CHAPTER SEVEN
Modalities of ‘Fear’: Reality Dimensions as Complex
Moderating Factors

‘Everything you can imagine is real.’

Pablo Picasso

7.1 Introduction
As discussed at the beginning of this thesis, a large body of thought and research on
media-related ‘fear(s)’, including Cultivation Analysis, has focused on the
relationship between viewers’ encounters with (film and) television and their
perceptions of ‘reality’. What people take away from the media and how mediated
stories impact on, or get interwoven with, people’s sense of themselves and the
world around them has arguably stood at the forefront of investigations. Because
research in this area has largely been driven by questions of cause and effect,
viewers’ judgements about the perceived reality of media texts, their ‘modal’ or
‘modality judgements’, have constituted an obvious starting point. The term
modality derives from Peircian semiotics, according to which it indicates the ‘truth
value’ of a sign or proposition.¹ Within audience studies, modality judgements have
found particular relevance in relation to child audiences (e.g. Buckingham, 1993,
1996; Hodge and Tripp, 1986; Götz et al., 2005) and/or viewers of science-fiction and
fantasy (e.g. Barker and Brooks, 1998; Barker et al., 2008), the former in response to a
concern about young people’s ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, the
latter partly in response to charges of ‘escapism’.²

As David Buckingham has pointed out, there is a danger in considering
modality judgements as straightforward indicators of media ‘impact’, that is, to
assume, firstly, that the more ‘realistic’ a programme is perceived to be, the more it
will influence its viewers and, secondly, that films and programmes which are
known to be ‘fantasy’ do not play a role in people’s perceptions of themselves and
the world around them (Buckingham, 1993: 241). In terms of media-related ‘fear’, a
similar, aforementioned pitfall is to reduce the debate to questions of viewer (ir)rationality, either by comparing viewers’ fearful perception of the world with ‘real’ threats (i.e. with statistically significant, ‘proven’ dangers, as in Cultivation Analysis, studies on fear of crime, or theoretical explorations of fear cultures) or by likening emotional involvement in certain media material to a lack of critical distance.

Although I will move on to demonstrate that modality judgements in relation to ‘fear’ are indeed more complex and complicated than the above suggests, it is important to acknowledge that these very discourses of rationality and modality were inescapable in participants’ talk and, as such, form part of the exploration here. As outlined in Chapter Four, this study has taken the approach of, firstly, interrogating viewers’ general engagement with the media (their likes and dislikes, the nature of their emotional responses) and, secondly, of asking participants directly about the differences and similarities they saw between ‘the world we live in’ and that portrayed on film and television, if indeed they felt it was possible to speak of such distinct (and coherent) ‘worlds’ at all. Issues of reality and realism were directly discussed in relation to the latter, but they also constituted a main reference point for participants’ making sense of their emotional responses and, as began to transpire in the previous analytic chapters, for assigning hierarchical orders to them.

The main body of this chapter outlines the different kinds of media material that were made relevant by participants in their modality judgements, as well as the general positions participants took on the question of relations between ‘reality’ and media representations thereof. Yet, in returning to the original objectives of this study, the aim of the chapter is also to draw out from participants’ responses the consequences of such reality judgements. One issue, which repeatedly surfaced and which has been touched upon before, is the degree to which film and television were considered as ‘entertainment’, with entertainment taking on a number of different meanings across interviews (e.g. entertainment as opposed to emotional engagement, as a quality judgement, or as the passing of time). Earlier chapters
have also begun to consider the importance of ‘imagined’ or ‘emotional’ realities, which will be discussed in more detail here. In particular, I want to introduce a different notion of ‘symbolic’ power than that employed by Gerbner et al., one that does not solely rely on ‘violence’ as the key indicator but also on other textual and contextual elements. Subsequent to the overall analysis and categorisation of reality dimensions in the material, the chapter finally turns to two themes which emerged as salient and at the same time particularly elusive in participants’ talk, the meanings of ‘humanity’ and participants’ take on the ‘supernatural’.

As with Chapter Six, I attempt to give justice to the range of material, which means that, at times, intricate discursive investigations have to give way to overall observations. Before turning to a discussion of the material, however, I briefly consider existing literature on modality judgements. For reasons of space, I specifically focus on the work of two scholars, David Buckingham and Alice Hall. Although other references will be made, their research is particularly relevant to this study because it accounts for ‘realism’ judgements in view of audiences’ ‘affective’ realms.

7.2 Modality Judgements

Viewers’ modality judgements, as they are discussed within media and cultural studies, were first meaningfully considered in Bob Hodge and David Tripp’s semiotic consideration of children making sense of television (Hodge and Tripp, 1986). Coming from a linguistic background, the researchers first discuss the ways in which language contains ‘cues’ or ‘markers’, which strengthen or weaken the modality of a text. Their example is the statement ‘it’s a monster’, which is weakened as a claim by words like ‘possibly’ and strengthened by terms like ‘absolutely’, e.g. ‘it’s absolutely certainly a monster’ (ibid: 104). There are other modality markers, such as laughter, screams, or the accumulation of indicators of certainty, e.g. ‘I know absolutely and for sure that it’s definitely a monster’ (which interestingly weakens the claim’s modality). To call something ‘fantasy’, Hodge and Tripp assert, is to indicate an almost negative modality and to recognise that it is
probably ‘untrue’ (ibid: 105). Importantly, modality is not a fixed property; it is a subjective evaluation of the relationship between a statement and reality. As the researchers put it, ‘it is a product of the judgement about that relationship which the speaker makes, wants or enables the hearer to make, and the judgement that hearers do actually make by drawing on their selective reading of the variety of cues [...] available’ (ibid: 106). As such, modal judgements always draw on people’s independent knowledge of reality.

In regard to visual media, Hodge and Tripp distinguish between internal and external indicators of modality (ibid: 107ff). Internal criteria relate to the characteristics of a media text (in relation to other known texts), while external criteria regard the comparison between text and reality, or the reader’s perception thereof. This distinction was adopted and developed by David Buckingham in, amongst other writings, *Children Talking Television* (1993). Here, *internal* indicators, entail issues of ‘forms and conventions’ (e.g. generic connotations and narrative rules) and of children’s understandings of the ‘production process’ (information about actors, technical aspects, special effects, etc.). In terms of *external* criteria, that is, the comparison between a text and an outside (perceived) reality, Buckingham distinguishes between assertions that seem dependent on ‘*psychological* assumptions or theories about human motivation and behaviour, and those which rely upon beliefs about the likelihood or frequency of events in *social life*’ (Buckingham, 1993: 228, his italics). Buckingham suggests that judgements based on internal criteria are more likely to be made after viewing, in the course of social interaction, which enables children to be ‘affected’ by material during viewing despite their knowledge of a programme’s constructedness (ibid: 233). In general, the children in his study assigned modality to films or programmes according to questions of ‘possibility’, ‘plausibility’, and ‘truth’ (i.e. by judging something to be theoretically possible, probable, or as known to have happened).

While the notion of internal and external indicators seems useful as a tool to unlock a variety of modality judgements in viewers’ talk, the distinction at times seems misleading, as both criteria relate to the respondents’ sense of ‘reality’. For
instance, the children in Hodge and Tripp’s study on the cartoon, Fangface, only recognize the modality of an internal cue (the two-dimensional property of cartoon characters) because of their external reference to three-dimensional people in real life who are not ‘coloured in’ (Hodge and Tripp, 1986: 110). Only the distinction between cartoon and live characters renders the criterion internal; the perception of external factors is arguably unavoidable.

Nevertheless, Buckingham further adopts the distinction in Moving Images, in which he considers children’s modality judgements of three particular programmes, Casualty, Crimewatch UK, and Ghostwatch. The programmes were chosen for investigation since they established very different relationships to ‘reality’ (1996: 215). Some of Buckingham’s findings are significant to this study, because they deal directly with issues of fear. For reasons of space, I list them:

- **Casualty** was commonly regarded as ‘lifelike’, due to credible special effects and a perceived social realism in the topics addressed. At the same time, it was unmistakably discussed as a ‘fictional construction’, which could be assessed against viewers’ own knowledge and experiences. The result was a degree of critical distance in children and parents’ talk.

- **Crimewatch** was considered as more frightening because it could not be dismissed as pure fiction. Interestingly, participants’ talk displayed a tension between awareness and paranoia, between sheltering children from bad stories and equipping them with the necessary tools to be cautious of possible dangers and able to defend themselves. As such, Buckingham detects ‘a very fine line’ in participant interviews ‘between being too scared and not being scared enough’ (ibid: 237).

- In terms of formal elements, **Crimewatch** was realistic and frightening because fictional clues, like dramatic music, were missing, which emphasised the fact that something really happened and could
happen to anyone. There was also a sense that it was wrong to gain pleasure from the detective elements of *Crimewatch* in the same way that one might with fictional detective stories.

- Significantly, Buckingham notes that some participants reported an intensification of already existing fears of crime. Yet, he remains uncertain as to the conclusions he might draw from this, arguing that it was difficult to define what a ‘realistic’ fear of crime might be in the first place (ibid: 232; cf. Lupton and Tulloch, 1999). His findings suggest that participants ‘translate’ what they see on screen ‘imaginatively into [their] own experiences’, in the sense that they imagine themselves in similar positions to characters on screen (ibid: 234). Because fear is partly a result of this act of imagination, it is ‘unlikely ever to represent a rational response to a statistical probability’ (ibid: 232).

Finally, Buckingham deals with *Ghostwatch*, a notorious BBC spoof programme which played with the boundaries of fact and fiction, and indeed sought to deceive viewers with false claims of reality. *Ghostwatch* employed factual broadcasting techniques and well-known, respectable presenters in order to convince viewers that they were watching a ‘real-life ghost hunt’ in the outskirts of London. Buckingham’s discussion of participant responses centres on whether and when children figured out that what they were watching was a hoax, as well as how this impacted on their emotional responses to the programme. All of the children who had watched the programme defined it as the ‘most frightening programme or film they had ever seen’ (ibid: 239). Yet interestingly, and in accord with Buckingham’s focus on the power of imagination, children reported that their fear intensified after viewing, even when they realised that the programme had been entirely fictional. Initial fear reactions seemed both based on the claim of ‘reality’ and the ‘liveness’ of the event. The problem was that despite their retrospective understanding that this particular story was unreal, it was less straightforward to dismiss the ‘plausibility’
or possibility of such things happening in real life. None of the parents were able to completely dispel the idea that ghosts might exist, and so the programme successfully played with the children’s willingness to grant its happenings plausibility, perhaps providing some of the imagery that would foster the lingering fear responses.

