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'I just don't think I could sit through [Jurassic Park or The Texas Chainsaw Massacre]': Films as Cultural and Emotional Measures

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Abstract

This paper is part of a wider cross-national and cross-generational audience study of media-related fears and anxieties. Over the course of several months, qualitative material in the form of viewing diaries, open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was gathered from three-generation families in Germany and the UK, in an attempt to explore the meanings and functions of broadly 'fearful' responses to film and/on television. During the course of the study, it emerged that specific films functioned as reference points, or 'measures', in participants' discussions of emotional 'thresholds' (compare Hill, 1997), even if family members had not in fact seen the films in their entirety, or any scenes at all. This paper interrogates the different criteria participants employed when evaluating these and other films: for instance, associations with film-makers, imagined audiences, specific textual content (e.g. forms of media violence), and the 'emotional effort' participants *anticipated* in the light of their preconceptions of the films. [1]

Key Words: film audiences, distastes, vernacular categories, embodiment, emotion work

Introduction

> *Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste […], all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others. (Bourdieu, 1984: 56)*

In 2005-06, I gathered a range of qualitative material for an audience study into the nature and functions of media-related fears and anxieties. My aim was to explore what kinds of 'fears' might be media-related and how such fears might connect to people's wider understandings of and actions within the world. Further, I was interested to find out whether there were any distinctive generational fears, what it meant for certain emotions to be welcome or unwelcome to the different generations, and in which ways the specific media environments of two countries might affect the 'ecology' of fear. To answer some of these questions, I designed viewing ledgers (a form of diary, see Francis, 1998) and open-ended questionnaires, which later formed the basis for semi-structured interviews with three-generation families in Germany and the UK. Although the initial interest in media-related fears had been sparked by work on television audiences, and chiefly so by George Gerbner et al.'s 'Cultivation Analysis' (e.g. Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1979), I was keen to include the cinema (or film on television) in my considerations, not least because much work in this area had centred on mainly cognitivist or psychoanalytic reflections on the 'normative' fright responses of theoretical spectators, rather than on empirical studies of social audiences.

In the initial stages of my project, a potentially important dimension of viewers' affective experiences was whether and how they related to particular viewing preferences. Speaking to family members about the films they *liked* or *disliked* also sought to create some informality during the interview process, which I hoped might elicit other relevant talk. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, participants' responses were not always straightforward in this respect. At times, 'dislike' was considered too strong or involved a term. 'It's like saying do you like or dislike cat food' was the response of one family father who argued that the very nature of taste meant that it was fairly specific. Only the films he liked and which were targeted at him could be valued and judged, and only against each other. Films outside his personal taste category were ignored. Likewise, some participants were at a loss to further discuss the films they 'disliked' because they would simply not bother watching them.

Others, however, clearly had a concept of unwanted material, partly because they had tried and 'learned' to dislike, partly because, by association, they placed individual unknown films into already known categories. The vernacular criteria by which such viewing choices were made constitute the focus of this paper. Thus, the following is less about participants' responses to, and interpretations of, the films they have seen, and more about those they mostly imagined. Using Bourdieu's (1984) perspective on taste as manifestation and corroboration of class distinctions as a starting point, I want to test out some ideas about the possible meanings and significance of participants' choices and classifications, suggesting that the viewers in my study employed both cultural (aesthetic) and emotional 'measures' when choosing and judging films. Importantly, this paper constitutes a preliminary excursion

into this area and is based on qualitative material gathered for quite different purposes. Conclusions thus remain tentative within the context of this paper.

Points of Departure: *Bourdieu's Relevance: Distinctions and Symbolic Meanings*

Bourdieu's work on the social uses of art and culture has informed much film studies debate about taste formations and social hierarchies of consumption, such as the meanings and reception of high- versus low-brow entertainment (see, e.g., Barker and Brooks, 1998b; Blewitt, 1993; Egan, 2007; Jancovich, 2001; 2002; Sconce, 1995). A key argument in his seminal work, *Distinction*, is that 'tastes function as markers of "class"' (Bourdieu, 1984: 1) and that struggles about the meanings of the social world are ultimately class struggles, based on the division of labour and, thus, on distinctions between dominating and dominated members of society. Bourdieu's sense is that 'principles of division' (classifications, categories, and so on) function to normalise and reinforce an apparently natural social order, and that by producing such concepts, social groups simultaneously produce two sets of groups, those who have the power over the classificatory system and those against whom concepts are produced (ibid: 479). According to Bourdieu, taste is one such categorisation. As he writes

> [t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinction they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed (ibid: 6).

