Natural Born Killer: Risk Theories and the Mass Media

By

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Films such as Natural Born Killers (Oliver Stone, 1994) and Crash (David Cronenberg, 1996) have become famous for their alleged associations with real violence. Politicians, the media and campaign groups apparently believe that these movies are a drug which produces serious side effects. Look at any discussion of these movies in the press and you will find a raging debate on violence in the mass media and violence in our society. There is a basis to this dominant discourse that can be understood by reference to social theories of risk. It is my thesis that risk theories can help us to understand the dynamic of the current debate on media violence.

Risk analysis is concerned with invisible risks that are harmful to individual and global environments. The companies who manufacture products that are perceived to have risks refuse to claim responsibility for their actions and, instead, talk of ‘acceptable risk levels’. Campaign groups, such as Greenpeace, argue that anecdotal evidence suggests there are no acceptable levels: they reveal the full extent of the real and potential side effects produced by these large industries. Pro-censorship groups and self-appointed moral watchdogs have utilized this dominant discourse to engineer a political debate that they hope will lead to the regulation of media violence. The entertainment industry is presented as a manufacturer of risks. They produce products, for example violent movies, which are perceived to contain side effects that are harmful to individuals and to social environments. The industry may talk of ‘acceptable levels’, but anecdotal evidence, such as the James Bulger case, suggests that media violence can lead to real violence in our society. Anti-violence campaign groups undertake their own research which claims to measure the side effects of television violence. The entertainment industry is asked to self-regulate, and legislation is called for.

My argument is that the debate on media violence has become polarized. Independent researchers need to change the terms of reference in order to alter the dominant discourse surrounding risk theories and the mass media. What is more, researchers must recognize that the effects of watching films or television cannot be measured in the same way the effects of car pollution are measured. Watching films or television programmes is a complex and dynamic process that does not lend itself to scientific measurements. Thus, new methods of research must be utilized in order to break the circularity of the debate on violence and the mass media.

One such method is to understand viewer response to risk, and perceptions of the dangers and rewards associated with risk-taking behaviour. John Adams’ (1995), ‘risk thermostat hypothesis’ indicates that people have a propensity to take risks which varies from one individual to another. Recent qualitative research in audience response to media violence also suggests that this is the case. New research methods can seek to understand individual perceptions of risk-taking, and the cultural construction of risk, in relation to the mass media.
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Abbreviations

BBFC (British Board of Film Classification)
BSC (Broadcasting Standards Commission)
CAA (Cinema Advertising Association)
CARE (Christian Action Research and Education)
CRTC (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission)
NGVFA (National Gulf Veterans and Families Associations)
NTVS (The National Television Violence Study)
NVALA (National Viewers and Listeners Association)
MCD (Movement for Christian Democracy)
PAPFCPG (Parliamentary All Party Family and Child Protection Group)
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To Don Butler
Introduction: Risky Business

Oliver Stone and John Grisham don’t get along. The controversy surrounding the release of the film *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) is such that a leading crime novelist and a leading Hollywood director have taken to throwing mud, close range, at each other. And why? *Natural Born Killers* is a film about two mass murderers who go on a killing spree and become media stars. Oliver Stone made the movie because, in his words, it is a film about ‘the media’s obsession with...senseless sensations’ (1996, p.238). John Grisham would disagree. In his opinion, *Natural Born Killers* is a movie that inspires young people to commit murder. And Grisham is prepared to go to court to prove this. *Variety* (1996a, p.11) reports:

Hollywood author and lawyer John Grisham wants films to be legislated as products. Just as manufacturers can be held liable for breast implants that leak or poorly placed gas tanks in vehicles that contribute to a death or serious illness, the scribe behind the bestseller ‘The Firm’ wants studios or directors to be held liable for a film that inspires violence.

Grisham claims that the film *Natural Born Killers* is partly responsible for the death of his friend William Savage. Despite the fact that Sarah Edmondson and Ben Darras stand accused of murdering Savage, Grisham intends to bring a lawsuit against Oliver Stone and Warner Brothers (the distribution company) because he believes: ‘A case can be made that there exists a direct causal link between *Natural Born Killers* and the death of Bill Savage’ (Grisham, 1996, p.235).
Grisham uses the rhetoric of risk in order to draw attention to the hazards of screen violence, a medium which he compares to any other product on the market. Although the two murderers claim to have watched *Natural Born Killers* more than twenty times before they went on a killing spree, they also claim to have taken LSD, and it is significant that Grisham has chosen to concentrate on a movie, rather than drugs, as the direct cause of the murder of his friend, Savage. If screen violence was not such a high profile concern of the public and not so popular with the media, would Grisham have made the same choice?

It is this very question that lies at the heart of this study. John Grisham is able to situate a film such as *Natural Born Killers* within a judicial debate about industrial risks and hazards. Grisham is able to do this because he assumes that the alleged negative effects of screen violence can be measured in the same way that the negative effects of breast implants, or gas tanks can be measured. In other words, *Natural Born Killers* is an industrial product, not a work of art. This is important because for Grisham to make a case for films to be legislated as products, he is assuming that films contain risks, and any director, producer or writer can be held responsible for these risks.

This tells us a great deal about the construction of the media violence debate. Politicians, the media, and public opinion have ensured that such movies as *Natural Born Killers, Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) and *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996) are perceived to be environmental hazards; just like carbon monoxide, violent movies pose a 'risk' to innocent civilians, especially children. It is my argument that the debate about screen violence can be linked to social theories of risk, theories commonly associated with industrial products. This thesis will be the
first to use risk theories as a means of understanding the current discourse of screen violence.

Social theories of risk will be presented and critiqued in relation to the mass media, and the objective of this thesis is to show that watching television is a complex and dynamic process that does not lend itself to scientific measurements. Recent qualitative research in audience response to media violence validates this claim. This thesis will discuss such research, and introduce new research by the author in order to demonstrate that individuals are willing to take 'risks', and this is part of the reason why violent movies are so popular. The aim of this thesis is to argue that new research methods can seek to understand individual perceptions of risk-taking behaviour and the cultural construction of risk, in relation to the mass media. Before I present an overview of the chapters in this study, I would like to consider the way in which risk and the cinema have come to be associated with one another.

**Risk and the Mass Media**

Going to the cinema has always been a risky business. Back in the pre-Hollywood era of the American film industry, audiences eager to see the latest cinematic release had to contend with physical and moral hazards to their health. Early cinemas such as nickelodeons were considered to be poorly lit, unhealthy, amoral fire traps.\(^1\) Annette Kuhn (1988, p.1) writes that in between 1909 and 1925, this early period of cinema 'may be regarded as an extended moment of risk'. It may also be regarded as the period in which cinema established itself as a powerful social,
economic and political force. It is no accident, then, that the risks and hazards of cinema somehow became intertwined with the growth of the cinema as an entertainment industry. Indeed, the more popular that cinema became, the more it was perceived as dangerous and amoral.

Despite many myths regarding the hazards of early cinema, the general public still displayed an appetite for this type of entertainment, and it is this connection between perceptions of cinema as a risky activity and the viewing practices of audiences that is the focus of this thesis. As we have seen from the example of nickelodeons and anxiety about early cinema, the construction of the audience was in many ways shaped by risk regulators. For example, fire insurance underwriters had a direct impact on the cinema going experience because nickelodeon proprietors and the film industry were forced to take into account regulatory guidelines which minimized physical risks to the audience. However, from the very beginning debates about the risks of cinema were not confined to physical risks, but also incorporated perceived moral risks to the individual and to the social environment. As the history of cinema censorship indicates, it is this second type of risk which has come to dominate viewing practices, and with the advent of television, censorship and regulation of perceived social and moral risks has become an industry in its own right.

It is with this in mind that an examination of the perceived ‘risks’ of media violence and audience response to this type of entertainment will prove to be useful to our understanding of the role of mass communications in contemporary society. Now that cinemas themselves are relatively safe buildings, the threat of fire or disease is no longer such an issue; however, the threat of moral risks appears to have become a global ‘problem’, and, as we approach the end of the millennium, commercial cinema and television are perceived to be even more violent than ever. You only have to look
at the amount of news articles that regularly denounce media violence, and to see how many film stars believe screen violence to have ‘gone too far’, to realize that media violence is a popular cause for concern.\textsuperscript{5} And yet, what are the ‘risks’ of media violence?

There are three common ‘risks’ associated with media violence: these are copycat violence, desensitization to real violence, and an increased fear of real violence in our society (for further details, see Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989; Gauntlett, 1995; Buckingham and Allerton, 1996). High profile cases such as the Suzanne Capper case, the James Bulger case, and the Dunblane massacre spark ‘another panic attack’ (Buckingham, 1996, p.31) about the alleged effects of media violence on innocent children.\textsuperscript{6} There may be unproven connections between these cases and screen violence, but in the case of public opinion these children signify the visible side to the risks of television violence. Rather than considering the mass media as a positive force, there are ‘invisible threats’ (Beck, 1992, p.73) to watching television, or playing computer games: the mass media is seen to be destructive and out of control.

This is how the ‘risks’ of media violence come to be linked with risk and environmentalism, and it is important for us to consider how risk consciousness and conflict has had a significant impact on our understanding of popular culture, and in particular media violence. The growth of environmentalism and eco-politics has created a society that is far less trusting of the government and large multi-national corporations. These aspects of a traditional, industrial society are no longer seen as positive forces, but rather something that must be watched and regulated. The public distrust government politicians and industry spokesmen because events such as Vietnam, or Chernobyl, or environmental hazards such as acid rain, or the destruction
of rain forests, are examples of unethical and amoral practices. Risk is not confined to one town, or country, it is a global phenomenon. We now live in a 'risk society' where the side effects of poorly made products are visible in the 'voices, faces, eyes, and tears' of our children around the world (Beck, 1992, p.61).

This is how risk consciousness and conflict evolves. Individual citizens come together and produce causal proof that these hazards of modernization are affecting the health of their children, not just now but in the future. This causal proof is based on anecdotal evidence, public opinion, and scientific research. Citizens change the terms of reference so that what 'scientists' call 'acceptable levels' are no longer acceptable, and indeed are hazardous to the health of our future society. This type of risk consciousness and conflict is important in ensuring that multi-national industries and politicians are held responsible for unethical and amoral management. The Gulf war syndrome, and the consequent campaign to force the British government to accept responsibility for the negative effects of organo-phosphate pesticides, is a good example of this.

However, this does not mean that all aspects of our society should be treated in the same way. The issue of media violence is a good case in point. Media violence is concerned with fictional and mediated representations of violence. The 'risks' of media violence are not real, but rather are 'virtual risks' that are to do with our imagination and not part of our experience of everyday life. It is very difficult to measure the effects of watching television. This is a complex and involved process, and it is precisely because media violence is not real, that the process of watching media violence does not lend itself to scientific measurement. Other, more subtle methods of qualitative and quantitative research need to be used in order for the complex and dynamic nature of watching film and television to be explored. Research
by Ann Gray (1992), Marie Gillespie (1995), David Buckingham (1996), Martin Barker (1997b) and David Gauntlett (1997) are recent examples of this, and such research shows that children and adults are sophisticated and active viewers.

It is a testimony to the strength of the concept of risk and environmentalism in our society, that such new types of audience research are routinely misinterpreted and ignored. The media, politicians, and campaign groups are not interested in alternative ways of understanding the media violence debate. Instead, political and social commentators, such as Lord Alton, or the Daily Mail, are only interested in one way of interpreting media violence, and this is from the point of view of risk. The debate has been set so that media violence is constructed as an industrial risk, one that must be controlled and regulated, just like any other product on the market. Once this debate has been constructed, citizens' campaign groups apply pressure on the entertainment industry to self-regulate, and pressure on the government to produce new legislation.

**Natural Born Killers: Risk in Action**

The case of *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) is a good example of this type of moral campaign in action. At first glance this media violence controversy could be seen to be an example of a 'moral panic'. The usual rhetoric associated with 'dangerous' popular texts was employed by the press to demonize this movie. Christopher Tookey (1995, p.9) wrote an article in the Daily Mail with the sensational headline ‘Why This Film is a Work of Pure Evil’; and the film was linked with several murders in America and Europe. Charles Laurence (1994, p.27) in the Daily Telegraph called the film ‘our worst nightmare’ and went on to write:
The blood from Hollywood's jackpot of violence seeps into soil already thick with the roots of dangerous social ills. At the very least, it must enrich that soil. And in that lies the argument for refusing a certificate to *Natural Born Killers*, a film which is part of the media culture it itself portrays as accelerating the cycle of real-life violence.

Using the kind of words one would associate with biblical sermons, and harking back to W B Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming' where the 'blood dimmed tide' signifies the end of the world, Laurence successfully taps into this source of social fear: violence is everywhere and films are to blame. In another article in the *Daily Telegraph*, William Cash (1997, p.27) similarly warns that 'there's worse to come' and says *'Natural Born Killers' heralds a new era in Hollywood depravity'.

This media campaign was very effective. Although the film was given an '18' certificate in 1995 and released at the cinema, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) took three months to come to this decision. When the film was due for its video certificate, the BBFC similarly withheld the release of *Natural Born Killers*. At the start of 1996 the BBFC passed this film for its video certificate but the Dunblane massacre in March 1996, where Thomas Hamilton shot 16 school children dead, prompted Warner Brothers, the producers of this film, to withdraw its release date, claiming it would not be appropriate to release the film in the light of the Dunblane massacre (see Wintour and Bunting, 1996). This far, the moral campaign to ban *Natural Born Killers* can be traced to consistent media coverage of increasing levels of crime and alleged links with real-life violence, and with the help of its over anxious distribution company, *Natural Born Killers* appears to have become a successful target of 'moral panic'.
However, one key factor has been left out. On the day of the Dunblane Massacre, Warner Brothers actually telephoned David Alton, the then Liberal Democrat MP who actively campaigned to ban this film, and told him of their decision to withdraw its video release date. Quite why Michael Heap, the managing director of Warner Brothers, felt it necessary to telephone David Alton from California is a mystery until it is made clear that David Alton is not only a member of parliament, but also a key member of the Movement for Christian Democracy (MCD), a campaign group that has been instrumental in highlighting the perceived ‘risks’ of such films as *Natural Born Killers*. David Alton and the MCD had managed to mobilize over 80 MPs to table an Early Day Motion condemning the video release of this film, which was due only one week after the Dunblane Massacre, on March 22, 1996. David Alton's response to this decision by Warner Brothers is indicative of how ‘uncompromising’ and how powerful he, and his campaign group, have become. The *Guardian* reports his reply next to an article about Dunblane as a “Safe” haven for city parents (Wintour and Bunting, 1995, p.5): ‘A furious Mr. Alton said: “If this film is not appropriate to be released as a video because of this horrific incident, it is not appropriate to be shown at any time. All the evidence shows that these videos lead to a culture of violence and we need to stop it”.’ Thus Alton, via the *Guardian*, links *Natural Born Killers* with Dunblane and the causal effect of screen violence. Note how ‘furious’ he is; a response that is appropriate to his role as a tough moral guardian, and suggests a vindication of his campaign to ban this film.

