APPENDIX D – Interview Summaries

British Interview Summaries

UK Family A, ‘the Andersons’: 6 participants – 3 generations

UK Interview XIV – Celia (Mother, 45) and Edwin (Father, 47)

UK interview XIV was conducted with the parent generation of Family A on 26 July 2006, and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Very little prompting was required for this interview, since on the whole the conversation flowed freely between participants. Both Celia and Edwin were willing to talk and reflect at length about their viewing, and often took it upon themselves to develop conversation topics further and even ask their own ‘interview questions’. The interview transcript is enormously rich and multi-layered in this sense. What struck me particularly when reading and re-reading the conversation were a number of recurrent themes and topics that seemed to dominate the couple’s talk.

One of these was Edwin’s description of what he calls his ‘phobias’. Twice considering himself half-jokingly as a ‘sensitive’ or ‘soft’ soul, Edwin particularly refers to his fear of crowds or confined spaces which he partly puts down to his memory of the news coverage of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster. Celia also considers herself as a very ‘emotional person’: Television programmes, even the news, can cause her to cry, and she has one particular ‘phobia’, that of drowning, which made it difficult for her to watch David Blane’s televised water stunt. The memory of the stunt even initiated some anxiety when Celia went for a swim the day after viewing the programme. Just thinking about her or someone else’s prospects of drowning brings a great deal of discomfort to the mother. Interestingly, the David Blane programme was enjoyed by both participants, yet came with a lot of mixed emotions. The couple describe the programme simultaneously as ‘disturbing’, ‘entertaining’, ‘captivating’, ‘horrid’, ‘horrific’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘incredible’, ‘fantastic’, ‘anxiety-making’, and ‘bizarre’. They were ‘hooked’, ‘scared’, ‘panicking’, and ‘concerned for [Blane’s] well-being’ when watching the programme. And for the main part, they could not tell whether what they were watching was fact or fiction (UK-XIV: 46-51).

Whilst Edwin mainly speaks of his personal fears during the interview, Celia points out that most of her fears are relational: They are all about her children. The couple also detect some differences in their emotional behaviour in that Celia would speak openly about her fears and worries, while Edwin would often keep them to himself. As such, he is described as a more introverted person in everyday life, although this does not necessarily show during the interview. Edwin’s phobias have in the past resulted in panic attacks and fainting fits. Yet it becomes clear through the course of the conversation that his fears constitute something which can ultimately be
managed, at least in certain situations. As with many fears and phobias, time is
described as a healer in the sense that over time fears become less prevalent or
easier to deal with. This includes both personal fears and the kinds of worries and
concerns (or even just heightened levels of consciousness) which Edwin and Celia
put down to knowledges gained through media output. For instance, Edwin’s
reservations about flying and his tendency to observe fellow passengers for
conspicuous behaviour in the aftermath of 9/11 eased off when attacks of that kind
had ceased to happen. Although he still does not enjoy the prospect of flying, his
mind is now less occupied with terrorist threats than with the general risk of dying
in a plane crash.

One of the issues that crops up in the initial stages of the interview and that turns
into a recurrent reference for the couple is their dislike of ‘gratuitous violence’.
Although I had never initiated a link between the study and questions of media
violence, it was clearly something the couple associated with emotional responses to
film and TV. Being keen viewers of some thrillers and horror films, they speak of
their enjoyment of suspense and tension, of ‘the scary bits, but when you know it’s
scary but it’s... it’s not real’ (UK-XIX: 2). The kind of fear or ‘scares’ one experiences
while watching such material as thrillers or horror films is pleasurable and can be
enjoyed because one knows they are only make-belief. Celia’s response suggests
that fear responses underlie certain rules of morality. There are moments when the
combination of ‘pleasure’ and ‘fear’ is appropriate and normal, and others when it
could be considered as morbid or deviant, though Celia does not fully elaborate on
this.

The couple dismiss the ‘blood and gore’ and the ‘violence for violence’s sake’ of
such films as Pulp Fiction or Freddy vs Jason, and instead much prefer old-style
horror or the kinds of films that suggest rather than blatantly display the horrific.
Films are more intense for them if they are not too graphic. They like it when a film
shocks or startles them, or makes them jump. What they object to is seemingly
unnecessary violence of which, they argue, there is far too much on film and
television these days.

The distinction between ‘these days’ and the past forms a recurrent reference in the
couple’s ongoing narratives of change. Change, according to Edwin and Celia, is
present in the following:

1) Media material: Television used to be ‘wholesome’; it used to be ‘fun’ and
‘informative’ and has changed from information, culture and news
programmes to reality, trivia, sex and violence. Plots are more complicated
now, and there is a lot more action. There is also more violence on television
(or in films) than there used to be, which is why young people these days
start by being exposed to a much higher ‘level’ of screen violence than their
parents.
2) Desensitisation: Because young people witness screen violence from an earlier age, they have a higher tolerance to graphic material. They accept and expect more, and they are more likely to seek out graphic material than their parents or grandparents. At one stage Celia and Edwin discuss the concern over media effects, considering whether being exposed to too much violence (including violent games) from an early age will make them less likely to be able to distinguish between reality and fiction. Celia sees dangers in the way that violence is almost cartoonised in play-station games these days.

3) Loss of childhood: A newspaper article, which suggested children were growing up more quickly these days and had lost a sense or memory of childhood, fosters some discussion around the loss of childhood, which is partly put down to the media but also to parental behaviour. Children are seen to have sex earlier than they used to and access adult material earlier than they should. They swear more, and they expect to possess certain material goods (cars, TVs, mobile phones) at a much earlier stage without having put much effort into acquiring them. Edwin calls for the return of a somewhat romantic image of childhood (‘[they] are doing things these days, which really they shouldn’t be doing, they should be out in the park playing football, or... you know, down the river swimming’), whereas Celia considers the flipside of the coin, arguing that parents’ concern to protect their children has led to sitting them in front of TV and computer screens, in the belief that they will be safer, ‘and they’re not’ (UK-XIV: 21).

4) From toy to weapon: Britain’s apparently growing knife culture dominated headlines at the time of the diaries, and constituted one particular point of discussion during the interview. Edwin recalls how he used to play with a pen knife when he was a young boy, how he would use it to whittle away on pieces of wood or throw it against a tree or into the ground to see if it stuck. Today, the knife has changed from a toy into a weapon, into something one carries to either defend themselves or inflict harm on others. The changed meaning and use of knives seems to stand as a metaphor for the decline of society as a whole.

5) ‘So does reality reflect what we’ve watched on TV, or is it... the other way round?’ (UK-XIV: 37): Celia is the driving force in discussing media effects while at the same time being more cautious in her claims about the issue. It is much clearer to Edwin that society has changed, that we live in a different world now, and that much of that is down to the media (film, television and PCs). Television, he thinks, actually creates some of today’s culture and has an influence on the way people lead their lives (UK-XIV: 36). Still, ‘half the stuff that is on TV, you never ever come into contact with in your life’, and much of it depends on where you live, with Aberystwyth being, for the main part, a safe and protected haven to inhabit (UK-XIV: 37).

This notion of change and the references to ‘days gone by’ run through the interview. In articulating their worries, the participants draw upon stories and issues they have encountered in the media, and in parts it seems that the media play
a crucial role in creating their anxieties. Yet it is also possible to read participants’ use of the media material as a way of strengthening their main argument (i.e. societal change), through factual evidence derived from newspaper reports and other authoritative sources.

The couple mostly agree that things have changed, and they can see some of the consequences of this. There is less certainty as to why and how things have changed. Interestingly, and this is mirrored by the interview with Celia’s parents, the couple sometimes take the force out of their relatively grim argument by referring to their age and to the fact that their parents used to say the same thing about where society was going. Being pessimistic is constructed as a by-product of getting older, while at the same time the couple are holding on to most of their claims.

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

Both Celia and Edwin point out that my study made them ‘dwell’ on things more than they would perhaps otherwise have done. In the course of everyday life, they say, they often file the things away that disturb or upset them (UK-XIV: 5). They also became more conscious of the fact that ‘real’ stories (news, documentaries, dramas based on actual events) scared and stayed with them a lot more than any purely fictitious work, though especially Celia points out that ‘some fiction does [scare and] get to [her]’ (UK-XIV: 44), possibly because of a feeling that it might mirror life.

Their emotional involvement with upsetting or disturbing material was often one of empathetic imagination in which they put themselves into the situation of people on screen and imagined how they would feel if they were in their position.

**UK Interview XV – Nina (Daughter, 17/18) and Matt (Son, 19/20)**

I spoke to Nina and Matt at their parents’ house in Aberystwyth on 27 July 2006. Nina was still living at home at the time, having just finished her A-levels, while Matt had returned from university for his summer holidays. Whereas Matt had
consistently kept an annotated viewing diary, Nina’s exams had reduced her involvement in the project to filling out my diary questionnaire. She was nevertheless vocal during most of the conversation and at times even dominated the talk. What worried me about this interview was the fact that I was unable to fully create a relaxed atmosphere between interviewer and interviewees. Matt, Nina and I had an equal tendency to try and rescue sometimes awkward situations through funny remarks, and so it was hard to establish an environment in which more serious and personal matters could be revealed and discussed with some comfort. It was also difficult to scratch beneath the surface, partly because the siblings were not always in a position to elaborate on relatively general and generic statements. On re-reading the transcript I noticed a number of missed opportunities for further inquiry; yet equally, I was surprised by the amount of comments and observations that I had failed to spot during the interview itself, perhaps because they occurred towards the end of the interview when I had already largely given up hope. The conversation took about 40 minutes. Some of the issues emerging from the interview were the following.

Matt’s largely pessimistic diary is reflected in his talk. Watching Carol Vorderman in Brainbox makes him worry about plastic surgery and the fact that in twenty years from now everyone will look ‘weird and... the same’ (UK-XV: 9). He is shocked to see teenage pregnancies and under-aged drinking in Wife Swap, wondering where society is going. And Big Brother, he is convinced, is ‘gonna end in tears eventually’; sooner or later, he thinks, someone will die live on TV (UK-XV: 11). Again, there are at least four strands of talk about change in this interview, and change partly in terms of decline. Matt’s references to a general societal decline (not his words), as represented on television, constitute one strand, while the second refers more readily to the perceived changes and developments within television as a medium. As Matt argues, ‘everyone’s more aggressive and crazy these days’, and film and TV are becoming more extreme ‘because they have to be to keep people entertained’ (UK-XV: 11, 17). These two notions of change are combined in the sibling’s talk about media impacts or effects, to the extent that Matt argues that gradually ‘the real world is gonna become like the world on TV’ (UK-XV: 16). The siblings put the media’s ‘huge influence’ down to people aspiring to the lives and actions of characters on screen, which they see for instance exemplified by the boy-racer phenomenon: ‘There never used to be boy-racers and stuff like that’ (UK-XV: 16). A fourth reference to change includes audience expectations and experiences regarding emotional responses. Here, the siblings make generational differences between fear thresholds, for instance in comparison with their parents, which again they explain through changes in media and society:

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

M: [amused] Boring...
... Yeah, it’s not even, you don’t even see the whole...

... [Good effort, though??]...

... But I think that’s cos times change, isn’t it, like in them days... things like that were like new...

... Yeah, society changes though.

That was scary for [our parents], but now... cos society has moved on, you just look at that as a thing in the past, you need something newer... and more scary and more frightening...

... Yeah...

... You know, the... generations.

Hmm...

... It’s all to what you’ve been exposed to in the real world... to how...

... Yeah, exactly.

... Cos they always make the films more extreme, don’t they? So... depending on what the real world’s gonna be like... the film’s gonna be even... more extreme. So I reckon that my [grandma and granddad??] are probably scared a lot easier than my parents... and my parents more than us.

Yeah, they’ll be shocked a lot easier.

Yeah.

Pretty hard to shock us.

Yeah.

Matt and Nina also see processes of desensitisation at play, constructing themselves as on the whole fearless viewers, because of having seen scary material (such as horror films) from an early age. ‘Suspense’ is what keeps them engaged and interested in horror films, and they agree that horror films are ‘more scary’ when the evil remains concealed. Yet, on the whole, they do not consider themselves particularly prone to fearful reactions, unless something horrific on screen is very close to reality and could actually occur:

... You can see why young children would be really scared by something like..

Yeah, cos they are, yeah...

‘Nightmare on Elm Street’.

Cos they’re more impressionable, aren’t they?...

... Yeah...

... And they believe more what they see... But as when you get, like, when you get older, you realise that it’s just... [pause] it’s just mindless, isn’t it? It’s not actual... real... life. I think the horrors that are more scary are those that do... kind of portray... like, reflect more real life than like...

... Yeah, that could actually happen.

Yeah, than just like ‘Freddy Kruger’, cos you know it could never ever happen.
In Matt and Nina’s view, then, they occupy a unique position. They are generally old enough to differentiate between fact and fiction and thus, on the whole, do not get scared by films. Yet at the same time they are young and media-savvy enough to have acquired the tools of dealing with more extreme film and programmes than older generations who they consider to be more accustomed to moderate material. Of course, by implication, this suggests that older generations of viewers live in somewhat of a time bubble and do not assimilate to the changing media environment around them.

If Matt and Nina don’t usually get scared by media material, they are much more likely to describe moments of being ‘upset’, ‘shocked’ or ‘worried’. These are the terms employed in the siblings’ discussion of the news, such as reports about the war in Lebanon, which Matt finds ‘upsetting’ while Nina entertains the idea of something like that happening in their own country. The events surrounding 9/11 are ‘scary’ in a sense, though there is some negotiation about the deeper meaning of that word:

N: Like the September 11th thing and that kind of stuff… It scares you, but not in a way like [stretched] ‘ah’ scared, it’s just like a… ‘oh my God’ scared.
M: It’s more shock.
N: Shock, yeah… More shocking than scary.

The siblings agree that the closer the news, the more worrying they are. The London bombings in July 2005, for example, felt closer and more personal, and in that sense affected them more than the news on 9/11. News from further away, such as reports on the war zones, ‘bother’ them (Matt), or ‘scare’ them for the sake of the people involved (Nina), which could perhaps more readily be described as an empathetic response. As Nina explains, ‘I don’t feel scared like – oh, I’m scared of my safety. But more scared of how… the people around there are gonna… rebuild their lives’ (UK-XV: 24).

A further distinction the siblings make, this time with regard to fictional programming, is between ‘exciting fear’ and ‘petrifying fear’. For them, the former relates to taking on an observing position as viewers of film and television, which will elucidate the kinds of emotional experiences that can be easily forgotten. The latter regards being part of real life instances that are more personal and stay with you until they are resolved (UK-XIV: 18).

An issue which, prompted by Matt, arose out of the blue in the middle of the interview (and should have perhaps been elaborated further) was religion. The siblings both expressed their confusion over the topic. Nina mentioned that she does not like thinking about what might happen after death, because it worries her. And both were astonished by ‘all the wars, the fact that people would go to such length for religion’ without having any proof of a higher existence (UK-XV: 12). To them, it
is almost ‘like if someone was killed about Santa Claus’ (UK-XV: 13). Religion is ‘powerful’, and the thought of how far people can take it is ‘scary’.

At the time of the interview, I was somewhat perplexed by the siblings’ talk about religion and I sensed, perhaps wrongly, that Matt and Nina were not willing to disclose more about what seemed a sensitive topic. In hindsight, I wonder whether they would have wanted me to discuss the issue further.

UK Interview XVI – Rachel (Grandmother, 73) and Jim (Grandfather, 75)

This forty-minute interview was conducted at the couple’s children’s house in Aberystwyth on 27 July 2006 and was marked by Rachel and Jim’s insecurities regarding the degree of help they could bring to the project. Rachel, in particular, seemed worried about giving useless answers and not being able to articulate herself properly. While I repeatedly tried to reassure her that there were no right or wrong answers and that I was merely interested to hear about her viewing experiences, she remained apprehensive and nervous through most of the interview. The couple were also rushed to take their daily medicine towards the end of the conversation. All in all, then, the interview would have benefited from some more time as well as perhaps more interview experience on my part, since I soon lost the confidence to ask the kinds of probing and exploratory questions I had aimed for. Often thoughts and arguments remained unfinished, and my analytic reading almost turned into a game of second-guessing of what might have been said. Yet despite this fragmentation of talk and the tendency to remain on the surface, the interview still provided a great deal of insight into Rachel and Jim’s ‘fearful’ lives.

A significant reference which framed much of our conversation was the couple’s age, and their feeling of belonging to a different generation (than me, or their children and grandchildren for that matter). Rachel and Jim often mentioned their age at the end of a series of worries and concerns, about crime in particular (see UK-XIV). These included anxieties about paedophiles, general cruelty against children, the ‘knife culture’ (which dominated news headlines at the time of the diary), the exploitation of the elderly, drink and drug problems, as well as a general disillusionment with the justice system. Relatively sweeping statements about the decline of society (or humankind as a whole) – ‘it’s the age we live in, pet’ (p. 8) or ‘trouble is it’s becoming an everyday occurrence’ (p. 16) – were often softened or modified by such observations as ‘it’s our generation, it is’ (p. 23) or ‘trouble is we’re getting old, pet’ (p. 6). Age or generational differences did not only feature in talk about the change of the media or society as a whole, but also with regard to the couple’s changing attitudes or emotional lives. As Rachel explains:

R: ‘When you’re younger, you don’t sort of, erm... [pause] you know... [struggles] think... too much about that, [quietly] think too much about it,
but... you know, it, it gets, it hits home when you’re older, and then, you know, things like you, you... realise your own mortality’ (UK-XVI: 25).