In Bourdieu's terms, (good) taste and cultural needs are the result of a person's educational level in the first place, as well as their general social origin in the second, and he argues that '[a] work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded' (ibid: 2). Elsewhere, Bourdieu refers to this kind of competence as part of a person's 'cultural capital'. Importantly, his sociological research material, gathered in France in the 1960s, leads him to suggest that different classes have inherently different ways of appreciating or engaging with cultural objects. Whereas the educated classes appreciate art in detached, distanced and 'informed' ways, the working classes are seen to give in to a 'popular aesthetic', embracing '"facile" involvement' and '"vulgar" enjoyment' of particular pieces of art (ibid: 4). Rather than enjoying cultural objects in their own right – autonomously, as art for art's sake – the working classes expect them to perform particular functions (e.g. for a photo to resemble a memory) and always judge them on moral or subjective grounds: 'Whether rejecting or praising, their appreciation has always an ethical basis' (ibid: 5).

Bourdieu's work has in the past been criticised for its elitist and ahistorical implications, as well as for its narrow focus on social class *per se* (see, e.g., Blewitt, 1993: 370). Although issues of age and sex are mentioned, these are only of secondary importance to Bourdieu.

Yet, his argument about the power of concepts and classifications, as I understand it, is a compelling one. In a way, it is reflected in more recent work by sociolinguists and discursive psychologists, such as Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter, who have emphasised the constructive and indexical features of language as opposed to its representational use.[2] Both consider language – concepts and categorisations – as constitutive of realities and, partly, as generating or reinforcing (social) divisions.

My interest in Bourdieu's work lies in the relationship between his understanding of taste as an expression of social distinctions, as related to people's viewing choices, and to his division between distanced and involved (or 'unemotional' versus emotional) engagements with cultural objects, such as films. Since the participants in my study largely derive from a well-educated middle-class background, my research does not as such allow me to compare across class sections. Instead, I am interested in the complexity of participants' stances towards particular films and, specifically, in traces of cultural and emotional dimensions to their viewing choices.

Although I have elsewhere supported the contention that emotions are both personal and social (Leder, 2009; see also Manstead, 2005), it is possible to identify distinctions between personal and more 'borrowed' discourses in viewers' emotion talk and, by extension, their 'taste' talk. Whether explicitly or implicitly, audiences draw on what John Blewitt has described as institutionalised 'ideologically acceptable tastes', which are based on the mechanisms of critical reception on the one hand, and (self-)censorship and classification as guardians of 'public morality [… and] sensitivities' on the other (Blewitt, 1993: 370). At the same time, my research suggests that viewers also have emotional responses and expectations to(wards) the screen, which are more readily linked to an (embodied) sense of self and one's emotional 'household'[3],but can transcend or overlap with such wider taste discourses. While the body enters Bourdieu's discussions in parts, it does so primarily in terms of his concept of 'habitus', that is, the system of bodily 'dispositions' which generate practices and perceptions. However, as Greg Noble and Megan Watkins point out in their discussion of the active skills acquisition in the field of sports, Bourdieu's emphasis on the unconscious nature of embodiment ignores the sometimes conscious, reflective and active processes of learning ('habituation') that lead to seemingly internalised dispositions (Noble and Watkins, 2003).[4] Similarly, I want to argue that viewers' engagements with films and their taste formations can involve an active evaluation and preparation in terms of the level of emotions viewers are ready to 'invest' at any given time.[5]

The Scope of 'Distastes'