Despite the fact that there is no evidence linking the Dunblane Massacre with any film at all, *Natural Born Killers* has now become synonymous with real-life mass murder, and thanks to politicians like David Alton and his campaign group (MCD) will probably not be released on video in this country in the foreseeable future.
Although the press have been instrumental in voicing this moral campaign, it is the pressure group behind it that has orchestrated this effective piece of censorship. And this pressure group have utilized the 'social drama' of risk (Pamlund, 1996); they have successfully campaigned against media violence as if it is a product, produced by the entertainment industry in order to pollute our environment and damage the moral health of our children, now and in the future.

The role of anti-violence campaign groups and media violence controversies will prove to be significant to an understanding of the construction of media violence as an environmental hazard because it is through an examination of these social groups that we shall see how the debate about media violence is less concerned with representations of violence per se, and more concerned with what media violence symbolizes in a technologically advanced society. Fighting against the release of *Natural Born Killers* gives anti-violence campaign groups the social resources they need to fight their 'real' battle (Renn, 1992, p.191), which is concerned with the protection of family values, and a desired lifestyle which is based on the teachings of the Bible (see Barratt, 1997; Thompson, 1992). Consequently, what I want to do in this study is re-examine the media violence debate in order to understand the origins of this discourse and in order to situate it in relation to the 'masterframe of environmental discourse' (Eder, 1996) and the symbolization of risk (Renn, 1996).

Despite this overwhelmingly negative approach to the issue of media violence, people still choose to watch films and television programmes which contain violence. Indeed, films such as *Natural Born Killers*, or *Reservoir Dogs* are advertised as 'risky' films, daring the audience to see if they can watch. It is this phenomenon and the way in which people choose to engage in risk-taking behaviour that will become the subject of the second half of this thesis. The construction of media violence as dangerous and
hazardous ensures that those people who choose to watch films such as *Natural Born Killers* are demonized and perceived to be evil and depraved, just like the movie. However, not all ‘risky’ activities are treated in the same way. The question that I want to ask is why? Why must this type of risk-taking behaviour be any different to other types of risks that people choose as a form of entertainment?

Some risk-taking activities are perceived as acceptable by the media, politicians and social commentators. For example, skydiving, or bungee jumping, are constructed as exciting but dangerous sports; not everyone wants to fall from a plane or bridge, but those people that choose to take part in this sport ensure that it is as safe as possible so that they can enjoy this activity time and again. They do not choose to sky dive or bungee jump because they are social misfits, or because they have a deathwish, but rather because they find such activities exciting and exhilarating. Indeed, many people jump from airplanes and bridges to raise money for a charitable cause. They do this, in part, in an attempt to show that people who like dangerous sports can be morally and socially responsible members of the community. However, watching media violence is not perceived as an acceptable form of risk-taking behaviour. People who watch media violence are considered to be socially inadequate, immature, unstable people. They are perceived as people who must like violence, who must naturally be aggressive in the first place in order for them to like such films and television programmes. You would never find a horror fan taking part in a sponsored film event, daring themselves to watch ‘risky’ films in order to raise money for a charitable cause. This would not happen because watching media violence is a socially unacceptable form of behaviour.

What I want to examine in this thesis is both the construction of media violence as an environmental hazard and the reality of media violence as an
entertainment activity. Audience research suggests that people who choose to watch media violence are neither evil, or depraved, but rather are ordinary men and women who like to watch films and television programmes that are both shocking and entertaining. Some people may perceive *Natural Born Killers* as a shocking movie, but it does not mean that it cannot be perceived as entertaining by other members of our society. Similarly, some people may transgress social rules and threaten the safety of the community, and they may do so after watching a film or television programme. However, this does not mean that such a 'problem person' is made this way by watching media violence, but rather this means that such a person brings with them a history of aggression and mental illness that makes them unable to balance their behaviour in relation to others. This is an important point to bear in mind when considering 'effects' research, or anti-violence campaign groups such as CARE, or the MCD, and what we shall find in later chapters is that people who choose to watch media violence have little connection with the type of 'problem' person these groups are concerned with. It is time to open up the issue of media violence and promote a dialogue between researchers, policy makers and people who actually choose to watch films and television programmes which contain violence.

**An Overview of the Thesis**

This study will begin with an overview of media violence controversies and the type of academic research which has come to dominate our understanding of this issue. Chapter three will re-examine the social drama of media violence in relation to
social theories of risk, in order that we can attempt to understand the social, cultural
and political significance of the construction of media violence as an environmental
hazard. In Chapters four and five, we can see how the 'masterframe of environmental
discourse' (Eder, 1996) has come to shape, not only our perception of environmental
risks, but also the way in which we perceive the role of popular culture in our
everyday lives. Debates about the conservation of nature, or a safe, idealized
community are about social relationships with nature, society and technology. These
debates are less about reality but more about 'discursive realities' (Hajer, 1996, p.257)
in which cultural politics are shaped and made. The cultural construction of risk and
media violence is one such 'discursive reality' and these chapters will explore this
from an anthropological and sociological perspective.

believes everyone has a propensity to take risks, everyone has a 'risk
thermostat'; some people like to have their thermostat set higher than others, but no
one wants a zero-risk lifestyle. Individual risk-taking behaviour is based on a delicate
balancing act between perceptions of risk and personal experience of risk. This theory
will prove to be useful in our understanding of how and why people like to watch
films and television programmes which contain violence. In the final section of this
study, I want to find out what consumers of media violence have to say about their
experience of watching media violence. Chapter seven considers recent quantitative
and qualitative audience research which goes some way to explaining why people like
to watch media violence, and how people manage risk from an individual and social
perspective. Chapters eight to eleven introduce new audience research conducted by
the author on active consumers of violent movies, such as Natural Born Killers, or
Reservoir Dogs. This research has been previously published in a more detailed form
(see Hill, 1997), but here, key results of this qualitative research have been theorized in relation to social theories of risk, particularly Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis. The final chapter shall attempt to situate new audience research and risk in relation to a more general understanding of environmentalism and the mass media. Here, I wish to show that social theories of risk present a new perspective on the media violence debate, one that calls for an integrative approach to an understanding of this controversial issue.

Notes

1 Between 1908 and 1913, New York and London passed a series of regulations that set out to reduce the risk of fire, altering the layout of cinemas and in turn the viewing experience, in order to make the cinema a safe leisure activity. Many New York clerics campaigned for greater control of films and audiences in order to reduce the ‘risk of damnation’. See Uricchio and Pearson (1994, p.45) for more information about nickelodeons and New York regulations of the cinema, and see Kuhn (1988, p.16) for information about the Cinematographic Bill (1909) and British regulation of early cinema.

2 The mayor of New York City received letters and complaints about the connections between the rise in immigrants, urbanisation, and the corruption of the young, and the rise of nickelodeons between 1908 and 1909. The film industry sought to counter such accusations, but the die was cast, and even though such accusations were founded upon impressionistic and anecdotal evidence, they remained a significant factor in the growth of cinema, leading to various different censorship laws (see Kuhn, 1988). For example, the Cinematographic Bill (1909) was intended to ‘safeguard the public from the danger which arises from fires at cinematographic entertainments’ and yet, according to Kuhn (1988, p.16) there was no evidence to suggest that any such fires had taken place.

3 See Kuhn (1988) and Mathews (1993) for more information about the history of censorship, and see Barker and Petley (1997) for more details about perceived moral and social risks of popular culture, in particular media violence.

4 I am referring to cinemas in the ‘first world’; cinema disasters do occur in developing countries, for example India.

5 There are a number of studies which have detailed the press coverage of media violence controversies. See, amongst others, Barker and Petley (1997), Cumberbatch and Howitt (1989), Petley, 1997, Barker, 1984a, 1984b. As to movie stars denouncing levels of violence, Dustin Hoffman, Gregory Peck are two examples, see Hoffman, 1996.

6 For detailed discussion of the Suzanne Capper case and the James Bulger case see Buckingham (1996, pp.19-55) and the Home Affairs Committee, 1994, Video Violence and Young Offenders. London: HMSO. For discussion of the Dunblane massacre, where Thomas Hamilton gunned down 15 infants, see newspaper coverage from Thursday March 14, 1996 onwards. In particular see, the Guardian, Thursday March 14
For more details about environmental risks and globalization, see Beck, 1992, and Risk Society for a useful overview of this issue. See also, Krimsky and Golding, 1992, Social Theories of Risk for a detailed discussion of different perspectives of risk and society, and Lash, Szersynski and Wynne, 1996 for different discussions of the environment, the self, and the politics of knowledge.


'Moral panic' is a term applied to the way in which the mass media manufacture news items in order to amplify negative and anxiety ridden perceptions of 'risky' activities, such as taking drugs, or watching violent movies. The theory of 'moral panics' was invented by Cohen (1972) and Cohen and Young (1973), although see Pearson (1983) and Kasparsen (1992) for more examples of this type of research.


The film, produced by Warner Bros., was scheduled for release on 18 November in the UK, but was withheld by the BBFC until 24 February 1995.

For examples of such research see Gunter and Wober (1988), Hill (1997), Barker and Brooks (1997), and for similar research in children's responses to violence see Buckingham (1996) and Hargrave (1996) amongst others.
Dangerous Movies

Media violence is an emotive topic. There has been a great deal of writing in the area of media violence, but there is very little of this that truly aims to treat this subject in a rational and non-judgemental manner. The aim of this thesis is to redress the balance. It is high time that researchers should deal with both the negative and positive aspects of media violence and attempt to consider why, despite the vast amount of negative literature on this subject, many people still choose to watch films and programmes that are shocking and entertaining. Therefore, this thesis will examine the social construction of media violence, and attempt to understand individual responses to films and television programmes which contain violence; it is my intention to show that everyone has a propensity to take risks, and that active consumers of media violence are engaged in a risk-taking activity that is concerned with virtual risks that are part of our imagination, not part of our experience of real violence in everyday life.

Consequently, what I want to outline in this chapter are various different approaches to understanding the subject of media violence in order to argue that there has been very little theoretical and empirical research that really engages with the perceived ‘risks’ and benefits of watching media violence. Most research focuses on anxieties about the negative effects of media violence, specifically behavioural effects, such as ‘copycat’ violence. This ‘research’ presupposes media violence is both harmful and hazardous to individuals and to the environment; it assumes that
the effects of watching television can be measured just like any other product on the market, in order to prove a causal link between watching violence and negative attitudes or behaviour. Detailed surveys show that this type of ‘research’ has preconceived ends and fixed assumptions; its research methods are neither reliable or valid (Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989; Gauntlett, 1995; Buckingham and Allerton, 1996). And yet this type of ‘research’ is the most dominant in this area. The reason why this is the case can be linked to the emotive nature of this subject. Media violence is a common concern of the public, the media, and the government, and because anxiety about media violence focuses on the protection of children, it is a ‘problem’ that people would like to see resolved as soon as possible.

The construction of media violence as an environmental risk, a risk that must be contained and regulated in order to protect the safety of our future environment, is the starting point for this thesis. It is because media violence is perceived to be an environmental threat that risk analysis proves to be so useful in understanding the link between environmentalism and the mass media. My own approach to media violence is one that utilizes a number of different methodologies from several different disciplines. It is my contention that a combination of macro and micro levels of analysis, and ‘critical ethnographic research’ (Moores, 1993) is the best approach to understanding the ‘risks’ and rewards of media violence. By using theoretical and empirical developments in Media Studies, Cultural Studies and Risk Analysis, it is possible to examine the social and political construction of media violence, and individual practices to viewing violence. It is this new approach which brings together media studies and social theories of risk that will help to situate the subject of media violence in a social, political and environmental arena.
**Dominant Readings**

The most dominant readings of media violence and its related issues are readings which rely on experimental psychology and the ‘effects’ paradigm (see for example, Bandura et al., 1963, Tannenbaum and Zillman, 1975). Other research into media violence includes feminist and psychoanalytic readings of pornography, horror and the news (see, for example, Kappeller, 1995; Creed, 1993; Clover, 1992; Soothill and Walby, 1991), cultural studies approaches to the structure and reception of texts which contain violence (see, Barker, 1984a, 1989; Sconce, 1996), and media studies approaches to the production and consumption of violence and its relationship with other areas of mass communication (Cohen and Young, 1973; Barker and Petley, 1997).

In this section, I want to consider the theoretical and methodological problems in using the cause-effect paradigm, and feminist and psychoanalytic approaches to media violence. Such approaches begin with the assumption that watching violence is a negative act that is potentially dangerous to other, weaker and more vulnerable members of the community, i.e. women and children. Psychology, feminism and film theory pathologises the film viewer. Buckingham and Allerton (1996, p.7) comment: ‘viewers are... “other” people, who are presumed to be less intelligent, healthy, or well adjusted than ourselves...viewers are typically categorised as “sensation seekers”, or “addicts”... the pleasures that viewers derive from watching television come to be seen as somehow suspect or invalid.’ Consequently, this approach to media violence is overwhelmingly negative, and
suspicious of media violence as an entertainment activity: it is something to be monitored and controlled.

Thus, from this perspective, active consumers of media violence are seen to be immature, irrational and somehow defective, whereas other, more vulnerable viewers of television, such as women and children, are perceived to be impressionable and at risk to the negative 'effects' of viewing violence (see Barlow and Hill, 1985). We can already see that this methodology poses some problems when attempting to understand viewing processes. Before such research has even begun, viewers are treated as passive and unable to differentiate between fact and fiction; and media violence texts are perceived to be negative and hazardous to the environment. This is not an open and objective method of research.

Effects Research

There are three common 'effects' associated with viewing violence. The first, 'behavioural effects' is concerned with 'copycat' violence, and an example of this is the James Bulger case, where two young boys were alleged to have seen a horror film Child's Play 3, and then murdered a young child (Buckingham, 1996). The second 'effect' of media violence is concerned with attitudes or beliefs, for example towards gender or ethnicity, and an example of this would be the influence of negative, stereotypical portrayals of women in the media on male attitudes to women (Gerbner et al., 1980, 1986). The third 'effect', and the one that is most related to the research in this thesis, is concerned with emotional responses to television, and commonly refers to the desensitization hypothesis and cultivation effects (Gerbner, 1988, 1994). Here,
television is seen to either increase fears of crime in real life, or to desensitize 'heavy' viewers of media violence to real violence.\textsuperscript{2}

Effects research set out to 'prove' these alleged negative effects of watching media violence, and they did so with alarming regularity. Laboratory experiments (see Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1963, Donnerstein and Berkowitz, 1981), field experiments (see Feshbach and Singer, 1971, Parke, Berkowitz, Leyens, West and Sebastian, 1977), correlation studies (see Belson, 1978, Van Evra, 1990), and longitudinal panel studies (see Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder and Huesmann, 1972, 1977) all claim to have found 'proof' of the negative effects of television. Over time, this 'evidence' has accumulated into what is commonly referred to by political and social commentators as 'a vast world literature' (Barker, 1997a, p.16) and anti-violence campaigners such as David Alton, the Liberal Democrat peer, can claim that this vast body of evidence demonstrates links between screen violence and negative effects which cannot be ignored.