Doubts and uncertainty about the supernatural certainly constituted a significant topic of conversation for participants in the present study, touching on questions of identity and existence, which warrant a more thorough exploration of the issues at stake towards the end of this chapter. Buckingham’s discussion of participants’ sense of reality in the context of particular programmes is illustrative and relevant. Yet, instead of providing a structured conceptualisation of modalities, Buckingham’s work remains relatively vague, initially distinguishing between internal and external modality markers (i.e. intertextual and external realism), and between issues of possibility, plausibility and truth, only to indicate later that affective dimensions and acts of imagination may complicate these judgements. As such, in spite of problematising his initial criteria, he does little to put into place a new model of reality dimensions.

Alice Hall’s 2003 *Journal of Communication* article aims for a more comprehensive identification of distinct evaluation criteria of ‘media realism’. Hall initially reviews some of the (communications) literature on media realism, pointing out that contrasting approaches and definitions of ‘realism’ (i.e. the modality of media texts) firstly make it difficult to compare findings across studies and, secondly, run the risk of opening gaps between researchers’ and audience members’ understandings of the issues at stake (2003: 624). As she observes, ‘[d]espite the frequency with which perceived realism has been advanced as moderator of media influence, there is little agreement about how it should be conceptualized or how it is best measured’ (ibid).

In an attempt to resolve terminological and methodological shortcomings, Hall presents findings from a small-scale qualitative audience study, which drew out from viewers’ talk the different reality criteria employed in interpretations of
film and television. Based on focus group discussions with 47 participants (all students from an introductory course to communication studies), Hall identifies six distinct means of evaluating the realism of media texts. Starting with the most salient one, these are plausibility, typicality, factuality, emotional involvement, narrative consistency, and perceptual persuasiveness:

- **Plausibility** denotes that participants considered a media text realistic if it was clear, in their view, that an event could happen in real life or that real-life people could theoretically (or consistently) act or behave as represented on screen.\(^8\)

- **Typicality** acts as a caveat to plausibility, indicating that something should not just be theoretically possible but that it could be seen to happen to themselves or people like them, in the sense that they considered themselves as everyday kind of people. Thus, some participants framed realism in terms of the range of people something could happen to (as a quasi measure of representativeness) or how common an incident was.\(^9\)

- **Factuality** relates to participants’ understanding of a film or programme as ‘a text that accurately [represents] a specific, real-world event or person’ (ibid: 633). To an extent, this concept seemed to involve an odd naivety in the context of Hall’s study, with one respondent describing *Schindler’s List* as having an unchallengeable realism: “What happened in *Schindler’s List* happened [...] It’s not a matter of making it look real. It’s real. The history book says so” (ibid). Other perceptions of factuality were less straightforward, with participants displaying an awareness of artistic freedom and the role of construction. The more intrusive production processes were seen to be, the less realistic the programme was (ibid: 634).

These first three evaluation criteria seem to resemble those identified by Buckingham above. While they, as Hall suggests, ‘describe a continuum of realism
on which fantasy programmes or science fiction would, for different reasons, be placed at the less realistic end’, the concepts of involvement, narrative consistency and perceptual persuasiveness grant realism to just those kinds of fictional material (ibid):

- Regardless of how close to reality a film or programme was against the backdrop of the above criteria, it was considered by participants to be ‘realistic’ when they felt they could get involved with or relate to characters, either because they could feel the characters’ emotions or they had an affective response to them, just as they would for a real person. Hall’s involvement criterion is particularly interesting in the light of this study, because it implies that if emotional responses were considered ‘real’ or ‘true’, the media representation was also considered as more realistic (and perhaps more relevant).¹⁰

- Narrative consistency rendered otherwise implausible or fantastic stories as realistic when a story was seen to be coherent in itself, not to contradict itself and to leave nothing unexplained. For some participants, this functioned as a prerequisite for their emotional involvement, though the two did not necessarily have to go hand in hand.¹¹

- Perceptual persuasiveness stands for a critical appraisal of technical aspects, such as the degree to which participants were convinced by certain special effects. It seems reminiscent of Celia’s concern about the ‘realness’ of modern effects or Florian’s dismissal of technological shortcomings in cheap or old horror films (see Chapter Five).

There is overlap with Buckingham’s work, as the evaluative criteria at play are clearly both text-specific and ‘external’, though, again, the two seem intertwined (e.g. in the relevance of production processes in relation to factuality judgements). Importantly, Hall’s study goes beyond previous communications research by accounting for emotional dimensions of the ‘real’, as well as for sometimes
contradictory reality judgements within one and the same text. For example, something could be realistic in terms of emotional recognition but unrealistic as regards the plausibility of events. As such, modality judgements were fluid and complicated.

Both Buckingham and Hall’s explorations are reflected in, and thus partly confirmed by, the material gathered in the course of this study. Hall’s work has been particularly instructive in providing useful ‘labels’ for some of the reality dimensions at play (though the analysis itself was conducted prior to consulting Hall’s work). As will become clear in the subsequent section, there are limitations to Hall’s realism labels when applied to the issue of ‘fear’ and other emotions. The material under investigation suggests that similar reality judgements do not automatically lead to the same emotional consequences; the latter appear more idiosyncratic and dependent on other personal and contextual factors. Further, this chapter again demonstrates that ‘reality’ is a ‘loaded’ category in people’s talk. This is where I return to a closer examination of my gathered materials.

7.3 Comparing Two ‘Worlds’
As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, reality dimensions were discussed both in relation to emotional responses and to an overall assessment of differences and similarities between the ‘world’ we live in and that portrayed on film and television. I begin with the latter.

7.3.1 Overall Patterns and Criteria
The interviews conducted for this study suggested three broad ways of conceiving media/life (dis)similarities. Some of these can be related to the viewing positions identified in Chapter Six, though the connection is complicated. Those participants who drew strict lines between the two worlds were most likely to describe film and television as pure ‘entertainment’, with the exception of the news, which would mostly be seen as hard-hitting and more relevant. One participant who endorsed this view was Owain (grandfather, UK-XVIII). As mentioned in Chapter Six, he saw
television as a ‘transitory’ thing to be involved in. Although he described himself as pretty ‘fearless’ in everyday life, he deemed other people’s everyday fears and worries as more important than the emotions they experienced during encounters with the media. Such discourses of ‘media as pure entertainment’ often went hand in hand with notions of fear ‘resistance’, though in the particular case of Owain, some material was ‘rejected’ (e.g. ‘gratuitous violence’, which he did not want to enter his living-room).

Then, there were participants who drew seemingly self-evident lines between factual and fictional programming, with factual material (including documentaries, reality TV and the news) and stories based on actual events being far more ‘real’, and thus emotionally relevant or powerful, than purely fictional material. A third response, and one which participants of the second category would often endorse as well, was to consider the ‘real’ world as in significant ways reflected in film and television, in the sense that even fictional material was seen to deal with real-life issues and could thus impact on participants’ views and feelings, despite an awareness that what was seen was constructed (and thus still removed) and could be discussed in a critical light. Only very few participants reported to find it difficult to successfully draw lines between fictional material and reality. In the case of Nicole, a mother from Germany (G-V), the very fact that filmmakers could even conceive of the kinds of cruelties portrayed in some horror films was enough to ‘mess with her worldview’ and made it difficult for her to distance herself successfully from them. Like Owain, she ‘rejected’ violent content but, unlike him, she did so because she felt she could not ‘resist’ the emotional consequences of her viewing (I will return to her particular views and the possible issues at stake later on in this chapter).

Such specificities aside, participants saw obvious dissimilarities between the media and real life. Some of the more straightforward points can be related to Hall’s criteria of typicality and plausibility, though the two could not always be held apart:
1. Film and television – and here participants generalised about fictional material – were on the whole considered more ‘exciting’ and ‘exaggerated’ than real life, with participants repeatedly discussing the necessity of keeping viewers in front of the screen, of needing to keep them ‘entertained’. Nobody, they argued, would want to watch ‘real life’ on television because it is far too boring and mundane to be entertaining. Some material was, however, regarded as too ‘over the top’, such as *The Day After Tomorrow*. Olivera (15, G-VI), for instance, felt its sensationalism and exaggeration was tasteless if one considered that people around the world actually died in ‘real’ snow storms. By claiming to be realistic, and getting the balance wrong, the film alienated her.

2. Participants argued that, due to their very nature, films and programmes deal with ‘big moments’ and (sometimes unimaginably) big emotions. As Matt and Nina (the Anderson teenagers, UK-XV) suggested, films are either really sad or really gruesome or really happy; there is no middle-ground. Likewise, while they may deal with issues or events that occur in real life, these are usually out of the ordinary. Participants had (differing) views regarding the extent to which the media should emphasise this extraordinariness; there clearly were sensitivities towards the representation of violence. Yet, generally speaking, participants ridiculed the number of violent incidents presented on television, arguing that ‘life isn’t all... killing things’ (Patrick, 9, UK-X) and, with regard to particular murder mysteries, ‘you just know that there aren’t that many murders... in that part of Scotland... but there’s always a murder in *Taggart,* and *Midsomer Murders* – nobody would live there!’ (Sonia, mother, UK-XVII).