For the purposes of this paper, I initially revisited diary material from 22 German (6 male, 16 female) and 26 British (13 male, 13 female) participants, in addition to relevant stretches of

talk from individual interview transcripts.[6] Participants were between 9 and 80 years of age, with parents in their late 30s, 40s and early 50s. As mentioned above, all four German and five British families derived from a broad middle-class background, with some of the grandparents having clearly worked their way up from poorer circumstances. For reasons of space, I will only sketch some generational patterns here, rather than discussing them in depth. While bearing in mind all the while that the study does not allow for any claims of representativeness, it is possible to discern different kinds of emotional investment here. Specific focus will then lie on a number of parents' responses, which happen to provide especially rich examples of 'taste' talk and writing. I begin with participants' responses to the diary question of whether there were any films they particularly *disliked*, and why.

The Teenagers' Broad Dislikes

With the exception of a couple of boys who watched most films and had no particular 'distastes', the teenagers in this study made two main responses relevant to their dislike of particular films: fear and boredom (or a lack of engagement). In addition to a categorical dislike of three broad genres (horror, science-fiction and action, in particular), these teenagers tended to refer to specific film titles in their answers to my question. One teenager from Germany lists her 'least favourite' films as follows:

(1) *Lord of the Rings* – boring
(2) *The Village* – frightening
(3) *Oxygen* – disgusting, frightening (Wiebke, 17, G)

Typical examples of boredom were:

> *Spongebob Squarepants – The Movie*: I hate this because it is stupid and pointless. *Lord of the Rings*: I love the books but in the movie there is too much fighting. (Yasmine, 13, UK)[7]
>
> *Doom* – because it bores me to death. *Harry Potter* – the same reason as *Doom*. They're all boring.' (Ian, 14, UK)
>
> *Love Actually*: It's funny but I got bored of it quickly! I don't like action films that much either! (Zara, 12, UK)

The teenagers' diary entries were often marked by such relatively brief descriptions which, on their own, are difficult to interpret. What is evident is that the category of 'boring' films is wide and vague. With a degree of caution, it is however possible to consider it as more than the quick brush-off it initially represents. For instance, the use of the term 'boring' can potentially be approached as a distancing from cultural spaces which the teenagers see as being reserved for others. In the case of Yasmine, who is later interviewed alongside her 9-year-old brother, there is a sense that the named films might cater to a male or, as in the case of *Spongebob*, younger audience. Her engagement with the *Lord of the Rings* books might stand for what she considers a deeper and more mature engagement with the material. Zara's dislike of action films may feed into the same gendered stereotype, while her mention

of *Love Actually* may be more complicated: a distancing from girlie entertainment, from funny but predictable storylines (which do not challenge her), or from what could be considered more adult-centred entertainment (and does thus not fit into her space). Ian's comments are perhaps the most performative ones, in that he stands above what others might consider as highly thrilling and action-filled entertainment; again, he may be demonstrating a level of 'knowingness' that distinguishes him from younger, less experienced, or more easily entertained viewers. Another British teenager (male, 16) more explicitly stated that he found films with particularly poor plots, acting or directing 'difficult to enjoy', and that he derived no pleasure from films designed for a younger market.

Interestingly, fear was sometimes (though not exhaustively) described in more detail than boredom. As these teenage girls from Germany explain:

> Most of the time I can't stand horror and psycho films, but there are exceptions (only a few, like e.g. *Scary Movie I+II+III*, but there's comedy involved in those). Or else I only watch such films at overnight stays at my friends'. To be really honest, I get scared by films like that, that's why I avoid watching them, but when I watch them I need to watch them until the end. I can't stop then. (Olivera, 15, G)
>
> I don't like horror films because they always scare me and I can't sleep at night. Although I know that these films are unreal, they still evoke feelings of fear in me. I always wonder what it would be like if someone wanted to kill me or [if] all of a sudden a mass murderer or madman stood in my room. (Sandra, 17, G)

These girls have a clear concept of unwanted emotional responses and their aftermaths (nightmares, vivid imagination), and they largely construct or experience them as out of their control. However, there is also an active managing of anticipated emotions. The films are easier to deal with when they a) involve comedy, b) are watched with friends, or c) contain an ending in which the perpetrator gets caught. The latter is something Olivera elaborated on during the subsequent interview, although she points out that it is a risky strategy. It backfires when the perpetrator unexpectedly returns, and the viewer is left with an open ending.