In term of general viewing preferences, Rachel enjoys quiz shows and is a keen viewer of murder mysteries, mainly because of their ‘who dunni’ element. Jim particularly likes nature programmes and does not mind a bit of ‘action’ in the films he watches. Despite her interest in murder mysteries, Rachel dislikes any ‘violence’ or general ‘nastiness’ in film and TV. ‘Nastiness’ itself is not always clearly defined, though it seems as though any open representation of cruelty against human beings, and children in particular, falls into this category. To Rachel, media material has changed over the years. Television, in her view, used to be much more family-orientated. As she explains,

R: I feel... the programmes today, there’s so much violence, and it’s... you know, that’s what, erm... [change of voice] mind you... having said that, we... we listen to the news... on radio every morning, and... I mean... there can’t be anything more scary really than, err... what’s on the news, all this business, and all the... you know, and it is, you know... I worry for... you know, my grandchildren and... (UK-XVI: 3)

The couple repeatedly draw a line between fact and fiction, assigning far more significance to real-life events, and the kinds of feelings that accompany these, than to made-up content. Jim also argues that at least in real life he might be in the position to do something to change the situation (UK-XVI: 20). Rachel is interrupted at this point, and I do not succeed in bringing the conversation back to an elaboration of her link between the news and her concerns about the grandchildren. Only later does talk about the knife culture reveal another connection between the two, when Rachel expresses her concern that a young man killed randomly in a train stabbing was the same age as Matt and could have easily been her grandson.

Both Jim and Rachel very much construct themselves as family people. The London bombings took on a different dimension for them because they worried for one of their daughters and her family who lived close to London at the time. Their family comes first, and it is the children and grandchildren they worry about most in real life, more perhaps than about their own safety and well-being. Again, Rachel considers these feelings to come with time, arguing that as you get older you worry more about something happening to yourself or your family (UK-XVI: 9).

Interestingly, the couple’s talk repeatedly turns to the issue of ‘dwelling’ on such upsetting media material as the news or ‘nasty’ violence, with Jim referring to Rachel as dwelling on things too much. Rachel’s denial of any deeper or prolonged emotional engagement with upsetting stories hints towards a possible stigma about letting stories occupy one’s mind unnecessarily, which is further underlined when she expresses the thought that perhaps she should not be worrying about her children and grandchildren as much as she does. In general, Jim argues that there is no point in watching something upsetting or worrying. If something doesn’t suit
him or his wife, he will switch it off, because ‘that’s what the button is there for’ (UK-XVI: 14). Yet their talk also reveals that such decisions are not always made easily, such as in the case of the Moors murder docu-drama which the couple found horrendous and disturbing but at the same time acknowledged that it was compelling to watch.

The Moors murders constitute one example of stories and incidents which Jim and Rachel find difficult to comprehend, seemingly because they cannot imagine anything like that happening in their own circles. Likewise, there are certain representations of life in soaps which they cannot as such relate to, as they say, since their family has never had to deal with, for instance, domestic violence.

While the discussion revolves around a worsening society and humankind’s darker sides, there is also an acknowledgement that horrible things have always happened. The difference, they guess, is that we know much more now (UK-XVI: 5)

UK Family B, ‘the Bennetts’: 3 participants – 2 generations

UK Interview XI – Bob (Father, 43)

This 35-minute conversation, which took place on 23 July 2006, constituted one of the most difficult and challenging interviews I conducted, mainly because Bob actively contested many of my questions and definitions. While some of the interview schedule had intentionally been designed to be provocative, in the sense that it would perhaps allude to extreme positions which participants were then free to debate, Bob became increasingly unnerved with what to him seemed oversimplified ideas or concepts. For instance, he took issue with my questions about horror films because he felt the field of horror was so broad it defied any clear-cut genre definitions. Likewise, he argued against a discussion of differences between the world of film and television and the real world, pointing out that film and TV were not presenting one world, and reasoning that it was similarly impossible to speak of real life as one reality or world. And thirdly, he argued that asking people about films they did not like was similar to asking them about their thoughts on cat food. While he is not particularly keen on teen movies, he realises they are not made for him; so anything as strong as a ‘dislike’ to such films would be somewhat of an exaggeration.

Although I very much agreed with many of Bob’s reservations, it was nevertheless difficult to determine whether he was indeed still answering my questions and thus dealing with the same general ground that I had covered with other participants before. Of course it was in some of the distinctions he drew and the criticism he made that his standpoints and interpretations were clarified and crystallised.
Bob is one of the few participants in this study who constitute a very specific media audience because they are themselves either intellectually or professionally involved in film and television (or other creative industries). Bob is both a writer for film and TV and a university member of staff, and it is clear from our conversation that his professional background cannot easily be separated from his private self. While he argues that he enjoys films ‘the way everyone enjoys them’, or at least tries not to analyse them professionally unless he has to (UK-XI: 11), his discussion of films and programmes routinely falls into considerations of production processes and conventions. This is perhaps most visible in his insistence upon films and television programmes as ‘artifices’. He does not, for instance, find it important for drama to relate to real-life issues, because he argues that one never gets an accurate reflection of the real world. As Bob asserts, ‘drama is entertainment, and whenever it uses something it uses it for its own purposes’ (UK-XI: 3). And further, ‘what you end up with […] is a fiction that tries to convince you… that it has some claim… to reality. But it can only convince you that it has some claim to reality by […] establishing parameters, in which in this particular world it seems realistic. But that world… isn’t realistic, it’s a fictional world, created by people […] for… the purposes of entertainment’ (UK-XI: 10).

Bob repeatedly refers to the relationship between programme and audience as somewhat of a writer’s construct in that viewers are almost lulled into believing certain things. He interestingly describes a moment when watching Boogie Nights, in which for a brief moment he was ‘suckered in’: ‘I felt myself thinking of things like – yeah, it’s really sad how people aren’t nice to their kids, I should be nice… to my own kids, and then I kind of stopped and thought, wait a minute, [amused] this is exactly what they want me to be thinking, you know. So that was a brief moment where… I almost fell for it’ (UK-XI: 11).

When a viewer starts relating things to their own life, the film has succeeded in its aims. But, in Bob’s view, ‘to be emotionally involved with something, to identify temporarily with a character… does not mean that character has struck a chord with you especially… or that you identify with the character’. He asserts that identification is an issue of point of view: ‘It’s a programme’s job to try to make you identify for the length of time that you are watching… the programme. […] If as a writer you can get the point of view right, you can pull the audience in and say look through these eyes… and the audience will’ (UK-XI: 12).

The only emotional response to film or TV Bob alludes to (other than Boogie Nights) is his negative experience of having watched Se7en in the cinema, which at the time struck a ‘wrong note’ with him. While he thought the film was wonderfully done and well-written, he experienced it as extremely ‘downbeat’ and ‘unpleasant’ to the extent that he ‘didn’t know what [he] was supposed to be taking from it, other than – kill yourself now’ (UK-XI: 5). While he avoids discussing his response any further than that, it seems to suggest that he expects films to provide him with something
constructive or positive to take away with him, if only a glimmer of redemption (UK-XI: 5).

Bob displays a cynicism about what people would generally consider as ‘fear’, because in his eyes fears come and go with fashion. His example is the furore around paedophilia, which he argues was not a new phenomenon but got blown out of proportion by the tabloids in recent years. People’s reactions had less to do with ‘fear’ than with what he calls a ‘Jerry Springer mob mentality’, with tabloids playing towards the lowest common denominator. Likewise, Bob criticises my concept of ‘personal fear’, which he does not as such find comprehensible. If something is intrinsic to you as a person, then it is more ‘paranoia’ than ‘fear’. As he explains,

B:  ‘[E]veryone knows their kids can be subjected 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… and I have those. [chuckles] […] I just have a, a phobia about driving. I can’t do it. […] I’m convinced that if I did [drive] a lot of people would die in a big fireball. And I know that’s not rational… but… even then, because it’s the nature of phobias, I say that’s not rational, but… it’s better to be irrational than to kill everybody in a big fireball. You see, so… but that’s not fear… that’s, that’s a different thing. […] I would take by the question – what are your fears – that you have something that you… you rationally understand… you need to be afraid of. But I don’t… as I say, I don’t on a day-to-day basis feel fear.’ (UK-XI: 6)

This does not mean, Bob argues, that he cannot see the possibility of certain threats. Yet he reasons that once one has done their best to minimise dangers, there is not much else left. One just needs to be vigilant. Fear, then, is rational (in the sense that there truly is something one needs to be afraid about), which is something Bob does not feel on a day-to-day basis. Phobias are irrational. And anything else is just knowledge. While Bob does not often feel ‘fear’ in everyday life, he asserts he has other emotions, like ‘frustrations’, with fear being an a priori experience while frustration setting in after something has already happened that one hasn’t been able to deal with (UK-XI: 7).

Bob listens more to the radio than watching television. The only series he has actively been following is ‘24’. His busy life style does not allow for following many narratives, and so he prefers not to get involved in other serials at all. Most of his television consumption thus includes news and current affairs, because he can dip in and out of them, as well as the occasional dose of ‘American Idol’ or ‘Buffy’ which he watches with his kids.
His thoughts on media influence are that film and TV are neither crucial nor life-changing, at least not by individual programme. Perhaps literature is more influential in this sense, because it can be more intense, but even then it seems to Bob that the acquisition of opinions, attitudes and lifestyles is something that happens cumulatively and syncretically, in a ‘mélange’ of films, books, programmes, chats with friends, and things one overhears on the train.

UK Interview X – Patrick (Son, 9) and Yasmine (Daughter, 13)

This interview was conducted on 23 July 2006 and lasted approximately 45 minutes. It is clear from the interview transcript that my inexperience in dealing with younger viewers impacted on my confidence and trust in the interview schedule. As a result, I sometimes reformulated questions for better understanding along the way and occasionally fell into the trap of asking possibly too direct or leading questions. While this did not cause too much of a problem with Yasmine, who came across as quite mature, I felt it had a bigger impact on Patrick’s responses, particularly because he seemed to be at an age where he was susceptible to suggestions. While he changed his stories on a number of occasions to fit in with what had been said (e.g. after realising he could only have been four instead of seven years of age at the time of 9/11, he put his responses down to young age), I eventually had to accept the circumstances in attending to the transcript.

Dr Who and Buffy were two of their favourite programmes and ones that seemed relevant in their discussion of fear. They agree that some bits in Dr Who can be scary, but not that scary. The scary bits are actually part of what Patrick likes about the programme. Watching the series comes closer to excitement and an ‘enjoyable tension’ than fear, and even if something is frightening (e.g. the monster in the wardrobe), they know the Doctor will sort it out, which as Yasmine points out ‘is what always happens’ (UK-X: 5).

Watching Buffy is ‘like a drug’ for the siblings. They cannot do without it, particularly because the way in which information is released throughout the programme, one never knows the full story until the very end (UK-X: 10). According to Patrick and Yasmine, its ‘creepy’ music is quite important for building up the tension. But again, perhaps with the exception of ghost stories (which make Yasmine feel ‘weird’), Buffy is also for the main part not too scary. Although the series includes some dark and grim moments, at other times it is just like a comedy, and ‘practically’, according to Patrick, ‘Buffy is… somebody who kicks ass’ (UK-X: 5).

Whereas Buffy and Dr Who are limited in their scare potential, The Shining with Jack Nicholson is without doubt ‘one of the scariest movies in the UK’, as Patrick repeats on several occasions: ‘It’s blood and gore and it’s… really scary’, which is why he likes it. Patrick and Yasmine enjoy watching horror films in a group and not on their
own. Yasmine likes the way in which her and her friends get hyper and scream and squeak when watching, and Patrick particularly enjoys the moments when he can make his more fearful friends jump and scream. He also thinks it is more enjoyable to watch in a group because ‘you can talk to people... and stuff at the scary bits [...] or you could scream out loud [...] and they’ll think it’s on purpose’ (UK-X: 17). In general, the siblings associate watching horror with feeling ‘nervous’, ‘anxious’ and ‘shocked’. Horror films make them jump (Patrick) and curl up in the corner and hug something (Yasmine).

With regard to memorable news reports, the siblings recount their worry about using the London underground after the bombings in 2005. They were particularly worried, initially, because their Dad was in London during the time of another bomb threat. September 11th also stayed in their minds (despite Patrick’s young age at the time), because their uncle worked in a building next to the Pentagon, so it was scary when parts of the Pentagon fell into his car park (UK-X: 18). Watching the event unfolding on the news left Yasmine rather speechless (UK-X: 19).

Neither Yasmine nor Patrick seem to feel particularly worried or fearful on an everyday basis. Their main concerns are school and friends, and only here do they recognise worries at play, for instance with regard to exams or fall-outs with friends. They like film and TV to be different from the real world, because if they do feel worried or annoyed with something, they use TV to venture ‘into another world’ and, in Patrick’s case, watch cartoons in order to take their mind off things.

There is a difference for Yasmine between watching cartoons and programmes with real-life people. Cartoons are sometimes there to be laughed at, whereas with real-life people, she feels she gets more involved with the story, ‘more into it’ (UK-X: 9).

Both are keen to demonstrate their knowledge about the difference between the media and real life. Although sometimes films and programmes are set up around actual events and in actual places (e.g. The Sound of Music), and although some things on TV can happen in real life, the siblings know they happen more rarely (crime and terrorist attacks) and not always to the same people (as in soaps) (UK-X: 22f). This kind of knowledge makes them feel safe, as Yasmine explains:

Y: It’s always like boom-boom [chuckles], run around, running around...
P: ... It’s all, err, it’s all shouting, guns...
T: ... Yeah...
P: ... explosions and...
[...]
Y: I just like kind of know that doesn’t really happen here.
P: Yeah.
Y: Not [stretched] all the time. [pause] Cos... like, when it does happen, it’s quite rare.
P: Yeah.
Y: Well... in our country. [...] In our country anyway. [...] So... it kind of... I don’t know, it makes you feel, like, quite safe, the fact [laughing] it doesn’t really happen here...
P: ... Yeah...
Y: ... They have to make videos about it, because... it doesn’t actually happen.
(UK-X: 24f)

They agree with the suggestion that film and TV are just entertainment, because there is always ‘some part of you... that says... this is only a show’ (UK-X: 25), and they know there are ‘about fifty people standing behind the camera’ in any given film or programme (UK-X: 27). Likewise, they see differences in fearful responses to the media if compared to real life. You don’t really need to worry because in films and programmes things mostly turn out well, ‘goodies’ usually win, and even if something bad happens, the TV can be switched off. Yasmine and Patrick are pretty sure the bad things on TV will not happen to them.

UK Family C, ‘the Cowies’: 1 participant – 1 generation

UK Interview IX – Vivian (Aunt, 54)

This phone conversation with Vivian, a middle-aged registered nurse and senior manager at the National Health Service, was one of the richest and most detailed interviews in the study. Vivian’s extreme reflexivity regarding both her general emotional life and her viewing experiences mirrored that of Anja, a woman in her 40s, who I had interviewed as part of the German group of participants in 2005 (G-II). Vivian’s diary had already provided me with a great deal of knowledge about her as a person and the kinds of distinctions she made between different emotional responses to film and television. For reasons of space, I will list ten dominant features of the interview:

1) Emotional and reflective self: Vivian presents herself as very much in touch with her emotional self, in the sense that she habitually analyses and reflects upon her feelings, responses, dreams, and memories within viewing contexts and other life situations. Her account of overcoming arachnophobia through hypnotherapy and finding herself responding to stories in which children are saved and protected by adults – an image that had accompanied her dreams throughout hypnotherapy – puts this on show. She also speaks of an ability to control her emotional life in various ways. Her fear of flying, for one, is minimised by controlling both her breathing and her thought processes, much in the way she has learnt to deal with emergency situations. And if she watches something frightening which she thinks will subsequently occupy her mind in bad dreams, she makes a conscious effort not to dream of it, and apparently succeeds.
2) Imagination: Vivian loves fantasy and values imagination, describing herself as an open-minded person with a child-like quality who is happy to entertain certain thoughts that other people might dismiss as impossible (e.g. spiritual or paranormal phenomena), while at the same time working in and enjoying an environment in which science and facts are paramount and important. A certain suspension of disbelief is particularly significant for her when watching films. She wants to lose herself for the course of the viewing and describes her feeling as one very close to being part of the story. ‘Deluding’ herself in this way, lowering her barriers and letting herself go, is essential for her enjoyment of the film.

3) Good and evil: When watching a film or programme (or reading a book), Vivian favours stories in which either good overcomes evil or, if not concluding in a happy ending, there is at least a glimpse of hope. Closely linked to this preference is her dislike of zombie films. Although she does not entertain the thought of the zombies’ existence (and continues to watch some of the films), she dreads what they represent, i.e. ‘mindless’, ‘relentless’ pursuit until death. Mindless violence is terrifying for her, since she knows she cannot reason with it (such as would perhaps be the case with something like a Hannibal Lecter character, who at least offers points of negotiation).

4) Helplessness and hopelessness: Blood and gore do not excite her; they tend to depress her. Vivian prefers subtlety and suggestion to any graphic representation of violence or injury. She partly puts her dislike of gore down to working within the health service where, firstly, she knows what ‘real’ injuries look and feel like, and secondly, her main aim is to solve problems and improve people’s situations, which in relation to some fictitious situations she imagines herself to be unable to do. This is why she thinks she had such a strong response to a particular scene in Alien, in which the alien creature bursts out of a character’s chest. The feeling of helplessness, of not knowing what to do about that kind of injury if it happened in real life, left her ‘shocked’ and ‘disturbed’ at the first time of viewing, and stayed with her for some time (UK-IX: 16).

