and still jumps at that same scene. As such, it could more accurately relate to ‘scary pleasures’, again highlighting the relative flexibility of these two poles.

In any case, bar some exceptions (e.g. Zara in the UK and Olivera in Germany), the teenagers in this study displayed little interest in the news, which they seemed to consider as repetitive, adult-centred and largely irrelevant to their own concerns. They had a general sense of the goings-on around the world, but they rarely actively or regularly sought out the news.

Although the first Krimis were modelled on foreign formats, German television channels increasingly branded their own ‘German’ Krimis. The first of these was *Der Kommissar* in 1969 (see Chapter Five), though even *Der Kommissar* shared elements with foreign material,
such as the BBC’s *Maigret* series. For further information about the historical role and development of Krimis in Germany, see Cornell (1997).

15 See Appendix A (pp. 308-10) for a general overview of the German television landscape.

16 It should perhaps be noted that the rise of Nazi Germany is, amongst other factors, commonly associated with the enormous height of unemployment at the time, and that this is likely to play on German public consciousness. However, although the country’s Nazi past was discussed by participants, no direct links were made between the two.

17 Georg’s retelling of events was very touching and intense. A related war story about his brother almost brought tears to his eyes. The brother, then aged 16, had been forced to fight against the Russians and, in Georg’s view, only survived because he made himself guilty of desertion.

18 ‘It’ and ‘things like that’ are never quite explained by Rachel, but within the context of the conversation, ‘it’ most likely refers to her sense of mortality or vulnerability.

19 While it is possible to link these to the aforementioned DP-specific notion of ‘interpretative repertoires’, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to interrogate the extent to which these frameworks are indeed distinct and coherent as the concept seems to suggest.