However, this 'evidence' has been widely criticized. Detailed studies by Cumberbatch and Howitt (1989) and Gauntlett (1995), for example, have successfully argued that these studies are seriously flawed. Cumberbatch and Howitt (1989, p.9) note that effects research is based on an extremely crude theory that viewers are passive and experience identical responses to watching television. There are now many studies by Buckingham (1993b, 1996), Gray (1992), Schlesinger et al. (1992), and Hill (1997), to name but a few, that reveal viewers are active and experience a wide variety of responses to viewing television. Gauntlett (1995, p.10, 12) points out:

'Effects' researchers all too often fail to define, examine and reflect upon precisely what it is they are concerned about. The question 'what is the effect on viewers of all the violence on television?', for example, is asked as if it were just as clear cut as any other scientific problem about the response of a liquid to heat...(this is an) inappropriate 'scientific' view of what is basically art and/or
entertainment material, intended for consumption by conscious audiences rather than content-counting analysts.

Criticism of effects research has therefore been widespread in the academic discipline, and yet such comments are rarely aired in the media. Murdock (1997, p.69) succinctly explains why this is the case:

The attraction of these ‘many studies’ is not simply that they offer the illusion of strength in numbers, but that they fit perfectly with the common-sense assumption that, since ‘it stands to reason’ that there must be a link, responsible research is simply confirming what reasonable people already know, and that refusing to accept this is patently unreasonable.

Thus, once popular and political opinion has constructed media violence texts as dangerous and hazardous to the environment, it does not take long for ‘science’ to be called upon to verify the claims of public opinion. Murdock (1997, p.69) writes: ‘this circular relationship between empiricist science and common-sense thinking was built into academic work on media “effects” from the outset’.

Buckingham and Allerton (1996) point out other methodological problems to the cause-effect paradigm which echo criticisms by other researchers who have reviewed this type of effects research in detail (Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989; Buckingham, 1987; Gauntlett, 1995). One problem concerns the ‘nature of the “stimulus”‘; films and programmes which are used in this type of research are classified as ‘violent’ by the researcher, rather than by the subject of study: ‘this term is applied to a wide range of material, from Nightmare on Elm Street, to Hopalong Cassidy to anthropological documentaries about circumcision rites’ (Buckingham and Allerton, 1996, p.9). Clearly, who determines what is ‘violent’ is very significant to the outcome...
of a scientific study, and if the researcher fails to differentiate between different types of media violence, then they have failed to take into account the diversity of material available and the diversity of responses to this material.

Another problem, related to this, is the fact that researchers all too often assume that watching film or television programmes is a solitary activity, decontextualised from everyday life (see Feshback and Singer, 1971, Donnerstein and Berkowitz, 1981). This is clearly not the case. There is now a growing body of literature which demonstrates that watching film and television is a social activity and is very much part of our everyday experience. Work by Ann Gray (1992) and Marie Gillespie (1995), for example, reveals that viewers watch and discuss what they see at the cinema and at home, and part of the pleasures of watching film and television is to engage in social processes, before, during and after the viewing event. Thus, key researchers in television audience studies, such as Morley (1992) and Ang (1991, 1996) argue for the social contexts of television viewing to be taken into account. This is of particular significance to the social processes of viewing violence, because, as we shall see in later chapters in this study, one of the reasons people choose to watch media violence is because it is a social activity.

Perhaps one of the most central problems with 'effects' research is that it assumes that viewers have difficulty differentiating between real violence and fictional violence. Buckingham and Allerton (1996, p.9) sum up the significance of this as follows:

Seeing a gory murder in a television programme is clearly very different to seeing a gory murder in real life, in all sorts of fairly obvious ways, although the two are often regarded as parallel. The simple equation of television with direct experience enables the importation of ready-made psychological theories, and thus sustains the hegemony of the discipline. Above all, what is neglected here
is the mediated, textual nature of the experience of television – precisely the
dimension that has been so comprehensively ignored by research to date on the
effects of television violence.

This is an important point and one that will be taken up in later chapters in relation to
risk and media violence. What we shall see is that viewers of media violence choose to
see this type of entertainment precisely because it is fictional, and far removed from real
experience of violence.

What we can see from this brief overview of some of the theoretical and
methodological problems of ‘effects’ research is that it systematically fails to address
the complex and dynamic nature of viewing violence. Researchers cannot measure the
effects of television in the same way that scientists can measure the effects of car
pollution. As Gauntlett (1995, p.12) points out:

Any effect which may occur could only do so very indirectly, as television
merely sends out information which is perceived and interpreted by individuals
who are responsible for their actions; television can suggest meanings and
values, but the influence of these has to be far removed from the usual
definitions of ‘cause and effect’.

This fundamental problem with research into viewing violence should indicate that any
researcher who wishes to understand the social processes and individual experiences
associated with media violence will have to begin from a more open and objective
standpoint. Before I examine research in cultural studies and media studies which
attempts to do this, I would like to briefly turn to feminist and psychological approaches
to media violence in order to point out that such theoretical methods of analysis also fail
to consider the complex nature of viewing media violence.
There are a number of key studies in the area of media violence that utilize feminist and psychoanalytic methodologies. These studies are primarily located within the discipline of Film Studies. Here media violence is treated as a theoretical subject, and viewers of media violence are perceived to be 'spectators', passive to the dominant readings of film narrative and film apparatus. When using this type of research methodology, a writer will have a clear set of political and ideological assumptions about spectatorship and media violence, which, as is the case with 'effects' research, is already present before the research has even begun. Thus, such readings of media violence, whilst interesting and stimulating, have little to offer in the way of objective and reliable research data.

For example, Barbara Creed (1993), in her book *The Monstrous Feminine*, utilizes Freudian and Lacanian theories of sexual difference in order to challenge patriarchal assumptions about women as victims in horror movies. Creed argues that men, rather than fearing the monster in a horror film, fear the 'monstrous feminine'; it is a fear of the female as castrator, not the castrated which terrifies male spectators in the cinematic environment. For Creed, this is an indication of how powerful women really are; the female spectator can feel empowered by identifying herself as a female castrator, she can adopt sadistic and masochistic pleasure from the 'monstrous feminine' (1996, p.155). The problem with this theory of cinematic spectatorship is that it is restricted by feminist and psychoanalytic discourses. There is no sense that 'spectators' are engaged in an active and dynamic process, but rather that they are trapped by patriarchal institutions and the labyrinth of the unconscious mind. The only 'pleasure' to be gained from the cinematic experience is one of masochism or sadism,
the only reason for watching these films in the first place is to satisfy voyeuristic and fetishistic desires.6

This method of examining horror films is dominated by gender politics. There does not seem to be any attempt to acknowledge that aspects of viewing violence, for example feeling your heart beat faster, have little to do with gender, and more to do with heightened anticipation and increased adrenalin levels. Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws* is another analysis of horror films that is determined by feminism and psychoanalysis. Once again, Clover presents an interesting reading of the pleasures of horror films but these are centered around theories of identification and psychoanalysis. Male and female spectators 'identify' with female victims; indeed they cross gender lines, emphasising a 'feminine masochism' which cuts across familiar film theories of a 'one way eye/camera' that foregrounds 'aggressive voyeurism' (Clover, 1992, p.230) to open up a two way eye/camera in relation to horror. This reading of horror is based upon a binary opposition; even when Clover opens up the traditional feminist and film theory approach to spectatorship, she can still only introduce two ways of reading film. This does not leave much room for multiple readings, or dynamic and contradictory responses to media violence. Nor does it allow for the fact that the issue of identification is one that is open to interpretation. Martin Barker has critiqued the model of identification as used in media studies. He writes: 'the concept of identification has no scientific validity as one for understanding the relationship between media studies and audiences' (Barker, 1989, p.109). Neither Clover or Creed acknowledge the weaknesses in using the concept of identification, and yet such a concept underpins all of their theories about spectatorship and horror.
The very term 'spectator' implies a passive response to media violence, when it is clear from empirical studies in audience research that the viewer is active and very much engaged in physical and emotional responses to media violence on many different levels. The fact that Clover and Creed do not acknowledge empirical studies in audience research, nor attempt such research themselves, makes their theories regarding horror inappropriate to any real understanding of audience practices. Such writers make grand claims that are not backed up by any grounded research. Even when film theorists argue for different types of interpretations of a text, they still assume what audiences think, rather than asking audiences what they themselves have to say about certain films. For example, Cynthia A. Freeland (1995, p.140), writing about 'realist horror', the type of films that are discussed in this study, makes this comment:

My own strategy of reading this genre involves me, admittedly, in a sort of tension: ideological critique focuses on problematic ways in which realist horror films create discourses of knowledge and power, serving conservative and patriarchal interests, and it is likely to produce a critical view of realist horror. But I have also tried to foreground the horror and mass media audience's ability to produce subversive interpretations, acknowledging that viewers do indeed have a significant power and interpretive role in reading, and resisting, realist horror films.

Freeland acknowledges a tension between ideological practices and an understanding of audience reactions to horror, but she is still unable to refer to studies in what horror audiences actually have to say about this subject. This lack of any evidence or reference to empirical research makes such theoretical approaches weak and far removed from the real issues of audience interpretation of media violence.

Nevertheless, Freeland's acknowledgement of the significance of audience resistance is certainly more in line with audience research in this study. Freeland is right to suggest that audiences have 'a significant power', and her research is more in
keeping with philosophical and cognitive readings of horror than the feminist psychoanalytic approaches we looked at earlier. Freeland shares an interest in horror that is similar to that of Noel Carroll and his more common sense theory of the cognitive and evaluative processes of watching horror. In *The Philosophy of Horror* Carroll argues that when we watch horror movies we are engaged in the ‘thought theory of emotional responses to fictions’ (1990, p.79). Thus, we are not afraid of the monster in *Child’s Play 3*, but rather we are afraid of the thought that this monster might be real. Carroll also argues that we do not identify with the monster or victim by simply feeling what they feel, but, rather, audiences have a more comprehensive view of events taking place, and assimilate different points of view.

This is a much more dynamic approach to understanding audience reactions and Carroll has some interesting points to make about an audience’s conscious desire to respond to their own fear and revulsion. This ties in with the findings of the focus group interviews in this thesis which suggests that viewers like to test boundaries in relation to media violence. In the next section I want to consider a more macro-sociological approach to viewing violence, and it is in the fields of cultural and media studies that we shall find research which is more in line with my own theoretical and methodological practices in this study.

**Cultural and Media Studies**

There are a number of significant studies in the history and reception of media violence texts. In *The Manufacture of News*, Cohen and Young (1973) demonstrated
that the media do not reflect, but rather construct reality and create ‘moral panics’ about a range of issues, for example, youth subcultures such as mods and rockers. This shows that the way in which the media select and generate information about ‘social problems’ indicates that a sociological understanding of the mass media is significant to analysis of media violence. This theory is discussed in more detail in the next chapter, but what I want to point out here is that the problem with such a theory of ‘moral panics’ is that it places too much emphasis on the power of the media. As we shall see in an analysis of anti-violence campaign groups and their adoption of the discourse of environmentalism, there are other factors which help to shape the political and cultural construction of ‘social problems’. Indeed, these factors are in many ways as, if not more important than the ‘manufacture of news’: the function of the media is to communicate, whereas the function of non-governmental organizations is to bring about social change.

Geoffrey Pearson in *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983) also charts the cyclical nature of public anxiety regarding certain ‘risky’ enterprises, from riding a bicycle to reading ‘penny dreadfuls’. This history of ‘respectable fears’ is extremely useful in situating contemporary concerns about media violence within an historical and cultural context. It offers a macro-sociological approach to the issue of media violence. Pearson’s argument that people have always feared the loss of family values and respect for parents, and have always predicted a future of violence and social unrest, is particularly appropriate to our understanding of environmentalism and media violence in future chapters in this study. Environmentalism is a contemporary concern, but it has its origins in previous fears for the conservation of an idealised and ‘natural’ society. Thus, the historical context of environmentalism and media violence will be significant to any sustained analysis of this subject.
Pearson (1984), Murdock (1997) and Petley (1997, p.87) have shown that behind public anxiety of media violence there remains a ‘potent strain of class dislike and fear’. We shall see the significance of this in relation to the way in which dominant social institutions wish to control and regulate the risks of media violence. Similarly, Martin Barker’s research into horror comics in *A Haunt of Fears: the Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (1984b) and *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (1989) situates current media violence controversies in a wider political and social context. Here, Barker examines the production and dissemination of knowledge about violence and children’s comics and finds that such controversies are less about the comics themselves and more about political concerns, in this instance the threat of war and social unrest. Talking about censorship and the comic *Action*, Barker makes this point: ‘In each case, what has been removed is not the “excessive violence”… It is a very cynical reference to authority. Authority is just not allowed to be shown in compromised positions… Yet all this has happened *under the guise* of removing excessive violence’ (1989, p.35). We can see here that a close analysis of the structure of the comic *Action* and an understanding about the political and social issues of the time (the Vietnam war and social unrest) have proved fruitful in suggesting reasons for censorship of this comic. Barker presents a convincing case for the political and cultural construction of media violence controversies, and he does so by researching the production and consumption of such texts.8

Within cultural studies, there has been a rise in research into fans of horror films which places particular emphasis on what viewers have to say about their reasons for watching certain types of entertainment, entertainment which is considered ‘risky’ and separate from more mainstream leisure activities. Jeffrey Sconce (1996), Mark Kermode (1997) and David Sanjek (1990) have all examined media violence from the
point of view of the fan's perspective, and this research has much in common with my own interest in active consumers of films such as *Natural Born Killers*, or *Reservoir Dogs*, consumers who come to the viewing experience with a certain set of assumptions and expectations, what Barker calls 'investment' in a film.⁹ We shall see from the next section how new television audience research has begun to concentrate on the ethnography of media consumption, and how this awareness of the social and cultural contexts for film and television viewing has direct implications on the way in which we can understand why people like to watch shocking entertainment.

**New Audience Research**

A number of recent studies in audience research attempt to understand the different types of physical and emotional responses to television by talking to viewers themselves. These studies take into account the social context of television viewing and place an emphasis on the 'social construction of emotions', making reference to research in social psychology about the way in which people can construct different versions of events, none of which may be 'true' but which nevertheless demonstrates the types of discourses available at the time, and the choices people make about language and different forms of communication (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992).