5) Excitement, tension and fear: As mentioned above, Vivian makes relatively clear distinctions between different kinds of fear-related emotional responses to film and TV. For instance, she draws a distinction between ‘excitement’, ‘fear’ and ‘tension’ (UK-IX: 9). She sees excitement on one end of a spectrum, fear on the other, and tension in between. For her, excitement is a positive, pleasurable feeling of anticipation, while fear is a rather negative, yet bizarrely still enjoyable feeling within the viewing context. The enjoyment, Vivian suggests, comes from the fact that the emotion is experienced within a safe environment, without the real danger (see point 9 below). Tension is described as a restless feeling close to that of excitement, which comes accompanied by a physiological change and the sensing of danger. It is part of the ‘build-up’ to fear when
one realises something is wrong but is not quite frightened yet. Vivian likes the tension she experiences when watching thrillers and psychological dramas, particularly because they also engage her on an intellectual, puzzle-solving level.

6) Anxious and disturbed: Two more refinements of fear definitions relate to ‘disturbing’ and ‘anxiety’-producing material. Both are different from an immediate fright reaction and instead constitute something more reflective and ‘general’. The feelings of fear when watching zombie films, and the helplessness and hopelessness associated with them (see point 4), are closer to an ‘anxiety’ which, for Vivian, generally represents the kinds of things in life and in the world that one is unable to do anything about. As Vivian adds, ‘I’m a person who likes to solve problems…you know, the idea of having [something that you can’t solve?] is, is…disturbing’ (UK-IX: 17). – Another disturbing moment Vivian recalls is her viewing of a TV programme in which Michael Portillo discussed the dangers of avian flu. ‘The way he said’ what he said and the fact that the programme was aired late at night, when she felt it was only speaking to a small number of viewers, instilled a feeling of paranoia in Vivian and made her wonder whether the government was in fact playing the situation down. Again, what she felt was not a fear ‘as in sitting on the edge of [your] seat’ but fear in a more ‘metaphysical sense’, which she felt was ‘quite disturbing’ (UK-IX: 23).

7) Differences and similarities between film/TV and real life: Fictional film and television offer familiar emotions and familiar environments with characters that are ‘like real people’ in otherwise invented stories. Real life, to Vivian, is much more bland and mundane than film and TV and doesn’t always offer resolutions. Mediated stories are exciting and action-oriented. They often have a beginning, middle and an end, and everything in them happens more tidily than in real life. There are some things on television (e.g. violence) that Vivian does not want happening in her real life.

8) Differences and similarities between ‘real’ fear and media fear: Vivian has experienced fearful moments in real life as well as in front of the screen. Her arachnophobia was one ‘real’ experience, being mugged by a stranger another one. For her, there are differences between real fearful feelings and those experienced during viewing, which does not necessarily mean that the latter are less ‘real’ (see point 9). When viewing a film or programme, screaming can often be closely related to laughing, and Vivian considers it a tremendous relief to be able to laugh. Deep down she knows there is nothing to fear. In real-life fear situations, there is no feeling of laughter for Vivian. Instead, there is an adrenaline rush, which she can sense coming up through her body as a hot and unpleasant feeling (UK-IX: 12).

9) Fearful and safe: I have mentioned Vivian’s enjoyment of experiencing fearful feelings in a safe environment. This is something she revisits on
several occasions. What is important, here, is that she considers the emotional response to film and TV as much an emotion as any real-life feeling, though she acknowledges it might be ‘an attenuated version of the real emotion’ (UK-IX: 29). It seems that, to her, the whole point of engaging with a mediated story is to engage with it emotionally (while also being able to appreciate it intellectually or artistically). In Vivian’s view, one is frightened when watching something but any thinking person still realises that what they watch is unreal. So one gets ‘a dose of fear’, something to stimulate a reaction, feeling or emotion, without it doing any real harm. Feeling ‘real’ fear would be unpleasant: ‘You want it to be real enough to get that sort of... [pause] fix, if you like, that kick, that... that taster of, of an emotion, but not so real that you... that it... it leaves you in a mess, you know, leaves you wrecked’ (UK-IX: 26).

10) Authenticity: Towards the end of the interview Vivian speaks of the differences in response to three kinds of media material; real-life footage or documentaries of particular events (e.g. Fahrenheit 911), reconstructions or stories based on fact, and lastly purely fictitious stories. As she explains, ‘there’s nothing to... to me, quite as... erm, as compelling... as the real films, you know, the real footage of the real things happening to real people. [...] That’s the most... in case of the fear and the anxiety, that’s the most disturbing’ (UK-IX: 31).

UK Family D, ‘the Davies family’: 3 participants – 3 generations

UK Interview XVII – Sonia (Mother, 30s) and Ian (Son, 14)

This interview was conducted on 12 August 2006 and lasted approximately one hour and twenty-five minutes. Our conversation took place around a small dining-table in the family’s flat and was marked by a relaxed and on the whole light-hearted atmosphere. Both Sonia and Ian were very willing to talk about their experiences, and Sonia in particular reflected at length about their viewing preferences and responses.

A number of issues immediately caught my attention during the conversation and made their way into my interview notes. These were the fact that Sonia’s talk was conducted from at least four distinguishable positions or standpoints: that of a mother, a daughter, an academic, and someone who had worked in the cultural industry before. While it was possible for these positions to overlap, they nevertheless offered distinct discourses for Sonia to draw upon. For instance, much of the discussion about Ian’s viewing and gaming was framed by talk about parental guidance and censorship, whilst at other times value judgments were cast through academic or professional lenses. Then again there were references to perhaps more personal (or private) viewing experiences and memories which were linked to Sonia’s personal life history from childhood through to adulthood. These
were the moments when she talked about her emotional responses to the media, her fond memories of watching films with her parents, and her enjoyment of watching film and TV with her son, of spending quality time together as a family.

With regard to Ian, the most striking features of the interview were his enthusiasm for video games (which often constituted more relevant fear-related media material than film or TV), and the fact that experiences were often not described through words alone but also through sounds and facial/physical expression, drawing attention to a degree of physicality in his experiences. The latter of course was difficult to capture in its entirety in transcript form and had to partly be illustrated by other descriptive terms (though every effort was made to replicate expressions verbally, see below).

Relatively early on in our discussion Sonia provided an explanation of how she sees her personal responses to film and television, asserting that she does not as such get ‘scared’ by a programme but is likely to instead be ‘moved’ or ‘disturbed’ (UK-XVII: 2f). Theatre can often be more engaging for her than film or television. But, even so, she does not allow herself to be affected too much in that she will actively remind herself of the fact that she is only watching a play. With regard to films, the one thing that she remembers as having ‘frightened’ or ‘shocked’ her in the past is the twist in *Don’t Look Now* when the girl in the red coat turns around and reveals herself to be a little old man who ends up killing the film’s main character. It is this ‘element of surprise’ that still makes her jump, even though the initial shock will not be repeated in quite the same way.

For Sonia, being moved by something on television is always dependent upon finding characters or storylines credible or believable in some way, whether this is in relation to real life or within the contexts of the story world. One needs to be able to relate to characters to be in the position to ‘feel for them’. At the same time Sonia is keen to ‘protect’ herself. If, for instance, she knows that a character will die, she will try not to ‘get so emotionally engaged with them’ (UK-XVII: 37). This is why, ideally, she would always like to know what happens next.

Whereas Sonia distinguishes between being ‘scared’ and being ‘disturbed’ or ‘moved’ by a programme, her son sees differences between being ‘scared’ and being ‘freaked out’, though, as mentioned above, it is difficult for him to fully articulate these: ‘Freaked out is just like... arrgh, that’s just disgusting, and scared just – [makes an alarmed, shocked, petrified sound]. [...] I mean, you get more scared when you’re involved in it’ (UK-XVII: 37).

This involvement happens for Ian in a literal sense with regard to his computer games. The teenager is an avid player of such play-station games as *Resident Evil* and *Ghost Hunter*, which he enjoys both for their puzzle-solving elements and for the very fact that they scare him, especially when he plays on his own. Occasionally – for instance when a zombie unexpectedly jumps on him – something in the game
will unsettle him so much that he needs to pause and return to it at a later stage. His mother does not fully endorse Ian’s gaming but tolerates it, particularly since she sees benefits in the different levels of intellectual engagement with the chosen games.

In terms of film or television, Ian asserts, he is more likely to get ‘freaked out’, though he used to be scared by horror films when he was younger because they were ‘real’ for him then. Now he just enjoys watching and laughing at them with his friends. While Sonia and Ian share a number of viewing interests (e.g. for the action series 24 and sci-fi, such as Doctor Who), they differ greatly in their enjoyment of media violence, with Ian – perhaps unsurprisingly – being the action, horror and violence advocate. The fact that Ian admits to having been scared by horror films in the past strengthens Sonia in her belief that parental guidance at a young age was beneficial and necessary.

Ian particularly likes the combination of violence and humour, partly because humour helps to create a distance between the screen and real life: ‘[T]hey’re... trying to scare people at the same time they are reminding you that this is a film by making you laugh’ (UK-XVII: 14). Sonia puts her dislike of violence down to getting older and becoming a parent, and also to a change of environment. She used to love ‘the blood and gore’ of horror films as a teenager and became interested in horrific special effects when getting involved in film-making processes herself. In her view, what made the films particularly enjoyable at the time was the fact that she was watching them with her father and uncle ‘in a safe environment’ in which she felt protected. Nowadays, as an adult and living the life of a single mother, she much prefers the ‘feel-good factor’ of such ‘switch-off films’ as High Society and other musicals. This is not to say, however, that she does not enjoy deeper emotional and intellectual engagement. Too many fights and battles just bore her now.

Sonia’s reference to the general safety of viewing (violence or horror) is repeated several times and echoed by Ian in other parts of the interview. While Aberystwyth is considered by Ian as a ‘small little town’ that is quite safe anyway, the family makes distinctions between experiencing fearful feelings in a safe space – in the cinema or on the sofa – and in ‘real life’ where trouble could for instance be encountered on the streets (other than those of Aberystwyth). In the end what happens on the screen does not really matter. One might get emotionally involved, particularly if something is ‘brilliantly acted, brilliantly written, and [...] credible’ (UK-XVII: 31), but as Sonia argues, ‘you have distance between you... and the film’. And this distance is important to the extent that Sonia would not watch anything upsetting that is based in reality, such as Schindler’s List, because ‘[she knows] it’s true, and... things like that make [her] really sad’ (UK-XVII: 32). There is ‘interest intellectually’, but ‘emotionally’ she is not prepared to ‘go those places’. For both mother and son, then, it can be important to have a certain distance to a film or programme, whether this is created through comic elements, such as in Ian’s horror/action films, or the knowledge that what is being seen is fictional and not
based on any true story or event. If something is only temporarily unbearable to watch – in Sonia’s case any representation of operations or the breaking of bones – the mother will peep through her fingers while watching. Ian does not as such voice an avoidance of particular media material.

One last point which struck me as important, because it rang true with many of the interviews I conducted with parents and grandparents, was Sonia’s emphasis on parental worries as one of the, if not the only fear that would play a role in everyday life (see, for example, UK-XIII, UK-XIV, UK-XIX): ‘My biggest fear’, she says, ‘is something happening to him.’ (UK-XVII: 30)

UK Interview XIX – Deirdre (Grandmother, 69)

This conversation took place over the phone on 15 August 2006 and lasted just over an hour. It is clear from some of Deirdre’s comments that she was not entirely convinced she was of any help to me or my study. I had to repeatedly reassure her that she was indeed helping me a lot, and that whatever she said was going to be valuable.

There are, to me, two particularly significant features in this interview: Firstly, Deirdre makes a conscious decision of seeing and using film and television as easy (and cheap) ‘entertainment’. This is evident in her description of viewing likes and dislikes. She loves her soaps (Corrie and Emmerdale, in particular) and does not want to engage in anything ‘nasty’, ‘horrible’, ‘scary horrible’ or ‘uncomfortable to watch’. The latter might include ‘creepy’ horror films, ‘gratuitous’ violence, or explicit sex. Her emotional threshold extends to the news in that Deirdre would rather change the channel than get involved in anything too upsetting, such as reports about the disappearance of a child. She calls this her general cowardliness but also points out that at her age people are more inclined to do what they want to do, and to see what they want to see. Deirdre implies that she avoids anything too worrying or upsetting for fear of worsening real-life concerns about her children and grandchildren. She prefers changing the channel to ‘get lost in something else’ (UK-XIX: 17).

While Deirdre does not as such choose to watch anything ‘murderous’, she is a fan of murder mysteries (e.g. Midsomer Murders, Poirot), which she enjoys for their puzzle-solving elements: In spite of their obviously ‘murderous’ contents, Deirdre never thinks of them as depictions of killing per se. Wildlife programmes of the David Attenborough style also count as her favourite pastimes. Attenborough, in fact, is ‘the best out of everybody’, she argues, because he goes into detail and is ‘nice and quiet and [slow??] and gentle’ (UK-XIX: 5).

Deirdre’s viewing choices are informed by her desire for enjoyable entertainment. Film and television are further portrayed as simple pastimes in that Deirdre tends
not to dwell on them. Her viewing is momentary and does not, as such, occupy her mind for any time thereafter; in fact, her friends are amused by the fact that she will not remember a film’s storyline once she has left the cinema or turned off the television. Deirdre emphasises that she would not consider her viewing experiences to be important in any way. She could easily live without film and television if she had to, and in fact does so when back in Ireland. What matters to her are her children and grandchildren, her extended family, and her neighbours in Milton Keynes.

Related to this concern about the family is also what I consider the second significant feature of my conversation with Deirdre, significant because she makes it relevant throughout her talk. Many of her descriptions of viewing preferences and routines are embedded within references to her past, and are linked to her construction of somewhat of a life narrative. Where she is now, the identity she prescribes to herself, is strongly related to her childhood, to growing up as one of fourteen children in a Roman Catholic working class family in Ireland. As a labourer’s daughter she has been a supporter of the Labour party all her life, though she avoids watching any politics shows for the simple reason that politicians never really deliver what they promise. Deirdre lost her husband at a young age never to be in a romantic relationship again. One of the reasons why she loves reading and watching film and television is that she does not generally socialise much. She leads, in her own words, a ‘very quiet... nothing happening kind of life’ (UK-XIX: 6). A second reason for her enjoyment of film and TV, I suggest, is that they bring back memories and remind her of loved ones.

This is for instance the case with her excitement for westerns. She remembers her mother’s treat for the children, a weekly afternoon visit to the cinema in Ireland, was enabled through her father’s friendship with the exhibitor. While there was never much money for sweets or other treats, there was always a Shilling for the afternoon cinema. As Deirdre recalls, most of the films shown at the time were westerns, and so she still watches them now. As with the murder mysteries, Deirdre acknowledges a certain element of ‘violence’ in the westerns. Yet they are not, in her view, nasty in the same way as perhaps some more graphically violent films would be. Deirdre’s love for musicals derives from her experiences at convent school where each year her and her siblings took part in the school’s pantomime. Coronation Street reminds her of her mother – not because her mother would have seen the programme, but because Deirdre knows she would have loved it. On the whole, her parents are referred to as ‘lovely, lovely people’ who would have found much pleasure in watching TV, or so Deirdre imagines, which in itself seems relevant in her own enjoyment of the medium.

In summary then, Deirdre’s television viewing is marked by a conscious choice for easy, non-threatening entertainment and an avoidance of anything disagreeable. Her choices are further informed by her life history and an engagement with the family in past and present. Everyday worries mostly concern her children and
grandchildren. Even her discussion of terrorist attacks is linked back to her niece’s
first-hand experience during the London bombings. While Deirdre considers herself
to be somewhat of a coward, a generally fearful person, she has found ways of
avoiding scary experiences both in her viewing choices and other life situations.

UK Family E, ‘the Eagletons’: 4 participants – 3 generations

UK Interview XIII – Glenys (Mother, 30), Uma (Partner, 38), and Zara (Daughter,
12)

UK Interview XIII was conducted with a couple in their 30s, Glenys and Uma, and
their teenage daughter, Zara, in the family’s garden near Aberystwyth on 24 July
2006. It lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes and was occasionally
interrupted by the couple’s toddler who once in a while needed their attention. The
design of the interview schedule had been hampered slightly since not all members
of the family had consistently kept a diary. In fact, neither Zara nor Glenys had
logged their viewing or further elaborated on any media encounters. My
information regarding mother and daughter’s media use was solely based on their
answers to the diary questionnaire, which I only received shortly before our
conversation. Nevertheless, the conversation was rich and, although the parents’
talk dominated at times, on the whole well-balanced between different members of
the family. Topics often arose unprompted by the interviewer in a relaxed and
sometimes cheerful atmosphere. I had the impression that for the main part both
generations could speak freely in front of each other, which was not always the case
with joint family interviews. Having said this, the fact that I was interviewing
parents in front of their child had an enormous impact on certain parts of the
conversation.