How the girls know what kinds of film to expect is not explained, but they clearly apply certain categorisations in their viewing choices, distinguishing between 'pure' horror (for lack of a better term) and 'horror with comic elements'. The references to 'psychos' or 'madmen' also hint towards the type of film they envisage. Olivera later explains that it matters how characters are killed. It is watchable if someone merely gets shot, not so much when they then get sliced open and relieved of their intestines, 'or when they kill themselves'. Interestingly, she describes not knowing 'how to watch' something that is too 'intertwined' ('verschlungen'). Although Olivera uses this term on a number of occasions, she never fully explains it. 'Verschlungen' seems to stand for something that appears too obscure or irrational to her. Her use of the term suggests that she has both trouble relating to a given

character's deeds or mindset, and to the very idea of thinking up or telling certain kinds of 'psychotic' stories. Less prominent in this particular group of responses were mentions of disgust (again in response to horror), rejections of anything too unrealistic (i.e. implausible), avoidance of violence (seemingly, as in the *Lord of the Rings* example, out of disinterest, rather than moral considerations), and an awareness and evaluation of artistic quality and target audiences.

The Grandparents' General Voices of Distaste

The grandparents in this study strongly voiced one particular distaste, that of violence on screen. There were, however, exceptions and qualifications. Rachel (73, UK), for instance, prefers not to watch 'anything violent or where there's a lot of cruelty involved', because she finds these instances 'upsetting and worrying' and does not feel prepared to deal with them. In contrast, her husband, Jim (70s, UK), does not mind a bit of 'blood and guts', as he puts it, especially when combined with shock or startle effects, such as in *Fatal Attraction* (when a bloody Glenn Close suddenly erupts from the bath tub). Yet, he too, draws lines, not least if the violence portrayed is against children. These were thus distinctions between entertainment preferences (e.g. films that manage to startle) and those that involve personal taboo topics, such as cruelty against children. Other participants added cruelty against women and animals to their taboo category. When elaborating on these viewing taboos, participants often made their own role as parents or grandparents relevant in the discussion, thus linking representations on screen back to their own concerns about people close to them. These grandparents thus voiced fears that were more relational, that is, related to others.

Feelings of 'suspense' were mentioned by some of the older female participants as unbearable in the extreme. Irma, a German lady in her late 70s, illustrated intolerable levels of suspense through the example of *Das Boot*. While she was able to appreciate the artistic and ideological merits of a film, these could not outweigh the emotional investment the film required of her. Here, bodily responses got in the way of a cultural engagement.

A further category of unwanted material was that of 'American' films. This was interestingly voiced by (parent and grandparent) participants in both Germany and the UK. Georg (70s, G), for instance, avoided American war films, explaining that they contain 'nothing but superheroes'. With a life marked by his personal war experience – he was a child when his family fled the Sudetenland – Georg feels disdain for what he considers unrealistic (and perhaps glorifying) depictions of war. Another grandfather (60s, G) seemed to refer to similar types of film, describing them as 'war films à la Schwarzenegger' and as 'stupid'. While Schwarzenegger is not particularly known as a war film veteran – much rather a sci-fi/action hero – this comment again reflects a dislike of films that depict soldiers as somewhat

'superhuman'. Traude (60s, G) dislikes 'American crime stories of a more recent date', which she associates with 'scenes of great brutality and stupidity'. In *Knowing Audiences* (1998), Martin Barker and Kate Brooks observe that participants who refused to watch the action sci-fi, *Judge Dredd* (a 1995 comic book adaptation, starring Sylvester Stallone), made distinctions between themselves and *Dredd* viewers who they considered to be young, thrill-seeking males who found (what was to the participants' inexplicable and worrying) pleasure in media violence. Films like *Judge Dredd* were constructed by these participants as symptoms of a modern, worsening, Americanised society. They did not conform to their somewhat idealised, nostalgic view of reality. As the researchers observe, 'realism' was 'not [just] a descriptive criterion' in these responses but a selective view of the world (1998a: 296).

