CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion: Towards an Understanding of ‘Fear’ in Context

8.1 Introduction
This study has explored the different kinds of ‘fear’ that were made relevant by members of nine three-generational families in Germany and the UK when talking about their responses to and relationships with film and television. Thematic and discursive analyses of the interview transcripts in particular revealed that participants’ emotional and fearful worlds connect with the media in a number of complex ways, ranging from a largely visceral engagement with screen events to more reflective negotiations of factual and fictional media content in the light of participants’ personal life situations and narratives. The viewers in this study demonstrated that they do not associate their viewing with any clear-cut concept of ‘fear’; instead, they described various pleasurable, endurable or avoidable fear-related dimensions in their engagements with films and programmes. Further, they drew on a number of explanatory frameworks in accounting for experiential distinctions and hierarchies between their responses and thoughts, including various reality dimensions, their age or generation, physical and imagined geographies, the passing of time, imagined audiences, as well as particular life experiences or milestones, such as being a parent. This chapter summarises and reflects on some findings and observations and, further, deals with questions which can only be raised but not sufficiently answered within the context of this study.

8.2 Main Findings
The most significant, if perhaps unsurprising, conclusion of this study is that media-related ‘fears’ are manifold, and that they differ in valence, force, feeling, temporality and wider significance in viewers’ lives. The gathered material proved immensely complex and difficult to manage. Thus, looking beyond idiosyncrasies in participants’ responses has been a challenge. Nevertheless, I hope to have
demonstrated that, despite all their differences, there are also some common strategies in which participants made sense of ‘fear’.

1) Fearful responses to the media were understood and accounted for by participants in relation to their sense of self, that is, their life histories, current situations, and emotional dispositions (as identified and understood by participants).

2) Responses were both personal and social. Participants defined the self by distinguishing themselves from, or aligning themselves with, others. They ‘imagined’ other audiences, and this act of imagination could impact on their own responses to the media (see also closing paragraph).

3) Beyond this, participants had concepts of ‘fear’ and emotions in general, both with regard to media encounters and in the context of everyday life. This included a sense of appropriateness, typicality and controllability of responses.

4) Participants worked with specific theories of the media, particularly with respect to its purposes, its impact on self and others (including wider societal significances), and its role as (entertainment) business.

5) The central explanatory power of the media text was put into question, due to the idiosyncratic nature of people’s (symbolic) interpretations, as well as the range of extra-textual factors participants brought to bear on their viewing.

As such, this study supports the conceptual shift in recent ‘fear of crime’ literature (see Chapter Two), which has emphasised the importance of life narratives over socio-demographic variables in people’s perceptions of the world (Hollway and Jefferson, 1997; Lupton and Tulloch, 1999). While socio-demographic variables are not entirely irrelevant in people’s sense-making, the gathered materials suggest that viewers moved between viewing positions when engaging with the media, in the sense that socio-demographic details only became relevant when participants employed them as such. To take examples from the previous chapters, Vivian (UK-
IX) would variously watch and interpret media material through the lenses of motherhood, science-fiction enthusiasm, or her role as a health professional. Likewise, Georg (G-IX) swapped emotional positions between his identity as a family person or a member of the war generation. Sonia (UK-XVII) was at once mother, daughter, academic and cultural practitioner (with a background in theatre and film production), and while it was possible for these positions to overlap, they nevertheless offered distinct frames of reference for Sonia to draw upon. For instance, I have discussed her more personal (or private) viewing experiences and memories which were linked to her life history from childhood to adulthood (6.3.1.2). She applied an intellectual framework to her understanding of the role of stories in our lives (ibid) whilst describing more experiential, emotional boundaries when talking about *The Blair Witch Project* (6.3.2). At other times, she spoke of her fears as a mother and, although this is not explicitly discussed in these analytic chapters, much of her talk about Ian’s viewing and gaming preferences was framed by concerns about parental guidance and censorship.