3. There was some consent and concern about the media presenting unrealistic lifestyles and thus evoking aims and desires that can never be met. Traude (grandmother, G-VIII), for instance, criticised the representation of simple employees living in penthouse apartments which would under normal circumstances be beyond their means. The word ‘Traumwelten’ (dream
worlds) was used on occasion in the German context. In the UK, the issue came up with respect to participants’ perceptions of ordinary people aspiring to unrealistic beauty ideals or lifestyles, as can be seen in this brief exchange between Matt and Nina (teenagers, UK-XV):

N: [P]eople want to be how people are on the films... and the lives they lead, cos it’s portrayed as being so exciting...
M: ... Yeah...
N: ... isn’t it, and [...] desirable.
M: Yeah, people are really be’..., beginning to try act like they are.
N: And they don’t see the repercussions, properly, of it in the films, you know like..
M: Yeah, everything’s always [indist.]...
N: ... Everything’s, is always fine at the end... It doesn’t like, represent like real... real life. [...] 

People’s goals and aspirations are seen here to lead to the world becoming more and more like that presented on film and television (a view which will be discussed further below). The teenagers seemingly draw on public discourses in constructing some of these arguments, for example evaluating the ‘boy-racer’ phenomenon as a new thing and as deriving directly from films like Too Fast and Too Furious. Whereas the 1950s drag racing in Rebel Without a Cause spread concern about juvenile delinquency amongst adults (see Doherty, 2002: 83ff), these teenagers employ arguments about a contemporary film to distance themselves from the activities of people their own age (though arguably perhaps from a different class).

4. The viewers in this study shared the view that there were an unusually high number of happy endings on film and television, or endings per se. This was discussed in one of two ways. Firstly, participants made a point that film and television stories necessarily condensed real-life events into small stretches of time and, on the whole, were more ‘tidy’ than people’s lives. Most stories, participants argued, had some kind of conclusion; they had a beginning, middle, and an end. Murder mysteries were highlighted as especially conclusive and self-contained, which was, as discussed in
Chapters Five and Six, regarded as crucial to their enjoyment. Secondly, participants commented on the ways in which mediated life was seen through ‘rose-tinted glasses’. Rita, a mother from Germany (G-VII), spoke at some length about the kind of hardship family life can bring, the difficulties and crises it contains, which, to her, are never sufficiently discussed in the media, at least not in fiction. Life always looks a lot easier on film and television than she judges it to be from her own experience. There was also a general consensus that good often won over evil. As Patrick (9, UK-X) put it, ‘goodies always win in fantasy... and sometimes baddies win in... the real world’.

5. Conversely, there were some voices, particularly in the German context, which saw the media as more negative, or too negative at times. This was perhaps implicit in the observation that ‘life isn’t all killing and murders’ (Deirdre, grandmother, UK-XIX), but also in people’s perception of the news and some documentaries. Florian (father, G-XIV) pointed out that the news put most focus on negative events (see Chapter Five), a view shared by Georg (grandfather, G-IX), who argued that it should generally play a stronger role in telling people that life is worth living, that families are worth forming, and that it is good to bring children into the world. There was clearly a sense that news and documentaries contributed to public ‘scaremongering’ by distributing risk messages (examples: bird flu and global warming). Georg insisted the end of the world was not near, despite what the media said. ‘It’s not all doom and gloom’ was also a point made by Celia and Edwin (UK-XIV), Deirdre (grandmother, UK-XIX), and Celia’s parents, Rachel and Jim (grandparents, UK-XVI), who all commented on EastEnders as being overly negative and depressing. Deirdre knew from previous experience that the East End was a friendlier place, while the Andersons noted the programme sometimes made them wonder about life in the city. They were pretty certain it was not as bad as portrayed in the soap, but they could not always be sure.
6. Soaps were generally described as close to life (or closer to life than some films), in the sense that they dealt with (everyday) issues that were within the bounds of possibility, yet departed from real life in that it was unreasonable to believe all of these things would always happen to the same people. Matt and Nina (teenagers, UK-XV) argued that soaps were ‘like real life but spiced up’, and that what happens in soaps in one year would happen to ordinary people in five or ten years. Glenys (mother, UK-XIII) spoke of soaps as always dealing with ‘huge contorted situations’ where all it needs to solve a problem is for A to speak to B. Again, ‘real’ life was not seen to make for very interesting TV in this respect. According to Bert (father, G-III) and others, there were too many deaths in soaps, and the way they portrayed relationships – as unstable and as ‘everyone getting it on with everybody else’ – was unrealistic and failed to provide the kinds of role models he would have liked his teenage daughters to identify with.

7. There were other considerations of the constructedness of the media. For instance, in films bad things tend to happen in the dark, while in real life they can happen during daylight (Julia, 13, G-V). Real life does not usually come with fitting background music (Nicole, mother, G-V), nor is there ever pure silence (‘there’s always a car driving past in real life’, Julia, G-V). Films and programmes present characters in condensed and concentrated forms. At the same time, viewers get more insights into the complexities of characters than they would into the lives of ‘real’ others (Anja, aunt, G-II). And finally, films and programmes are more predictable than real life, probably because there are rules and conventions (Doro, 18, G-XIII).

It is evident from such broad statements that, when asked directly, participants took on a critical stance towards the media, emphasising difference rather than similarity. There were question marks about the frequency or ordinariness of violence in everyday life, which indicates that, for these viewers, television realities did not effortlessly transform into ‘perceptions’ of the world; common sense told them
otherwise. At the same time, there were concerns about media impact, based on other ‘common sense’ theories of the media, and of ‘imagined’ audiences. Importantly, for the participants in this study, questions of realism were often fundamentally bound up with notions of morality. The issue was not always whether it was ‘realistic’ to portray the world in a certain way but whether it was ‘right’ to do so. Within this, there seemed to be ‘media-related fears’ of a different nature, that is, fears about where society was going on the whole.

Hall touches on the extent to which participants in her study saw the production process as intrusive or manipulative to the dramatisation of ‘real’ stories and factuality (Hall, 2003: 634). In this study, references to the media’s ‘constructedness’ and ‘entertainment value’ seemed to take on dimensions in their own right. Owain (grandfather, UK-XVIII), one of the ‘fear resisters’, was not the only person who negated emotional engagement as a direct result of his ‘critical’ understanding. Bob (father, UK-XI) and Traude (grandmother, G-VIII) felt the same, with Bob pointing out that it was the purpose of the media to ‘trick’ you into believing there were links between stories and your own life. He spoke at length about the ways in which people were encouraged through storytelling to identify with characters on screen. According to Bob, any such identification was just an illusion; good scriptwriting could make you identify with almost anyone. Interestingly, however, Bob also spoke of the film *Se7en*, which he described as a well-done piece of film-making, as having left a particularly bad taste in his mouth because it presented such a ‘grim worldview’ that there was nothing ‘redeeming’ he could take away from it. In this instance, he clearly made an evaluation of the film against the backdrop of ‘reality’ but was reluctant to acknowledge having been ‘tricked’.

Both Bob and Owain had worked in the media industry before and causally linked their knowledge about ‘actors doing their stuff’ to that industry experience. There was a sense in some of the talk that anyone who was more deeply affected by what they saw on screen was either media-illiterate or somewhat weak-minded. Interestingly, again, Owain recounts being ‘absolutely horrified’ by Hammer horror
films when he was younger, and ‘feeling this enormous chill that goes down the back of your spine’. Yet, he is quick to ascertain that he does not ‘rate it any higher or lower than that’. They don’t ‘disturb’ him, that is, they do not linger on his mind or make him act unreasonably in his surroundings. Asked why other people might be more easily ‘disturbed’ by such output, Owain suggests that they are ‘drawn in’ to the extent that ‘they imagine themselves […] to be in this situation’, which is why they become fearful of similar situations in their own lives. Owain’s physical fright reactions are thus constructed as natural but meaningless; it is when people enter a meaningful act of imagination that responses become less ‘rational’, and thus illegitimate.

The related argument to the above, that film and television, with the exception of the news, are ‘only entertainment’ (see Dyer, 1992) was also made by Bert (father, G-III), and to some extent by his family (who would have found it difficult, in the context of that particular discussion, to say otherwise). Deirdre (XVIII) added the word ‘cheap’: Television was only ‘cheap’ entertainment for her, something to pass her time with since she did not go out much. Importantly, Deirdre strictly avoided, or rejected, any ‘nasty’, violent or otherwise upsetting material, thus filtering out emotional engagement on any of those levels.

All of Hall’s reality criteria were evidenced in participants’ talk; yet some were more salient than others. With regard to narrative consistency, Sonia and Ian (mother and son, UK-XVII) and Bob (father, UK-XI) spoke about the ways in which 24 managed to be ‘credible’, despite its far-fetched and implausible developments, because there was some sense of consistency and truth to itself and its storyworld. The obvious links to real life, for instance in terms of the ‘war on terror’, were seen to add to 24’s credibility and made it more interesting; yet they did not as such render it realistic (events still seemed over the top). Conversely, The Lord of the Rings was discussed as ‘realistic’ despite its evident fantastical (i.e. implausible) character, because it managed to create a logical world in its own right, through the use of specific settings, costumes, and languages (Matt and Nina, UK-XV).
Perceptual persuasiveness was largely discussed in terms of the progress in special effects. There was a general consensus amongst the few participants who made it relevant that ‘things look more real now’, as Celia put it (UK-XIV), and that some ‘bad’ (often antiquated) effects got in the way of a film’s enjoyment or conviction (Florian, G-XIV). Celia, of course, worried about the ‘realness’ of effects because she wondered whether there were some sections of the audience who would find it more difficult to distinguish between fiction and the ‘real’ if fiction started to look more realistic (see Chapter Five). A possibly relevant and related aspect of participants’ talk was the ‘explicitness’ of contemporary drama. Uma and Glenys (mothers, UK-XIII) spoke of the differences between old and new crime stories, arguing that The Messiah was much more explicit in its violence than this used to be the case with programmes like Juliet Bravo (though they also pointed out that one would have never let a woman deal with anything as big as murder at that time). Both participants granted The Messiah more realism in this respect, considering that real violent crime was unlikely to be as clean and painless as older crime stories suggested. Yet Uma and Glenys also reported finding it much more difficult to watch something like The Messiah as a result, and that they had even started to avoid it.