Some of the grandparents' responses reflect Barker and Brooks' findings. Although fellow audiences are not mentioned in direct terms, there is a sense that such films pander to what one of my respondents calls society's 'lowest common denominator'. Unlike the bodily responses described in relation to 'suspense', this particular dislike seems firmly grounded in moral concerns about the representation of violence on screen. Yet, these grandparents also attach emotional value to their discussion, claiming the realities of war for themselves; they can speak with some authority because it has, to varying degrees, been part of their lives.

The Parents' Diary Responses

Amongst the parents, (romantic) comedies, sci-fi and fantasy films were sometimes rejected as unrealistic, unengaging or unfunny, and there was again a feeling that they were targeted at audiences other than the self. One mother in her 30s (UK) quite categorically rejected war films because, in her view, 'it [was] difficult to tell a story without glorifying violence'. Again, most dominant in this particular range of diary responses was a dislike of 'gratuitous' violence, of violence for its own sake, or any form of 'brutality'. Slasher films and 'gore' were mostly described as boring and unentertaining, but there were also more engaged responses to forms of horror. Although it is well-established now that horror films hold aesthetic and other pleasures for both sexes (see, e.g., Cherry, 2008), this particular group of participants largely avoided the broad genre, with women in their 40s describing fearful responses and sleeping difficulties or nightmares as a result of watching certain films. Some of the responses do not only highlight the sense of embodiment which participants made relevant in their talk, but also the ways in which the 'distaste' had developed over time:

> I used to like horror films but can no longer watch them. They make me stressed now and they make me jump. I can no longer be bothered to invest the energy they require so I just avoid them. The same is true of most 'sad' films. I used to enjoy a good cry but now I find that it requires more energy than I have to waste on a film. So I dislike films that set out to scare, upset or create excessive suspense for the viewer without a greater purpose. *The Green Mile + Saving Private Ryan* were very stressful

> + upsetting but that was not their primary purpose and the quality of the film/story was worth the energy. (Mother, 44, UK)

Although it would be wrong to read this comment first and foremost in the light of the participant's role as a mother, her words are reflected by peers who, with growing age and increased responsibilities (as working mothers, for instance), have begun to cut out any films which, in one way or another, throw them into emotional 'turmoil'. What is particularly interesting about this diary entry is that, again, the participant has a concept of the emotional efforts required when watching certain films. These efforts may be closely related to Arlie Hochschild's concept of 'emotion work', the 'act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling' (Hochschild, 1979: 561). However, Hochschild employs it primarily with regard to social relationships and public/workplace encounters, in which feeling rules determine the appropriateness of felt or expressed emotions. The reluctance to 'waste' precious time may partly relate to an illegitimacy of giving in to emotional journeys when other, more 'worldly' issues and responsibilities are at stake. Yet, the quote does not suggest that all films and forms of distraction are a problem here. Perhaps the very act of letting oneself go and letting oneself be emotional, goes back to a time when this participant was more profligate and careless with her emotions.[8] Yet, she describes her emotional resources as restricted which, to my mind, suggests that emotional limits are felt as embodied 'thresholds' (Hill, 1997). The change in emotional investment is described as something that simply 'happened' over time. The physical responses are largely described (and experienced) as out of this person's control.

Cultural 'taste' comes into play when the participant speaks of what she considers quality films, that is, films which have something important to say, which perhaps argue a moral case. Presumably such films are not as easily dismissed, because there almost is a duty to engage with their subject matter. Perhaps the emotional energy invested in these films feels less like a draining of emotions, and more like a reward. In this sense, the participant actively negotiates the risk that lies in the choice between emotional ventures that are more or less worthwhile. Again, this demonstrates kinds of vernacular categorisations. Her husband provides a further example of this.