For instance, Uma and Glenys were clearly keen to demonstrate certain parental
controls regarding Zara’s viewing. There seemed to be an awareness of and
adherence to the watershed, and video and DVD ratings were followed, with the
exception of sleepovers at friends’ houses at which Uma and Glenys had to trust
other parents’ supervisory competence. These were usually the moments when Zara
was able to watch something her parents would not necessarily endorse, such as
<em>Jeepers Creepers</em> or other horror films. Yet while the parents used the interview
opportunity to talk about the kinds of media material that were and were not
allowed (and in my presence began to wonder about the boundaries, for instance
with regard to <em>Buffy</em>), it was clear from the conversation that even the viewing at
home was not always monitored vigilantly – there was an element of trust in Zara to
be able to choose appropriate viewing for herself.

The conversation with the family was marked by two general characteristics. Firstly,
particularly the parents were very reflective about their own and their family’s
viewing likes and dislikes, as well as about emotional responses to film and
television. Often they would try to find reasons behind such responses, which partly resulted in some sort of self-analysis and psychologising not uncommon for this kind of interview. Secondly, perhaps as a result, the talk was marked by differentiations and a search for definitions. Answers were not just given but arrived at, especially when participants underwent a struggle to find the words that would best describe their experiences. It was almost as if a crystal was being refined; initial statements were further qualified until all eventualities had been accounted for and misunderstandings disallowed. This often happened collectively within the group.

Just what I mean by the refinement of assertions is evident in the family’s talk about the relationship between the media and real life. An initial statement by Uma that stories had to relate to life and that she did not enjoy any science-fiction for that very reason was endorsed by Glenys but later jointly moderated by a realisation that Dr Who was an exception for both. Glenys then almost contradicted Uma’s earlier statement by arguing that there were moments when television was all too close to reality. For instance, while Uma watches them on occasion, Glenys entirely avoids any dramatisations of real-life tragedies, precisely because they are ‘too close to home’ (and partly because she detests the bias she expects dramatisations of real-life incidents to have, e.g. with regard to films like United 93). What initially seems to be a positive and desired element – the connection to something known and existent – later turns into a disadvantage, or even a peril.

The distinction between the two seems to be linked to another differentiation, that between preferred levels of engagement with a film or programme. The word ‘escapism’ was used on several occasions to describe ‘easy viewing’ experiences after a day’s work when really one does not want to engage in anything too demanding, or violent for that matter. The choice to engage in something more substantial needs to be made consciously and voluntarily, and when this kind of decision is made it is not uncommon to experience that certain emotional responses linger. Lingering emotions are then a sign of ‘good drama’, if experienced at the right time and place. For Uma and Glenys emotions often stay with them if the couple can ‘relate to’ something portrayed on television in a personal way. A particularly moving story in Holby City, for instance, stayed on their mind because they have children and family of their own, and something happening to their family is their ‘biggest fear’ (UK-XIII: 38). At the same time, they advise caution with regard to levels of engagement. As Glenys argues in relation to fearful responses to the media:

G: I think you’ve got to be [„„] try and be rational as well about... you know, what you do take away from programmes because [...] I think... you could... become quite... fearful about... most things if you were to... pick up on everything that you watch. [...] Cos I think, you know... [tentatively] most programmes on television, there is something there,, there is an element of it that would... make you fearful.
Most scary situations, she argues, are portrayed on television precisely because they are unusual, and not because they constitute the norm.

Discussions of the nuisance of media violence ran through the interview. Zara does not like the ‘gore’ in horror films but sometimes enjoys watching horror with her friends. Glenys has no time for horror films at all. The blood and gore bored her for the main part; in some cases they upset her. She even echoed Owain’s argument (UK-XVIII, below) that violence is ‘all around you’ anyway (UK-XIII: 11), for example on the news, at the same time acknowledging that her statement might be somewhat of a stereotype. Uma makes a distinction between ‘chainsaw’ horror and the supernatural, the latter of which is considered to often be more clever and interesting. What is common in most discussions about violence is that the couple (and to a degree Zara, too) see overt violence as unnecessary and find there is more to gain from subtlety. As Glenys argues, ‘the less you see... the more effective it can be’ (UK-XIII: 11).

A distinction is made again, this time between old-fashioned type crime series like Juliet Bravo (much loved by both Glenys and Uma), and the more recent, harsher programmes like Messiah, the second series of which they had to switch off because it got too violent and upsetting. While the women point out that as parents and responsible adults one’s perception towards media violence might be altered in any case, they also assert that the media has changed. What used to be gentle, innocent and harmless is now much more brutal and realistic. Again, there seems to be somewhat of a contradiction when Zara speaks of the artificiality of films like The Day after Tomorrow. Here the parents argue that audiences’ expectations have also changed and that the British kitchen sink era has been overturned by an Americanisation into everything glossy and superficial. The concept of the ‘real’ appears complicated again, and dependent upon processes of production and reception.

The issue of ‘fear’ is discussed very interestingly in this interview since the family makes distinctions between different kinds of ‘fear’, hinting towards experiential and consequential variations. Zara, in particular, talks a lot about being scared or ‘freaked out’ by things on television. Dr Who scares her sometimes, though it’s not the same fear as when watching horror, because horror films look somewhat more ‘real’ (except for Jeepers Creepers, which looked fake but still scared her a little). She enjoys Dr Who because ‘it can be kind of dark and... serious sometimes, but it’s also really funny’, and she likes David Tennant (UK-XIII: 4). Just occasionally, she finds certain episodes ‘scary’, like the ones with the werewolf and the cat nuns, which were ‘horrible’. Murder mysteries ‘freak [Zara] out’, and she does not like anything with ghosts in it.

Yet it was particularly with regard to the news that Zara reported a number of incidents that scared or worried her to the extent that the worry or fear would stay
with her for some time after the viewing. This was more recently the case with reports on the London bombings (July 2005). Zara overheard a conversation about the incident between teachers at school and later watched the news coverage on TV. Her worry was that something like that might happen in Wales. Likewise, during the lead-up to Britain’s involvement in the Iraq war someone on television made a reference to a potential Third World War, which ‘really scared’ her. And a few years ago, a Newsround report about the threat of a meteor hitting earth worried her so much that it occupied her mind for months. Zara remembers panicking and crying when hearing the news. In her mother’s words, she was ‘paralytic with fear about that one’ (UK-XIII: 21). In all cases she spoke to her parents who would try and put her mind at rest by discussing the probability of such incidents whilst reassuring her that it was ‘okay to be scared’ (UK-XIII: 21).

During the interview Glenys also remembers a panic of her own, of being ‘scared rigid’ that the world was going to end when hearing about the first cruise missiles arriving at Greenham Common airbase during the mid-1980s (UK-XIII: 22). With regard to the difference in reaction to Zara’s meteor threat, Glenys and Uma argue that as one gets older one learns to discern the risk involved from the kind of language used in reports: That something ‘might’ happen does not necessarily mean it ‘will’ happen.

This learning how to understand and interpret the media also arose as a conversation topic when Zara surprised (and to some extent concerned) her parents with a fear about immigrant ‘crooks’ invading the country. Much to the bemusement of Uma and Glenys, it turned out Zara had read a newspaper article at a friend’s grandfather’s house, which warned of thousands of immigrants being shipped to Britain. Obviously shocked by the apparent power of such ‘right-wing sensationalist propaganda’, Uma and Glenys proclaim that they will ‘talk about the media some other time’ (UK-XIII: 25). It is here where the family’s discussion reveals not a fearful reaction to any specific media content but a concern or worry about the possible impact of media material on individuals and society as a whole.

A further distinction between emotional responses to television is not entirely unrelated to this concern. At one point during the conversation Uma distinguishes between fear as ‘fright’ and fear as ‘anxiety’. The former is described as somewhat 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’s case, hiding behind one’s hands. The other is a feeling that dawns on you and thus perhaps develops over time. This latter experience is illustrated by an anxiety-instilling storyline in EastEnders when Uma describes her growing discomfort with the negative portrayal of Sonia as a lesbian mother. By the time of the interview she 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’ (UK-XIII: 19). 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’ (UK-XIII: 18). 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 interpretation of the Sonia storyline exemplifies a critical examination of the way in which specific people and circumstances are represented on TV, and one that concludes in both a rejection of the content and a worry about the message that might be received by others. Her own identity as a lesbian mother is evident but not 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 creates the growing anxiety Uma feels when confronted with the narrative. Avoidance of the programme is a way out of the discomfort and somewhat of a boycott of EastEnders which should be (and usually is) better at dealing with such issues. The media is clearly considered a powerful tool here and one that should, in Uma’s eyes, act as socially responsible agent.

UK Interview XVIII – Owain (Uncle, Grandparent generation, 60s)

This interview was conducted on the phone on 14 August 2006 and lasted approximately 40 minutes. Owain is not in fact a grandparent but broadly fits into the grandparent category in terms of his age. He is married to Uma’s (UK-XIII) sister. His age and willingness to participate made him a welcome candidate for this study. My initial interview notes disclose somewhat of a disappointment with the conversation; at the time I felt I had not managed to gather enough relevant talk, simply because Owain displayed a very matter-of-fact attitude towards film and television and hardly allowed for any emotional engagement with the media at all. He very clearly considered television to be an ‘entertainment business’ and nothing to get worked up about. On revisiting the conversation in transcript form, his critical distance of course turned out to be interesting in itself, not least because Owain’s talk about other people’s use of the media revealed as much if not more than that about himself.

Owain is a keen viewer of history programmes with a particular focus on the 20th century, due to a post-school realisation that he had lived through a number of historic milestones, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the fall of the Berlin wall, and the Vietnam War, which for him helped turn history into something alive and worth learning about. In terms of fictional entertainment, he is a fan of old sitcoms, such as Porridge, Dad’s Army, and Open All Hours, with the rare exception of some more recent ones, like The Office. He calls his enjoyment of the more dated situation
comedies ‘nostalgic escapism’ and ‘humorous escapism’, emphasising their origin in a time of superb television writing and acting that has given way to less skilled replacements. Other programmes he enjoys include Have I got news for you on TV and the Today programme on BBC Radio 4. Both are championed for their hard-hitting, provocative and witty humour, as well as for the competence of the broadcasters involved.

Though Owain only mentions this fact towards the end of the interview, his former employment as a television engineer informs, in his own mind, much of his attitude towards the medium. Owain is very aware of production processes and makes particular mentions of skills and craftsmanship when critiquing a film or programme. Films and programmes, he argues, portray the world through the eyes of directors and writers; they represent their world view, their attitude towards life. On the other hand, they also constitute a product of what audiences want to see or what they are generally expected to enjoy, which does not always correspond with Owain’s own wishes or requirements.

For instance, Owain has an aversion to ‘gratuitous violence’ which he does not like ‘coming into [his] living room’ (UK-XVIII: 7), considering most horror films and crime dramas as containing such violence. As he explains, if he wants to see violence, he will just switch on the news, ‘and [he doesn’t] really want to see violence’ (UK-XVIII: 5). Again Owain constructs a very media-savvy self, arguing that violence is a shock element employed by producers in order to keep viewers in front of the screen. He draws a line here to suspense thrillers, like Silence of the Lambs, which he appreciates for their ‘superb acting’ (Anthony Hopkins) and for the fact that violence is mostly implied, not physically acted out. The same goes for films by the ‘master of the suspense thriller’, Alfred Hitchcock.

With regard to horror films, Owain asserts that, unless one calls Hitchcock films ‘horror’, he does not particularly enjoy the genre. The kinds of horror films he used to watch, and that left him feeling ‘absolutely horrified’, were the Hammer films years ago when he was younger. He remembers ‘feeling this enormous chill that goes down the back of your spine’, but is quick to ascertain that he does not ‘rate it any higher or lower than that’ (UK-XVIII: 9). They don’t ‘disturb’ him, and by that he means that they do not linger on his mind or make him act unreasonably in his surroundings. Owain calls this his ‘cynical attitude’ towards horror, comparing himself to other people who might be more easily disturbed and who would switch on all the lights in the house after returning home from watching a horror film. As Owain explains, he knows that horror films just contain ‘actors doing their stuff’ (UK-XVIII: 10).

His talk about other people’s reactions to horror is particularly revealing here, because it implies a judgement of the kinds of responses that Owain considers as rational or irrational with regard to the media, and horror films in particular. 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 (UK-XVIII: 10, 11). Put drastically, the proposition is that some viewers will, firstly, not consider the fact that horror films are just played out by actors and, secondly, not be in the position to distinguish successfully between a filmic and a real-life situation, that is they will consider the film in a literal sense and not as a dramatic construct.

While this reads as a simplification of audience/text relations (which through further probing and discussion might not have been sustained in the same way), it is significant not because of Owain’s view about other people, but because his explanation highlights the limits of his own willingness to engage with films emotionally and intellectually. It is impossible here to discern whether his words can be interpreted as true representations of viewing situations or whether Owain is keen to portray his viewing in a better, more rational light. What matters is that the distinction between desired and undesired emotional (or other) responses is made in the first place, and that he speaks of ‘generally not [being] disposed of… being fearful about […] stuff on TV’, which suggests that the extent to which a person might engage with the media on an emotional level depends on their psyche or character (UK-XVIII: 10).

While Owain very clearly states that he neither has fearful feelings when watching TV nor ever in real life, there is one instance during the interview when Owain consciously uses the word ‘fear’ to describe his thoughts on television output, and that is with regard to hard-hitting reports on the famine in parts of Africa. As he explains, ‘it’s the fear that I have, erm, and I would use that word, I don’t mean… it doesn’t grip me, the fear, but it, but the… the suspicion, […] the thought that… I wonder… how much of this stuff, how much of this money, these medical supplies, how much of this water, food, and clothes etc. […] is actually… reaching the people who […] need it’ (UK-XVIII: 9). While such news reports do not occupy Owain’s mind for any longer stretches of time, they do ‘concern’ and ‘upset’ him at the time of viewing, because of this worry that no matter how much people give to help, there never is any guarantee that aid is received by the needy. His fear is not as such depicted as an overwhelming emotional response, but as a result or by-product of an intellectual engagement with the issues at stake. Only the fact that such news reports ‘really upset’ him (UK-XVIII: 8) points towards somewhat of an emotional engagement with the medium, and perhaps one that is justified in the light of factual rather than fictional content, though the latter is an observation not made by Owain himself.
Germany Interview Summaries

G Family A, ‘the Auers’: 6 participants, 3 generations

G Interview XII – Monika (Mother, 49) and Florian (Father, 50s)

This interview was conducted on 9 November 2005 at the family’s house in Bruehl (near Heidelberg) and lasted approximately one hour. While Monika’s reflective talk initially dominated the conversation, Florian began to open up soon thereafter, and it turned into an on the whole well-balanced discussion. Interestingly, the couple’s talk was not necessarily one that sought consensus as had been the case with some of the other interviews in this study. Instead, Florian and Monika would often describe their differences in response or opinion regarding various issues, such as the relationship between film/TV and reality, or the emotional engagement they sought and experienced with regard to the media. Because of these differences in their views and personalities, it makes sense to begin by discussing the couple as individual viewers and participants first, though cross-references will inevitably be made.

Television is clearly a secondary pastime for Florian, and one that often has to yield other (mainly work) commitments. Sports and documentaries constitute the only programmes he more or less actively seeks out, given he has enough time to watch them and, with regard to documentaries, is sufficiently interested in their subject matter (e.g. recent history). – Whereas Florian watches any documentary that topically catches his interest, Monika always needs a human reference’ (‘menschlichen Bezug’), some kind of idea of individual fates and histories. She loses interest if documentaries are too theoretical (G-XII: 9). For Florian, other viewing experiences are restricted to catching glimpses of programmes when sharing the same room as a family member, or engaging with parts of a narrative when devoting more than his usual attention to the screen. He mostly receives his news from the internet (e.g. Spiegel Online and FAZ.net1), and his last visit to the cinema goes back years.

Florian’s talk often displays a critical, media-savvy view of the media, and he describes himself as more ‘rational’ than his wife, in general but also particularly in response to the media. One example of this is his recurrent reference to the construction and purposes of storylines: For instance, if there are still thirty minutes to go in a film, he knows (and reassures his wife) that the main character cannot be dying (yet) (G-XII: 12). Florian generally sees life to be portrayed as more positive on film and television, with the exception of news programmes which he considers to focus on foremost negative aspects of life. Positive portrayals of certain issues,

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1 FAZ.net is the online version of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, one of Germany’s broadsheet newspapers.
such as the optimistic depiction of so-called Ich-AGs on television, are seen to serve specific purposes, in this case to give audiences an incentive for starting up their own businesses. Florian not only refers to the function of these representations but also implies that someone (television companies perhaps, or by extension the state) would benefit from such positive portrayals. As regards other reality factors on television, he points out that a lot of programmes lack child characters, which makes them appear removed from reality. Story content and character appearance, he argues, depend on the target audience (G-XII: 21).

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

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

F: Und dann gibt’s halt Analogien, dann hat man Assoziationen, man... wenn man was sieht in irgend’nem Film, wo man denkt, ach Gott, des stimmt, des koennt auch passieren, aber... aehm... also, [eben??] net durch den Film selbst, sondern in der Regel muss dann schon irgendwo... ausserhalb was passiert sein, oder dann in der Realitaet was passiert sein... um dann auch durch ‘nen Film auf diese... Gedanken wieder gebracht zu werden. (G-XII: 17)

2 Ich-AG (short for Ich-Aktiengesellschaft) is a description of companies founded by unemployed people who have been subsidised to start up their own businesses.
3 ‘And then there are analogies, then you have associations, when you see something in a film where you think, God, that’s right, that could happen too, but... err... well, not because of the film itself, but usually something has to have happened outside somewhere, or in reality, to then be reminded of those thoughts by the film.’
Florian rejects the possibility that films can provoke fears independently of the outside world. To him, there has to be some kind of associating link to one’s life in order to have any kind of impact on the self. Film and/or television thus function in a reminding and thought-provoking way.