This thesis has trodden new ground in applying theories and tactics from two otherwise divergent approaches to ‘emotion talk’: Discursive Psychology and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Both derive from the field of psychology, and neither has been developed with audience research in mind (though audience researchers have drawn on insights from DP before, e.g. Buckingham, 1993; 1996). They do not constitute models of media/audience interrelations; instead, they are theoretical frameworks and methods for the analysis of ‘talk’ in relation to psychological concepts. As such, they had to be adapted for the purposes of this study, and the tension between them – broadly speaking, between constructivist and reflective interpretations of emotion talk – has not fully been resolved, nor could it have been. Although the ‘constructedness’ and ‘constructiveness’ of emotional selves was evident in participants’ talk – as were the conceptualisation of ‘fear’ itself and the construction of other (generations of) viewers as more or less ‘fearful’ – this thesis has also demonstrated that there were processes of self-recognition at play when participants sought to explain their emotional responses or
dispositions, for instance through the referencing of socio-demographic variables or other social traits (see 6.2, in particular). Issues of age or gender were then not supervenient variables which determined the nature of responses in simple and straightforward ways. Instead, they formed parts of emotional positions which participants inhabited either in response to wider discourses (e.g. about the legitimacy of emotional responses within specific contexts) or because they made most sense for participants in relation to their notion of self and their life history. This, of course, links back to Lisa Cosgrove’s notion of the ‘sense of coherence and constancy that we have of ourselves’, despite constructing and reconstructing identities within different contexts (2000: 253, see Chapter Three of this thesis).

The above has important implications for the conceptualisation of media-related fears as defined by Gerbner et al.’s Cultivation Analysis and its various reincarnations since the 1960s, as socio-demographic or other commonly used analytic variables were not as deterministic in their fear potential as such studies suggest. Equally, this thesis makes an important contribution to research which broadly adopts a ‘uses and gratifications’ approach to fear, and to media encounters in general. Participants actively sought out material for specific purposes, including the achievement of certain emotional states which, partly, gratified felt ‘needs’. Yet, these needs were not constant or inherent psychological traits. They were very much dependent on context, such as on the time of the day, people’s frames of mind, their company, previous media encounters and experiences, and so on. Again, social roles were important but not overriding or deterministic. In other words, one (emotional) viewing position (or lense) could be prevalent in one context but not in another. Likewise, it is perhaps important to point out that the functionality of specific media material very much constituted a reflective framework for how participants made sense of their uses and interpretations of the media.

Further, while participants clearly interpreted media material against the backdrop of reality, they were not the ‘unsuspecting viewers’ Gerbner envisaged as being tricked by television’s ‘entertainment package’. Viewers in this study were
aware of the purposes of dramatic devices, and they often presented themselves as critical of media representations of the world. Although violence was a common reference in participants’ talk, its significance went beyond symbolic interpretations of winners and losers, as was its central role within CA, and instead involved considerations of purpose, aesthetics and media effects. Particularly with regard to the latter, emotional responses were not just privatised and individualistic, viewers also made sense of what they saw with other people in mind, both those who were physically present and others who were not. Some ‘others’ were even unknown. Celia and Edwin’s (UK-XIV) complex negotiations of ‘reality’ in the light of their conceptions of other viewers’ ability to distinguish between fact or fiction is exemplary of this. (Again, I will return to the issues of ‘imagined audiences’ towards the end of this Conclusion.)

In addition, while Gerbner et al. considered media violence as of primary relevance for the creation of ‘fear’, the examples of metaphorical uses of the media discussed in Chapter Seven illustrate some of the ways in which rather ‘harmless’ and non-violent material could have powerful implications for viewers’ fearful lives (cf. Newcomb’s critique of the centrality of violence, Chapter Two). This was, for example, evident in Uma’s (UK-XIII) evaluation of one troubling storyline in *EastEnders*, or in Matt and Nina’s (UK-XV) use of *The DaVinci Code* as a springboard for the discussion of much wider concerns, not all of which were directly linked to the film text. These are only some of the examples which disclose how people in this study composed stories of the relevance of contextual materials to their experience and lives. A further example of this is Monika’s account of the history of Muslim ‘invasions’ as a ground for fears of the future (see Chapter Five).