> I like films which emphasise triumph over adversity. (I think that the *Shawshank Redemption* epitomises this kind of film). I also enjoy films which deal with the tragedy and challenges of war for the individual without being too jingoistic; films like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Zulu*, *Black Hawk Down* etc. I like films which develop real tension and suspense, *Alien*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Red Dragon*, *Psycho*. I dislike films with gratuitous violence and cruelty – I can find them quite disturbing. I don't like the kind of horror films which rely purely on violence rather than tension; the difference between *Chainsaw Massacre* and *Psycho*. (Father, 52, UK)

Not much contextual information is given here, and it is unclear whether this participant has seen *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*; in fact, other respondents employed the film as a measure despite not having watched it in full, if any scenes at all. Yet, 'gratuitous' violence or 'cruelty' are evidently contrasted with suspense, with the latter again implying judgements of quality film-making. The listed war films are interestingly classed as not so 'jingoistic', perhaps again highlighting a contrast to 'Schwarzenegger-esque' war films, or a glorification of violence. The emphasis on 'triumph over adversity' hints towards an almost cathartic or invigorating emotional and intellectual engagement with films like *The Shawshank Redemption*, while the reference to more 'disturbing' material again suggests an emotional experience that is fruitless and tiring. There is also an important distinction of what one wants to take away from a film. In the case of *The Shawshank Redemption*, the link to real life is happily made; the tale of hope is empowering. When films evoke associations with scarier real-life concerns, such as humans' ability to inflict pain and suffering on each other, without the positive life lesson, then they function as a nasty reminder.

The above diary entries demonstrate some of the classifications and associations participants employed in their viewing choices. As I hope is evident, they contain as many examples of taste as social distinctions (performative, critical, constructive) as they contain traces of emotional sense-making, which are more readily linked to an embodied, reflective sense of self, and of a self with life history. I conclude this paper with a discussion of stretches of talk which, though they also contain analytic limitations, provide further and fuller examples of the categorisations employed.

Cultural Categories and Embodied Thresholds

The following interview excerpt derives from a conversation with a German couple, Monika (49) and Florian (53), who are in the process of discussing their definitions of and experiences with horror. Florian has made a contribution, and I here turn to Monika to discuss the topic further:

K: [pause] And, and how about you?

M: I mean, I just think from… I've… except… err, what was it called? … Where.., this famous […] oh, is that a horror film? The…

F: ... 'The Birds'...

M: ... No, yes, 'The Birds' I've...

F: … That was a good film, yeah…

M: … seen, but that was still, yeah, that was for me.., that's like on the limit, that film. I mean, I've enjoyed watching Hitchcock, and they were the kinds of… the films, where als'.., where I also often, where there was a lot of suspense… and where I also always wanted to see the end. [quickly] No, I wasn't thinking of that one. That… that big… ape which then, […] in New York..

K: 'King Kong'...

M: ... 'King Kong', not 'Dracula', […] I once watched that one, many years ago, and there was.., I then.., but I'd already known in the run-up to that, that's [obviously] a very well-made film, and it's… *not* so lurid, so one can.., I did [*unarticulated*] well… I watched it, and then that was good for me. But then when I, when those films emerged like 'Jurassic Park' and all that, and then I also only ever heard, oh, they're so extremely lurid, and for me those Krimis [i.e. crime drama] are.., the ones I talked about earlier on, like those… for me, that's already, like, the highest limit. […] And... more... more... I don't *want* to and... I probably *can't* expect of myself, and… everything that goes beyond, and I just have this conception in my mind [lit. for myself] that's even wor'.., that's even more tension [suspense], that is… that… I can't even bea'.., how shall I even physically bear that? […] Emotionally, that, that... and then I just think, I won't even do that to myself, I also don't have the need to t'… to try and… erm, really… to sound out whether I.., whether that's really true, I say… like, from… from what I've heard so far, how exciting ['suspenseful'] that is… [pause] I think… that will just get too close… then.

Monika's classification of horror films is interesting here. Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* which, according to the Internet Movie Database, was MPAA-rated as PG-13 'for intense science fiction terror', functions for Monika along similar lines as 18-rated films like *The Silence of the Lambs* did for others. Monika has never seen Spielberg's film, and yet, by hearsay, it functions as an emotional measure for Monika as regards her sense of acceptable suspense.[9] Although Monika enjoys suspense – she is a keen viewer of German and other European crime series ('Krimis') – she clearly constructs a certain hierarchy of emotional responses here.