Whereas Monika does not like horror films of any kind because they instil ‘fear’ (‘Angst’) in her, Florian avoids them for their violent content, particularly if ‘scenes of violence’ (‘Gewaltszenen’) are too ‘dissipated’ (‘ausschweifend’) or seemingly unmotivated (G-XII: 10ff). Florian further dislikes them if they display technical insufficiencies, or by contrast, if they are created in such a way that they get too close to the bone. He generally does not see any point in watching people getting physically or psychologically hurt: You would not want for anything like that to happen in reality, he argues; watching it on screen seems like a waste of time.

Monika describes herself as a ‘Krimitante’ (female term for a keen viewer of murder mysteries/crime dramas) and has been a fan of ‘Krimis’ since she was young, with her first memory of crime stories dating back to the 70s television series ‘Der Kommissar’ (Germany, 1969-76). She cannot quite explain why she was almost compulsively drawn to the genre, despite always having been a rather fearful child and having lain awake after watching the programmes. For some reason, she explains, Krimi-viewing has always been naturally part of her (‘das ist so einfach in mir drin’, G-XII: 6). The emotional response Monika most commonly speaks about with regard to her consumption of Krimis is ‘Spannung’ (‘tension’, which can also be translated as ‘suspense’, though Monika speaks of an ‘inner’ feeling here (G-XII: 27)). This tension can, as in the case of some British and Scandinavian crime dramas, be almost unbearable, and it sometimes happens that Monika will temporarily change channels if she feels that it reaches her limits or when she expects shots of dead bodies. Still, she has to watch the programme to the end, perhaps – or so she assumes – because she longs for some conclusion, for the offender to be caught. Although it is always in the back of her mind that a case will be solved and situations will go back to normal, this moment of tension relief seems particularly important to her. What exactly it is that makes British and Scandinavian crime dramas particularly ‘schaurig’ (‘lurid’ in a scary sense) and scarier than German ones is again unclear to Monika. What is certain is that they develop a whole range of other (seemingly stronger) emotions in her than their German counterparts.

The thought Monika most associates with viewing ‘Krimis’ is the hope that what she watches is indeed just a film or programme and does not translate into anything real happening to her or the people around her. (There is also a concern about copycat behaviour in real life, though both Florian and Monika appear unsure about the likelihood of such events, with Florian in particular being aware of what he describes as unsubstantiated claims in the tabloid press). Although Monika does not consider the tension she experiences as a negative emotion, she later insists that she does not as such find it a pleasurable experience either: In the aftermath of the
interview, Florian initiated a discussion about my research project and queried my emphasis on ‘fear’ and ‘worries’ to which I responded with a semi-academic answer, referring to the idea of an ‘Angstkultur’ and the question of whether it made sense to speak of only one fear in the light of such incidences as fearful viewing experiences that are enjoyed and sought after. This led to some discussion over whether Monika ‘enjoyed’ the tension during crime dramas and thrillers. Monika argued against this view, implying that her emotional responses were not strictly speaking positive or pleasurable, whereas Florian argued that she would not be watching them if she did not enjoy such moments of suspense. The notion of masochistic viewing tendencies was touched upon but not further elaborated. Yet there was a general sense that Monika was particularly prone to getting emotionally involved in a crime drama and thus occasionally arrived at certain emotional limits. In Florian’s view, people who watch (and ‘enjoy’) murder mysteries are either easily engulfed or are at least willing to engage with the programme on an emotional level (G-XII: 16). For Monika herself, it is again somewhat of a mystery why she gets so emotionally involved. She compares her engagement with Krimis to her then real-life commitment as a member of a court case jury. The court case occupied her mind in a similar way, and she had to always actively surface from within that world and, through family life, find back to herself and a sense of normality. It did not as such burden her (‘belastend’), but it occupied her thoughts and feelings (‘beschaeftigt’). The tension experienced during crime dramas and murder mysteries, Monika argues, usually subsides after watching (G-XII: 23).

Talk about tension and emotional involvement also dominated much of our conversation about horror films which do not only, as mentioned above, instil ‘fear’ in Monika, but are also on the whole avoided because they exceed the amount of tension (or suspense) Monika feels comfortable with. This is true for both proper horror films and for what Monika considers a more simplistic version of the genre, what she calls ‘creepy films’ (‘Gruselfilme’, generally spooky entertainment). Further distinctions are made between Hitchcock films and King Kong on the one side, which are seen to be well-made and to reach the absolute limit of bearable suspense, and films like Jurassic Park on the other, which Monika has never seen but, by hearsay, imagines to be extremely ‘schaurig’ (‘lurid’, ‘scary’), going beyond her personal limits of endurance (G-XII: 13). The act of watching horror films itself presents somewhat of a paradox for Monika: She imagines that horror viewers ought to have an ability to set themselves emotional boundaries and not let what happens on screen impact on them too strongly; on the other hand she wonders why people would watch these films in the first place if they were able to emotionally distance themselves to that extent.

Monika describes herself as a generally positive-thinking person with a positive attitude towards other people. While she does not as such have worries that go beyond everyday concerns (e.g. about her children), she very much enjoys programmes that present the world as somewhat of a nicer place where problems are solved and the positive prevails (G-XII: 20). While Monika admits to often
seeking out ‘shallow’ (‘seicht’) televisual material in the evening in the attempt to
switch off from everyday chores, she also asserts that at times she has a need for
films and programmes that are somewhat closer to reality. She strongly dislikes
German Volksmusik (‘folk music’) programmes, because she thinks they create an
illusionary, unreal and dishonest world that is full of clichés. So while she would
usually prefer to watch ‘pretty pictures’ and nice stories, there are equally moments
when they fail to satisfy her needs, or when they are too pretty and too unrealistic to
engage her on any level.

Monika shares her husband’s interest in sports programmes, having grown up in a
sports-enthused household and having in the past performed various sports
competitively (seemingly alongside her husband) for a period of twenty years.
Sports and cookery programmes often constitute background entertainment while
Monika goes about her daily routines. News stories do not generally worry Monika,
though they can touch her (e.g. news about the war in Iraq or earthquakes in
Kashmir). Her assumption is that if something on television worried her, she would
not watch it in the first place.

There is however a notion that worries can occur in the aftermath of certain
mediated events, and after some reflection. This was the case for both Florian and
Monika after 9/11 when the initial shock and disbelief (and the sense of relief that
what had happened had gone on in a far-away country) was transformed into
concerns about the possible beginning of a large-scale religious war. The events
surrounding September 11th, 2001, were then linked to moments in history when
muslims had tried to conquer the West (Spain in the 700s, Vienna in the 1600s), and
the couple began to wonder whether history was going to repeat itself. The older
one gets, Monika argues, the more such initial thoughts turn into worries about
what else might be in store.

G Interview IV – Dorothee (Daughter, 19), Sascha (Son, 16)

I spoke to Dorothee and Sascha at their family home in Bruehl (near Heidelberg) on
2 November 2005. Our conversation lasted approximately seventy minutes and was
on the whole relaxed and cheerful. Dorothee was clearly the more regular viewer of
the two and had a lot more to say about her film and television experiences than her
younger brother, at least in the beginning of the interview. Yet encouraging Sascha
to describe specific storylines and thus to contribute more to the conversation
seemed to generate some talk, and I eventually felt I got a small insight into both
their viewing habits and emotional lives.

Interestingly, when watching on her own, Dorothee never views films or
programmes in one go. She always keeps the remote control close to hand and
continuously zaps through various channels, predominantly out of boredom but
sometimes to avoid any unpleasant scenes or images (G-IV: 30). Doro can generally
be described as somewhat of a feel-good viewer, in that she prefers light-hearted and romantic entertainment to horrific or mysterious films and programmes. She enjoys romance and comedy both on film and television (e.g. *Sex and the City, Schillerstraße, Genial Daneben, Dawson’s Creek, Love Actually, About a Boy, Pretty Woman*). For her, love and friendship are ‘real’ and lie at the centre of life. Seeing people find their way to each other in a happy ending may, as she admits, be predictable, but it is nevertheless sought out, not least because it enables Doro to imagine that the same might happen to her one day.

Dorothee’s interest in human relations extends to her enjoyment of *Big Brother*, in relation to which she has developed a somewhat self-deprecating defence strategy: Having been the only person in her circle of family and friends who was still watching the seemingly permanent format of the programme at the time of the interview, she largely discussed it as a kind of voyeuristic habit, and one that is really quite ‘silly’ if you pause to think about it. She even argues that one has to be a bit stupid to keep watching it because all she does is watch people lead their lives. On the other hand, she stresses that this is the very element that makes it attractive for her, its closeness to reality, which Dorothee appreciates in spite of her awareness of obvious directorial choices and decision-making (G-IV: 20f).

Dorothee generally prefers films and programmes that are somewhat related to real life. She avoids any form of animation (e.g. her brother’s favourite, *The Simpsons*) and almost detests programmes like *The X-Files or Charmed*; the idea of witches, demons or aliens is simply ‘widerlich’ (‘revolting’) to her. Just imagining their existence is awful (‘schrecklich’) for Dorothee, and she does not like what she describes as the ‘strange faces’, the ‘strange music’ or the general unsettling atmosphere in such programmes (G-IV: 1). Music, in fact, plays a large role in her unease about such programming, especially when it is the kind of music that suggests something horrible is going to happen. To her knowledge, Dorothee has only ever watched two horror films from beginning to end (*The Blair Witch Project I & II*), and only because she saw them in the cinema where it was more difficult to walk out. She has seen parts of a handful of other horror films, namely *Halloween* and *Scream*, but missed the majority of the films because of watching in a home environment and thus being able to avoid the most horrible bits. Dorothee’s primary expression for describing horror material of this kind is ‘schrecklich’ (‘awful’, ‘terrible’). It was easier for her to watch something like *The Blair Witch Project*, despite a great tension (‘Anspannung’), because it did not depict any graphic pain or killings. Most of its horror was based on the atmosphere (‘Stimmung’), and the horror was more ‘psychological’. Besides, Doro watched it with a group of friends who even played with the idea of venturing onto the local graveyard after watching the film. This idea, of course, was eventually discarded.

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4 The apparently never-ending Big Brother season in Germany, where participants lived in a whole village instead of a house, lasted 363 days and was taken off the air in February 2006 due to low ratings.
because the girls were too frightened. In the end, they returned home and imagined alternative endings to the film(s) in order to make themselves feel better, which is a tactic Dorothee still employs for coping with bad dreams. Dorothee would not have watched *The Blair Witch Project* ‘out of free choice’, as she says, and she would never watch such films on her own. In fact, she noted her difficulty of writing about scary media material or fearful responses since she would usually do her very best to avoid them as a whole.

The teenager voices a general agitation with the fact that people even conceive of making films about murders and killings in the first place, especially if such killings are particularly gruesome. She also dislikes the prospect that some viewers will enjoy counting the number of deaths in such films. Her brother presents himself as much more laidback on the matter. He occasionally watches horror films because he finds them ‘funny’, but he does not have a strong interest in the genre. Dorothee puts his relative indifference down to gender distinctions. Men, in her view, have less problems with horror films because they do not let them get as close to the bone, whereas women, as the weaker sex, are more sensitive: ‘Wir fühlen ja viel mehr als die Männer’ (G-IV: 3). She describes herself as someone who is easily scared (‘Angst’, lit. ‘quickly has fear’); her personal ‘Schmerzgrenze’ (‘pain threshold’) is much lower than that of her brother. Whereas Sascha speaks of some feelings of ‘fear’ (‘Angst’) when viewing horror, he mainly recounts goose bumps, tension (or suspense), and perhaps some startle reactions to jumpy bits. As he argues, most of the time one will know or be able to imagine what is going to happen next (G-IV: 4).

Films like *Scream* also occupy Doro’s thoughts in a different way. As she mentions both in her diary and during the interview itself, the thought or theoretical possibility of someone going around and randomly killing people frightens her. The fear of an ‘Amokläufer’ (a person running amok) is something she assumes most people share. Random school shootings have occasionally been on her mind, not least since the happenings in Erfurt in April 2002.

A documentary about rape, and particularly an incident twenty years ago in which a 17-year-old girl was raped and killed by an American who was later interviewed on camera, constituted one of Dorothee’s most memorable viewing experiences. Just the thought that someone could be so ‘sick in the head’ (‘krank im Kopf’) as to commit such a crime was awful for Dorothee, but there was also a certain curiosity to hear a rapist and murderer speak about his side of the story. So while Doro found it in some ways terrible to find out what exactly had happened, she also found it intriguing to follow the report and hear a perspective usually unspoken.

Sascha, for his part, mainly speaks about action adventures during the interview. Two films, *Anacondas* and *Blood Surf*, particularly stuck on his mind, not because

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5 ‘We naturally feel much more than men.’
they had scared him in any significant way but because they had him on the edge of the seat – or, in his case, on the edge of his bed reaching for his remote control in order to change channels, if necessary. While Sascha displays a great deal of indifference towards most media material, there are clearly moments when he is engrossed in a film’s narrative, and there are images he would rather avoid. He only changes channels if something gets really ‘creepy’ (‘gruselig’) or he anticipates something ‘disgusting’ (‘eklig’), for instance the image of a decomposed body. Sometimes he will be tense for longer stretches of time and occasionally be lying in bed on a heightened state of alert after having watched such a film. But just as commonly he will fall asleep before the end of an otherwise exciting film. Revisiting the films in his mind, he will usually remember them in a humorous way: They had him entertained, even if it was not the best kind of entertainment. Sascha particularly emphasises the fact that, to him, most films are so illogical, unrealistic or far-fetched that he ultimately does not care about them, which impacts on his emotional engagement with the screen on the whole.

*Jurassic Park* is the only film that has ever had him hide behind the sofa, or so he has been told: He was only little when he watched it, and his response partly resulted in a stricter monitoring of scary material by his parents. Doro and Sascha also recall their mother’s restrictions on *Notruf*, the German version of *999*, out of a newspaper-derived concern that it might evoke nightmares in children. They watched it secretly and apparently without the nightmares. There are scenes in films like *Anacondas* that give Sascha a ‘fright’ (‘da erschrickt man halt’, G-IV: 6) in the sense that they make him jump, but he is keen to assert that films do not evoke any responses or reactions beyond the immediate, physical reflex and a possible subsequent state of alert that will soon subside.

Neither of the siblings watches any news on a regular basis, mainly because they are not interested in politics, though Sascha will sometimes catch the end of a news programme out of his interest in sports and multimedia. Watching events unfold on September 11th, 2001, was an exception. Yet at the same time Sascha and Dorothee felt relatively removed from what was happening on screen. They were shocked by the loss of life and the fact that someone had even conceived of flying planes into buildings in order to kill people. Yet it was only later on when they experienced terror alerts on their doorstep, for instance at the US army camp in Heidelberg, that they felt more affected. Four years on, they do not see any real likelihood of terror attacks happening in Germany. Hearing about car bombs in Iraq almost leaves them cold because of their all too regular occurrence. Natural disasters on the other hand, such as hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, are considered as somewhat different, because they are, in their view, nobody’s fault and could theoretically happen in Germany as well. It worries them that people are left defenseless in the eye of such catastrophes.

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*Like his sister, Sascha has to defend some of his viewing habits before his parents who regularly urge their children to engage in something more sophisticated.*
Dorothee draws some distinctions in responses to fictional and factual material, and specifically between *The Blair Witch Project* and the aforementioned rape documentary. In both cases Dorothee speaks of fearful responses. Yet, to her, the films evoke different kinds of fear, and to different consequences. *Blair Witch* is more brutal and eventful. The tension is relatively constant for the course of the film and might last for another night, making it difficult for her to sleep. The film gets close to the bone, but the ‘fear’ is constricted to that time frame. In Doro’s view, the events within the film are (nowadays) theoretically possible but do not as such constitute a real threat. Watching in the company of others serves as protection, and there is an element of hyping up one’s own fears and of feeling a rush of adrenaline.

With regard to the documentary, however, the ‘fear’ is perennial (‘bestaendig’) and goes beyond the moment of viewing, not least since Dorothee estimates a higher likelihood of such events happening in real life, and potentially in her life or that of friends and family. To her, this fear is always present (and might have preceded her documentary-viewing), especially when she is out of the house, on her own, in the dark, as a woman. Whereas Sascha will just put on his MP3 player and cycle home, Doro will be much more aware and cautious of her surroundings, and sometimes petrified by the prospect or imagination of someone following her.

Dorothee makes further distinctions between fictional media and real life, as well as mediated and real-life emotions. Her emotional responses to fiction are not considered as strong or close to the bone as real-life emotions because she still reminds herself that what she is watching is in some sense unreal. She also observes that film and TV are more likely to deal with the bigger fears and worries in life – with death and lovesickness, with ‘unimaginable’ worries or pain – whereas they ignore the smaller worries, like exam stress, which are much more likely to affect people’s everyday lives. Sascha underlines this by arguing that his everyday worries only ever relate to school, and that any emotional response to films or programmes wears off after just a little while. Again, he only watches for entertainment purposes, in the sense that something would really have to directly relate to his life to be able to bother him. And something like that has never happened (G-IV: 34).