Whether or not Hall’s concept of perceptual persuasiveness can be applied to the explicitness of media violence is debatable. My sense is that it includes the visual (and perhaps sensual) dimension Hall refers to, but that it also relates to issues of narrative consistency, as well as particular socio-cultural dimensions which Hall’s discussion does not as such refer to. Analytically, it clearly becomes difficult to discuss her concepts in separation from each other, or in separation from viewers’ perception of ‘imagined’ audiences. This is evident in aforementioned differences between rejection, endurance or enjoyment of blood and gore. If blood and gore was deemed unrealistic, it functioned as a tool to distance oneself from what was happening on screen (e.g. through humour, as was the case with Ian, 14, UK-XI, or because it was felt as exaggerated, as in Anja’s view, G-II). Realism
becomes a problem when it touches on other sensitive issues, such as the question of whether others were able to distinguish between fiction and reality.

7.3.2 Factuality

Certainly, factuality and emotional involvement were made particularly relevant in the present interviews. Factuality judgements had a distinct impact on participants’ emotional sense-making of fictional content, and I will discuss this in more detail in the subsequent section. In general, it can be summarised that news and documentaries were by and large seen as the ‘real’ thing, with the news’ focus on real people’s deaths or misfortunes acting as prominent points of reference, though there were differing views on the news’ accuracies. Olivera (15, G-VI), for instance, argued that reports should stick to the facts instead of sensationalising and exaggerating incidents (‘it’s never just a flood, it’s always the flood of the Century!’). Others were concerned about a lack of context to the news, which they saw as part of a general tendency to ‘dumb down’ (Uma and Glenys, UK-XIII). There were slight differences between participants who saw documentaries as reflecting the world (e.g. Irma and Helmut, grandparents, G-XIII) and those who saw them as interpretations of the world (e.g. Georg, G-IX). In any case, and my material does not allow for too much detail on this, the overall consent was that documentaries and the news contributed to our understanding of the world, that they introduced us to other cultures and societies, including those who were worse off than us, and that they, along with other factual programmes (e.g. health magazines), informed and educated.

The thought that certain kinds of information can lead to some fears or worries was mostly entertained hypothetically. Georg (G-IX), as mentioned before, touched on the notion that the media had a tendency to scaremonger. Bob (father, G-VIII), too, discussed the ways in which some media (he referred to the tabloid press, in particular) triggered fears or panics in people, often animating what he called a ‘Jerry Springer mob mentality’ which catered to the ‘lowest common denominator’. Yet, to him, the media should be a source of knowledge and
information, not so much one of personal fears. Like Traude (grandmother, G-VIII), and to some degree Sonia (mother, UK-XVII), he discussed the virtues of vigilance, as opposed to fear:

**B:** Erm, you know, everyone knows their kids can be subject to danger, everyone knows their house can burn down, everyone knows you can be hit by a car or be in a car as it... you know, strikes somebody, all of that... but... that’s just knowledge. Yeah, we try to minimise those damage’, you know, if, if something *really* bugs you... then that... isn’t really fear anymore, it’s err... it’s some sort of a, erm... [pause] phobia...[...] I’ve come to terms with one very big phobia that I have16, simply by saying I don’t do that... which is how I deal with things. I get [out??] just by shunning them. [...] Erm... but in terms of day-to-day fears... I don’t worry much. [...] And that doesn’t mean [slowly] that I don’t... realise that bad things can happen, but as I say, [slowly] once you’ve done your best to minimise them... what’s left? [...] Just, you know... be vigilant.

Bob’s argument seems to be that if knowledge automatically led to fear, we would all be in a constant state of panic. Fear is discussed by Bob as a ‘rational response’ to a ‘real threat’. None of the examples he gives here are threats in his sense of the word; they are mere possibilities and almost entirely hypothetical. Bob does not, however, deny that they might still impact on one’s behaviour. In a similar vein, Traude does not consider herself to be scared by the media but, on the other hand, if she knows that her granddaughter is jogging in nearby fields, and if she has the time, she will go and accompany her by bike. This is not because she is ‘scared’ as such, but because ‘one hears so much’ (in the news) and, if possible, is vigilant. Both Traude and Bob, then, presented themselves as sceptical but cautious people.

In contrast, other participants reported individual incidents when the news (or other factual programming) struck a particular chord with them. Vivian (aunt, UK-IX), for instance, recorded a moment in her diary when a late-night current affairs programme, *The Week*, had instilled a feeling of ‘real kind of paranoia’ in her. High-profile politicians and experts had discussed the possible dangers of bird flu. One of them, Michael Portillo, had described the possible devastation of the population as one on a scale not seen since the Middle Ages. It was in ‘the way he
said it’, combined with the fact that it was broadcast on a late-night programme (which, in her view, would only attract a handful of viewers), that suddenly made her wonder whether the government was hiding the real extent of the threat. In the follow-up phone interview, she describes the kind of ‘fear’ she felt:

V: I found that quite disturbing because... and, you know, not frightening in a sense that I was sitting on the edge of the seat, you know, I was still sitting on this, this seat, but it was, it was frightening in the, in the more sort of... metaphysical sense, [amused] if that’s the right word, but you know... this may well be something that the government is well aware of that it’s a really serious threat [...] and they’re, they’re playing it down.

Working within the health service and having been in contact with the Department of Health, she is likely to have had access to specialist knowledge on the topic in comparison with other members of the public. And still, the issues discussed during that particular programme made her ponder. Important, here, was the context in which the ‘information’ – or what was really just a person’s opinion – was received. The implication was that if Vivian had watched it on the 10 o’clock news, she might not have taken the same impression away with her. Bob and Traude’s examples seem to stand at almost opposite ends of a spectrum to that of Vivian; in between, there were participants who granted some emotional impact to the news but varied in their estimation of its salience. I postpone any further discussion of this to the subsequent section, since factual programming was often used as an important point of comparison for ‘reality’ talk about fantasy and fiction. It should, however, be clear by now that even the factuality judgements in participants’ talk contained different levels and dimensions, as well as different emotional outcomes.

7.3.3 Emotional Involvement
As a reminder, Hall’s participants made relevant some emotional connections to characters as a ‘realistic’ feature of entirely fictional material. This was also the case in the context of this study, though participants still made distinctions between the kinds of emotions they associated with their involvement with characters and those
they would have in real-life situations. Further, within the overall theme of emotional involvement, there were a number of different modes of engagement, namely the simple recognition of emotions on screen, the feeling of empathy for characters, putting oneself into a character’s situation (not quite the same), and relating a situation to one’s own life (which yet again came with different connotations and consequences). In addition, there was a sense that one could learn from characters on screen because of such parallels to real life and because, as mentioned above, participants felt that film and television created different subject positions, if you like, from which to observe what was going on between media characters.

In terms of the simple recognition of emotions on screen, Sascha (16, G-IV) pointed out that the tears and sorrow after a character’s death are ‘real’, in the sense that people in real life would cry and be sad if they lost someone. Likewise, his sister Dorothee (19, G-IV) saw the media as dealing with some of the values and emotions that stood at the centre of life, for instance love, friendship and the family. Matt and Nina (19 and 17, UK-XV) argued that certain similarities to real life are needed in order to be able to relate to and identify with characters. And Anja (aunt, G-II) saw some core human behaviour and character traits (the good and the bad in human nature) represented on screen, which is why she felt she could ‘learn’ about life from making sense of characters’ stories. At the same time, Anja was one of the people who spoke of ‘identification’ as a dangerous thing, not because of possible behavioural effects, but because it implied a breaking down of barriers between fiction and reality. This was, for example, the case when a character on screen was portrayed in so much (emotional) detail that she ‘imagined’ herself in that character’s position – in this instance as waking up on an operating table and realising that someone was conducting an autopsy on one’s living body (as in the German film *Anatomie*). Stepping over that line in her imagination was distressing and memorable.

With respect to other kinds of involvement, feelings which could be described as empathy were discussed by Irma and Helmut (grandparents, G-XIII)
who made the point that they knew films were unreal but that they could still ‘feel with the characters’ or live vicariously with them. Likewise, Georg (G-IX) made room for some empathy, though he continued to emphasise that it remained somewhat ‘artificial’. What seemed like other common modes of engagement – tension, suspense, and particularly some shock and startle effects – were not considered by participants to depend on reality judgements (or ‘identifications’ with characters) per se but could more readily be described as belonging to a *visceral* dimension, one where the construction of the film or programme invited bodily responses, despite one’s knowledge that one was watching fiction, and even though participants did not always feel significant emotional involvement with any of the characters at stake. Sascha (16, G-IV) spoke of a tension and ‘heightened awareness’ during his viewing of *Blood Surf*, even though he found numerous reasons why the film was bad and unrealistic. Jim (grandfather, UK-XVI) pointed out that some horror does not look real and still makes you jump. My material only allows me to speculate about this visceral dimension, but it seems to represent a kind of emotional engagement that is not as such dependent on any objective (or relative) reality claims.

### 7.4 Reality Dimensions and Emotional Consequences

As I have indicated before, participants across the board considered ‘real’ media material to be scarier than ‘fantasy’ or fiction, with a hierarchy of ‘realness’ and impact starting from the news and documentaries at the highest level of their ‘fear’ potential, via docu-dramas or dramatisation of real events, to purely fictional material at the bottom. According to Rachel (grandmother, UK-XVI), ‘nothing [was] as scary as the news’. Even sceptics like Owain (grandfather, UK-XVIII) or Bert (father, G-III) admitted that the news can hit home, can leave an impact. Bert and his wife even argued that the news is sometimes ‘too real’ in that respect. At the same time, the news’ fear potential often only seemed acute when compared with fiction. When participants spoke about their actual responses to the news, they would usually downplay their significance, for instance by arguing that the news would
only really cause them to be worried or frightened if they were directly affected by it, or when they knew of someone who was close to affected areas (the Andersons worried about Matt, who was close to London at the time of the London bombings; Patrick and Yasmine worried for their dad for the same reason, and for one of their uncles during 9/11, because he was working close to the Pentagon; Anja (G-II) reported some particular strong responses to the news about the 2005 tsunami, since she had just been to the Maldives and had made some friends there).