Some recent examples of this approach to audience research can be seen in David Morley's *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (1992), David Buckingham's *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to*
Television (1996), and David Gauntlett's Video Critical: Children, the Environment and Media Power (1997). All of these studies begin with the assumption that listening to audiences will tell us more about their viewing practices than any theoretical paradigms. Consequently, viewers are given primary importance. The results of these research studies show that the viewing experience is an active and dynamic process, and we should not underestimate the 'media literacy' of television audiences who are capable of understanding and interpreting texts in a wide variety of ways. This does not mean to say that the significance of the text is ignored, but rather to highlight that 'textual analysis can be a useful source of hypotheses for audience research' (Buckingham, 1996, p.311).

For example, in Video Critical, Gauntlett finds that when children were asked to make a video which dealt with environmental issues, they showed a great deal of awareness and anxiety about the environment both on a local and global scale. However, despite this concern, many children felt a sense of paralysis in relation to how to combat environmental problems (Gauntlett, 1997, p.145). Gauntlett links this finding to a tendency in media coverage of environmental issues to draw attention away from sociological explanations about environmental degradation towards a more individualistic explanation of such issues. Thus, the children may be aware of environmentalism, but their awareness is influenced by the way in which the media report such issues. For Gauntlett, this is an example of 'hegemonic bending', a theory about the way in which structural, social and political accounts in the news are shaped into more individualistic, psychological stories. Gauntlett (1997, p.151) himself notes the similarity between this treatment of an environmental problem and the treatment of media violence. The James Bulger case is a good example of how the tragic death of
one child came to dominate the way in which the news media dealt with the wider sociological issue of violence in our society.

David Buckingham’s study, *Moving Images* (1996) is similarly appropriate to the subject of this research, and Buckingham’s findings about the way in which children understand and engage with horror, melodrama and the news can be seen to validate my own data analysis. Buckingham finds evidence to suggest that ‘in the case of fiction, “negative” responses are often inextricably connected with “positive” ones, such as excitement and enjoyment’ (1996, p.306). This links with the theory put forward in this study that there are ‘risks’ and rewards to viewing violence. Buckingham also found that ‘children develop a variety of “coping strategies” that enable them to avoid or deal with these responses’ (1996, p.307). This means of ‘coping’ with positive and negative responses can be directly related to the reactive mechanisms of self-censorship and boundary testing which participants discuss in my own research findings, detailed in Chapters ten and eleven.

Out of the three research studies discussed so far, only Buckingham actually considers the issue of media violence and the way in which viewers respond to fictional and mediated images of violence. And yet, despite the similarities with Buckingham’s research and my own, his viewers are children, not adults. When it comes to critical ethnographic research into adult consumers of media violence there are very few examples to refer to, despite the fact that most media violence controversies are sparked off by a movie which is intended for adults, and which will have been given an ‘18’ certificate by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). The reason why this is the case is to do with the nature of the media violence debate which is framed around anxiety and concern about the protection of children (see for example, Newson, 1994; PAPFCPG, 1997). However, as researchers such as Buckingham (1996) have shown,
children are less concerned about 'video nasties' and more concerned about violence on the news. Indeed, most of the children in Buckingham's study are better able to 'cope' with horror films than their parents (1996, pp.254-299).

It is time that more researchers begin to consider the way in which adult viewers respond to media violence. Recent examples of this type of research are few and far between. Research by Gunter and Wober (1988), Docherty (1990), and Morrison, MacGregor and Thorpe, (1993) examines responses to violence in television fiction and factual television. Gunter and Wober (1988) in Violence on Television: What the Viewers Think have some interesting points to make about how viewers perceive the issue of media violence. Whilst viewers claim that they are worried about the amount of violence on television, their own viewing practices indicate that they themselves watch crime drama and other programmes which contain violence (Gunter and Wober, p.67). Viewers are worried about the negative 'effects' of media violence on other people, not themselves. This finding is similar to other research projects, for example, Buckingham (1996) and Hargrave (1996), and is of particular interest in relation to perceptions of risk and media violence, and individual risk-taking behaviour, issues which are discussed in Chapter seven.

Women Viewing Violence (Schlesinger et al., 1992) and Regulating for Changing Values (Kieran et al., 1997) are two studies which attempt to examine the way in which adults engage with the controversy of media violence, but both studies are problematic and fail to provide an objective and comprehensive account of viewing practices. Both of these studies are critiqued in detail in Chapter seven, but what is important to point out here is that Schlesinger et al., fail to consider the potential pleasures to be gained from watching media violence, and instead confine themselves to an examination of portrayals of women as victims of violent crime; it is not surprising
to learn that women who have had experience of violence perceived such portrayals of women on television as negative and in no way entertaining. *Women Viewing Violence* therefore is a study of a particular type of violence, and a particular type of viewer, one that could not be classified as an active consumer of media violence. In the case of Kieran et al., and their study of television viewers and moral and ethical values, this study only touches the surface of viewing violence, and indeed is more concerned with how audiences perceive a wide range of issues, rather than how audiences engage with media violence texts.

Thus, it can be seen that my own research in active consumers of media violence marks a significant contribution to our understanding of how and why people like to watch films and television programmes which contain violence. The qualitative research in this study uses discourse analysis and critical ethnographic practice as a means to understand the way in which people discuss and respond to media violence. This research was first presented in *Shocking Entertainment: Viewer Response to Violent Movies* (Hill, 1997) as untheorised, raw data. However, in this study the data has been interpreted in relation to social theories of risk and individual risk-taking behaviour. This is because risk presents a useful means of hypothesizing about the perceived ‘risks’ and rewards of watching media violence. Why social theories of risk are significant to an understanding of individual viewing practices will be explained in the next section, where the relationship between environmentalism, risk and the mass media will reveal a new approach to the topic of media violence.
Social Theories of Risk

Risk analysis is fast becoming a popular subject in the social sciences. There are two parallel approaches to the study of risk, one which involves scientific studies, case analyses and empirical findings, the other which involves social theories of risk, focusing on human response to risks and hazards, and the role of social and cultural factors in the experience of risk. Krimsky and Golding (1992, p.xiii) explain the growth of risk analysis as follows:

The field of risk studies grew out of the practical needs of industrialized societies to regulate technology and to protect their citizenry from natural and technological hazards. From its inception the study of risk was positioned at the intersection of academic, governmental, and industrial interests. Rising public concern about environmental hazards, in conjunction with growing corporate fears about liability, brought risk assessment and risk management to the foreground in the public and private sectors.

The way in which risk analysis has divided into two fields, the one concerned with measuring the effects of natural and industrial hazards, the other more interested in examining perceptions of risk, and social and cultural roles in risk management, can be seen to mirror the way in which audience research and media violence has separated into the study of 'effects' and the study of individual and social responses to media violence.

Consequently, how social theories of risk attempt to bridge this gap and utilise conceptual frameworks and empirical evidence is one that is of particular interest to this study of the 'risks' of media violence. Social theories of risk have focused on cognitive and cultural approaches to an understanding of risk. Ortwin Renn (1992) presents a clear and helpful overview of the major sociological perspectives of risk and how these
have grown from technical, economic and psychological approaches to risk. Out of these three areas, it is the psychometric paradigm and its interest in subjective judgement about the nature and magnitude of risks that relates to perceptions of risk and media violence. The psychometric paradigm explores the qualitative characteristics of risk and examines the contextual variables which shape an individual’s perception and management of risk (see for example, Slovic, 1987; Slovic, Fischoff and Lichtenstein, 1981; Marris et al., 1997). The qualitative characteristics of risk and media violence will also be examined because perceptions of risk shape the way in which people choose to engage in risk-taking behaviour.

Cultural Theories

The psychometric paradigm has influenced the way in which sociological and cultural perspectives of risk have developed. The starting point for sociological and anthropological approaches to risk is that perceptions of risk are filtered through social and cultural frameworks. Such cultural theories of risk are influenced by anthropological studies in social organization. The cultural perspective of risk focuses on proposed prototypes of cultural belief patterns which help to shape perceptions of reality. Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), Schwartz and Thompson (1990), Douglas (1992) and Wildavsky and Dake (1990) all identify a number of cultural patterns. There are four commonly proposed patterns, the fatalist, the hierarchist, the individualist and the egalitarian.

Renn points out that the cultural theory of risk helps us to understand that what people and organizations perceive as undesirable events reflects their perception and evaluation of the cultural definition of the social context and its relevance for their
worldviews’ (1992, p.76). However, despite its usefulness, the cultural theory of risk can be restrictive, and offer a type of ‘cultural imperialism’ (Kasperson, 1992, p.164) which is too deterministic. As shall be argued in Chapters six and seven, a typology of cultural bias does not help to explain the various and often contradictory responses to risk-taking behaviour. What is more, it fails to take into account the fact that people construct versions of events which aren’t necessarily true, but reflect types of discourses and language choices. Thus, elements of the cultural theory of risk are useful in understanding social contexts, but these are hypotheses, not exclusive explanations.

Social Theories

There are a number of different sociological studies of risk which have been well documented by other researchers (see for example, Renn, 1985,1992; Krimsky and Golding, 1992), and there is not room to undertake an extensive overview here. However, it is worth outlining some of these studies in order to highlight the relevance of risk analysis to studies in mass communication. There have been studies on the organizational aspects of risk (Perrow, 1984; Clarke, 1989); investigations into risk conflicts and their causes (O’Riordan, 1983; Wynne, 1996), and analyses of media coverage and communication of risks (Peters, 1990; Hansen, 1993; Anderson, 1997). It is in the analyses of media coverage that the relationship between media studies and risk analysis becomes most apparent. There have been some interesting studies in how the media construct and disseminate information about risk events, and environmental issues, such as the Chernobyl accident, or the seal plague that affected a large number of seals along the Norfolk coast in Britain. However, the way in which risk analysts have examined environmental and industrial hazards has usually been defined by the
way in which the media communicate risk events. Whilst this is significant to an analysis of risk, it does not open up the arena of risk analysis to other areas of investigation. Such studies have been confined to analyzing discourses and media texts and examining the impact of such communication on the general public (Peters, 1990; Hansen, 1993). There has been little endeavor on the part of risk analysts to see the mass media from a more macro-sociological perspective.

There are two recent studies in risk which attempt to broaden the debate and cross fertilize with other disciplines, such as cultural and media studies. Alison Anderson (1997, p.1), in *Media, Culture and the Environment*, makes an important point when she claims that the ‘study of risk and environment deserves to play a crucial role in framing this contested terrain’. Anderson’s book promises to examine the role of the media in constructing ‘social problems’, but her area of investigation is restricted to environmental issues; she fails to see that the ‘masterframe of environmental discourse’ (Eder, 1996) ensures that other issues within mass communications, such as popular culture, or globalization and transnationalism are also related to risk and environmentalism. Anderson considers key approaches in cultural studies (Morley, 1992) about ‘active’ audiences and their critical interpretation of news events, but once again, the promise of interesting parallels between media studies and risk analysis are not fulfilled. Instead, Anderson is content to frame television audiences in relation to ‘circuits of communication’ and collective identities (Anderson, 1997, p.201). She offers nothing new in the way of understanding viewing practices, or examining risk-taking behaviour in relation to popular culture. Indeed, she merely adds traditional theories in mass communication to social theories of risk: there is no real sense of cross-fertilization here.
A more promising study by Simon Cottle (1997) begins with an examination of local TV news programmes about environmental issues, but expands the findings of this content analysis to incorporate a more influential approach to the study of risk and the media, where the media is seen to be a mediating force, rather than a relayer of messages. Cottle (1997, p.1) summarises the potential for cross-fertilization between media studies and risk analysis as follows:

Mass Communications researchers...have attended to the environment as a mediated ‘social problem’ and pursued processes of source interventions, claims-making and discursive contestation waged via the media public stage. They have yet to specifically pursue, however, the complex ways in which the mass media articulates with and mediates both expert systems and lay knowledge.

Cottle is right to point out that mass communication researchers have failed to take on board the theoretical and social implications of risk and environmentalism. For Cottle, this means that an interpretation of local news programmes from the point of view of risk analysis can reveal that there is an expert and lay knowledge of risk at work in the mass media. We can understand this division between expert and lay perspectives of risk by exploring wider theoretical issues relating to social dominance and social processes of contestation. For Cottle, macro-sociological theories of a ‘risk society’ and ‘reflexive modernization’ can provide a useful source of enquiry. Macro-theories of risk, as outlined by Ulrich Beck (1992) in *Risk Society*, and Beck, Giddens and Lash (1995) in *Reflexive Modernization*, will be considered at length in the next chapter. Briefly, a risk society is one in which the risks and hazards of industrialization are visible, and pose a threat to the health and welfare of our local and global environment. These risks and hazards are the site of risk consciousness and conflict, and mobilize a reflexivity which challenges the structures of traditional modern society. What I would
like to point out here is that macro and micro levels of sociological analysis can and will be useful to an understanding of risk, environmentalism and the mass media. Such an analysis need not restrict itself to one line of enquiry: the environment is not the only cause for social concern. It is my argument that by using a cross disciplinary approach we can situate the issue of media violence, in a wider, political, social and environmental context.

Perhaps the most influential theory of risk in relation to my own line of enquiry about the social construction of media violence as an environmental hazard is the theory of the social amplification of risk (Kasperson and Renn et al., 1988). This theory attempts to present a holistic approach to the study of risk communication. The theory of the social amplification of risk is analyzed in relation to media violence in the next chapter, but a brief synopsis is appropriate here. Kasperson and Renn et al. (1988) claim that when a risk event occurs, such as a nuclear accident, there are a number of primary and secondary processes that we must take into consideration. Risk is not just about assessing the dangers of this risk event to the environment, but it is also about the social process of risk communication. Thus, formal organizations, social institutions, cultural and social groups, and individuals are all part of the social processes of risk. Kasperson (1992, p.162) explains: 'the sociological and individual interactions (are) inherently inseparable, with the particular social mechanisms that shape particular societal responses functioning in a kaleidoscopic manner'. It is this wide ranging approach to an understanding of risk communication that has been of particular help in relating seemingly disparate areas, such as media violence and liability insurance, to theories of mass communication and environmentalism.
It is this type of integrative framework for understanding and managing environmental and industrial risks that is of interest here. Ortwin Renn (1992, p.79 explains this as follows:

It has become evident that a novel and integrative framework is necessary to capture the full extent of the social experience of risk and to study the dynamic processing of risks by the various participants in a pluralistic society. Such a novel approach cannot and should not replace existing perspectives, but should instead offer a meta-perspective that assigns each perspective an appropriate place and function. The major objective of such a meta-perspective is to make the various perspectives compatible with each other and to provide a semantic framework that allows comparative analysis across the various perspectives.

In the final section of this chapter I want to show that a comparative analysis across various different perspectives, including media studies, cultural studies, and risk analysis can provide a ‘meta-perspective’ which will help us to understand mass communications and the social experience of risk.