For Sascha, the main difference between films and real life is that everything usually works out in films and that the main characters will always succeed, not least because they come equipped with unlikely skills and abilities. Jackie Chan’s fight scenes present one such example. While Sascha acknowledges that the media sometimes deal with some real-life events and emotions (e.g. tears and suffering after a person’s death), he argues that most films and programmes are unrealistic and far-fetched. Yet Sascha prefers the media to diverge from real life. Otherwise, he reasons, people might think they can copy things and will end up in hospital (G-IV: 26).
G Interview XIII – Irma (Grandmother, 78), Helmut (Grandfather, 79)

This interview was conducted on 10 November 2005 at the couple’s home in Ludwigshafen. It lasted approximately seventy minutes and consists of two parts: the main interview which followed the usual interview schedule, as well as parts of our post-interview conversation in which the couple added relevant points to the initial discussion and thus prompted me to restart the tape. In general, this interview was an interesting one because I had the sense that particularly Helmut had put a lot of thought into his participation in the project and into what he was going to raise during the interview. There were moments when he controlled much of the agenda, and I had to work hard to cover the themes and topics on my list of questions. I eventually gave in to the couple’s general tendency to move slightly off topic. Partly I resigned to the fact that they were going to tell me anyway. Partly it felt important to allow for a participant-led discussion because of its potential for opening up unexpected dimensions. In the end, I had to accept that stretches of talk could be dismissed for their lack of direct relevance.

Reading through the couple’s diaries, I had already sensed how much television was part of a daily routine for Helmut and Irma. The interview itself confirmed this view. Being relatively active pensioners, the couple had their set times for watching their regular dose of news and current affairs, as well as political programmes and health magazines, between visits to the swimming-pool and general social outings. At the same time it turned out that the diaries only told half of the viewing story, in that they described the couple’s overall practices rather than taking into account excerpts from programmes they had watched while zapping through channels, or shows that had been on in the background while Helmut and Irma were going about their household chores.

Beyond the above viewing preferences (health, politics, current affairs), the couple also share an interest in nature programming, with Irma particularly enjoying films about horses and Helmut being fascinated by the physique and movement of any running or jumping (wild) animal. They also both seek out travel reports about far and not so far-away places some of which they have been to in the past. They reject films or programmes that present the world through rose-coloured glasses, such as Rosamunde Pilcher films, the Black Forest Clinic (Schwarzwaldklinik), Lindenstrasse, or Die Fallers, which they find outright ‘silly’ (‘laeppisch’) and unworldly. To them, such films and programmes suggest a world in which, bar some minor exceptions, everything is safe and sound and in best order. Irma and Helmut prefer the more realistic depictions of life (though there are some deviations from this general rule, as I will show below). Furthermore, they argue that the makers of such programmes seem to run out of ideas because storylines keep repeating themselves in slightly altered versions.

Beside their shared viewing interests, the couple also speak of some individual likes and dislikes. Irma is a particularly keen viewer of German crime stories/murder
mysteries (‘Krimis’) like Tatort and SOKO, as well as the German version of Crimewatch (Aktenzeichen XY… ungelost) which she says she mainly watches in case she is able to help with a case. According to Irma, she watches them without getting particularly emotionally engaged with them. Nothing on TV really ‘scares’ her, though she usually avoids anything too agitating (‘aufwühelnd’) or suspenseful, such as the Godfather trilogy or other films about the mafia. She finds westerns ‘unnatural’ (‘unnatürlich’), especially their unrealistic shooting scenes. Helmut, on the other hand, enjoys any depictions of mafiosi life and is enthusiastic about some of the older western classics (‘Edelwestern’, especially those with ‘good actors’, e.g. Ronald Reagan), which he has watched since childhood. Helmut also speaks of historical films about the mafia, which he finds intriguing on a socio-political level (i.e. in which way and under which conditions the mafia has functioned), though it is not clear whether these films differ from the Godfather examples or whether they are indeed the same. Most importantly, Helmut is a keen viewer of anything that has to do with sports. He strongly dislikes ‘American-style’ films, and war films in particular, which for him are ‘taboo’. Having been a soldier himself, he finds such representations of war ‘stupid’, ‘untrue’ and ‘exaggerated’ (G-XIII: 3). The only exception to this rule is a German war film, Das Boot (Petersen, 1981), which has deeply touched him in the past, not least because of a general fascination with submarines. Having volunteered for submarine duty during World War II and having been turned down for medical reasons, he is still very interested and knowledgeable about this part of the navy. Watching Das Boot constituted one of those moments for Helmut when ‘you empathise’, you ‘feel with’ the people on the boat, and you are ‘tense’ and ‘thrilled’ with them (‘mitfiebern’), even though you know it is only a film. This is not, in Helmut’s mind, the same as being there. But there certainly is a feeling of experiencing the situation vicariously with the characters (‘mitleben’) (G-XIII: 17). For Irma, the uncertainty over whether the characters would come out alive was again too agitating, and though she considered it an interesting film, she could not watch it to the end.

Neither Helmut nor Irma watches any horror films, though they have seen some horror in the past. While they do not consider horror movies to evoke any fear responses – after all, most of them cannot come true – it is the tension (or suspense) and excitement that Irma, in particular, finds difficult to handle (G-XIII: 15).

There were a number of issues that Helmut, and to a lesser extent Irma, raised and made relevant early on in our conversation. Both of them related to Helmut: firstly, his firm political views as a member of the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands), and secondly, his yearlong affiliation with the BASF (Badische Anilin & Soda Fabrik, an international chemical concern with headquarters in Ludwigshafen) both as employee and as member of the workers’ council and union. Exactly why these issues were foregrounded and emphasised was not entirely clear, though Helmut seemed convinced they would aid my understanding of his attitude towards the media and life as a whole. In any case, they constituted dominant themes in his identity construction and seemed to inform some of his knowledges.
and understandings. They also had an impact on his viewing choices, though again the extent of this is more implied than explicated.

There was certainly a sense that, for Helmut in particular, it was important to be aware and critical of one’s surroundings, be that the economy, politics, or general socio-cultural developments. Linked to this might be the couple’s preference of realistic depictions of life, both in factual and fictional programming. They particularly like the fact that the medium of television has an educating and informative aspect, in that it gives economic and socio-political insights into other countries and helps viewers gain an understanding of why certain things are the way they are. Accordingly, the couple make connections between the then critical situation in Parisian suburbs and the slums in Chicago where black youths were the first to react and call for social change in years gone by (G-XIII: 21). New generations of young people, Helmut argues, are the first to revolt in a post-colonial world in which technological development pushes aside human input, and where people turn into frustrated, lost subjects.

Speaking of the state of affairs in Paris also prompts Helmut and Irma to consider the German situation where, according to interviews in the press, today’s youth want to get jobs with high income, lots of holidays, low amounts of working hours, and as little effort as possible. Again drawing on his own experience as member of the workers council, Helmut describes a year-long unhealthy fostering of high expectations, of pay-scales that could not, in the long run, be sustained.

The job market is certainly a worry that occupies the couple’s minds with regard to their children, or more pressingly their grandchildren (‘first you worry about your children, then the grandchildren’, G-XIII: 25). Helmut and Irma emphasise an awareness of the kinds of societal and economic changes that have led to job instabilities. Whereas in former days one would expect to send their offspring to the BASF or other large companies where they would secure a job for life, today people cannot be sure of their job and have to continuously receive further training and schooling in order to become flexible and survive. At the same time Helmut argues that there are countries that are worse off than Germany. In spite of people’s protests against Hartz IV, the welfare state continues to protect people and the social network is relatively tight.

As hinted above, the question over whether film and TV were close to reality caused some confusion and, with regard to Irma, some conflicting responses. Initially arguing that there aren’t too many disparities between the world as portrayed on television and the world we live in, she later states that ‘life is different’. And further on in our conversation she even remembers moments when she welcomed distinction between her life and that of characters on screen. As she explains:

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7 Hartz IV is a controversial law that was passed as part of larger (un)employment reforms in Germany in 2005.
I: Also ich muss ehrlich sagen, wenn ich mir früher als junges Mädchen einen Film angeguckt hab, und des waren nur Reiche und Schöne, angezogen, des hat mir gut gefallen, weil ich selbst arm war. Wir waren sechs Kinder daheim, und da hat mir des gefallen.’

Helmut, who also grew up in a relatively poor household, finds it important that people learn about the kinds of circumstances others live in, if necessary in a ‘plastic and dramatic’ way. And then, he argues, it might be possible that certain fears arise and that in hindsight one hopes that the same will not happen to oneself or one’s family: ‘Fragen, die beschäft’... net bewegen, aber man denkt mal kurz dran, net?’ – ‘Questions that occupy... don’t move, but you briefly think about them’ (G-XIII: 24)

In general, Helmut is of the conviction that television mostly presents life in a positive way, which can be beneficial, for instance with regard to positive portrayals of family life, but generally – as in the case of the one-dimensional programmes mentioned above – go against his disposition.

Health was an issue that arose during the first part of the interview and eventually prompted me to restart the tape for a second part of the conversation. The couple differed greatly in their level of trust in the medical and pharmaceutical professions, with Irma acknowledging the help and health improvement she had gained from visiting the doctor, and Helmut predominantly arguing that doctors and consultants were prone to making mistakes, as had been the case in his own health (hi)story. Although he acknowledges his wife’s point that, at times, he needs his doctors (not only as a diabetes patient but also more recently after a fall), he eagerly argues that he doe not trust them and would rather avoid any contact. A related part of the discussion concerned various health panics, for instance regarding blood pressure and cholesterol, as well as conflicting messages about whether one should or should not take Vitamin E. Both are, in Helmut’s eyes, contributing to a general scare-mongering of the public (which neither Helmut nor Irma see themselves affected by). There is a heightened engagement with medical expertise through health programmes on television, as well as through the kinds of senior citizen events organised by their union. These are considered as important and interesting. Yet at the same time Helmut’s cynical attitude towards medicine leads him to actively question and negotiate any information he gains through these sources. What is more readily accepted and taken on board are pieces of advice on how to assess and cope with certain symptoms, as well as some of the nutritional information gained from health programmes.

8 ‘I have to honestly say that when I used to watch a film as a young girl, and there were only rich and beautiful [people], [beautifully] dressed, I did enjoy that, because I was poor myself. We were six children at home, and I did enjoy it then.’
G Interview II – Anja (Aunt, 40s)

This interview took place on 1 November 2005 and lasted approximately one hour. Little prompting was required for this conversation since Anja, a single engineer in her forties, was open and detailed in her considerations of viewing experiences and emotions. Anja’s participation had been suggested by her sister, Nicole, possibly in order to make up for lost numbers. I had recruited Nicole along with her parents and daughter, Julia, through an acquaintance. Except for the family’s grandfather, all other male relatives had declined their participation. (The conversation with Anja and Nicole’s parents has since been excluded from consideration.)

Anja presents herself in the interview as a person who is very aware of, and reflective on, her emotional life (see, for comparison, UK-IX). She comes across as a thoughtful and sensitive woman, but also as someone who has learnt to deal with her emotions, at least in most circumstances. With regard to (horror) films, she ‘gets into trouble’ when she watches something that addresses the supernatural, esoteric topics, elements that do not ‘fit into her reality, into her belief’. 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, 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. Likewise, she finds it difficult to distance herself from certain films if she feels a strong empathy for, or identification with, a character – or if she can imagine the horror (or otherwise) the person is going through. On the other hand, she still wants to get involved in a film. Anja watches some horror, as long as it does not move into her taboo zones (the supernatural, cruelty towards children, perversions). She does not care for bloody and brutal horror films (for her, the sounds are the worst), but she is tolerant towards people who enjoy them (e.g. towards fans who enjoy the way they’ve been made).

One of her big worries is the future of German society which she believes to become more and more individualistic, egoistic, and aggressive. She dreads a society in which economic growth is put first and social aspects last. She also feels that children are getting more and more aggressive, which she acknowledges some people put down to the media. Anja herself has not quite made up her mind about this issue but believes that the problem lies deeper: within family contexts, and within the context of society as a whole.

Anja calls herself a ‘Krimifan’ (fan of crime series/murder mysteries) and particularly loves these programmes for their interesting ‘types’ of main characters. Monk is a favourite because his personality is an unusual one in that he gains his powers from an apparent weakness, his illness. Anja also enjoys good acting (e.g. Peter Falk in Columbo, although she regrets the change of his dubbing voice), as well as the tension (or suspense) aspects of crime dramas. In terms of films, she adores
old comedies with Cary Grant, because they show the ‘good’ side in humans (as opposed to the dark side that also exists and that is dealt with in horror). She loves the self-deprecating humor of his character, his way of admitting weaknesses and taking them with good spirits.

This emphasis on dealing with weaknesses is interesting. In her thirties, Anja had a, to her, life-changing experience when she found herself at a moment of existential fear, a loss of future perspective. At the time it was a book which helped her realise that her desire to end her life only stemmed from a fear of not being able to manage life. She now tries not to expect too much from herself, and is more likely to admit her own limitations.

G Interview V – Nicole (Mother, 44), Julia (Daughter, 13)

This mother and daughter interview took place on 3 November 2005 at the family’s home in Ketsch. It lasted approximately one hour. Although my initial plan had been to speak to generations individually, I had left it up to each family to decide whether they wanted to be interviewed by themselves or in a group. The main aim was to create an interview context in which participants would feel comfortable and at relative ease. Unfortunately, with this particular interview, I felt the arrangement of a joint interview might have had somewhat of an adverse effect on the conversation, in that I sensed the daughter’s tendency to fall in line with her mother’s comments and observations. I could not always be sure whether her responses would have been considerably different if I had had the chance to speak to Julia on her own. This was additionally hampered by the fact that Julia came across as shy and could not always elaborate extensively on conversational points. Yet, on the other hand, Julia also made some contributions which at least suggested a degree of reflexivity and independent thought. It was nevertheless her mother who, despite her equally gentle nature, dominated most of the interview.

Nicole describes herself as particularly sensitive and emotional, often creating a contrast between herself and her daughter on the one hand and her more rational and perhaps more controlled husband and son on the other. Her favourite films are romances and ‘tear-jerkers’ (e.g. Gone with the Wind, Titanic), and she regularly amuses her family with her tearful reactions to such films. Yet not all strong emotional responses are unwelcome to her. She sees it as her right to indulge in her favourite films and to live through strong emotions, such as anger and sadness. She generally likes ‘Spannung’ (‘suspense’) in films and programmes and is a keen viewer of some crime drama and murder mysteries, particularly those with strong-willed and extravagant (or atypical) lead characters (e.g. Columbo, Agatha Christie).

Yet one of the overriding themes in this interview is the discussion of media violence. Both Nicole and Julia assert their dislike and avoidance of anything too violent, which includes both implicit and explicit representations. For Julia, this
even extends to crime dramas which her mother is generally happier to watch, probably because they do not include the same level or kind of violence as she believes to be present in horror films.

For the mother, who admits that she does not always successfully differentiate between films and real life, the issue of media violence seems to take on a particular dimension. Just the fact that even writers or filmmakers can come to imagine certain cruelties – issues which she thought were taboo – goes against her conception of the world, and of what it means to be human. She is ‘surprised’ by the kinds of thoughts and ideas people have, and ‘disappointed’ that human beings, who are meant to distinguish themselves from animals, think and act in such inhumane ways. Again, there is no clear differentiation between those people who write the scripts and make films about malice and brutality, and those that actually perpetrate cruelties themselves. Having seen some horror films in the past when she ‘was not yet sure about herself’ – Silence of the Lambs is a recurring reference during our conversation –, she has come to realise that she is not the type of person who would want to subject herself to such films. She loves harmony and wants to lead a steady life. The thought of dreaming about such films and thus experiencing the horror twice is not a valid or desirable option for her.

There are three noticeable points where her distinction between film and real life seems to fall flat for Nicole. Firstly, there is a sense that she is worried about media effects and the impact violent programming might have on certain members of society. (The implication is that some people might be more open to such ideas, though no particular group of people is identified.) Secondly, there is a worry (and unwillingness to accept) that such cruelties might happen and exist in real life. And thirdly, her mode of viewing, the fact that she experiences such films vicariously, means that she somehow translates them into reality. It is particularly the desire of a person to inflict pain or suffering onto another human being that frightens and confuses her. Watching such films would be a waste of time for Nicole, not least since she would only hold her ears and cover her eyes for most of the films’ running time anyway (G-V: 1f).

Friends who enjoy horror films claim to like them for their ‘thrills’ (‘Nervenkitzel’), the suspense, the cinematography, the fact that films like these can be unpredictable, and in Nicole’s view, because they might want to prove something to themselves, show that they can cope with watching such material. What is interesting here is that ‘violence’ almost equals ‘horror’ for Nicole (G-V: 4). Watching it ‘agitates’ her, ‘stirs [her] up inside’ and makes her feel ‘insecure’. It messes with her worldview. This worldview, as Nicole describes it, suggests that people want to be their own individuals and want to be respected as such. They do not want to feel pain or be held against their will, and for that very reason they should not want to make others suffer. One of the things that frighten Nicole about the topic is that there are some people who would commit crimes without regret, without feeling remorse. None of this is comprehensible to her.
There are distinctions for Nicole between a sheer (for her, inexplicable) desire to harm or kill and the killing that happens ‘for a reason’, or because someone is trying to draw attention to themselves for other purposes. Thus while she is shocked by such events as 9/11, the London bombings or the happenings in Palestine, and although she finds terrorist attacks unacceptable, she has some sympathy for the fact that people are ‘throwing stones against tanks’, and that there are political motives behind such deeds.