Participants made clear experiential distinctions between fictional and factual material and, when fictional material touched them, it did so in complex, personal and social ways, again depending on the ‘lenses’ they utilised and on the wider processes they saw at play. There was, as such, no evidence of an accumulation of ‘fear’, as each media encounter existed according to specific contexts, parameters, and *kinds* of fear. Gerbner et al.’s focus on the significance of
overall messages and power relations also misses the importance of the range of
direct emotional responses and (dis)pleasures viewers reported as crucial to
individual viewing contexts. Media material was actively sought out and, if
necessary in the light of participants’ personal fear thresholds, filtered out.

In terms of the related literature on ‘cultures of fear’, two points are
particularly worth mentioning. Most importantly perhaps, participants were often
aware of ‘fear and the media’ discourses, and while this awareness does not in
time render them immune to feelings of fear and worry in relation to (film and)
television, it implies a self-reflectivity that at least complicates some of the issues at
stake. Participants in both countries argued that the media played some role in
scaremongering and that certain fears came and went as part of trends. Regarding
factual/news programming, for instance the reporting of crimes or risk messages
(e.g. global warming, bird flu), participants veered between voicing worries and
arguing that ‘we know more now’, in the sense that bad things have always been
going on and the only thing that has changed is our knowledge of them. Likewise, I
have indicated ways in which media messages were used to back up or reinforce
what seemed already formed and ‘sedimented’ views of the world (see Chapter
Five’s in-depth discussion of Edwin and Celia’s talk). Yet, while these wider views
can be analytically linked to Tudor’s aforementioned ‘network of fears’ (see Chapter
Two), it is important to point out that they often contradicted viewers’ own ‘lived’
experiences. As such, personal and borrowed discourses often clashed in
participants’ talk, and this rendered fearful perceptions of the world both complex
and fluid.

On the whole, the news (along with documentaries and some stories based
on fact) was considered as emotionally more powerful than most fictional content
(see Chapter Seven). Even so, participants still largely distanced themselves from
the news. They rarely felt directly affected and associated it with shock and
empathy, rather than ‘fear’ for the self. News reports were negotiated on a number
of levels, often including a sense of physical or ‘imagined’ geography. September
11th, 2001, was discussed as one of the most terrible, shocking and unbelievable
events; many of the responses associated with watching the attacks unfold on screen focused on disbelief, along with a sense of empathy with the people affected. Yet, participants would usually describe feeling somewhat distant or removed from the events. What drew them in closer was either the involvement of known people (friends or family) or the wider symbolic meaning of the event, a shift of ‘reality’ as it was known, that was implied in the fact that one of the world’s super powers had been attacked on its own soil. Again, however, on a day-to-day basis, the impact was only felt personally when emphasis swung to local terror alerts (as was the case in Germany). Even within the British context, the London bombings felt relatively removed for participants, though there was a difference in that participants were more likely either to visit London themselves, thus pondering about their use of the Underground, or to know people who were living in the capital.

A study by the global advertising agency network McCann Erickson recently confirmed some of this study’s findings, though the context in which the research took place and the conclusions drawn from its results differ from the focus here. In an attempt to test the nation’s ‘mood’ in 2007, the market researchers had discovered that ‘whilst Britons found the bigger picture [i.e. the state of society] quite scary, the smaller things – the things in their personal “arks”, such as family, friends and treasured objects – were pretty good’. Although, according to McCann Erickson’s ‘mood monitor’, the sentiment of the nation worsened in 2008, that is, the nation went from ‘moody Britain’ to ‘moodier Britain’, discrepancies between personal and public ‘uncertainties’ persisted. For the market researchers, this result had an impact on branding and advertising strategies; their clients, such as top UK supermarkets, were advised to present themselves as more ‘personal’ and ‘accessible’ in order to foster a ‘trusted’ environment in which customers felt safer to spend their money.

These somewhat cynical consequences of ‘fear’ or mood research are fascinating. Whether consumer practice really translates in this way is to be seen. As the current recession begins to impact directly on individual lives, ‘fear’ for the future may become a personal discourse. Yet, the fact that people’s personal and
wider concerns of realities mismatched when speaking about risks, dangers and the state of society as a whole suggests to me that participants move between personal and borrowed fear discourses, between those that have relevance to their own experiences and those they discuss as ‘informed’ members of a publicly struggling society. The ‘fear’ which pundits have ascribed to citizens across the world during these last few months of the global ‘credit crunch’ is again largely discussed in singular, collective, and cumulative terms. The material discussed in this thesis, however, suggests that citizens will construct their own meanings of the crisis in relation to their life situations, their life histories, and depending on the positions they inhabit or the lenses they utilise in the process.