Towards a New Approach

Martin Barker (1997b, p.70) believes that in relation to the media violence debate ‘What is happening around the media today bears not one mark of a rational debate in which people weigh evidence, assess arguments, and debate knowledge’. So, what are academic researchers in this field to do? Barker and Petley (1997, p.10) present this challenge to other colleagues in audience research:

There is an unexamined model in ‘effects’ research about how we might be influenced by the media: what is it, and what are the problems with it? And
what interests - political, financial, bureaucratic - lie behind the seventy-year tradition of such research? And, finally, what is it about this body of ideas about 'effects' that it so strongly resists challenges to its validity?

There are many questions posed in this challenge. Barker and Petley know that 'effects' research has been examined and critiqued in considerable detail (see amongst others, Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989, Gauntlett, 1995), and yet this type of research still remains unchallenged by politicians, the media and public opinion. This type of examination, then, is not enough. Researchers need to re-examine the 'effects' model; they must discover why it is so successful, and they must present new approaches which challenge conventional assumptions about media violence.

I want to suggest that a re-examination of the 'effects' debate will reveal a new method of approach that can help us to understand the full extent of the social experience of media violence and the dynamic processes at work. It is my thesis that the nature of the screen violence debate can be related to a specific sociological phenomenon, that of risk. Social theories of risk reveal a new way of understanding the current discourse on media violence, and it is my contention that once we have understood the origins of this discourse, we can begin to change the pattern of the debate.

In the next chapter I want to outline Ulrich Beck's theory of a risk society (1992) in order to reveal that there is a strong correlation between the effects paradigm and the risk paradigm, as outlined by Beck. The risk paradigm draws on the political and social significance of modernization hazards, such as carbon monoxide, or acid rain. With the mobilization of citizens' campaign groups, such as Greenpeace, multinational corporations are challenged to regulate their products, to make the environment 'safe'. It is due to the success of these campaign groups to publicize and fight for the
right to live in a ‘safe’ environment that politicians and the judiciary are forced to take such issues seriously and implement new legislation.

In the same way that campaign groups such as Greenpeace highlight the hazards associated with certain modernization products, organizations such as Christian Action Research and Education (CARE), or the Movement for Christian Democracy (MCD) present media violence as a health hazard that can affect, not just individuals, but society as a whole. The next chapter will outline how and why anti-violence campaigners have utilized the risk paradigm. I will then critique this paradigm in relation to media violence, and go on to assert that, as critics of ‘effects’ research have been saying for some time (Gauntlett, 1995, p.10), audience response to viewing violence cannot be measured in the same way car pollution can be measured. We are dealing with entertainment, not carbon monoxide. The challenge comes with presenting media violence as a form of entertainment many people choose to engage with.

Research in perceptions of risk, conducted by John Adams (1995) in Risk, show that it is possible to see that individuals form their own ‘risk thermostats’, and choose to take risks because they are aware that there is always a balance between the rewards to be gained from taking risks and the drawbacks to such activities. Adams and Mary Douglas (1995), in Risk and Blame, see this propensity to take risks as a common reaction by individuals to the cultural construction of risk in modern society.

Thus, my thesis that the ‘effects’ debate has utilized the risk paradigm in order to control a product such as media violence can be broadened to include a new way of understanding media violence in all its various forms. If in-depth qualitative research can understand how and why people choose to watch texts which contain violence, and if social and cultural theories of risk can help us to understand the wider implications of these viewing processes, then it is possible to build a new theory with regard to media
violence. The qualitative research used at the close of this study is presented as an indication that this new theory regarding violence and the mass media is founded on hard evidence. Presenting this new theory is a challenge, but one that is not without reward.

**Notes**

1 This case has been well documented by other researchers in the field, and as Buckingham (1996), and Barker and Petley (1997) have shown, there is no evidence that either John Venables or Bobby Thompson, the two murderers of James Bulger, had indeed seen this film at all.

2 For a detailed survey of these three types of effects, see Cumberbatch and Howitt (1989), Gauntlett (1995) and Buckingham and Allerton (1996) amongst others.

3 In the laboratory setting, often films designed specifically for the research project will be shown. For example during a laboratory experiment by Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1963, children were shown a film in which a man hit a bobo doll, and then shown into a room with a bobo doll. If the children were seen to hit the doll, this was taken as an example of the effects of watching the programme. Clearly, experimenter demand and unreal examples of media violence have influenced the outcome of this study (see Gauntlett, 1995, p.17).

4 It is important to point out that whilst Morley (1992) and Ang (1991, 1996) point out the significance of empirical research in the social contexts of television viewing, they themselves have little new research to offer. There is clearly room for a great deal more research in this area.

5 Judith Mayne’s overview of this aspect of film theory, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (1993), is a good introduction to this area, and includes chapters on the subject of spectatorship, and spectatorship as an institution. This form of film theory relies heavily on Freudian and Lacanian theories of voyeurism and film as signifier and signified.

6 In this sense, Creed is building on a history of feminist film criticism that begins with Laura Mulvey and her essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 1989, London: Macmillan.

7 As Buckingham and Allerton (1996, p.20) point out in their overview of children’s negative responses to television, there has been some research into horror audiences, notably Sparks (1986, 1989, 1991) and Zillman et al. (1986) who attempts to consider the social context of fright responses.

8 Annette Kuhn (1988) and Tom Dewe Mathews (1994) have also examined the social and political reasons for censorship in the history of cinema.

9 See an unpublished paper by Barker and Brooks (1997) about action movie fans and their responses to the film *Judge Dredd*. 
10 See for example *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) or *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996) which were both given an 18 certificate by the British Board of Film Classification.

11 Technical analysis of risk involves collecting statistical data and probabilistic risk assessments, and examples of this can be seen in the work of Morgan, 1990, and Renn, 1985. Economic analysis of risk involves the calculation of risks and benefits as utilities; risk analysis ‘is part of a larger cost-benefit consideration in which risks are the expected utility losses resulting from an event or an activity. The ultimate goal is to allocate resources so as to maximize their utility for society’ (Renn, 1992, p.62), see Smith (1986) for an overview of this area.


14 Expert and lay knowledge of risk has been written about in some detail by risk analysts and theorists. Expert knowledge is a scientific perspective and understanding of industrial and environmental hazards, lay knowledge is a public perspective of risk. See Wynne (1996), Marris et al. (1997), Krimsky and Golding (1992) for more information.
The Risk Paradigm

Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* is a study of postindustrial society. Beck (1992) argues that multinational corporations make products which contain invisible risks that are harmful to individual and global environments. The companies who manufacture risks refuse to claim responsibility for their actions and, instead, talk of 'acceptable risk levels'. Sub-political groups, such as Greenpeace, argue that anecdotal evidence suggests there are no acceptable levels: they seek to reveal the full extent of the real and potential side effects produced by these large industries.

It is my thesis that the issues Ulrich Beck associates with a risk society are the same issues utilized in the debate about violence and the mass media. Pro-censorship groups and self-appointed moral watchdogs have drawn upon environmental discourses in order to engineer a political debate that will lead to legislation and regulation. The entertainment industry is presented as a manufacturer of risks. They make a product, for example violent movies, which contain side effects that are harmful to individual and social environments. The industry may talk of 'acceptable levels', but anecdotal evidence, such as the James Bulger case, suggests that media violence can lead to real violence in our society. Those researchers who claim there is little or no evidence of these risks are perceived as part of the industry. Sub-political groups undertake their own research which claims to measure the side effects of television violence. The entertainment industry is asked to self-regulate, and legislation is called for.

This chapter will examine this thesis in detail and outline the parallels with Beck's theory of risk and the media violence debate. What we shall see is that the
construction of media violence as a type of entertainment that is dangerous and hazardous to the environment serves to highlight the origins of this dominant discourse. By using Beck's theory of a risk society, and other social theories of risk, such as Kasterson, Renn et al. (1988) and the social amplification of risk, we can re-visit the media violence debate in order to understand the social and political implications of risk and the mass media. In the next section I want to consider the way in which media violence is reported in the press in order to highlight how environmental discourses frame discussion of this issue.

**Sick Crash Sex Film Ban**

Two days before Christmas 1996, the *Daily Mail* ran this sensational headline: 'Crash Film Go-Ahead May Sink Censors.' The *Daily Mail* chose to highlight this news story about the potential cinema release of David Cronenberg's new film *Crash* (1996). The film, dubbed a 'sex and wrecks' film by the *Daily Mail*, caused a commotion when it was shown first at Cannes, and then the London Film Festival. After seeing the film at Cannes, the *Evening Standard*, called it 'beyond the bounds of depravity'. It took three months before the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) chose to grant the film an 18 certificate, uncut, and another three months before the film went on general release in Britain in the summer of 1997.

The short history of this particular attack on screen violence can, as is so often the case, be traced to political and social pressure. One press article after another led to the inevitable call for censorship. When the film was due to be screened at the London...
Film Festival the *Daily Mail* ran a front page headline that said: ‘Ban This Car *Crash* Sex Film’ and began a campaign to stop the film being shown in Britain. Following on from this, the ITV programme *The Big Story* posed the question: ‘Does this film wreck lives?’ and then went on to consider children’s interest in toy cars, and computer games such as ‘Destruction Derby’ and adult fascination with car crashes. At the same time Virginia Bottomley, the then Heritage Secretary for the Conservative Government, called for the film to be banned by local authorities because, she claimed, ‘all of us must be worried about material which, if seen repeatedly, can influence lives’. Her comments co-incided with national newspaper reportage that politicians had called for significant cuts in the levels of screen violence; this, in turn, came in the wake of the morality campaign by Frances Lawrence, the widow of Phillip Lawrence, a headmaster who was stabbed to death by schoolboys. So significant had the TV violence debate become at this time that the *Daily Telegraph* reported that Virginia Bottomley and Michael Howard (the then Home Secretary) had placed ‘pressure on programme makers, distributors and censors to consider afresh the impact of screen violence on children’ on the front page next to a large photograph of Bill Clinton celebrating his re-election as President of the United States. The political agenda about the debate on screen violence could not be made more obvious.

It is significant that *Crash* was given its cinematic release one month after the British general election. Conservative politicians seized the opportunity to use this film as a scapegoat for many social fears and concerns about violence in our society, and the BBFC chose to wait until the general election date was fixed before deciding when to grant the film a certificate. It is clear from subsequent press coverage of this film that a call for increased censorship and regulation of media violence is not confined
to one political party. According to Rachel Sylvester (1997, p.1) of the Daily Telegraph:

Tough proposals to tighten the regulation of sex and violence in films are to be put before parliament...the move follows reports that James Ferman, the chief film censor, is to stand down as head of the BBFC. He has come under pressure to resign after he cleared the release of Crash, the film about car crash fetishists, earlier this year. Jack Straw, the Home Secretary, is examining proposals to overhaul the board...

Thus, Jack Straw, Home Secretary for the Labour Government, is considering the same proposals that Virginia Bottomley sanctioned in her press report six months earlier. It appears that the Daily Mail’s warning that ‘Crash is the point at which even a liberal society should draw the line’ has been heard by New Labour.12

Indeed, MPs across all parties are now considering proposals which aim to amend the Crime and Disorder Bill; two of the proposals argue for radical changes in the organization of the BBFC and a separate system of classification for films shown on television. Julian Brazier, Tory MP for Canterbury, says: ‘We have got to find ways of curbing the way in which videos and films are encouraging the culture of violence by glamorising it’ (Sylvester, 1997, p.2). The catalyst for this political re-organization of Britain’s censorship and classification laws is the film Crash. In the next section I want to consider how the debate about Crash reveals a dominant discourse associated with screen violence, a type of discourse which can be found to appear regularly in newspapers such as the Daily Mail.
The way in which politicians, social commentators, and journalists discuss the perceived threat of *Crash* as an immoral and depraved film which glamorises violence can be seen to be part of a dominant discourse that shapes the way in which we consider media violence and social communication. Comments such as this one by Bel Mooney (1996, p.5) writing about the danger of films like *Crash* in the *Daily Mail* will serve to illustrate this:

I am proud to call myself a liberal, but I cannot see why freedom of expression must mean the freedom to peddle violence and pornography...Over many a dinner table I have argued that unless people like myself take a stand against the seemingly endless downward spiral of sex and violence in books, film and on television, the world that I was born into will disappear forever, and we shall allow our children to inherit a moral vacuum, not a civilised community.

This type of discourse focuses on the social and moral implications of the negative effects of screen violence. There is a particular type of rhetoric which is common to this way of discussing media violence. The repetition of key words such as ‘evil’, ‘depraved’, ‘saturated’ and ‘risk’ used in press coverage of notorious violent movies such as *Crash*, or *Child's Play 3* are common. For example, Christopher Tookey (1996, p.6) of the *Daily Mail* claims that *Crash* ‘promulgates a twisted morality of its own...and clearly runs counter to any moral consensus’, while Nigel Reynolds writes in the *Daily Telegraph*: ‘The film is morally vacuous, nasty, violent and little more than an excuse to string together one scene after another of sexual intercourse.’ David Buckingham (1996, p.25) notes the same type of discourse in his analysis of the *Child's Play 3* furore. He writes:
Looking across the press coverage of the (James Bulger) case, a very familiar rhetoric emerges. Violence is being ‘pumped into our living rooms’. Young people are ‘saturated’, ‘hooked’ and ‘corrupted’: their ‘impressionable minds’ are ‘bombarded’ and ‘warped’. The videos themselves are described as ‘an addictive pollutant’: they are ‘evil’, ‘sick’, ‘brutalising’, ‘poisonous’...The scale of the problem is enormous - and it must be contained by firm and decisive action. This ‘stuff’ must be stopped.

What this rhetoric indicates is that screen violence is presented as a product that can poison impressionable minds. This product is addictive; it is evil; it is everywhere. What is more, it can influence future generations, and thus, Bel Mooney’s impassioned plea for a moral society where children can grow up safe and secure from the evils of the world is one that is echoed time and again in the argument against media violence.

The dominant discourse associated with media violence is not new and, indeed, researchers have shown it is cyclical in nature (see Pearson, 1983, Barker, 1984, 1997a, Kidd-Hewitt and Osborne, 1996). Graham Murdock (1997, p.67) charts ‘an archaeology of popular anxieties’ which are related, not just to violent movies, but to popular culture in general. Murdock (1997, p.67) writes: ‘The... image of direct effects draws its power from a deep reservoir of social fear and dogma which first formed in the mid-nineteenth century.’ Popular entertainments such as ‘penny dreadfuls’ and coverage of crime in popular newspapers became the subject of moral campaigns. Murdock (1997, p.68) writes: ‘Commentators were quick to see them as both a potent symptom of moral decline and a powerful new incitement to anti-social behaviour.’ Thus, concerts and theatres were seen to corrupt the young and new popular media were described by one professor in 1904 as having the same kind of ‘evil effects as syphilis or leprosy’ (Murdock, 1997, p.77).
As Murdock shows, it did not take long for popular culture to become the subject of moral campaigns, and for popular texts to be demonized by the press. Crime movies in the 1930s were the subject of sustained media campaigns, and in the 1950s, children's comics were also targeted as a ‘powerful new incitement to anti-social behaviour’ (Murdoch, 1997, p.68). As Martin Barker (1984b) revealed in *A Haunt of Fears: the Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign*, such media campaigns led to acts of censorship which had very little to do with the actual content of the texts themselves, and more to do with the political and social climate at the time.