It is perhaps interesting that German participants by and large distanced themselves from the news more readily than this was the case with British participants, though individuals noted that some other factual programming could worry them if they related issues to their own lives. Rita (G-VII), for instance, felt affected by a documentary about children with leukaemia and had a sudden sense of realisation that something like this could happen to her own children, while simultaneously feeling more empathy for the people on screen than fear for her own healthy children. Those participants who described the news as particularly scary were usually British and often belonged to the grandparent generation. Again, their fears were less for themselves than they were for others. Rachel and Jim, for instance, spoke of knife crime as a particularly scary issue, especially since it gave them the sense that it could happen to anyone at any time. Yet the fact that a recent knife crime victim was only twenty years of age when he got stabbed in a train automatically reminded them of their 19-year-old grandson, and they worried for his sake. For Deirdre (grandmother, UK-XIX), the London bombings of 7/7 were particularly scary because she has family in London; one of her nieces was in fact leaving an Underground station when one of the bombs detonated on a nearby train. Deirdre’s subsequent talk about terrorism does not, as such, display a fear for herself:

D:  You know, and erm… [pause] that, in that sense I do worry and think about, you know. […] Apart from my niece, the rest of my family… you know, my niece’s… err, children, they’re, they… go on, they’re… ten years old, travel around on the underground in London and… you know… they don’t think anything about it. It’s just another day to them. […] But erm… [pause] that
kind of thing. I mean, terrorism went on in Ireland for [stretched] all them... years... and erm... you know, because people will... like... [pause] the, the... terrorists out there, the IRA, they were actually blowing up and killing... Irish people... you know, it’s... [pause] and... [pause] can be a ca’.. [stops] Is this religion? What can it..., can it be religion? Or is it politics? I don’t know. [...] So... [pause] I mean, I was., we were never involved, because we were., I lived in Southern Ireland. But we were never brought up to hate... err, people because they had a different religion... or hate people because they were... a different political... err, people to... what we were. [...] You know... my parents were... lovely... lovely people, they..., you know?

K: Hmm... and, and can you remember, cos you mentioned 9/11 as well, erm..
D: That was, yeah, that was terrible [indist.]
K: Yeah, c’...
D: ... I did watch that.
[pause]
K: Bu’., on the news...
D: ... I was wat’... yeah, well, I was watching erm... my... daughter-in-law’s mum was sitting her, [Name], and we were having a cup of tea, and we were watching an old... movie, black and white... I can’t remember, erm... the name of it now... And, you know, and as soon as that., they showed us this news flash... I thought there’s no way that plane has... accidentally... I just knew, I just had this feeling... and I think that was the... the scariest thing that... terrifying thing that ever happened. I just... couldn’t believe it. [...] And then the second plane, that was... oh..
K: D’..., do you remember what kind of thoughts went through your head, or what kind of feelings you had when you watched that...
D: ... [I don’t even think I thought it??]... I didn’t think of who it would be... you know, or, or what... what it was about. It’s just... think it was horrendous, and then... to see... I did watch the news... and then to see... [pause] them showing some people actually jumping from tha’., [stretched] oh God, it’s awful to think about it. [...] But erm... day to day I don’t think of... [pause] terrorists. [...] Or erm... you know... I think, erm... like... some other people, I’ve had a good long life... erm, if... anything happened to me, well, it’s... you know. [...] You know, if it’s going to happen, there’s nothing you can do about it... if you’re in the wrong place at the wrong time, but... you know, these... I think it was horrible, horrendous, what happened.

Deirdre’s lines of association, for lack of a better term, move from a response of worry for her family to a comparison with IRA terrorism and brief considerations of the causes of such attacks. While she thinks about her family’s safety, indicating that they themselves just get on with life instead of worrying, she also notes that terrorism is not something that occupies her mind on a day-to-day basis,
particularly not for herself. As suggested in Chapter Six, there is a sense that age plays a role in the fear equation; her niece’s children are only ten years of age, their deaths would be more tragic than anything happening to herself. Terrorism itself is framed as a known phenomenon, as something she has more or less lived with for years (though 9/11 seems to stand out in its magnitude). There is an acknowledgement that terrorist attacks are indiscriminate and could thus hit anyone and that, whether grounded in religion or politics or both, they are based on having learned to hate, something Deirdre clearly distances herself from. Although she describes 9/11 as the scariest and most terrifying thing she has ever seen, particularly recalling images of people jumping out of the World Trade Center windows, there is no real consideration of consequences and fears for the self but of the horror that unfolded before her eyes, and a disbelief at what she was witnessing. Similar responses were reported by other participants in this study. Disbelief, shock, horror and empathy were the emotions most commonly associated with September 11th, while some participants negotiated their position as distant witnesses, arguing that they were still removed from the incidents. Others considered some possible knock-on effects (e.g. Monika and Florian, see Chapter Five). Interestingly, some of the German participants only felt an impact when they became aware of local terror alerts, for instance with respect to close-by US army camps, and thus the ‘threat’ became more ‘real’ to them. Additional topics for the discussion of news and documentaries were natural disasters (and the helplessness in the face of nature, which was considered a greater and more omnipresent threat than terrorism, because they were even less controllable), school shootings, and rape, which was particularly discussed by one German teenager, Dorothee (G-IV), who had watched a, to her, harrowing (but intriguing) documentary on the topic.

Again more emphasised in the British than in the German context, though it played a role in both, was talk about films that were ‘based on real stories’. Bar one exception, Bert (G-V), participants seemed to agree that real-life stories in fictional contexts were a lot ‘more gripping’ than pure fiction (Matt and Nina’s words, UK-XVI). Examples of the films that were discussed in this category in the UK were See
No Evil: The Moors Murders, Angel of Death: The Beverly Allitt story (about a patient-killing nurse), United 93 (about the passengers who crashed a plane before it could become a terrorist weapon during 9/11), and Cry Freedom. Participants either felt a strange compulsion to watch, and thus endured difficult emotions because they were still ‘hooked’ by the programme, or they avoided such films altogether because they were considered as too close to reality and too difficult to watch (Glenys was further uncomfortable with the thought that United 93 might paint a one-sided picture of events and entail a political view she could not endorse). One participant, Sonia (mother, UK-XVII), said she was unable to watch Schindler’s List because she knew these things had happened and she did not feel prepared to put herself through what she expected to be highly distressing emotions.

The response to such films and programmes was essentially the same as to news and documentaries: Those viewers who watched and endured them repeatedly expressed their disbelief at such violent, psychopathic, raping, killing people really being ‘out there’. As will be discussed in some more detail in the section below, the issue of what it means or should mean to be human was a significant stumbling block for some. Whether one would relate participants’ talk to ‘stranger danger’, as discussed in Chapter Two, is debatable. There was no sense that they avoided going places and meeting new people. The ‘out there’ was a rather unspecified term, and participants almost did not feel prepared to even ‘go there’ in our conversations, because they were dealing with dark and unknown parts of human life, with those things they would not have deemed possible if they had not been confronted with them. The ‘what if...?’ element introduced in Chapter Five was particularly common in these discussions. Participants entertained the idea of what they would do if they were ever put in similar situations to victims or their relatives.

It was not only factual or near-factual material that made participants ponder about the ‘what ifs...?’. For various reasons, purely fictional material was also considered to evoke such emotional responses, including fears, particularly when they involved live actors rather than monsters or cartoon characters, when
they were set within real-life contexts, when they were plausible, in the sense that they could happen to anyone, or, importantly, when they functioned as a ‘metaphor’ for other issues.

The distinction between relatively literal and more metaphorical readings of specific films is evident in Dorothee (18, G-IV) and Vivian’s (aunt, UK-X) talk, though both imply symbolic dimensions. Dorothee could not bear watching the film *Scream* because of the number and kinds of killings involved, and she seemed particularly distressed by the randomness of the murders, which reminded her of killing sprees in schools and other public places:

D: Cos often you, that... [indist.] that ‘Scream’, where there’s just someone walking around and... randomly stabbing err..., erm, stabbing and... [to S] I think just stabbing people, right? He had...
S: ... Hmm...
D: ... a knife and stabs everyone... Purely theoretically that could... also happen in real life... And that’s what I’m scared of, that., or generally, that many people are scared for that, like, a typical amok person who... randomly kills people... and then over se’, over several days or something..

Serial killers can exist in real life, people do run amok, and just the thought of someone randomly and unstoppably killing people frightens her. Dorothee’s talk generally discloses a lack of control, which is also evident in Vivian’s discussion of zombie films. Although she watches them, she finds zombies particularly frightening and difficult to deal with. In her attempt to draw out what it is that frightens her, she describes a similar unstoppable phenomenon to that discussed by Dorothee:

V: I, I’ve tried and tried to work out what it is about... zombies, erm, that, that seems to disturb me, I mean, it’s, it’s a totally ridiculous idea.
K: [chuckles]
V: But there’s something, and I don’t think it’s the id’, I mean, I don’t think I actually... think that there could be zombies that could do that, but it’s more... what they represent, and what the represent is... mindless, relentless... erm... [pause] pursuit to the death, I think that’s... that’s the thing that, it’s... because... there is no reasoning with them, there’s no... you know, even..., I, I mean, I’ve watched, erm... [quietly] oh, what do you call it,
erm... the Hannibal Lecter films [...] and he is... you know, he's a pretty horrible character and... does some pretty dreadful things to people and [indist.], but... the man... himself, you know, in terms of, you know, if you could have a conversation with him, is, is highly intellectual, highly... intelligent, is a reasonable person in the sense that you can reason with him. He might not agree with you, and he might eat you at the end of it, but you know...