Hitchcock's films and other horror/adventure classics of an earlier date come attached with connotations of suspense but also of quality, thus moving along the boundaries of bearable tension and excitement. *Jurassic Park* and any films classed in that broad category are at the top of the hierarchy and go beyond Monika's perceived emotional limits. Though this is not made explicit, the latter kinds of movies do not seem to carry the same connotations of quality as *King Kong* or *The Birds*. As such, they might generally be likened with the 'other', both in terms of material and kinds of audience; they are unfamiliar and untested territory.

Importantly, Monika constructs her emotionality as defining and absolute. Her specific emphasis on emotional boundaries gets directly linked to 'physical' boundaries. For Sonia, a 40-year-old mother from the UK, one unknown but nevertheless avoided film is *The Blair Witch Project*:

S: You've got things like, erm… 'The Blair Witch Project', which I've never watched and I have no desire to watch, cos I think that *would* scare me, because you don't *actually*

> see anything… you know, and, and it's that… I mean, I don't know, cos I haven't seen it, but it's kind of like… that notion of a reality… so it, it wouldn't appeal to me, cos I won't, I won't watch things that I… think might disturb me. I mean, there are things that disturb me… emotionally, cos they're terribly sad, I won't watch anything about children getting hurt or anything like that.

It is difficult to identify just what kind of knowledge of *The Blair Witch Project* Sonia possesses. She is clearly aware of the invisibility of the 'monster', which, in her mind, raises the fear potential. Further, her comments suggest an awareness of the reality claim of the film, which is of course best known for an extensive publicity stunt that alleged it to be a documentary rather than a work of fiction. It is the 'closeness' to reality that Sonia envisages as 'disturbingly' frightening in a similar way as films in which children are hurt can be 'disturbingly' sad. Both evoke strong emotions that seem to impact on the way she relates to life, and it is this connection Sonia is keen to avoid.

Other examples of films as unknown entities and no-go areas were *Silence of the Lambs* (e.g. Rita, 40s, G) and, as in the above example, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Vivian, 50s, UK). Such films clearly went beyond personal 'thresholds', but these thresholds were largely based on imaginary content as 'built up' through hearsay and brief encounters with individual scenes. Vivian's comment that she 'cannot imagine… why anybody would want to watch… something like "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre"' highlights the ways in which 'imagined audiences' featured in people's choices and evaluations. Although she enjoys some horror and science-fiction, her previous points about unnecessarily high levels of violence in some films suggest that she imagines explicit bloodshed from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and, as a result, finds herself 'physically' incapable of sitting through the film. Similarly, Rita finds *The Silence of the Lambs* awful ('furchtbar') to the extreme:

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

It is perhaps because of the very nature of the 'reaction' to such unknown entities that the participants remain vague about the exact content they want to avoid. This is also interesting because it suggests that they expect me as a fellow viewer or non-viewer to understand, precisely because they assume a culturally shared notion of a film like *The Silence of the Lambs*. Rita is slightly more articulate about her anticipated response. Watching the film would lead to fears and nightmares. These fears are in addition to those experienced in everyday life, which in Rita's case manifest themselves as worries about her (at the time