Thus, the dominant discourse surrounding screen violence is not new, and we can see that fears concerning media violence regularly become the news topic of the day. The question we must ask is: how can we understand this phenomenon in relation to wider social issues and concerns? One common response is to refer to the work of Cohen and Young (1973) and the role of the media in the construction of ‘moral panics’. Cohen and Young (1973) demonstrated in *The Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media* that ‘moral panics’ are engendered by media fantasies and can be based on a wide variety of topics, ranging from bicycles to drug-taking hippies. Stanley Cohen (1972, p.172), in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, examines the media's tendency to ‘over-report’ the confrontations between mods and rockers in the 1960s, and subsequently create a moral panic. What Cohen calls an ‘amplification spiral’ can be seen in the way the press campaigned to ban penny dreadfuls, or films like *Crash*. When Christopher Tookey (a film critic for the *Daily Mail*), speaking on BBC's *Heart of the Matter*, says: ‘I don't consider myself particularly at risk from sado masochistic eroticizing films; I've no doubt that others would be more at risk’ he is referring to a common fear that weaker members of society are more vulnerable to the negative effects of media violence. However, as
Julian Petley (1997, p.87) points out, 'lurking behind these fears about the "corruption of innocent minds" one finds, time and again, a potent strain of class dislike and fear.' It is this 'potent strain of class dislike and fear' that is one aspect which can fuel the 'deviancy amplification spiral' and lead to a moral panic.

Thus, it can be seen that concerns about media violence are in fact concerns about class, youth, ethnicity and gender and are manufactured by the media in order to mobilise support for the control of these socially constructed 'problems' (see Cohen and Young, 1973; Kidd-Hewitt and Osborne, 1995). Whilst this way of thinking about the more macro-sociological issues associated with the media violence debate is both useful and significant to our understanding of this phenomenon, it still does not help to explain why the dominant discourse associated with media violence has been and continues to be so successful. Moral panics and the amplification spiral focus on how the media manufactures social 'problems'; it does not tell us how other factors, such as anti-violence campaign groups, or multinational screen entertainment industries fit into the socially constructed 'problem' of media violence. Therefore, in the next section I want to consider the significance of 'risk', not just as a term of reference, but as a social and political movement in its own right that has far reaching consequences for our understanding of the role the mass media has to play in our society. The first place to begin is with an overview of the work of Ulrich Beck, as it is his theoretical paradigm of 'the risk society' that helps to situate risk analysis away from the field of science, and into the arena of politics and social change.
The publicity blurb for Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* calls it a 'panoramic analysis of the condition of Western societies (which) has already been hailed as a classic.'¹⁷ *Risk Society* was first published in Beck's native Germany in 1986, and it was only translated and published in this country in 1992. Between 1986 and 1992 the book has become a 'classic' sociological text, and is widely seen as one of the first books to popularize the notion of 'risk analysis', something that has now become an international industry, with books, conferences and courses addressing the concept of 'risk'.

*Risk Society* has two central premises. The first concerns 'reflexive modernization'. Beck (1992, p.10) describes this as follows: 'Just as modernization dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century and produced the industrial society, modernization today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being.' For Beck, all societies must evolve; they must become 'reflexive' if the relationships between social structures and social agents are to change. Reflexive modernization requires that social agents, such as husbands and wives, recognise the choices they make in the workplace and at home are culturally imposed, not chosen freely. Individuals must break loose from these structures, and 'reflect upon and flexibly restructure the rules and resources of the workplace and their leisure time' (Beck, 1992, p.3).
Beck's second theory is of the most significance to the dominant discourse of media violence. In an industrial society, science and technology are seen as positive, guiding forces in social change. In a risk society, science and technology represent risks and hazards which have a global impact and can affect generations of lives. Beck (1992, p.20, 21) writes:

In the modernization process, more and more destructive forces are also being unleashed, forces before which the human imagination stands in awe... The concept of risk is directly bound to the concept of reflexive modernization. Risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself.

Thus, Beck (1992, p.58) believes that a 'narrow-minded belief in progress' has led to a 'techno-scientific rationality' where science is allowed to overshadow natural resources. It is only recently, in the face of denial from multi-national corporations, that the risks and hazards associated with 'techno-science' have become part of public debate.

Beck argues that as science has become de-mystified, the social recognition of risks has become more commonplace. As illustration, Beck (1992, p.60) compares a pre-sixties instruction sheet on what to do in the event of a nuclear war, with contemporary understanding of the hazards associated with nuclear power. In 1959, West Germany informed its public to 'immediately jump into a hole, a pit or ditch' to protect themselves from the 'thermal effects' of an atomic bomb. Such instructions appear ludicrous in the light of current public knowledge on the effects of nuclear radiation.
It is the need for economic productivity that has led to a repression of the risks and hazards associated with certain products. Now, Beck (1992, p.61) argues, the side effects have developed voices of their own. They have revealed themselves to the public eye. Beck writes:

People themselves have become small, private alternative experts in risks of modernization...They no longer need to ponder the problems of their situation. What scientists call ‘latent side effects’ and ‘unproven connections’ are for them their ‘coughing children’ who turn blue in foggy weather and gasp for air with a rattle in their throat. On their side of the fence, ‘side effects’ have voices, faces, eyes and tears...For them risks are not risks, but pitifully suffering, screaming children turning blue. It is the children they fight for.

Thus, in Germany, the side effects of sulphur dioxide develop human voices, and parents whose children suffer from pseudo-croup begin to question the established acceptable values for pollutants: they join citizens' groups and demand for reductions in national levels of pollutants.

A similar example can be drawn from the British government denial of Gulf war syndrome. Only recently, after six years of denial, has the government admitted that organo-phosphate pesticides were extensively used throughout the Gulf war. Evidence from citizens' groups has already established that organo-phosphate pesticides can be extremely harmful, not just to the person exposed, but to future generations. This government about-turn on Gulf war syndrome comes as a victory for the National Gulf Veterans and Families Associations (NGVFA), which repeatedly emphasised the side-effects soldiers were experiencing after the war. With the help of the Guardian in 1993, it was revealed that Gulf veterans' fertility had been adversely affected and their children showed abnormal incidence of birth defects. Three years later, the then Conservative government finally admitted to the source of such illness, and a new
Labour government has ordered new research into ‘Gulf War Syndrome’.18 If it were not for the strength of anecdotal evidence, press pictures of babies fighting for survival and the pressure applied by the NGVFA, no response would have been forthcoming at all.19

**Acceptable Levels**

Beck (1992, p.63) writes in some detail about the denial of risk. He believes that scientists block citizens' accounts of side-effects by demanding that strict causality must be proven. As the account regarding Gulf war syndrome indicates, proving causality can take a long time, and can endanger lives. Victims of side effects experience a loss of reality as their illnesses and injuries are denied in the face of scientific measurements and statistics. Acceptable levels, or, as Beck (1992, p.64, 65) calls it, ‘the acid rain dance’, can be the main barrier to official acceptance of risk:

Acceptable levels...are the retreat of a civilization supplying itself in surplus with pollutants and toxic substances. The really rather obvious demand for non-poisoning is rejected as utopian. At the same time, the bit of poisoning being set down becomes normality. It disappears behind the acceptable levels. Acceptable levels make possible a permanent ration of collective standardized poisoning.

Thus, acceptable levels permit toxicity and cancel out the real side-effects that are being produced: they make them ‘harm/less’ (Beck, 1992, p.65). What is more, acceptable levels of toxicity contain unknown elements, poisons and toxins which have not yet been identified, and are therefore freely introduced into our environment.

Of course, as the Gulf war syndrome case points out, real people are affected by ‘acceptable levels’. And it is only once a substantial number of real ‘victims’ have
stepped forward and claimed a causal connection between organo-phosphate pesticides and birth defects that what is ‘acceptable’ can be questioned at all. As Beck (1992, p.69) says: ‘We are concerned...with a permanent large-scale experiment, requiring the involuntary human subjects to report on the accumulating symptoms of toxicity amongst themselves.’ And even then, the burden of proof is still placed with the ‘victim’, not those responsible for ‘acceptable level toxicity’.

The Politicization of Risk

Beck (1992, p.73) believes there has been an about-turn, a ‘cultural risk consciousness’ which has led to the social recognition and politicization of risk. Where as thirty years ago people were helpless against the invisible threat of air pollutants and fertiliser toxins, now people have begun to speculate on invisible threats to their health and to their future (Beck, 1992, p.73). Speculation leads to social and political action. Beck (1992, p.77) writes:

Suddenly the problems are simply there, without justification, as pure, explosive challenges to action. People emerge from behind the conditions and objective constraints. Causes turn into causators and issue statements. ‘Side effects’ speak up, organize, go to court, assert themselves, refuse to be diverted any longer. These are the dynamics of reflexive politicization, producing risk consciousness and conflict.

These examples of ‘reflexive politicization’ lead to what Beck (1992, p.195) terms ‘a de-centralization of politics’. A large number of citizen's initiative groups and political movements resist state authority and become sub-political groups which utilize the judiciary and media publicity to effectively campaign for environmental protection, or
organic foodstuffs. These sub-political groups demand personal responsibility, they
demand new legislation to reduce levels of risk. What was once non-political, and the
subject of management meetings on production processes and the disposal of waste, has
now become political, a 'hot potato for governmental policy-making', which, as Beck
(1992, p.78) points out, can compete with problems of unemployment, or law and
order, when it comes to opinion polls.

There are two types of pressure that come with public criticism of 'acceptable
levels', and the development of sub-political groups which politicize risk. The first type
of pressure concerns multinational corporations who have unleashed such harmful
products on the environment. These corporations are asked to self-regulate. This can
lead to two options: eliminate the product, or cause of risk, at a primary stage; or,
produce a new product which will eliminate the cause of risk at a secondary stage. Beck
(1992, p.160) believes that the second option is most commonly taken because this
transforms risks into developmental opportunities.

The second type of pressure concerns the government, who are asked to
intervene and control and/or eliminate levels of environmental hazards. Beck (1992,
p.80) calls this a 'legitimate totalitarianism of hazard prevention'. He explains:

> The political 'side effects' of civilization's 'side effects' threaten the continued
existence of the democratic political system. That system is caught in the
unpleasant dilemma of either failing in the face of the systematically produced
hazards, or suspending fundamental democratic principles through the addition
of authoritarian, repressive 'buttresses'.

Thus, the right to intervene, and prevent individual and global hazards, creates a
politicization of risk that is highly undemocratic. It is Beck's assertion that one of the
essential tasks of a future risk society is to create an alternative method of dealing with
risk (Beck, 1992, pp.231-234). One such method is ‘differential politics’ where with the aid of flexibility and reflexivity sub-political groups can legitimate ‘the moralization of industrial production’ (Beck, 1992, p.222).

*Risk Society* presents a global theory of understanding contemporary society. Beck's theories regarding environmental pollution and social conflict have been much discussed and widely praised. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991) agrees with Beck's theory regarding reflexive modernization. However such writing has remained clearly within the discipline of sociology. It is my theory that Beck's concept of risk, and other areas of risk analysis, can be applied to the mass media. In the next section I would like to outline the relationship between risk theories and media violence, a relationship which will prove central to understanding the dominant discourse associated with this emotive topic.

**Risk and Media violence**

One of the key changes that Beck notes in his analysis of risk awareness is the point where risks that were once invisible become visible. The visibility of risk is significant to the way in which the perceived negative effects of media violence are discussed and scientifically examined. The visibility of risk and media violence takes on many forms. These ‘risks’ can be to the individual and to society as a whole. There are three common negative ‘effects’ associated with media violence. The National Television Violence Survey (NTVS) is a large research programme (based at the Universities of California, North Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin) which attempts to
measure the effects of television violence. In a recent report it identified: ‘three primary types of harmful effects associated with viewing violence: learning aggressive attitudes and behaviours, becoming desensitized to real-world violence, and developing a fear of being victimized by crime’ (NTVS, 1996, p.viii). These three types of harmful effects have all been the subject of a great deal of scientific research. Belson (1978) found that high exposure to television violence increases the degree to which serious acts of real-life aggression will be committed by adolescent boys; Van Evra (1990, pp.96-97) reports on a substantial body of evidence that suggests violence on television desensitizes viewers: those who are used to watching violence are less shocked by the violence watched than other types of viewers; and Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorelli (1980, 1986) argue that heavy viewers of television violence develop a distorted view of society and become more fearful of crime.

It is possible to see that the perceived risks of media violence affect individuals and the social environment. The ‘copycat’ effect is believed to be a result of the glamorization of violence on television and film: impressionable and vulnerable television viewers may be exposed to this type of media violence and attempt to imitate this behaviour in real life: such a risk affects individual behaviour, particularly the behaviour of young children who may not be able to differentiate between real violence and fictional violence. The desensitization effect is believed to be a result of an individual’s propensity to watch too much violence; such viewing patterns can distort perceptions of real violence and the risk of watching increased amounts of violence is that viewers will cease to be sensitive to real violence and the suffering of others. The effect of developing a fear of real-life crime is believed to be the result of watching increased amounts of violence on television which only distort the risks of real violence; thus, a viewer of media violence perceives greater risks of real violence than
there actually are in the community. All of these risks affect the individual and the social community and are believed to be visible risks that can be measured and scientifically proven as hazardous and unsafe.

There is certainly a case to be made for the negative effects of media violence, and researchers such as George Gerbner (1988, 1994), or Ed Donnerstein (1981, NTVS, 1996), and writers such as Michael Medved (1992) have argued vociferously for a reduction in the risks and hazards of media violence. They base their argument on the high visibility of such ‘risks’, and their aim is to increase risk awareness in relation to media violence. However, the visibility of risk is as much to do with media publicity as to do with the actual side effects of economic products. In the case of media violence, once the link has been made, media publicity can in fact generate perceptions of risk, and label films such as *Natural Born Killers* a health hazard, when in fact no causal connections have been made at all by any injured parties. In this way, a film like *Natural Born Killers* is perceived to be part of the entertainment industry and therefore capable of producing risks to the environment; once perceived to be capable of such acts, *Natural Born Killers* is allegedly linked with copycat murders, and desensitization, the two most common side effects of screen violence. These allegations in the press lead to further allegations by social and political commentators, and the government is called upon to produce new legislation to deal with this risk.