K: ...[laughs]...
V: ... At least you would feel... that you were the victim of somebody who, erm... was..
K: Who you could...
V: ... who [had a??]...
K: ... argue with...
V: ... brain and was thinking and... had...
K: ... Yeah...
V: ... a reason for what he was doing and..., even if you didn’t think it was right. It’s just this... kind of... idea of something... [pause] brute [...] that’s killing you, with no... erm, you know, you’re not going to be able to try and negotiate with them, you can’t... appeal to their better nature, you can’t appeal to, err, their... their want, you know, their need for... for money or their need for anything, cos they just [...] don’t care, they just keep coming, you know what I mean? I mean... tha’, so that kind of... erm, mindless... violence... is just... it’s, it’s, it is really... I find the idea of that terrifying, and [...] I find it, I would find it terrifying if it were, you know, actually [if I was faced with it??], but it's also a terrifying idea... [pause] It, it if... it... it frightens me on, on both levels, on the kind of... the, erm... [long pause] the real level, you know, if there really were something like that, you know, if [...] somebody was... incredibly... erm... [pause] [indist.] brute-like... and didn’t have very much reasoning power [...] but was very violent and was pursuing me, or indeed if it., you know, the idea that... there could be a world where... [pause] people were... you know, just... mindless, well, I suppose that there are people who mindlessly... attack others and kill them, you know, particularly... erm... and that, that is just... [pause] you know, that, that’s, to me, would be the worst thing that could possibly happen.

There is a lot going on in what seems like a very reflective kind of talk; I am not able to go into great detail here. Vivian clearly has thought about this before, partly as a result of the diaries, which is where she first mentioned her disturbance about zombies. Although on measures of plausibility, she rejects the idea that zombies exist in real life, downplaying her own response to them as somewhat ‘ridiculous’, Vivian suggests that they stand for something brute-like and mindless, something
she cannot negotiate with and is thus helpless against. Just like a *Scream*-like killer, Vivian sees something unstoppable represented in the zombies. There is a sense of the unknown, a worry about whatever part of existence she might not yet have come across, but also a realisation that the idea in itself might not be too far from reality. Vivian constructs herself as someone whose strength lies in her intelligence, in her ability to negotiate and reason with people, and it is the problem she would encounter was she not able to make use of these abilities that seem to frighten her.

So, along with the idea that mindless killing can happen in real life, the zombies also take on a metaphorical power as something Vivian does not feel equipped to deal with. Similarly, she reports being particularly ‘shocked’ and ‘disturbed’ by a scene from *Alien*, in which the alien creature bursts out of a character’s chest. The scene was so upsetting that it stayed with her for some time. In reflecting on what it was that disturbed her, Vivian again makes relevant her work as a health care professional and the fact that if it happened in real life, she would not be able to do anything about it, ‘because he was beyond help’:

V: And I think it’s the hopelessness… the hopelessness in that situation, and I think, again, it’s the hopelessness of the zombies, it’s the fact that… there’s, there’s nothing you can do… […] Erm… and that’s, that’s probably, you know, or… that’s… err, not so much a thing as, err, I suppose it’s, [it is a??] fear, but it’s also, erm… an anxiety.

[pause]
K: What’s the difference for you?
V: Erm… [pause] because I think, erm… [pause] [quietly] I don’t know, I think… it, it represents… the anxiety represents, erm… [pause] things about life, you know, that… you know, you see… I mean, there are all, there’s… things going on in the world all the time that you, you can’t… it’s completely, you feel as if you’re completely helpless to do anything about them, and… [pause] and I suppose that’s the more general thing, and it’s not an immediate fear, and it’s not, erm… [pause] and I think it’s… it’s… a combination of… the inability to do anything and the shock of the…, cos it’s the visual shock… erm, which you get a lot in, you know, if you’re in health care, you know, you, you, y’…, if you’re working in certain areas, you do see some… fairly scary things, and, and [indist.], but th’…, there’s always this element of, oh, well, what are we going to do, sort of thing, or what can we do about this. […] Erm… whereas… in these, in th’…, some of these films you just think, well, there’s nothing, you know, [chuckling] it’s just […]
hopeless, helpless, you know. [...] I think it is more of an anxiety... erm, that... and it’s, cos, a sort of general thing about life, you know, that there’s things going on that you can do nothing about. [...] That’s... that’s frustrating [...] cos I’m... you know, I’m a person who likes to solve problems... you know, the idea of having [something that you can’t solve??] is, is... disturbing.

Vivian speaks with an unusual degree of self-analytic reflection. At the same time, she mirrors what was touched upon in other conversations, the fact that there are some things in life one cannot do anything about or where one is at least limited in one’s abilities and options (e.g. natural disasters, wars, world hunger). This stands in sharp contrast to a job in which one is able to deal with difficult issues and to solve problems. Vivian speaks of an ‘anxiety’, rather than a ‘fear’ which she describes as more immediate or acute. Calling it an anxiety perhaps implies that it is at the back of one’s mind and only comes to the forefront when triggered and reflected upon. Perhaps related to this idea of general anxieties is Florian’s reason for avoiding some horror films (Chapter Five). Speaking of portrayals of physical and psychological violence, Florian, who generally constructed himself as a rational and media-savvy person, asserts that ‘it is a film but you also know that things happen’ (G-XII). Just as Vivian seems to imagine realities beyond her immediate surroundings, Florian also engages in making links between fictional material and the world that might be (and partly has been) ‘out there’.

A different, though also ‘anxious’ way in which fictional material was related to the real world was evident in Uma’s talk about a particular storyline in EastEnders, which instilled some anxiety or discomfort in her (UK-XIII). In fact, Uma also distinguishes between ‘fear as fright’ and ‘fear as anxiety’ here. The former is described as something of a split-second reaction, a jump, or a ‘cold-blooded’ fear which can easily be avoided by switching off the television or, as in Glenys’ case, hiding behind one’s hands. The other is a feeling that dawns on you and thus perhaps develops over time. Uma’s discomfort derived from EastEnders’ negative portrayal of one character, Sonia, as a lesbian mother. By the time of the interview, Uma had largely stopped watching the programme; yet she was still able to (rightly)
predict that Sonia was sooner or later going to realise ‘the error of her ways’ and return to her heterosexual self. In Uma’s eyes, Sonia is punished for being gay and for being a gay mother: ‘they’ve even turned her into an alcoholic’. She describes her anxiety regarding this issue as ‘something […] that develops over time after you’ve given it thought and […] reflected on the fact that in […] this millennium, we shouldn’t actually have to be subjected to that kind of… prejudice of storylines […] when generally they’re quite good with dealing with… issues’. What scares her is the thought that the story might be a ‘crowd pleaser’, that ‘Middle England’ will be self-satisfied with such a reactionary depiction of gay motherhood.

Uma’s own identity as a lesbian mother is evident but not overtly made relevant by Uma herself. What seems particularly significant here is that Uma does not solely negotiate her identity with regard to that portrayed on television. While she might ‘identify’ with some of the problems Sonia encounters, for instance in the sense that she can imagine or might have experienced prejudice herself, Uma also watches and negotiates on a social level. She imagines how other viewers will respond to Sonia’s story, and this in turn increases the anxiety Uma feels when confronted with the narrative. It is this symbolic interpretation of the media material that leads Uma, upon reflection, to feelings of discomfort. Uma’s problem is not that she expects Sonia’s situation to be played out in real life, but that its portrayal will impact on real-life perceptions of lesbian mothers and thus undo years of campaigning against prejudices.

The above thus demonstrates some of the ways in which fiction could relate to real-life concern or fears for participants beyond those identified by Hall. To an extent, it also highlights the ‘power of symbols’ (or, rather, metaphors) which form much of the theoretical basis for Cultivation Analysis. Yet, unlike Gerbner et al.’s approach, this symbolic power is not only restricted to issues of media violence (though violence can become extremely relevant), it also involves participants’ sense of other audiences, as in the case of Uma’s concerns. And further, especially Vivian’s comments exemplify that ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’ are not always easily identified by gender, age, class, occupation or place of residence. More than
anything, the zombies and aliens in Vivian’s story represent an idea, in her case one of not being able to make use of her strengths and abilities (her intelligence, her medical training), and a more general uncertainty about life, as she calls it. On the other hand, nothing in Vivian’s talk suggests that this uncertainty is a constant feeling or that it might attach itself randomly to other objects of fear (as Furedi (2005) or Glassner (1999) might argue, see Chapter Two). Instead, films or scenes like the ones above can prompt Vivian to reflect on other elements of her life and of her sense of identity. Some of these may be a diffuse sense of uncertainty, of personal limits, unknown entities, or of wider (almost philosophical) discourses participants made relevant. How people’s ‘realities’ were structured by what they knew and did not (yet) know is the focus of these final two sections of the chapter.

7.5 Case Studies

7.5.1 The Unknown Known: Negotiations of Humanity

The question of what it means to be ‘human’, of what human beings are capable of, their virtues and downfalls, first emerged as significant in my analysis of Edwin, Celia, Monika and Florian’s talk in Chapter Five. There, I illustrated the ways in which Celia distanced herself from particularly shocking real-life violent acts, such as the Jamie Bulger case and the killings of police officers in Northern Ireland, noting that it made her ashamed to be part of the human race. There is in participants’ talk clear evidence of difficulties in conceiving the realities about the Moors Murders, the Beverly Allitt case and, to some degree, the events of September 11th and 7/7. Regarding fictional programming, crime stories in particular, Monika voiced the hope that what she was watching was indeed just a film and would not happen to anyone in real life. On a more general level, too, there were considerations of humanity, for instance with respect to comedy showing the good in human nature and horror showing the deepest depths (Anja, aunt, G-II). One particular stretch of conversation, however, stood out because the participant, Nicole (mother, G-V), brought a somewhat unexpected dimension to the topic (and one which was also touched upon by Dorothee, one of the German teenagers).
Speaking about media violence and specifically horror films, Nicole explained how she found it difficult to successfully draw lines between reality and fiction (or filmmaking *per se*):

N: But I don’t need the scenes of violence with it or also not the though’, you couldn’t *see* a lot of violence in [*The Silence of the Lambs*], but you could imagine it. And I don’t ever have such thoughts, so I’m surprised as to what kinds of thoughts people have, [people] who show violent films. I mean it was about using parts of human skin for clothing and […]. So I’m surprised, I have in that direction…, I have thoughts about a lot of things and I enjoy talking about them, but not in that direction. I find […] there are so many other things you could do [with your life] and… [It] doesn’t benefit me, it rather stirs me up and makes me insecure or also discontent, I don’t see a life aim in them and […] it also makes me disappointed, of the human being who we put above animals, the human being, who’s virtually got animalistic gestures now, so [it] disappoints me [with regard to] human beings who think like that, act like that, because they then don’t differentiate themselves anymore to me. Those kinds of thoughts.