Finally, the significance of participants’ employment of everyday media theories reflects findings from a recent article by Andy Ruddock, which I briefly referred to in the Introduction to this study. In it, Ruddock puts forward the case for holding on to the concept of media ‘audiences’, predominantly because members of the public themselves conceive their position as at the receiving end of powerful, industrially produced messages. The young people in his study knew and made it relevant in conversations that these messages were designed to influence their actions and perceptions, and they sometimes felt ‘vulnerable’ to these purposes. Yet, at the same time, as Ruddock argues, this ‘very same position also became a place where they could critique industrial processes. Hence, seeing themselves as an audience, in the traditional sense, was something they found useful’ (Ruddock, 2008: 14; his italics). My materials—suggest a related dimension, in that viewers’ interpretations and uses of media material were bound up with both their theories of how the media work, and their sense of themselves and others as audiences. While an emphasis on viewers as knowledgeable and media-literate agents has in the past been utilised to champion audience activity and resistant readings of mass-produced messages, this study indicates that such characteristics may be significant beyond questions of cause and effect.

All in all, this study has demonstrated originality by exploring the media/fear/audience relations qualitatively and from the perspective of different
kinds (generations) of viewers in Germany and the UK. This approach has identified a level of complexity to media-related ‘fear’ which had hitherto been largely neglected, particularly in theoretical and quantitative pieces of research which have tended to conceptualise ‘fear’ as a mere media effect.

8.3 Reflections and More Questions

When I outlined some of the objectives of this thesis in Chapter Two, I proposed to develop a more ‘holistic’ approach to the media/fear relationship than had been the case with previous studies. Instead of solely focusing on fright responses or fearful perceptions (in reference to individual, predetermined media texts or genres), the intention was to explore what kinds of ‘fears’ might be related to which kinds of media materials, and in which ways. This tactic has been important and valuable in a number of ways, not least because participants’ overall sense of the media environment proved crucial to individual instances of ‘fear’ or related emotions. In addition, the combination of viewing diaries and semi-structured interviews ensured that participants determined much of the agenda (even though, in the end, their choice of relevant films or programmes did not perhaps contain many surprises). There have, however, been a number of drawbacks to this overall strategy, some of which can be usefully reformulated into objectives for future research.

Firstly, the sheer wealth and complexity of material meant that the balance between detail and overall observations was a difficult one to strike. The more comprehensive examinations of interviews G-XII and UK-XIV in Chapter Five demonstrate the many layers of meaning and significance that a closer investigation of other interviews could have revealed. At the same time, it was the goal of this study to map the nature and functions of media-related ‘fears’ across a range of materials, and thus to transcend individual cases.

The tension between detail and overall findings also relates to the employment of DP and IPA in this study. While the two approaches constituted important theoretical frameworks, helped to pave ways into the research materials
and, importantly, disclosed the kinds of processes at play between more personal and borrowed discourses, they did not in the end function as ‘methods’ in the sense that they accompanied the analysis from beginning to end. Ultimately, I found myself asking questions of the material which neither IPA nor DP could follow through, which takes me back to the aforementioned lack of prescribed analytic strategies in qualitative audience research (see Chapter Four). As mentioned above, DP and IPA were not, in the first instance, developed for the purposes of audience research, and while some of their elements formed useful parts of my analytic toolbox, their methodological details are closely entwined with their disciplinary roots. There is room, then, for further developing approaches to language which take into account the specific needs and nature of qualitative audience studies.

A third dilemma of my ‘holistic’ approach was the role of nations and generations in the project. Studying the media/fear relationship within family units and across countries has certainly constituted an original component, and one which has revealed a number of important processes and dynamics. Age and geography, two of the resources respondents drew upon in making sense of their emotions, arguably appear particularly pertinent as a result of this approach. Yet, because more general issues of media-related fears were at stake, some matters could only be signaled, rather than explored.