Therefore, although a case can be made for the negative effects of media violence and the risks this poses to vulnerable viewers, such as children, a case can also be made that researchers and social and political commentators construct such risks, and manufacture a campaign against media violence in order to achieve political and social change. This is an example of what Ingmar Palmlund (1996, p.199) calls ‘the social drama’ of risk evaluation. Palmlund (1996, pp.209-210) writes:
The plot in social dramas over technological risk reflects two opposing impulses in modern, industrialised society: the celebration of technological progress as against the protection of the health, safety, and property rights of individuals. The conflicts from these opposing impulses are made visible by a precipitating event – real or socially constructed – that fuels the underlying dissatisfaction and frames it as anxiety over certain technological risk.

Thus, it can be seen the media violence controversy is a conflict of two opposing impulses, and that when a precipitating event occurs it is an event which is socially constructed in order to fuel underlying dissatisfaction and anxiety about the perceived risks of media violence. We can see this most clearly in ‘moral panics’ such as the James Bulger case, the Dunblane massacre, or the controversy over Crash.

Palmlund (1996, p.210) lists five criteria which must be met if a specific technological risk will become a social controversy:

1. The risk should be tied to effects that appear familiar and close to people.
2. The effects should stir up emotions of fright and fear.
3. The risk should concern a large or important enough group of people for politicians and senior administrators to worry about their support.
4. Raising the issue of risk in national politics should not obviously threaten fundamental national interests of major importance.
5. The issue should ideally be such that the mass media can grasp it and assist politicians in placing it and keeping it on the agenda in national politics so as to satisfy the public’s need of spectacular drama.

All of these criteria fit the social controversy of media violence. The ‘risks’ of media violence are familiar and close to members of the public because film and television is a popular form of entertainment. The perceived negative effects of media violence ‘stir up emotions of fright and fear’ because of the shocking nature of certain types of media violence and because the ‘risks’ concern children and vulnerable members of the community. Those people who fear the ‘risks’ of media violence represent a large
proportion of the voting public, and therefore politicians and senior administrators are concerned enough to address such issues in order to win votes and retain support. We can see this most clearly when President Clinton called for a ‘violence summit’ in the run up to the recent presidential election (see *Time*, 1996, and *Variety*, 1996). Raising the issue of the ‘risks’ of media violence does not threaten ‘fundamental national issues’, such as health or unemployment, and the issue is emotive and dramatic enough for the mass media to assist politicians and anti-violence campaign groups in keeping it on the agenda in national politics.

I want to examine this theory of the social drama of risk in more detail in the following sections. First, I would like to consider the role of citizens' activation groups and pro-censorship campaigns, as these are the next stages in the formation of Beck's risk society. What we shall see from an examination of these sub-political groups is that non-governmental organizations can choose to become caught up in the ‘social drama’ of risk (Palmlund, 1996, p.199) and, as social actors, adopt a criteria for campaigning against media violence that aims to create social controversy and change.

**Christian Campaign Groups**

It is not difficult to relate the entertainment industry to other multi-national corporations like ICI, or Coca Cola. Multinational screen entertainment industries are concerned with economic development and produce consumable goods to achieve that end result. Large companies such as Time-Warner, or the Disney Company, and entrepreneurs such as Rupert Murdoch control much of our cinema, television, advertising and electronic communication (see Giddens, 1997, pp.382-388; Lull, 1995; Waters, 1995). The globalizing of the media ensures that 'a world information order –
an international system of production, distribution and consumption of informational goods – has come into being’ (Giddens, 1997, pp.396-397). Once this connection has been made, anyone interested in campaigning for reduced levels of media violence has only to turn to the dominant discourse on the risks and hazards associated with multinational industries and chemical products to see the way forward for the success of their own campaign.

On an international level, there are many citizens groups which support censorship, and are anti media violence. In the USA, there are large organizations such as the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV), the National Council for Families and Television (NCFT), Americans for Responsible Television (ART), to name but a few. The significance of these campaign groups in relation to risk awareness and the politicization of media violence (for example the V-chip, a micro-chip which can regulate television viewing) will be discussed later in this chapter.

In Britain, the largest and most active organizations which campaign against media violence are Christian Action Research and Education (CARE), the Movement for Christian Democracy (MCD), the National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVALA) and a more recent, as yet unofficial, body, the Parliamentary All Party Family and Child Protection Group (PAPFCPG). William Thompson (1992) and A.J.B. Barratt (1995, 1997) have researched these campaign groups in some detail. Barratt (1997, pp.1-2) writes:

These groups are engaged in a political struggle over lifestyle choices of society: attacks on television, cinema and video form only one front in the battle against the ‘permissive society’ which stands opposed to the fundamentalist Christian ideal. Both CARE and MCD actively campaign against homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, and single-parenthood in their support of ‘traditional’ family life underpinned by Christian morality. However, headline grabbing stories are more often associated with their actions
in support of ever stricter regulation of the media. Audio-visual media (television, cinema, video) come under fire because they are seen by these groups to actively promote humanistic and amoral lifestyle choices... the ultimate aim of these groups, to found and maintain a society built upon the basis of Biblical standards, will not be realised if the media are allowed to support values which run counter to this ideal.

Barratt’s point about religious fundamentalism and non-governmental organizations is a significant one in relation to risk and environmentalism. Just as Christian campaign groups argue for ‘a society built upon the basis of biblical standards’ (Barratt, 1997, p.2) so too do environmental groups argue for a society built upon the basis of nature as the collective good. Klaus Eder (1996, p.213) writes: ‘Life histories of environmental movement activists clearly show that religious motivations have in fact played a major role in the engagement of “caring” for nature. Members of traditional Christian churches have played a major role in the environmentalist movement.’ CARE and MCD believe that the mass media promotes amoral lifestyles, and in the words of Dr Clifford Hill, a key figure in the PGVE’s report on ‘video nasties’ in 1983, and the PAPFCPG’s recent report Violence, Pornography and the Media: ‘in order to effect basic changes to the structures of society we have to change the values of society' (cited in Barratt, 1997, p.2). The environmentalist movement also challenges the way in which industrial products promote environmentally unfriendly lifestyles, and they defend the value of nature, arguing for an environmental ethics that will change the values of society (Eder, 1996, p.211).

We can see evidence of this link between religious fundamentalism and environmentalism in the way that campaign groups like CARE or the NVALA carefully outline their central aims with regard to violence and the mass media. For example, the NVALA (1997) states:
The Association campaigns for: higher standards in the media; the eradication of pornography and violence; bad language and blasphemy to be cleaned up;...wholesome family viewing helping to strengthen marriage and family life;...the portrayal of good moral behaviour and standards.

The mass media is something that must be controlled. Without this control a 'permanent ration of collective standardized poisoning' (Beck, 1992, p.65) would take place. Note the way the NVALA talk of 'wholesome family viewing' and 'good moral behaviour' as if these factors are under threat, are being 'poisoned' by the entertainment industry.

Similarly, CARE is a Christian charity that specializes in issues affecting family life, in particular children. It began as the Nationwide Festival of Light (NFOL) in 1971, but quickly re-organized itself to become a more effective lobbying organisation. It now has a membership of 80,000, and a head office only five minutes away from the Houses of Parliament (see Barratt, 1995, p.22, and Thompson, 1992). CARE (1994, pp.27, 28, 33) states:

It has been involved in assessing the impact of the media on society for over twenty years. Through its separate non-charitable lobbying arm, CARE Campaigns, CARE has sought changes to legislation affecting broadcasting and other media. In particular, we have been involved with the Protection of Children Act 1978, the Indecent Displays (Control) Act 1981, the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, the Video Recordings Act 1984, the Broadcasting Act 1990 and several Parliamentary attempts to reform the 1959 Obscene Publications Act...CARE believes that violent and sexually explicit videos, television and other media can have a very damaging effect on children, especially if they have repeated exposure to such media...We recommend a review of the law to assess the differences in arrangements for controlling the content of different media.

As can be seen from this extract taken from the Home Affairs Committee on Video Violence and Young Offenders (1994), CARE is a campaign group of some power. It has set up a non-charitable lobby group, CARE Campaigns, in order to successfully
campaign against, among other things, media violence. CARE uses the rhetoric of risk, identifying children as the focus of their concern, identifying the ‘repeated exposure’ of media violence as a dangerous threat to children, and calling for control and censorship of such modernization products before it is too late. This method of focusing on the protection of children is a common campaign issue used by CARE, the MCD and the NVALA. As Thompson (1992, p.86) notes: ‘the protection of children, rather than the threat of moral decline, (becomes) the major public justification for further controls (and) alternative legislation’ of media violence.21

And CARE has not been slow to campaign against all aspects of media violence, including radio, television, computer games and the internet. As CARE states, it has been involved in numerous acts of government legislation with regard to media violence, and has been successful in achieving results. In 1984, following the ‘video nasties’ scare the Video Recordings Act (VRA) 1984 was introduced which required that all videos must be classified by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). From 1982 to 1984 the BBFC and the video industry operated a voluntary code which regulated types of videos, however, following a successful campaign by CARE, with the help of the Parliamentary Group Video Enquiry (PGVE) and a report on ‘video nasties’ in 1983, the VRA 1984 was pushed through parliament to co-incide with the Conservative general election (see Barker, 1984).

The Home Affairs Committee’s report on Video Violence and Young Offenders in 1994 also led to significant amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill. In this instance CARE, and another Christian campaign group, the Movement for Christian Democracy (MCD) conducted a moral campaign which once again utilized the media and social and political commentators to achieve results (Barratt, 1995, p.22, 23). In the wake of the James Bulger case in 1993, David Alton, the then Liberal Democrat MP who is also
a leading figure in the MCD, tabled for amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill; 'the amendment proposed that any video recording should be banned for private use "either because it presents an inappropriate role model for children, or because it is likely to cause psychological harm to a child"' (Buckingham, 1996, p.27). Alton's amendment had been devised at a meeting by the MCD in March, 1994. Although Alton's amendment was withdrawn, Michael Howard, the then Home Secretary, introduced an amendment that placed tighter restrictions on regulation of the entertainment industry which shared many similarities with Alton's original proposal.

Here, two sub-political groups, CARE and MCD, engineered media publicity and public opinion to place pressure on the government, and what is now called the Criminal Justice Act 1994 is proof of their success. How they achieved this is significant and serves as an illustration of the 'social drama' of risk (Palmlund, 1996). In April 1994, just two weeks before David Alton's proposed amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill was due to reach the floor of the House of Commons, a report was published by Elizabeth Newson (1994), a child psychologist. Christopher Graffius, then Secretary-General of the MCD and personal assistant to David Alton commissioned this report, titled *Video Violence and the Protection of Children*, which claimed to present overwhelming evidence that media violence causes harm to children. Martin Barker (1997a, p.12) comments:

(MCD) had spoken of gratuitously violent films and videos, and how bad they are for the young. And they had played on the memories of recent cases where young people, even children, had so obviously gone to the bad. And they had got their argument into every newspaper in the land, and onto many radio and television programmes. The effect, as their Parliamentary sponsor David Alton himself put it, was that they had 'changed the terms of reference' in which 'films of this kind' would henceforth be discussed.
It is possible to see from the evidence so far how campaign groups such as CARE or the MCD have managed to ‘change the terms of reference’ in relation to media violence. It is their utilization of the rhetoric of risk that has enabled such a change to take place and it is their adherence to the five criteria Palmlund outlines as necessary to create social controversy that has made the visibility of the ‘risks’ of media violence so successful. The Newson Report made the effects of media violence familiar and close to people in the way in which it concentrated on the common sense assumption that if ‘children had gone to the bad’ it must be because of ‘video nasties’. The report stirred up feelings of fright and fear, and because it focused on the protection of children, the report was taken seriously by concerned parents, politicians and the media, who grasped the ‘social drama’ of the situation and managed to assist MCD in ‘keeping it on the agenda in national politics so as to satisfy the public’s need of spectacular drama’ (Palmlund, 1996, p.210).

The fact that there is little research into the role of Christian campaign groups and the media violence debate also mirrors the way in which the role of NGOs and technoscience has been neglected by risk researchers. Eder and Jamison make it quite clear that environmental groups are powerful and effective political movements and have helped shape risk consciousness and conflict. According to Jamison (1996, p.242):

NGOs are becoming significant in the social shaping of science and technology, particularly in the environmental field. Organisations like the World Resources Institute and Worldwatch Institute have become highly effective in their production and dissemination of environmental information, and their various publications are widely read by other actors, as well as by the general public. They have become, in my terms, crucial ‘translators’ of academic research findings into the discourse of science and technology policy. Nor should this surprise us; this is the very task for which they were established. What should surprise us, however, is that their role in the contemporary world of technoscience is so unexamined.
Similarly, Thompson (1992) and Barratt (1997) have both argued that the role of Christian campaign groups in the media violence debate is significant. We have examined how groups such as CARE and MCD have become ‘effective in their production and dissemination of...information’ and what I want to consider in the next section is how anti-violence campaign groups have also become ‘translators’ of academic research findings. The Newson Report is one example of this, and a more recent report on Violence, Pornography and the Media by the campaign group PAPFCPG will now be examined in detail in order to reveal that the role of ‘science’ and ‘research’ is not objective, but is instead another component in the ‘social drama’ of risk.

‘Violence, Pornography and the Media’

A recent report, Violence Pornography and the Media, was submitted by the Parliamentary All Party Family and Child Protection Group (PAPFCPG) to both Houses of Parliament in June 1996. The report was distributed by, amongst others, David Alton of the MCD, and Charlie Colchester and Claire Wilson-Thomas of CARE. Through analyzing this report, it is possible to see Beck’s theory of ‘reflexive politicization’ (1992, p.77) and Palmlund’s theory of the ‘social drama’ of risk (1996, p.210) in action. The report collects together anecdotal evidence from teachers, social workers, paediatricians and the police about the causal link between media violence and aggressive acts. It also includes an opinion poll which suggests that 65% of the British public are concerned about sex and violence used for entertainment in the media (PAPFCPG, 1996, p.4). The report says that there has been a shift in public opinion;
now that more people own videos and computers, children have greater access to the media and are therefore more at 'risk'. Children are seen as 'vulnerable viewers' who may 'blur the distinction between fact and fantasy' if they have experienced 'repeated exposure to violent...material on the screen' (PAPFCPG, 1996, p.12, 14).

In a key passage, the report links researchers who refute claims of causal-effects as mouthpieces for the entertainment industry. It says (PAPFCPG, 1996, p.13):

There has always been a powerful lobby for many years claiming that there is no causal connection between violence portrayed on the screen and that taking place in society. These claims have always been promoted and publicised by parts of the television and video industry...Some have considered that an unrealistic requirement for more definitive research may be used as a mechanism for delaying policy change...

The report makes the entertainment industry appear as a powerful company who hires researchers to talk about 'acceptable levels' and lack of 'causal proof' in order to delay policy change. Just as Beck (1992, p.65) talked about 'the acid rain dance', so too is this demand for 'definitive proof' seen as a delay tactic which only allows a surplus of pollutants and toxic substances (screen violence) to threaten our civilization.