K: So, people in real life who act like that…

N: Yes, yes, but…

K: … or the people who make those films?

N: Oh right, yes, okay… now I’m too far. I’m not talking […] I can’t sometimes [with] a film, I live with it then. So I think I turn it into reality too quickly. Of course that isn’t the case, but I sometimes can’t differentiate.

This is a difficult piece of conversation to discuss because Nicole never quite gets beyond a certain ambivalence about what she means by not being able to differentiate and by turning things into reality too quickly. Importantly, Nicole’s concerns go beyond what is explicitly depicted in the film text, partly because her imagination fills in the gaps (compare Buckingham, 1996), but also because just the thought of certain cruelties is enough to disturb her. It is the very subject matter of human’s darker and, as she seems to suggest, animalistic side that bothers her, and the fact that people entertain those thoughts to such an extent that they put them on film.19 Her point that she does not see a life aim in these stories implies that she demands a different purpose of entertainment, perhaps a more uplifting dimension, one that she can actively draw on in constructing the life she wants to lead. She also actively distances herself from the ‘dark side’; the kinds of ideas depicted in some
horror films would not under normal circumstances cross her mind. The question Nicole seems to ask herself is what it is that drives others to engage with them.

While Nicole does not refer to any distinct ‘fear’ in the light of such films, she speaks of the insecurities that the depictions of violence and nastiness instil in her. There are certain places she does not want to go; one of them is the place where humans hurt or kill other human beings, or even just think about it. Humans should distinguish themselves from animals. They should be able to make use of their (rational) thought, be compassionate, and control their urges. The idea that they might get out of control was one of the scariest things participants had to deal with in both factual and fictional media material. Yet, as should be clear by now, there was a vast spectrum between quite literal negotiations of media texts and humanity and those that were less predictable. Common to all of them was people’s sense of some darker and incomprehensible forces at work in the real world, which they often chose not to engage with.

Evidently, my material only allows me to speculate about the universality of people’s fears of humankind’s ‘dark side’. What seems significant is that media material can interact and conflict with quite wide-reaching, philosophical concepts of the world as it is, or as it should be, in the eyes of participants.

7.5.2 The Unknown Unknown: Considerations of the Supernatural

Throughout this chapter, emphasis has been on participants’ fearful interpretations of media material in relation to their understandings of the world around them. The fact that family members had to sometimes draw on information from other sources in making sense of the world (friends, colleagues, school, and the media), instead of solely basing reality judgements on personal experience, meant that there was always some degree of uncertainty about parts of the world as they knew it. Yet, this was nowhere as much the case as in discussions of the supernatural or any notion of existence beyond the ‘known’, such as the afterlife or the future in general.

One of the first interviews I conducted for this project surprised me in that respect, simply because it opened up a dimension that, except for Buckingham’s discussion
of Ghostwatch, I had neither substantially come across in the literature nor theoretically anticipated in any meaningful way. While it is important to point out that it did not constitute a main point of reference across interviews, it came up repeatedly and usually involved a heightened sense of emotion or ‘uncanniness’, clearly occupying people’s mind on a number of levels. Here, I will briefly summarise the nature of such responses and present some of the thought processes participants went through in accounting for them. Two interviews, one with Anja (G-II) and that with Vivian (UK-IX), stood out as particularly reflective and articulate in an early assessment of the research material. They nicely illustrate two broad positions participants took up in their dealings with supernatural media content. But first, I briefly summarise the kinds of ‘unknowns’ that were made relevant by participants across the interviews.

Just as in Buckingham’s study on children’s emotional responses to film and television, participants across the age range seemed to take some comfort in the fact that certain fiction was ‘unrealistic’ or did not constitute an immediate threat to them. Julia (13, G-V) knew that monsters were unreal (which is why she found them easier to deal with than ‘evil’ live characters), dinosaurs were extinct and, to her mind, there were no wolves in German forests, so she did not have to worry about them either. Likewise, some participants spoke about sci-fi and fantasy as being ‘obviously unreal’ (e.g. Anja, Uma, Glenys and Zara), though some pointed out technological progress meant life was getting more and more like that portrayed on film and television (e.g. Rachel and Jim) or that some sci-fi was within the bounds of possibility (e.g. Vivian). Some ‘concerns’ were voiced more or less explicitly in regard to future possibilities. Imagined futures (IFs) were made relevant in talking about both fictional and factual material, such as disaster movies (e.g. The Day After and The Day After Tomorrow) and other disturbing visions of days to come (e.g. Blade Runner) on the one hand and the kinds of worries about the future that derived from news and documentaries on the other. Teenagers and parents hypothetically considered the possibilities of global warming, meteors hitting earth, other natural disasters, terrorism, the likelihood of a World War III in the light of the war on
terror, and others. The sense that ‘reality’ can be altered from one day to the next (as some felt was the case with 9/11 when, for the first time, they felt terrorist attacks could happen anywhere) was a stark reminder that claims to reality could change over time.

One uncertainty about reality claims was discussed by Matt and Nina with regard to The DaVinci Code. Again, the film encouraged thought on wider, more essential issues than those immediately related to the text:

K: And then about, erm... ‘The DaVinci Code’ you wrote... that it made you think and worry a little about the... the public... about how little the public really may know.

M: Well yeah, like, because you hear of all these conspiracy theories and stuff, and then... but I mean imagine if they were, they were true [I don’t know]... there’s stuff like... the government hides all the stuff like... aliens and stuff, like... aliens probably isn’t true... But I mean, like... the religious stuff in ‘The DaVinci Code’... could easily be... true-ish. [...] And... yeah, I s’... rel’... religion confuses me.

N: Yeah, and me.

M: Well, the fact there are so many religions... and so many people devote their life to their... religion, and yet... they can’t all be right... and so... how do you know which religion to choose.

N: Or if any, or if any at all.

M: Well, exactly.

[pause]

N: No, that...

M: ... So...

N: ... Now that worries me, not worries me, but like the whole thing after death like... the whole is there a God thing, is there not? Or what is to come after death? [pause] Yeah, I don’t like that. [coughs]

K: What about, erm... well, where do you kind of get... confronted with religious issues. Is it, erm, on the the news as well when you hear about...

N: ... It’s all the wars, the fact that people would go to such lengths for religion...

M: ... Yeah...

N: ... and they’ve got no, like, real hard evidence... to support their beliefs, but they’re willing to like fight and kill each other... over it in... essence, it’s just like... it’s scary how much... how far people take it, like... into their own... like hands, really, just based on religion.

M: Yeah, cos if you went to kill for something you believe to be true but don’t know to be true, then..
N: Yeah, it’s like if someone was killed about Santa Claus, isn’t it? Sounds like... that kind of thing...
M: ... Or because, yeah...
N: The same kind of principle, isn’t it?... Cos no-one knows and no-one will ever know, will they, til... well, never.. [pause] what it is.
K: Hmm.
N: It shows how powerful it is.

There is again a lot going on in this stretch of talk. I will attempt to draw out just some of the lines of thought. Matt and Nina are bouncing ideas and concerns off each other here; in their considerations, the media does not always stand at the centre of attention but almost serves as a springboard for wider issues. So the storyline in *The DaVinci Code* made Matt consider other hidden truths in society, including the possibility of government intelligence about alien activity (which he simultaneously plays down) and, further, since the film was about religion, it made him wonder about religions as well. The teenagers both display an existential concern and uncertainty over whether there is a God and what will happen after death. Yet they are baffled by those people who seem to be certain about such uncertainties, who take religion to an extreme because they think it is worth fighting for. The news features as a source of information about religious wars.

In general, ‘reality’ was seen by the teenagers as a question of what one was willing to believe. In the following, they discuss the nature and likelihood of responding emotionally to fiction. They again point out that ‘true stories’ are more gripping than pure fiction, but they also emphasise the importance of letting one’s imagination wander:

N: Like I think films can really make you emotional, like, if you get into..., if you really get into a storyline, then they can make you cry and stuff... [...] I think it’s..., I think it’s how far you let yourself believe it’s true. I think real life films...
M: ... Yeah...
N: ... like, films that are based on, like, true stories, to me... like... grip me more, like... make me feel more emotion than... like more fearful if it was a fear response, than like just... complete fic’..., erm, fiction?!
M: Yeah...
N: ... Because... it’s more..., you know, it could go on, you know it has gone on, so... it grips you further, I think.
M: Yeah, it has to be a believable, cos if you...
N: ... Yeah, it has to be believable...
M: ... if you get a horror film, where it’s like... a moment which everyone laughs at which... wasn’t meant to be... funny, then the film’s never gonna... scare you, they’re not..
N: Yes.
M: You just can’t take it seriously.
N: Yeah.
K: Hmm... how does it become... believable, do you think?
M: Err... good characters...
N: ... I think it’s how far...
M: ... surely.
N: And I think, too, how far someone’s imagination is... If you are just really realistic...
M: ... Yeah, [indist.]
N: ... and think [in an earnest voice] no, this is the real world... But if you’ve got imagination that wanders and... is quite, like... if they’ve got aliens and stuff, I mean you can actually think they could happen... then that could, like... fear [sic] someone a lot more than someone who is completely... this is the world, this is what it is, it’s nothing else.

This is a good example of what Alice Hall has described as narrative consistency criteria and involvement (as in the emotional engagement with characters), and it also rings true with Buckingham’s observations about the entertaining of certain ideas, including the possible existence of aliens, through acts of imagination. Nina constructs this as a disposition, as being generally more receptive to certain ideas, and this is how it is mostly talked about by other participants as well.