failing or failed) marriage and the future and well-being of her children. Her preferred evening viewing consists of stark opposites, namely of romantic comedies and other light entertainment. As she asserts, happy endings are extremely important to her, because she experiences them as positive and is then able to go to bed with positive thoughts on her mind. (The comparably 'happy' ending of Jodie Foster's endeavour is either unknown or overshadowed by the strength of negative thoughts and images.) Important in this and the other women's account is that, firstly, like Monika, the participants have a 'physical' or embodied sense of self and their 'thresholds', if you like. They can't 'physically sit through' such films, they can't 'bear' them. Secondly, they have (culturally shared) expectations of specific media material – some from hearsay, some from previous experience – and they assign specific purposes to their viewing. Thirdly, these purposes are intrinsically linked to their life situations, to responsibilities and everyday concerns. There is a process of distinction going on in Rita's talk, in that she constructs herself as particularly emotional in relation to other, more rational or distanced viewers. As such, it is possible to investigate her 'stake and interest' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) in the conversation and perhaps arrive at the conclusion that Rita's emotionality is constructed as 'positive' and as something she values in fellow human beings. At the same time, however, the emotional responses and boundaries she describes seem 'felt' and 'experienced', which suggests a dimension beyond the significance of social taste categories.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the criteria and vernacular categories viewers employed when talking about their film choices, and their dislikes in particular. Again, the above considerations are somewhat of a by-product of a study which was primarily concerned with the relationship between the media and viewers' fearful perceptions of the world. As such, there may be a specific emphasis on 'fear' talk, which is not the case with other considerations of film choice. Further research is needed and richer material has to be gathered systematically to follow up on some of the issues I can only begin to raise here. In addition, it would be useful to employ forms of textual analysis to test or illustrate the relationships between some of the films participants grouped and associated here. Really, what I want to suggest is that, in the context of this study at least, films constituted (shared) measures in relation to emotional 'risk-taking', and that participants' talk involved both intellectual and emotional judgements. This is not to say that intellectual and emotional investment had to stand at contrasting ends. In fact, emotional rewards could be an important component in the intellectual enjoyment of a film. In essence, however, the materials presented in this paper problematise 'taste' as a singular concept and highlight complexities in the tension and relations between cultural (social) and emotional (embodied) notions of audiences' viewing choices. To return to Bourdieu, the fact that some of the participants in this study could experience their emotional household as given and restrictive suggests that

there has indeed been a process of naturalisation and sedimentation. Taste distinctions were partly made with cultural hierarchies in mind, and viewers did not as such reflect on the ideology underlying their cultural tastes. Yet, reflection was there, nonetheless, in the narratives of change of emotional lives, in the felt, embodied hierarchies of emotions, and in participants' strategies of emotional risk-taking.

Biographical Note

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Filmography

Alien (Ridley Scott, 1079)
Black Hawk Down (Ridley Scott, 2001)
Das Boot (Wolfgang Petersen, 1981)
Doom (Andrzej Bartkowiak, 2005)
Fatal Attraction (Adrian Lyne, 1987)
Judge Dredd (Danny Cannon, 1995)
Jurassic Park (Steven Spielberg, 1993)
King Kong (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsock, 1933)
Love Actually (Richard Curtis, 2003)
Oxygen (Richard Shepard, 1999)
Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)
Red Dragon (Brett Ratner, 2002)
Saving Private Ryan (Steven Spielberg, 1998)
Scary Movie I; II; III (Keenan Ivory Wayans, 2000; 2001; David Zucker, 2003)
The Birds (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963)
The Blair Witch Project (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999)
The Green Mile (Frank Darabont, 1999)
The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King (Peter Jackson, 2003)
The Shawshank Redemption (Frank Darabont, 1994)
The Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991)
The Spongebob Squarepants Movie! (Stephen Hillenburg, 2004)
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974)
The Village (M. Night Shyamalan, 2004)
Zulu (Cy Endfield, 1964)

[1] I would like to thank delegates at the EIFAC 2009 for their helpful feedback on this paper. I am especially indebted to Prof. Martin Barker and Dr. Melanie Selfe who commented on an earlier draft and suggested the renewed emphasis on emotion work.

[2] The researchers would, however, take issue with some of Bourdieu's 'cognitive' assumptions, such as his notion of 'habitus' (see Potter and Edwards, 2003: 105).

[3] I refer to a person's emotional 'household' in order to give justice to emotions' personal/private dimensions, complex and somewhat contained, but also to their manageability and their interrelations with other social agents.

[4] See also Melanie Selfe's discussion of post-war film society members' 'deliberate acquisition of cultural competences' (Selfe, 2007: 62).

[5] Thanks to Melanie Selfe for providing the 'investment' terminology here.

[6] For the initial study of media-related 'fears', I conducted a total of 32 interviews but had to eventually settle for the analysis of only 20 of them (10 from each country). The selection was the result of a tight time frame and sought a balance between comparable family set-ups and kinds of interview (e.g. individual vs. group).

[7] Names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

[8] Thanks again to Melanie Selfe for this thought.

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