Her response to such news reports as those about 9/11 and the London bombings was further mixed in that Nicole was shocked by how people could conceive of doing such a thing, while at the same time admitting that in order to affect her directly and more deeply they would have had to happen closer-by. Her daughter’s responses are much the same: She sees the tragedy but does not seem to have particularly strong feelings about it because it did not happen in Germany (G-V: 8). With regard to bird flu, which at the time of the interview was dominating some of the German news headlines, Nicole also displays a relatively relaxed attitude. She feels well-advised and trusts the media and politicians when they tell her that there is no imminent danger to humans. At the same time, she would probably not buy chicken from Rumania, which is where there had just been a bird flu outbreak at the time of the interview. Certain news might occupy her mind, but she feels relatively helpless in doing anything about them. While she is not politically active, she tries to act responsibly in everyday life, make the right (environmental and/or humanistic) decisions locally, rather than trying to affect things on a global level (G-V: 8).

Julia likes having a laugh when watching films or television, and she prefers happy ends, though the latter is apparently not integral to her enjoyment of a film or programme. The teenager is a regular viewer of a range of television programmes, such as Full House, Fillmore and Crocodile Hunter. She particularly enjoys films and programmes in which children constitute the centre of attention, such as Home Alone (1990). To her, they offer more light-hearted entertainment than adult-centred material. Finding Nemo (2003) was a family favourite, enjoyed in the cinema by both Julia and Nicole. Although Julia and her mother generally share the same kind of viewing preferences (except for ‘Krimis’), there are differences in their emotional engagement with the media or the expression thereof. Julia is amused by Nicole’s tendency to cry over sad or romantic films, though she understands how one would get involved and experience the film vicariously with the characters. With regard to horror films, she acknowledges that watching such films in a group is only half as bad as watching on your own. For both mother and daughter sounds and music play a large role in agitating and unsettling them, and Julia does not like the darkness in such films. Although she mentions a fear of monsters in her diary, she points out that she finds it more difficult to deal with real-life characters doing bad things.
Mother and daughter both construct a difference in responses between man and women, with men (grandfather/father, father/husband, brother/son) being the more distanced sex, less emotional and more interested in violent material than Julia and Nicole themselves. Nicole’s husband, she argues, only shows signs of being touched when becoming aware of his wife’s emotional responses. Emotions are something one needs to allow to happen, they argue. Whether they are openly expressed is a different matter and always depends on the viewing context. For Nicole, it can be reassuring that for instance her father (Julia’s grandfather) manages to keep a certain emotional distance to programming, because it helps her to delve out of that realm and get back to normal (G-V: 22). Nicole and Julia agree that the male members of the family would be more likely to approach film and TV as entertainment, while the women will appreciate being entertained but at the same time want to ‘feel with’ the characters on screen (‘empathise’ with them, put themselves in their position for a few minutes). – As Nicole argues, if she has time to sit down and watch a film, then she wants to experience it fully; and if a film is done well, she will suffer with a character physically and vicariously.

With regard to the kinds of differences Nicole and Julia see between the world on screen and that we live in, the two particularly mention the lack or addition of ‘sound’: Nicole points out that real-life situations are not always conveniently accompanied by music, while for Julia it seems weird that films are so ‘quiet’; in real life there would always be the sound of cars in the background. She also notices the use of filmic conventions, for instance that bad things will often happen in films when it is dark while in real life they can happen in broad daylight. Of course there aren’t any monsters in real life, and in Julia’s view, there are also less murders in real life than on telly.

Nicole sees parallels between mediated and real life, in that the media will for instance deal with some real-life issues, such as love, intrigues, misunderstandings, work or unemployment. In her mind, life on screen is meant to mirror real life to some degree. It is when such real-life connections can be made that one can learn from mediated stories, get a better understanding of certain things or consider issues from a different perspective. But she asserts that films are more likely to include a happy ending, and that real life never appears as tidy as mediated life. One difference she particularly treasures is the fact that she has an influence on her own life, has an agency that she does not have in relation to the already pre-constructed, schematic stories on screen, in relation to which she feels quite passive.

Despite generally speaking of their more or less strong emotional engagement with the media, both Nicole and Julia note experiential and consequential differences in real life when one can smell, touch, and feel. Films are always a bit ‘unreal’, or made up. And real-life issues linger and occupy one’s mind more than those on television. As Nicole explains,
The fact that television does not have a great deal of lasting emotional impact on their lives is reinforced by Nicole’s argument that the family will go long stretches of time without watching any TV (for instance when they are on holidays), and that they do not feel more or less frightened during that time than when they watch on a daily basis.

Julia repeatedly points out that she knows what she watches is just a film, and although she would have been scared and had nightmares when she was younger, she only gets scared about things like murders happening in real life, not if they happen on film or TV. She recounts experiencing frights when watching a film or programme, but no fears. Besides, as mentioned above, both her and her mother filter out possibly fear-evoking material from the outset (G-V: 26f).

G Family C, ‘the Conrads’: 3 participants, 3 generations

G Interview VI – Olivera (Daughter, 15)

Interview VI was conducted with Olivera at her grandmother’s house in Ketsch on 6 November 2005 and lasted approximately fifty minutes. Traude, Olivera’s grandmother, had been my main contact with the family, and this was the first time I saw or spoke to Olivera. The teenager was generally outgoing, confident and talkative, and although I felt some issues could have been discussed in more detail, on the whole the interview was rich and informative.

Oli describes herself as a fun person and as someone who likes to laugh a lot. She enjoys comedies, such as *Wild Wild West* (1999), and romances, such as *Titanic* (1997). If a film manages to make her cry, she considers it as a good film, though she argues that she only needs the ‘tearjerker’ kind of entertainment now and again. Olivera also has a particular passion for history and thus enjoys films that are set in the past, such as *Troy* (2004) or *Alexander* (2004). Her favourite TV programmes are her daily soap, *Gute Zeiten Schlechte Zeiten*, though at the time of the interview she

*‘[…] real life is real life, it would burden me for a long time… if something bad happened, occupy my mind for a long time and… I wouldn’t be able to work through it as quickly, and with a film, at that moment I might get a fright, be sad, be…, but I switch it off and then… perhaps it’ll linger… a bit in a dream or so, but then it ends… It’s turned o’, away… it ends.’*
had temporarily ceased to watch it out of boredom, and such American sit-coms as *Full House* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. The latter are not always watched closely by Olivera and instead constitute background entertainment during the afternoon while she completes her homework.

Much of our conversation evolved around the teenager’s experiences of and attitudes towards horror films. Having expressed her unease about certain mystery programmes and horror films in the diary, Olivera used the interview to elaborate on her dislike of anything too ‘verschlungen’ (G-VI: 1, 2, 6, 7). This word, which in its literal translation means ‘entwined’ (fig. ‘intricate’ or ‘complex’), was not used by other participants in the study, and its meaning was initially not entirely clear to me. In the course of the interview, ‘verschlungen’ came to mean a number of things: It partly related to not knowing how to watch something (in the sense that, as Oli explains, one could not be sure who the killer was and why he was committing the crimes), as well as not knowing what to think of a story or crime. Likewise, it was used to describe that something was too ‘unrealistic’ or far-fetched, and that no normal person would ever think in such a way. Murders or other obscure situations were described as ‘psycho’ and ‘disgusting’ (G-VII: 3, 10). Oli generally prefers films and programmes that have some relation to ordinary life, though she loves fantasy of the broad *Harry Potter* kind (e.g. wizards, elves, and dragons), any fantasy that is exciting (‘spannend’) but does not consist of constant murders and slaughtering. She also distinguishes between murders in horror films and those that are dealt with in the kind of murder mysteries she will sometimes watch with her grandmother. The latter are not as ‘psycho’ as the former and leave no lasting impression.

In terms of mystery series, Oli particularly mentioned *X-Faktor* as a programme she disliked because of its mystical and mysterious content. Equally, she does not feel comfortable with programmes that deal with dead people, for instance shows that seek to solve past crimes by dissecting century-old bodies in order to reveal more about their cause of death (G-VI: 1f). She much prefers humour to mystery. As for films, a particularly memorable and ‘wicked’ (‘schlimm’) experience for her was *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), as well as the Hannibal Lecter films that were to follow a decade later. Olivera makes it clear that she has no general desire of watching horror films and would never watch them on her own. She usually encounters creepy films during sleepovers at friends, and although she will not always give in to peer pressure, watching horror films in a group is not as unpleasant for her as if she was watching on her own or with just one friend. She does not *enjoy* watching them, but sees that it can be fun to ‘get the creeps’ in a group.

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10 Not to be confused with the ITV show *The X Factor*, the German *X Faktor* is a programme about paranormal occurrences, which challenges the viewer to decide on the truth factor of each narrated mysterious story.

11 Somewhat confusingly, Olivera’s example of this kind of programme is *Without a Trace*. It is likely she means *Cold Clues: Without a Trace* (2002) here.
Oli particularly dislikes the aftermath of her horror encounters, the fact that such films instil a certain panic in her, or used to do so in any case. Things have been better in the last nine months or so. As she explains, the more you watch them, the more you realise they are entirely unrealistic, and the less scared they make you feel. It is only when similar happenings resurface in real life (e.g. on the news) that insecurities return. In the past certain thoughts and images have stayed on her mind and kept her awake at night, sometimes even causing her to feel hot and shivery and to fall asleep out of sheer exhaustion. She would often feel paranoid for days after watching a horror film, yet would always have to watch films to the end to find out whether individual ‘psychos’ were eventually going to be caught. Two elements stand out as having a particular ‘fear’ factor for Olivera. These are frightening images (e.g. a woman in a bath of blood, with a man sitting by her side, drinking the blood through a straw), and the suspense-instilling music that is common to many horror films. Sound (e.g. music, noises, the screams of victims) can often be worse for Oli than the images. When things get unbearable, she will look away or turn the sound off.

She is convinced that some horror viewers only watch in order to appear cool. And she notes that the really mad people will even copy what they see on screen, which interestingly seems to contradict her assertion that horror films are totally unrealistic and beyond belief (G-VI: 4).

Oli describes herself as always having been a fearful child, and as being more easily scared than her friends: For a long time, she could not sleep without a light on in her room, and she could not be left alone in the house until she was ten years old. Yet Oli does not report any personal fears as such. In the past, worries have mostly related to school (though with Oli being a good student, they constitute strains due to ambition rather than any real worries) and family life. With regard to the latter, Oli has had to deal with her parents’ recent break-up, but is beginning to come to terms with the changed situation.

Film and television constitute entertainment for the teenager. Yet at the same time she acknowledges that she lives viscerally with the characters, and mostly wants to do so. If they are scared, Oli is also scared. If they are empathetic, Oli is also empathetic. In a sense, she argues, the way in which to react emotionally to the screen is spelt out for you, whereas in ‘real’ life one has to decide on one’s emotions themselves (G-VI: 18). And this is the crucial distinction, for her, between emotional responses to the screen and those one experiences in real-life situations. The teenager likes the fact that there are also differences between the world on film and television and the world we live in, because she enjoys diving into a somewhat different world when watching. At the same time, she acknowledges that there are certain dangers inherent in the way particularly fictional entertainment presents certain things, because they might create wrong expectations in viewers, particularly in children. As a child she always wanted to live like a TV star but now
realises that real life is different. Likewise, she imagines children will get the wrong ideas about jobs like nursing, because hospital programmes present them with warped conceptions of life as a nurse.

Oli is also keen to point out that, firstly, fictional film and TV would not be entertaining and worth watching if they were exactly like real life (especially real life in her hometown, Ketsch), and secondly, that even the news are not always close representations of the world around us. In her eyes, they often exaggerate and make things sound worse than they really are (similarly to the kinds of exaggerated representations of climate change which the teenager sees at play in The Day After Tomorrow (2004)). Being aware of some of the more sensationalist news content makes Olivera less inclined to believe everything she is being presented with on screen. At the same time, some news content stands out as particularly ‘shocking’ and ‘frightening’ with regard to 9/11, and as evoking ‘empathy’ with regard to the tsunami in 2004. The latter prompted Oli to donate some of her pocket money. The events of September 11th were at first difficult to understand (Oli was eleven in 2001). Thoughts about something like that happening in Germany crossed her mind, and at the time she talked to her parents and grandparents about what was bothering her. She believes that the images of both those days, 9/11 and December 26th, 2004, will stay on people’s mind forever.

**G Interview VII – Rita (Mother, 40s)**

Rita and I met directly after Olivera’s interview on 6 November 2005. We spoke for a relatively short amount of time, approximately forty minutes. Rita was not as open and detailed in her descriptions as some of the other participants I had spoken to, and it was at times difficult to generate long stretches of talk from her which went beyond direct answers to my questions. It almost seemed like the interview was somewhat of a chore to her and that she was keen to get it over and done with. Whether this was down to her own insecurities or an unwillingness to contribute in detail was unclear. Given that she presented herself as a generally apprehensive and self-critical person suggests to me that the former was the case.

Rita has a strong dislike of horror films and of what she calls ‘Gruselschocker’ (fig: ‘spine-chillers’, or creepy and shocking films). While she remembers wanting to watch Dracula films as a young girl, she also recalls watching them with her ears shut. It was particularly the music that would contribute to the development of ‘Spannung’ (‘tension’, ‘suspense’) in the films. In hindsight, and in comparison with today’s horrors, Rita considers the Dracula films as harmless. Horror, to her, is something that creates such a fear (‘Angst’) in her that she would constantly have to think about it and not be able to sleep (G-VII: 2). That is why she vehemently avoids watching them. A particularly scary example is Silence of the Lambs which, to her, is terrible or ‘furchtbar’ (lit. ‘frightful’), even though she has only ever watched individual scenes or snippets. The images she has seen and the stories she has been
told about the film by others are enough to keep her from watching it as a whole. Rita describes herself as particularly fearful in this respect; she knows such films would occupy her mind involuntarily for some time after, and she would rather avoid that experience. As she points out, one does not have to inflict unnecessary feelings of fear or anxiety on oneself. When she watches, she wants to enjoy herself and have fun. In her opinion, horror viewers (e.g. teenage boys) possibly want to prove something to themselves, perhaps that they can watch horror without being affected by it. She acknowledges that much of the enjoyment might stem from watching within a group.

What Rita prefers and favours instead, then, are romances, or ‘Liebesschnulzen’ (fig. ‘tear-jerkers’), like *Pretty Woman*. Happy endings are very important for her because she wants to go to bed and fall asleep with positive feelings, instead of lying awake and hearing every creak on the stairs as would be the case if she watched horror films before bedtime. She feels calmer and collected after watching a love story in which, via detours, two people eventually get together. Such stories about the complications and resolutions of relationships also made her ‘addicted’ to the ZDF telenovela *Bianca – Wege zum Glück* when it was on between 2004 and 2005 (UK-VII: 9). With regard to her enjoyment of the latter, Rita is a little self-deprecating, arguing that it was silly to make oneself dependent on something that was not very special as such. She ended up missing most of the final episodes for a realisation that the programme’s cliff-hangers were always going to make her return to the TV at a, for her, inconvenient time during the afternoon. Asked what kinds of people were most likely to watch the programme, she uses the word ‘labil’ (lit. ‘labile’, ‘unstable’), suggesting that perhaps one relates the stories to one’s own relationships and problems, that one seeks to gain strength and hope from positive outcomes. Her talk about the relationship between her enjoyment of romances and her real life is interesting here, not least since her husband had only recently left his family, a fact which Rita herself did not make relevant during the conversation.

Her everyday worries mainly concern her children. She worries generally about their health, their friends, school and future careers, and more specifically when they leave the house in the morning. She is relieved when they return safe and sound in the afternoon. For her, this is normal. It’s what mothers do, and she does not get herself into a state about it.

In the past, programmes have caused some indirect worry. A documentary about leukaemia, for instance, had her thinking about what would happen if her own children were affected by a serious illness, because it could happen to anyone at any time. Yet again she tried not to get herself too worked up about it and sought to distance herself to an extent. She felt empathy for the family on screen but did not feel too personally affected (G-VII: 6). Hearing about bad things happening to children always generates emotions in her. She feels grateful for having healthy and happy children, and she hopes (and tries to make sure) it will stay that way.
With regard to news reports that have particularly bothered her, she mentions 9/11, and the then more recent troubles in Paris. At the time of the interview she was imagining what would happen if troubles similar to those in the Parisian suburbs started to happen in Germany. It was horrible to think that people would behave in that way. As for the former, Rita remembers 9/11 as ‘unimaginable’ and ‘inconceivable’, as ‘schrecklich’ (‘terrible’, ‘horrible’, G-VII: 7)). It was perhaps the unexpectedness of the event that made it seem as if similar attacks could happen anytime and anywhere. Rita describes fears about terror attacks in Germany, despite the fact that the event had happened so far away. She was initially hesitant to go to crowded places, and it even crossed her mind that her son’s school bus might become a target for possible attacks.

Rita uses television both as a source of (sometimes alarming) news and information and as entertainment. When asked about the differences between the world as presented on screen and that we live in, she insists on the importance of making a distinction between the two, and further on her own ability to do so. TV, she argues, often creates wishful thinking, a dream world in which problems will always be solved and family life appears to be ever so easy. While positive portrayals of everyday life and relationships might, as in the case of Rita’s enjoyment of Bianca, give some strength in coping with real-life difficulties, the reality will often be different.