Exactly what it is that made some participants more ‘susceptible’ to ideas of the paranormal is difficult to tell. Yet, there were clear differences, as I indicated above, between two particular respondents in this study, Anja from Germany and Vivian from the UK. Anja presented herself in the interview as very aware of, and reflective about, her emotional life. She came across as a thoughtful and sensitive woman, but also as someone who had learnt to deal with her emotions, at least in most circumstances. During the interview, she spoke about certain films, particularly horror films, as ‘getting her into trouble’, in the sense that they do not
‘fit into her reality, into her belief’. These are moments when films address the supernatural or other ‘esoteric’ topics, as she calls them. She ‘takes them on as a possibility’, which frightens her, because she feels insecure in a world in which she does not know the rules and does not know how to defend herself. It is worse if the films are otherwise set within everyday contexts and thus appear plausible and closer to reality, such as was the case with *The Sixth Sense*. In addition to her dislike of the supernatural, one film (mentioned in Chapter Six) reportedly caused some existential fear in her when she watched it as a young woman, because it again dealt with a world she did not have any certainty over, the afterlife (or as she calls it, the ‘Zwischenwelt’, lit. the ‘in-between world’). *Flatliners*, a film about medical students who stop their own hearts and revive each other in order to explore near-death experiences, instilled a great fear of death in her and stayed with her for years. Although she watched it on her own at the time and thinks that she might react differently if she watched it again (in the company of others), she still feels a certain unease when thinking about it.

Vivian, who watches most films except for *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (see Chapter Six), makes a particular point of being an open-minded person who (like Anja, for that matter) deals with a lot of facts in her day-to-day job and likes knowing her facts, but at the same time, and in contrast to Anja, enjoys entertaining thoughts of the spiritual, unproven, paranormal kind. She does not, as such, believe or accept such possibilities, but she sees a childlike quality in playing with the idea that fantasy might have some real dimensions. She also finds it impossible to believe that ‘that whole great universe out there hasn’t got any other life forms’. As opposed to Anja who likes to get emotionally involved but sees some dangers in identifying with characters and situations (because it can be too distressing), Vivian likes losing herself completely when watching a film and momentarily suspending all disbelief (her words).

Here, then, are two viewers who differ to a large extent in their enjoyment and acceptance of spiritual or supernatural content. While both women seek some emotional involvement in films, they draw different lines as to how far they are
willing to go with it. What connects them is an entertainment of ideas – one welcome, the other unwelcome – that what the boundaries of what they know as reality can be blurred through their encounters with some films and programmes. Certainly, a connection could be made to the ‘uncanny’ feelings described by Freud in his classic 1919 essay (see Chapter Two). There is a sense of uncertainty over the existence of particular phenomena, and there is some level of ‘attraction’ to these, at least in Vivian’s account. Yet, whether such issues derive from formative experiences in childhood is beyond the scope of the arguments presented in this thesis. What seems significant is that the two women relate to these feelings and encounters as meaning-making adult viewers, and that this shapes much of their experience.

7.6 Conclusion
Again, this chapter has had to cover a lot of ground and deal with a wide range of complex issues and materials. In addition to providing an insight into individuals’ ‘fearful’ interpretations, I hope to have illustrated a number of wider concerns and processes at stake. Crucially, some of the material has put into question the centrality of media texts in elucidating fearful responses. In fact, while I have employed the term ‘response’ throughout, I have to question its usefulness regarding participants’ wider reflections on media encounters. Media texts were important references, and it would be nonsensical to fall into an extreme textual relativism position by favouring an idea of audience individualised indiosyncrasies. Participants reported the significance of visual shocks, the explicitness of media violence, musical cues, the importance of generic conventions, specific subject matters, storylines, and so on. Their stances towards a text’s modality claims were clearly important, not least in terms of viewers’ critical reflections on the media’s representation of the world as they knew it. Some of their comments, for example, seem to directly undermine the logics behind comparing violent incidents on screen with people’s perception of violence in real life, because viewers see violence as a dramatic device in its own right.
However, this chapter has also dealt with some concrete contextual factors likely to impact on viewers’ emotional sense-making. Individual texts served as catalysts for the discussion of related (though sometimes surprising) issues and, as already suggested in Chapter Six, viewers judged production and reception processes in their evaluation of material, for instance by questioning producers’ aims and objectives (or states of mind) or second-guessing the meanings other audiences might draw from media texts. These kinds of extra-textual evaluations rendered seemingly harmless material ‘scary’ or ‘worrying’ in viewers’ eyes. Even when the text stood in the foreground (e.g. with regard to Vivian’s zombie stories), participants derived kinds of symbolic meaning from it which were deeply entwined with their sense of identity and life situations.

Finally, while my interviews suggested that reality dimensions played a profound role in participants’ mapping of emotions into hierarchies of strength or significance, this chapter has also further highlighted the importance of imagination, either in terms of filling in gaps in a media text, of letting one’s imagination ‘wander’, or of relating the stories on screen to one’s own real and/or hypothetical situations. Reality was not a static entity in participants’ talk. It contained different levels or dimensions, such as distinctions between one’s everyday realities, imagined realities, ideal realities, and profound or existential realities. All in all, they rendered the media/fear/reality triangle a complex one.

1 Peirce identified three types of modality: actuality, necessity and possibility (i.e. something is considered to be actually true, logically necessary, or hypothetical, see Hodge and Kress, 1988: 26).

2 The last two decades have also seen a particular rise of interest in issues of ‘reality’ in the light of viewers’ interpretations and negotiations of reality programming (see, for example, Jones, 2003; Hill, 2005; Nabi, 2007; Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2007), the related, though until recently rather neglected, area of documentary audiences (e.g. Austin, 2007), as well as the particular challenges implied in the notion of ‘virtual realities’ within cyberspace.

3 I am not so much interested in their findings as in their conceptual approach here, but I should point out that one of the conclusions Hodge and Tripp draw is that children make sophisticated and complex modality judgements from a young age, but these judgements become more consistent as the child grows up. As such, the researchers suggest that the
process of getting it wrong is important, and that children should be exposed to a variety of programming, including explicit fantasy, in order to develop a ‘confident and discriminating modality system’ (see Hodge and Tripp, 1986: 130).

Buckingham also emphasises the fact that children worried because they saw themselves as potential victims, rather than perpetrators, dispelling any views that the programme might incite or provide ideas for particular crimes.

This is interesting because it reverts the argument made by participants in my study that it was particularly the dramatic cues – setting, music, sound in general – that heightened their ‘fear’ or suspense when watching a horror film or thriller. It was the fact that they knew something would happen that created much of the inner tension for viewers in this study.

The author likens the controversial BBC spoof documentary to Orson Welles’ US radio production of War of the Worlds, which had caused some panic in ‘unsuspecting’ listeners in 1938. Of course, the event was extensively researched at the time, and it turned out that some viewers only ‘entered’ the programme half-way through because they switched over from a particularly boring station and, secondly, some people missed parts of the production because they went outdoors to see whether others were doing the same. See Hadley Cantril’s 1940’s The Invasion from Mars for a well-known media-psychological study of eyewitness accounts.

Hall’s interest in ‘measurement’ clearly demarcates her media communications approach from the broad education and cultural studies perspective Buckingham inhabits. There are terminological differences, too (e.g. the use of ‘media realism’ versus ‘modality’ judgements), and Buckingham puts more emphasis on the social function of participants’ talk than this is the case with Hall’s study. However, in terms of their bottom-up approach to qualitative research in the conceptualisation of reality dimensions, they share some common ground.

Programmes which focused on characters with paranormal powers, like Buffy, Charmed or Sabrina the Teenage Witch, were repeatedly, though not solely, cited as unrealistic in that respect (of course, it is questionable whether the focus group context would have allowed for any participants to entertain such magical ideas!). With regard to non-magical stories, participants referred to particular characters, lifestyles, relationship patterns or plot developments as implausible and thus unrealistic (e.g. unnatural dialogue, overly harmonious presentations of family life or, in contrast, the evilness of specific characters). Importantly, the criteria against which participants judged the material varied, ranging from cultural knowledge to information from others or other (more reliable) texts, as well as from personal experience.

Hall associates typicality with ‘absolute realism’ (Shapiro, Weisbein and Shen, 2002) and the concept of ‘realism as probability’ (Dorr et al., 1983), as identified in previous communications research.

Of course, for some of the participants in Hall’s study (and mine), plausibility constituted a prerequisite for emotional engagement.

Hall likens narrative consistency to Shapiro et al.’s ‘relative realism’ (2002).

Considering the news as entertainment was in fact seen as somewhat sick or inappropriate, since most news were concerned with other people’s misfortune or tragedy.

Richard Dyer’s book title, Only Entertainment, is of course a play on irony, since his compilation of critical essays demonstrates that the commonsensical ‘only’ in front of ‘entertainment’ masks the fact that entertainment can contain powerful ideologies.

For others (e.g. Uma and Glenys, UK-XIII), the very fact that it was fantasy, i.e. ‘unreal’, turned it into Bored of the Ring. Despite the coherence in storyworld, narrative or special
effects, they could not see any point in Jackson’s trilogy because they preferred material that was set in real-life (i.e. entirely plausible) contexts.

15 Of course Hall acknowledges this herself, illustrating how participants made different ‘realism’ judgements with regard to different features of one and the same fictional text. Her aim was, however, to be able to employ her conceptualisations in future (quantitative) work, which is problematised by the concepts’ overlaps and discrepancies.

16 Bob does not drive because he has what he calls an irrational fear of ending up in a big fireball if he put himself behind a wheel.

17 Bert’s wife, Claudia, spoke of her experience watching Downfall in the cinema and of her urge to leave the room because the film was particularly traumatic for her. Her daughter, who had gone to see the film with her, was less affected (because she felt further removed from the incidents). Bert, on the other hand, acknowledged that terrible events had happened, yet could not see himself emotionally engaging with Downfall, because it was still ‘just a film’.

18 Even though Vivian temporarily reacted fearfully to one ‘risk message’, that of bird flu, there were contextual circumstances which prompted her to consider (and eventually discard) the notion of a ‘real’ threat.

19 In the case of The Silence of the Lambs, of course, real life provided some of the ideas, as the film is thought to be partly based on a real-life serial killer, Ed Gein (see Niesel, 1998, for an interesting take on the aesthetics of taxidermy). Judging from her line of argument, Nicole is likely to be unaware of this connection.

20 Conversely, Dorothee’s response to Jurassic Park at a young age was one of horror because she imagined dinosaurs might still be alive somewhere.