As regards the topic of generations, I can see some application to a growing body of work within sociology where Karl Mannheim’s 1927 writing, ‘The Problem of Generations’, has found renewed attention, partly because the field has woken up to an ageing society (see, for example, Pilcher, 1994; Corsten, 1999; Vincent, 2005). Scholars have begun to move away from defining generations as chronological cohorts, towards understanding them as groups of people who share a common sense of identity (e.g. the ‘War’ generation), or a ‘generational consciousness’. The possible significance of the media in shaping or contributing to this sense of identity has been pointed out by, amongst others, June Edmunds and Bryan Turner (2005), who propose the notion of ‘global generations’ in an age of global communication.
Traumatic incidents, they argue, are now not only experienced and made sense of as national events but as global phenomena.

In ‘Sympathy for the Devil: Cinema, History, and the Politics of Emotion’, Johannes von Moltke recently explored the ways in which Murray Smith’s ‘structure of sympathy’ can be applied to the biographical depiction of Hitler in *Downfall*, which, for von Moltke, connects powerfully with a new affective discourse on history in German cinema (the new ‘Geschichtsgefühl’, or feeling for history). He writes, ‘[a]s the history of the Holocaust and the Third Reich recedes from collective into cultural memory and the witness generation dies out, the period’s historical valence changes – as do the politics of representation’ (von Moltke, 2007: 20).

Incidentally, von Moltke’s analysis of the theoretical spectator’s empathy for Hitler stands in stark contrast to the brief insight into Georg’s (G-IX) relationship with the film, which I was able to provide in Chapter Six. Nevertheless, von Moltke’s notion of generations as defined through the emotional relationship with specific ‘generational objects’ (a term borrowed from Hubbo Knoch) could be fruitfully interrogated when revisiting the materials gathered for this study (which may, in turn, clarify some of his concepts.) Again, the events of 9/11 and the teenagers’ vague recollection thereof are reminders that considerations of ‘generation’ matter in any wider understanding of cultural consciousness.

Of course, the notion of a shared consciousness is also inherently linked to the idea of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983). Throughout this study, I have employed the term ‘imagined audiences’ and, again due to the scope of the project, have largely had to refrain from pursuing this notion in depth. My contention is that it is an important element of viewers’ emotional sense-making, and that it may be closely related to two other concepts or communities, the ‘interpretive’ and the ‘projected’. The former, ‘one of the most used and abused’ concepts in media audience research (Schröder, 1996: 337), is a term originally coined by Stanley Fish (1980) and first applied to audience research by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance* (1988). Although it has variously been employed to describe sets of people who belong to the same socio-demographic grouping (or even just the same focus
group), it specifically refers to collections of people who are defined by sharing some form of media use or engagement (Schröder, 1996). The most obvious interpretive community would be fans of a particular cultural object. Barker’s notion of ‘projection’ implies that people can be united by conceiving a set of common values (perhaps, by extension, shared histories, ‘generational objects’, and so on) which may stimulate them to find others to share their interests with (see Barker, 2008: 90). As such, the community only exists in people’s heads and is, momentarily at least, an imagination of like-minded people ‘out there’.

The notion of imagined audiences, as it seems to emerge from participants’ talk, is a similar mind construct, but it is less action-orientated. Further, it is defined both by common values and by a distinction from those of others. What may be true for judgements of taste in Bourdieu’s classic notion that ‘[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ (1984: 6) may be equally relevant to ‘judgements of affect’. When participants in this study imagined audiences, they did so by aligning themselves with, or distancing themselves from, the emotional responses of others. How others may react to the media was such an object of imaginative consideration, as was the question of how others may judge the self. All of this, then, opens up a range of important avenues for further research into media-related emotions, and it suggests that they should be approached as both personal and social.

1 As a side note, Edward Said speaks of ‘imaginative geography’ in Orientalism, referring to the ways in which Western societies conceive of the Orient in a way that puts them above the East. Drawing imaginative boundaries between spaces simultaneously defines the self. As Said argues, ‘imaginative geography and history helps the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away’ (Said, 1978/2003: 55). While my material does not allow me to elaborate on the same political implications (e.g. the power of those who imagine), there appear to be important links between the two concepts.