Likewise, Rita distinguishes between fear evoked by film and television and those that one has in everyday life. The former are more temporary. They mostly finish when the film is over, and they do not usually linger on one’s mind. One fears for other people, those on screen, whereas real-life fears relate to you personally and to your problems. As Rita explains, you carry them with you, minute by minute.

G Interview VIII – Traude (Grandmother, 60s)

This conversation, the final one on the day, took place on 6 November 2005 and lasted about one hour. Traude’s diary had been one of the most comprehensive ones in the study. Not only had she logged all of her viewing and partly included snippets from TV magazines, she had also commented on most of the programmes consumed. Yet only rarely were diary entries related to emotional responses. For the main part, they were critical reflections on the style and content of films and programmes, on whether they had been enjoyed and what kinds of thoughts they evoked.

It is clear that Traude wants to emphasise the distinction between television and real life, and much of her talk about emotional responses to film and television suggests an emotional distinction as well. This is not to say that Traude remains entirely unmoved by what she watches. Television can make her feel angry, powerless,
engaged, calm and relaxed. Yet none of the thought or feelings Traude describes in relation to her viewing seem related to fears or anxieties.

Television, for Traude, serves three purposes. It provides relaxation (particularly with regard to nature programmes), information (news and documentaries), as well as entertainment which mainly involves ‘Spannung’ (‘tension’ or ‘suspense’) in the form of ‘Krimis’ (murder mysteries). She has been a keen viewer of Krimis for as long as she can remember, though she much prefers German Krimi programmes, like Tatort or Ein Fall fuer Zwei. She hates the amount of ‘action’ in modern American crime dramas and finds the Sylvester Stallone type programmes just ‘impossible’ (G-VIII: 9) A good crime drama, for her, is one that keeps her interested by managing to conceal the killer’s identity until the very end. Traude has also always been interested in exciting or suspenseful reading and only later transferred her literary interest to the screen. Her preferred literature as a child included adventure stories, explorations and discoveries, as well as stories about ancient cultures. The life of the old Egyptians and the Mayas has always fascinated her, what living was like in the past and what humans were already able to generate and conceive of in those days.

Traude is very selective in her television viewing. If something hits a wrong note with her, she will turn it off. TV is only viewed in the evening, and only when it really interests her. She prefers public service broadcasting to commercial channels, mainly because the advertising irritates her. She speaks very fondly of nature programmes, particularly the ones that depict mountain ranges because Traude and her husband are keen hikers and enjoy every moment they spend in the midst of astonishing landscapes. It is here that she can feel full relaxation, and the mountains, rocks, rivers and seaside have a calming effect on her, whether on screen or in real life.

Traude has never watched a horror film (unless one was to describe James Bond as horror), and she does not show a lot of understanding for anyone who would find pleasure in watching graves opening up and bodies being cut to pieces. Viewers of horror films, in her opinion, are not likely to enjoy walking in the mountains; they are unlikely to be peaceful people like her. They seek thrilling entertainment. When Traude’s grandchildren stay over, she will usually make sure they do not watch anything too brutal or disturbing, just for the sake of their good-night sleep.

In real life, Traude is afraid of lifts and much prefers taking the stairs if she has to climb a building, especially if the lifts are only tiny. She will take one, if she has to, but feels uncomfortable with that choice. In contrast, she argues she would not get nervous or anxious about watching a film or television character get stuck in a lift. Something like that would leave her utterly unaffected.

When speaking about everyday worries, Traude puts particular emphasis on talking about the dangers of unemployment, in the sense that it worries her for the sake of
her children and grandchildren, but also in a broader context in relation to what has been happening in Paris and what could potentially happen in Germany as well. These are things that cross her mind when watching the news and hearing about company closures. Redundancies now even affect the bigger companies (e.g. AEG, Siemens, die Bahn), those which once upon a time offered job security for life: ‘die Sicherheit, die wir noch hatten... gibt’s heut nimmer’ (‘the security that we still had... isn’t there anymore these days’, G-VIII: 7).

In Traude’s view, being without a job means being without a future perspective. She describes the happenings in the Parisian suburbs as ‘schrecklich’ (‘terrible’) and understands the young people’s anger at the same time as denouncing them for letting their anger transform into blind destructiveness. She sees German society as potentially steering into the same direction, with immigrants suffering from high unemployment and low education, failing to offer their children the support they need to survive in the German educational system, and thus worsening their general outlook. Yet much of Traude’s knowledge about this issue derives from conversations with her daughter (who works in a school) and her neighbour, rather than from the media. Her neighbour, now retired, once taught classes in which over half of the children were immigrants, and she had to deal with parents’ heights of expectations as well as a lack of encouragement and guidance for the children. She was even confronted by one of the parents at knife-point while trying to do her job (G-VIII: 11). There are, as Traude argues, exceptions to the rule, but often it seems to her that omissions are being made with regard to these young people’s lives.

Documentaries about torture and mutilation (e.g. Mao’s cultural revolution, or genocides in Africa) have deeply touched Traude in the past, and the thought that such cruelties could happen in the 20th century (and even today), under the eyes of the whole world, have left her both angry and powerless. Humans are worse than animals. Yet feelings of fear would only emerge if something bad happened in closer proximity and affected her or her family personally (G-VIII: 10). It will occupy her thoughts but not evoke any real fears or worries.

Having felt this lack of fearful responses while filling in her diary, she had gone to speak to friends about what might frighten them. For her friends, Aktenzeichen XY... ungelöst (Crimewatch) was a general point of reference. Yet the only related thing Traude could think about was that she is always vigilant if her granddaughter is out and about on her own, like jogging in the fields. If Traude knows she is out, and if she has the time, she will go and accompany her on the bike. This is what Traude calls being careful, rather than dealing with any real fear. As she argues, one hears a lot about rape and child murder, but most possibly these things would have happened in the past, too, and it is only through the media that one is now more informed and aware about them.

Traude can only imagine that watching something would not evoke the same fears as experiencing it in reality. And likewise, one might think about how terrible
something would be, and perhaps imagine how one would behave if put into the situation. Yet in the end, in reality one might act altogether differently.

With regard to similarities or differences between the worlds of television and real life, Traude argues they mostly diverge. Television often creates a dream world (and thus in point of fact evokes wishes and desires in some people that cannot always be fulfilled, leading to frustration and discontent). She agrees that fears are unfounded because, beside the other two purposes of informing and relaxing, television is mainly there to entertain. She is a ‘realistic’ person and thinks ‘realistically’ (G-VIII: 23).

G Family D, ‘the Dieterle family’: 5 participants, 3 generations

G Interview III – Claudia (Mother, 40s), Bert (Father, 40s), Wiebke (Daughter, 17), Emma (Daughter, 16)

This interview was conducted with Claudia, who part-runs a local family business, and her husband Bert, who works as a technical manager (both in their forties), as well as with their daughters, Wiebke (17) and Emma (16). Because participants were interviewed as a group, the nature of the talk is substantially different from that of other interviews in the study. Emphasis is less placed on individual in-depth conversation and more on the interaction between different members of the family. This creates some interesting dynamics and processes of active position-taking and categorisation, while it also causes a few problems, for instance the fact that some voices came through more ‘loudly’ than others.

Especially Bert takes on a strong position as the voice of reason and experience. It seems clear throughout the interview that he seeks to prove a point – to me, namely that ‘films are only films’, and that they do not have an ‘influence’ on him. While he is keen to distinguish between real-life incidents on television (such as death on the news) and fictional representations of death and violence, the latter are not worth losing sleep over, not even if they are based on facts. In general, the family takes on a matter-of-fact position about the relationship between fear and the media. While there are certain things they do not feel comfortable with watching, film or television do not really have the power to ‘scare’ them in any meaningful way. The only exception might be the news, particularly reports about natural disasters or issues that might directly impact on their future. But even then they preach caution: While some people might be prone to being influenced by media scares, especially Bert positions himself as very aware of this trap.

Claudia and Wiebke take on slightly more emotional roles in the interview. They share the habit of changing the channel if something on TV bothers them. Wiebke
hates X Faktor\textsuperscript{12} and avoids anything that involves ‘dead bodies’. She finds it ‘abnormal’ to enjoy something like Medical Detectives\textsuperscript{13} which, interestingly, is one of her mother’s favourite programmes; having formerly been a nurse, Claudia finds their way of solving murder mysteries intriguing. Claudia enjoys crime series in general (although Bert is the one who turns them on) and likes the fact that they offer closure, so she does not have to think about them afterwards – they are ‘just entertainment […] like fairytales once were’.

Emma, unlike her sister, enjoys X Faktor because she finds it fascinating to explore the thin line between truth and fiction. She is the only person in the family who admits to watching horror films (although Bert doubts she has really ever seen a ‘proper’ one), but she is keen to point out that she would never watch them on her own (‘who would do such a thing?’). Instead, she enjoys the experience of watching in a group because everyone around her seems to get scared, and she does not! The family agrees that watching horror films in groups makes sense; Claudia cannot imagine ‘being friends’ with someone who watches horror by themselves.

According to Claudia, fear itself is something one has, not something one analyses, which is why she (and Emma) had to take some time to think about their answers in the diary.

\textbf{G Interview IX – Georg (Grandfather, late 60s)}

Interview IX was conducted with Wiebke and Emma’s grandfather on 8 November 2005 and lasted approximately fifty minutes. While both grandparents had planned to take part in the study, the diary entries were written entirely by Georg, partly with some input from his wife who ultimately seemed too shy to commit to the interview. The conversation took place at the couple’s home in Ketsch, and while it was a very friendly encounter, it was also at times an awkward one. I was more aware of both my age and my gender when speaking to Georg than this was the case with most of my other participants, perhaps because I felt I was treated more like a daughter or granddaughter than a researcher. The interview was also exceptional in that Georg got rather emotional when talking about parts of his past, to the extent that I felt uneasy to dig deeper into his undoubtedly fascinating and touching life story. Still, I felt I gained an insight into Georg’s life that I had not anticipated, and it was his interview that first made me aware of the significance of life history in participant’s consideration of emotional responses to film and television.

\textsuperscript{12} Not to be confused with the ITV show The X Factor, the German X Faktor is a programme about paranormal occurrences, which challenges the viewer to decide on the truth factor of each narrated mysterious story.
\textsuperscript{13} Medical Detective is a TV series in which real-life crimes are solved through medical technology.
Georg describes himself as someone who is happy and content and does not as such have any worries in life. Having run his own family business for forty years he recalls going through ups and downs, but argues he never had to deal with any real worries. He puts this in part down to always having had a strong bond with his wife (‘wenn man sich einig ist in der Ehe, dann kann man die Welt einreissen’ – broadly translates as ‘if you see eye to eye in your marriage, you can take on the world’). Georg generally presents himself as a family person; he values family life and is proud of his own family’s closeness and cohesion. He also speaks of his religion, Catholicism, though most of his talk about religion points to his disappointment thereof, not in terms of his personal religious views and experiences (which he does not as such discuss) but with regard to the role religions have played in conflict zones around the world.

Perhaps linked to his general positive outlook on life is his discontent with television’s tendency to, in his view, focus on negative aspects, for instance with regard to the news. One example given is the reporting on climate change which, according to Georg, almost anticipates an instantaneous end of the world. What others discuss as a lurking disaster created by humans, Georg describes as part of a recurring cycle. For him, nature is much stronger than it is given credit for. Yet is not only with regard to the representation of nature that Georg insists on television’s duty to pass on positive viewpoints and values. He feels that it is important to present the world as a place worth living in and to encourage people to start up their own families and care for each other. Today’s younger generations, he argues, are much better off than any generations before them, and still they are presented with a pessimistic outlook on the world.

Georg is continuously fascinated by the strength of nature and life in general, and he counts viewing nature and travel programmes as some of his favourite pastimes. With regard to the former, he is also particularly mesmerised by the topic of evolution, by questions of where we come from and where we go. Learning about the world through television (as well as books and newspapers) is his substitute for a second favourite pastime, travelling, which he would still like to, but cannot always embark on. Another fascination Georg discusses is that with ‘fate’ (or whatever one might call it), the fact that the smallest event in history can have a major impact: If, for instance, the Siege of Vienna had turned out differently in 1683, Georg argues that the dominant religion in Germany might have been Islam.

Like most participants in this study, Georg dislikes horror films, crime and action dramas, and more generally any ‘glorification of violence’ on screen (‘Gewaltverherrlichung’, G-IX: 2), which he foremost associates with contemporary, partly American material. He cannot stand watching problems being solved with guns or knives, or women being beaten up. In his view, a lot of these films and programmes are removed from reality: To him, they are almost entirely built around shooting scenes, in which the goodies always hit and win, and the baddies always miss. Georg does, however, enjoy western classics, like *High Noon*, which he
has watched since he was a child. And equally, Hitchcock classics and older murder mysteries are exceptions to his general rule. In his view, neither the western classics nor Hitchcock’s thrillers glorify violence, murder or manslaughter but present them in such a way that one is aware of their abnormality and infrequency (G-IX: 3). He likes black and white films because, to him, they still portray heroes as heroes and not as ‘Uebermenschen’ (‘supermen’, G-IX: 5). Any of the older German murder mysteries, such as Der Greifer (prob. The Copper, 1958) or Der Hund von Baskerville (prob. the 1955 version), are harmless and easy viewing in comparison to today’s shooting games.

Georg’s definition of horror includes ‘a zombie eating raw human flesh’, dead bodies covered in blood, or other terrible ‘blood scenes’, as well as psychological horror, like the exploitation and abuse of human beings. He also speaks of horror when discussing the news, because it seems to him that there is a growing lack of respect for human dignity, with camera crews almost wanting to ‘crawl into the dead bodies’ they film (G-IX: 5). His predominant emotional response to any such depictions is ‘disgust’ (‘Ekel’), and he does not see any purpose in getting worked up about horrific films or programmes, which is why he avoids watching any upsetting material, especially if it is fictional. His wife, he concedes, may be a little ‘harder’ and less sensitive in this respect. He assumes there are people who enjoy watching horror and violence but prefers to reserve judgment on who that might be.

Georg also has strong feelings about the depiction of war, both in factual reports and fictional entertainment, particularly when he gets the sense that war is being ‘glorified’ in any way. He tells me that when he was ten years old his family was displaced from the Sudetenland (Czechia), and while he acknowledges that as a child he did not comprehend the full extent of their situation, he nevertheless feels that this part of life has stayed with him. He gets emotional when speaking of his brother who at sixteen years of age was sent to fight against the Russians and only survived because he managed to escape. While Georg does not usually get scared or worried by media material, it is the depiction of war that often bothers him. In the case of the Kosovo conflict, which for Georg felt right in front of the doorstep, he even developed certain fears, as well as empathy for the people suffering under the war. He was particularly disappointed with religion then, by the fact that every religion was only out for their own goals, feathering their own nests, while nobody spoke up to bring otherwise divergent groups and voices together. Films like Der Untergang (Downfall) anger and hit him close to the bone, because they highlight the futility of war and the inhumanity of those in power, those responsible for death and destruction. As one of his diary entries suggests, he does not understand how a people that considers itself to be ‘noble and sublime’ defies 2000 years of Christianity and its commandment not to kill or murder (G-IX: 8).

There are some news report that might frighten him, such as the news about the Kosovo conflict, because he has lived through war and does not wish it on any generation. There are also concerns about news reports on terrorism. With regard to
the latter, there is a particular worry about the ruthlessness of terrorists, in that they
would not hesitate to use a nuclear weapon if they got hold of one. And likewise,
there will always be people who are so devoid of scruple that they will make
business with terrorists. While Georg mentions these issues with regard to news-
viewing, he also re-emphasises and criticises the fact that the news keep spreading
fear and terror by always centring on negative news and information. (Georg much
prefers the newspaper to watching television news, because the paper is more
exhaustive and balanced, and ‘opening up the whole world’ to him.) In terms of
mediated fears and worries with regard to fictional programming, Georg mainly
speaks of startle effect reactions, or what he calls ‘shock’ or ‘fright’ responses, such
as those one would experience in some Hitchcock film (e.g. Psycho, G-IX: 8). In
general, while he sees some parallels between real life and fiction, he always
attributes a certain artificiality to the latter. He acknowledges feelings of empathy
for characters as a possibility but is reluctant to associate it with any fearful or
worrisome responses. He sees other forces at play with the media, for instance the
significance and pressures that new fashion, as portrayed on television, has on
young people.

To Georg, there are two big threats to today’s society, both of which he had
mentioned with regard to his worries in the diary. The first, which he calls a
behemoth, is the steady rise of bureaucracy in every area of everyday life. Although
he does not succeed in explaining why, to him, bureaucracy constitutes a ‘threat’, it
is clear that he would rather do without it. Georg argues that he experiences
bureaucracy on a daily basis and that there is no way around it: For every decision
(e.g. building an extension to one’s house) one needs a permit. Processes are
complicated, and permissions cost money. Within this system, freedom of choice
only ever means freedom of choice if one subordinates to such rules and
regulations, and that seems to worry him.

The second threat to today’s society, as Georg sees it, comes from further afar, and
particularly from third world countries where people are struggling with poverty
and famine. Again, Georg does not share the full extent of his concerns with me, but
there is a sense that the needy of this world, those who find themselves without any
future perspectives, will seek to change things and turn to the Western countries for
help. The threat is one of getting ‘run over’ by these people, by which I expect Georg
means some kind of mass immigration (‘ueberrannt’). In his mind, people in need
will not ‘care’ about anything but finding a better life. This and bureaucracy, then,
constitute two of Georg’s perceived dangers or threat to today’s society, or more
likely that of coming generations.