The report calls for anecdotal evidence to be taken into consideration. It says: 'There is now vast anecdotal evidence associating the portrayal of violence with violent behaviour' (PAPFCPG, 1996, p.13). Like drugs, screen violence is 'administered to a person from outside the body with the intention of altering some local or general function' and 'once a drug has become established...evidence for deciding that it has harmful side effects...is entirely anecdotal' (PAPFCPG, 1996, p.13). The report goes on to recommend: 'There is a need to collect all the available evidence, both anecdotal accounts and experimental studies, into a consolidated body of information'
This ‘body of information’ can be presented to parliament (as the PAPFCPG have done) in order that citizens may place pressure on the government to provide new legislation. As the PAPFCPG (1992, p.5) says:

> With a large proportion of the population saying that freedom of expression has gone too far and blaming the rising tide of crime upon media displays of sex and violence there is a clear case for government action to respond to public disquiet.

What is important about the rhetoric of this report is the way it draws upon past research, anecdotal evidence and public opinion as if it is a received truth. In actual fact the report has no new evidence to suggest causal proof, nor is it compiled by one known researcher in this field, and yet it is confident that the government will respond to its demands for industry accountability and political legislation.

The confidence of the PAPFCPG is not unfounded. The Newson Report also claimed it had found causal proof, and yet its principal source of evidence was a populist tract by Michael Medved (1992). This did not stop the national newspapers from hailing it as ‘definitive proof’ that ‘video nasties’ could pose serious risks to children. As was noted earlier, the Newson Report was instrumental in paving the way for the Criminal Justice Act in 1994 (see Buckingham, 1996, Barker, 1997a). Such reports, therefore, are not without considerable social and political power and we can see from the way in which they are written and the way in which they are reported by the media that the campaign groups who are behind these reports have become ‘crucial “translators” of academic research findings’ (Jamison, 1996, p.242).

The PAPFCPG's report on *Violence Pornography and the Media* has already attracted media publicity. The *Daily Telegraph* chose to mention it twice on one page,
as proof that ‘experts’ and public opinion were in agreement that ‘there was a link between violence on the screen and violent crime’. A commentary on this report by Martin Barker (1996, p.5), a well known researcher in the field of violence and the mass media, called it: ‘a devious piece of moral campaigning, with an agenda not based on significant evidence at all but on the ideological ambitions of its adherents’. This commentary has so far not been mentioned in association with the PAPFCPG’s report. This silence suggests that, as with the Newson Report in 1994, criticisms of the PAPFCPG’s report may well go unnoticed, such is the strength of anti-violence campaign groups and their effective production and dissemination of information on media violence.

**Effects Research: ‘Acceptable Levels’**

The Newson Report and the PAPFCPG report reveal how significant the need to provide definitive proof of the effects of watching violence on television is to the success of sub-political groups who advocate anti-violence. Without doubt the most powerful methods of proving causal connection are anecdotal evidence and public opinion. However, the role of ‘experts’ like Elizabeth Newson are significant to media publicity. Without ‘experts and ‘scientific proof’ the authenticity of citizen's claims would be based solely on anecdotal evidence. Whilst this is enough to convict ‘video nasties’ in the press, government ministers demand more ‘objective’ evidence. Scientific research and hard statistics provide the necessary ‘expert’ opinion needed to bring about new legislation (Barker and Petley, 1997).

The combination of evidence used by sub-political groups campaigning against violence is similar to evidence used by sub-political groups campaigning against toxic
waste, or environmental damage to rain forests. Beck (1992, p.71) writes in *Risk Society*:

...so long as risks are not recognised scientifically, they do not exist - at least not legally, medically, technologically, or socially, and they are thus not prevented, treated, or compensated for. No amount of collective moaning can change this, only science. Scientific judgement's monopoly on truth therefore forces the victims themselves to make use of all the methods and means of scientific analysis in order to succeed with their claims.

In the case of media violence pro-censorship groups present themselves as if they are victims of risk who are forced to counteract a wealth of scientific data, which argues for 'acceptable levels' of media violence 'in order to succeed with their claims'. The risks associated with watching violence on television do not exist, according to certain experts. These experts, as the PAPFCPG report indicates, are implicitly identified as part of the entertainment industry, despite the fact that they are independent researchers in their own right. Once a researcher refutes the causation hypothesis they are automatically seen to deny the strength of anecdotal evidence and public opinion which suggests a causal link between media violence and aggressive acts. To deny the 'obvious' strength of evidence like the James Bulger case is to deny any human feelings at all. Thus, independent academic researchers like David Gauntlett (1995, 1997), Martin Barker (1984a, 1997a), Guy Cumberbatch (1989) and David Buckingham (1993, 1996) who publish evidence to suggest that there are no 'risks' associated with watching television, are seen to be unfeeling, objective and either 'a fool or villain' (Barker, 1997a, p.16).

The paradox is that evidence which supports the cause-effect debate has always been the more dominant, both in volume and media publicity. As Newson (1994, p.6)
points out: ‘a vast world literature, more than 1,000 papers, linking heavy exposure to media violence with subsequent aggressive behaviour’ has accumulated over the past seventy years. What is more, such research concentrates on laboratory tests and quantitative analysis (see Gerbner, 1988, Donnerstein and Berkowitz, 1981, Van Evra, 1990), whereas research which counteracts the cause-effect model tends involve in-depth qualitative analysis (see Buckingham, 1996, Gauntlett, 1997, Gray, 1992). This is exactly the opposite to the way ‘effects’ research is portrayed in the press.

However, bearing in mind the pattern established by sub-political groups campaigning against ‘modernization risks’, if the structure of the dominant discourse is to pitch science against citizen, then, in relation to media violence, the evidence which supports ‘acceptable levels’ of violence on television must be seen to be blind to the ‘real’ hazards affecting citizens on a global level. Once this structure has been put into place, NGOs can utilize the rhetoric of risk and present their own campaign as the only moral and ethical course to take. If the entertainment industry will hide behind its talk of ‘acceptable levels’ then the anti-violence campaigners must prove that these levels are no longer acceptable in today's society.

National Television Violence Survey

Some examples of research which supports the cause-effect model will illustrate this point. The National Television Violence Study (NTVS) is a recent American study that was commissioned by the National Cable and Television Association to provide the largest content analysis of media violence ever undertaken. An executive summary of the NTVS for 1994-95 claims the following key finding: ‘The context in which most...
violence is presented on television poses risks for viewers' (NTVS, 1995, p.ix). This is the first claim. The NTVS (1995, p.ix) explains this finding in more detail:

The risks of viewing the most common depictions of televised violence include learning to behave violently, becoming more desensitised to the harmful consequences of violence, and becoming more fearful of being attacked. The contextual patterns noted below are found consistently across most channels, program types, and times of day. Thus, there are substantial risks of harmful effects from viewing violence throughout the television environment.

The clear link between the rhetoric used here, and the rhetoric used by Ulrich Beck in *Risk Society* should be noted: television viewing involves 'substantial risks'; the 'harmful effects' of viewing can be found 'throughout the television environment'.

To substantiate their claim, the NTVS (1995, p.3) has attempted to measure the effects of viewing violence on television, examining 2,693 programmes on 23 different channels and analyzing over 18,000 violent interactions on television in order to prove the causal link between watching violence and aggressive acts. The method of content analysis which the NTVS use to validate their claim of causal proof is a research method which focuses on quantitative data. This means that the NTVS can quote statistics every time they wish to prove a causal link. Thus, for example, the statement: 'Violence predominates on television, often including large numbers of violent interactions per program' is followed by this statistic: 'The majority of programs on television contain violence (57%), and roughly one third of violent programs contain nine or more violent interactions' (NTVS, 1996, p.25). This example of precise information, and hard statistics, reveals how the NTVS attempts to measure the effects associated with watching television violence. These statistics are presented as proof that violence on television is not within 'acceptable levels' of exposure: if 57% of television
programmes contain violent content then this is over half of all US television viewing. Armed with these types of statistics, it is possible for the NTVS (1996, p.viii,ix) to make statements like: 'The context in which most violence is presented on television poses risks for viewers' because in their opinion the ' precise quantitative content analysis techniques' which have been employed prove that this is true: 'Perpetrators go unpunished in 73% of all violent scenes'; '47% of all violent interactions show no harm to victims'; 'Only 4% of violent programs emphasize an anti-violence theme'; 'Children's programs...frequently portray violence in a humorous context (67%)' (NTVS, 1992, p.x). The statistics speak for themselves.

The fact that this type of research has been seriously criticized by many researchers in this area (see Gauntlett, 1995, Cumberbatch, 1989) and shown to be lacking in reliability or validity has very little impact on the impression formed by the general public that there are harmful side effects to watching television. This type of study quantifies the volume of television violence, and then uses such statistics to suggest that viewers are at 'risk' to high levels of violence. For example, the NTVS (1992, p.x) claim that 'Perpetrators go unpunished in 73% of all violent scenes.' This is exactly the kind of alarming statistic the media, and anti-violence campaign groups utilize in their 'translation' of academic research (Jamison, 1996 p.242). And yet, if one examines the factors behind this analysis, it is possible to see that the NTVS is referring to perpetrators who go unpunished in the same scene. It is no wonder such a high figure has been found. As one American journalist commented, to punish perpetrators in the same scene one would have to 'create a scene in which, lets say, a man is shot, a cop sees it happen, and the criminal is arrested on the spot. US television chooses to do things the old fashioned way. There's something called plot' (cited in Barker, 1997a, p.27). Unfortunately, such criticism and examples of research which counteracts these
claims are rarely given public hearing. For example, Barrie Gunter (1996, p.2), in his report *Violence on Television in the United Kingdom - a Content Analysis* makes no such claims as the NTVS, and indeed finds that ‘the amount of violence has declined since 1986’, and ‘now accounts for 0.61% of programme output time compared with 1.1% in 1986’. It is true that these studies involve different countries, and that Gunter's report suggests that ‘the most common setting for violence is the USA’ (Gunter, 1996, p.3), but despite this, the difference between these two reports is extensive.

What is significant about research which attempts to measure the effects of television, and what marks it out as so successful to anti-violence campaigns, is the way that it verifies anecdotal evidence and public opinion polls that dominate press coverage of this area. Once these three aspects of ‘reflexive modernization’ come together it becomes difficult to deny this accumulation of evidence because each verifies the other and becomes caught up in the ‘social drama’ of risk. What is more, once the media, the judiciary and the government express concern and fear for the safety of society, sub political groups who advocate anti-violence have only to present reports such as *Violence, Pornography and the Media* (discussed earlier), for the whole issue of risk and the mass media to become a politically sensitive issue.

**The Politicization of Media Violence**

For risk to become a political and social issue, it must have the news media, the public and the judiciary on its side. The recognition of modernization risks involves ‘collective knowledge...and the political illumination of the associated chains of cause
and effect' (Beck, 1992, p.77). It must also involve 'a new ecological morality': campaign groups who are on 'a crusade against pollutants must scrutinize the industrial operations from the eco-moral point of view' (Beck, 1992, p.77). This new point of view produces a specific type of risk awareness and conflict: if ecological hazards are to be reduced or eliminated, the very process of elimination must become political in nature.

The issue of media violence has become a political hot potato. Collective knowledge of the risks associated with watching media violence has led to political intervention. As the PAPFCPG report indicated, anecdotal evidence, public opinion polls, and 'expert' opinion lead to the politicization of media violence. The Video Recordings Act (1984) and the Criminal Justice Act (1994) were implemented because of the recognition of television violence as a modernization risk. What is more, it is the moral component of the campaign against television violence that has been the most successful in winning public and political support.

In an essay titled 'Time to Face Responsibility', Mary Whitehouse, the founder of the National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVALA), makes absolutely clear the eco-moral point of view Beck speaks of in relation to the recognition of modernization risks. She highlights the links between children, the environment, and responsibility when she asks this question: 'how do we fill the film-makers with a sense of their own responsibility for the health and welfare not only of the whole of our society, but especially, for pity's sake, the welfare of the children who are the future?' (Whitehouse, 1996, p.61). The answer to her question, of course, is for citizens' groups such as the NVALA to make sure that the entertainment industry takes full responsibility for 'the moralization of (their) industrial production' (Beck, 1992, p.222).
Above all else, anti-violence campaigners demand for ‘ethical practice’, and ethical practice, in the case of media violence, means increased control and censorship.

**The V-Chip**

A good example of the politicization of media violence is the proposed introduction of the V-chip in America and Canada. The V-chip, invented by Professor Tim Collings in Canada, sends an electronic signal to TV sets when programmes which contain material considered to be unsuitable for children are broadcast. A ratings system is applied to violence, language and sexuality. It enables parents to choose from a viewing level of 0-5 the amount and type of violence, language and sexuality they wish to see on their home television screens. Unsuitable material would be scrambled by the V-chip, unless it were switched off by an adult using a secure code. The ratings system which parents will use to control the risk of television violence can be operated by an independent organization or by the entertainment industry themselves.

The V-chip was designed by Professor Collings in response to effects research which determines to find evidence of causal proof that television violence can cause risk to society - the ‘V’ stands for violence. Collings first approached the regulatory body, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC, 1996), about the V-chip in 1991. After trials in Canada, the CRTC has decided to introduce widespread use of the V-chip in new TV sets, as of September 1996. America has also decided to introduce the V-chip, and its target date for all new television sets over 13 inches to be equipped with a V-chip is July 1st 1999. Britain is still considering the possibility of whether to introduce the V-chip.
A recent report titled 'Respecting the Children: a Canadian Approach to Helping Families Deal with Television Violence' (CRTC, 1996) reveals how sub-political groups campaigning against violence succeeded in producing this legislation. A section at the end of the report lists ten anti-violence advocacy groups to contact. These anti-violence advocacy groups took part in public discussions on screen violence and were instrumental in voicing the opinion of parents who 'want further action to protect their children against gratuitous and glamorized TV violence'. Nearly two million Canadians signed a petition calling for greater protection for their children. The results of this public meeting were to launch a V-chip rating system to help parents protect their children from television violence.

The CRTC's report reveals that campaign groups can and do effect change on a global scale. Indeed, so successful has been the case for causal proof of the side effects associated with media violence in Canada that the case against such evidence is not even presented in the CRTC's 1996 report. At the back of the report is a list of the 'selected readings related to the issue of television violence' which includes 28 references to research which claims that aggressive tendencies and desensitization effects are among the risk factors associated with watching television violence. There is not one mention of any research which refutes such claims, even though there is a substantial amount of well respected research in this area (see Barker and Petley, 1997; Buckingham and Allerton, 1996; Cumberbatch, 1989; Gauntlett, 1995, 1997). The case for causal proof is presented as conclusive. And with 'conclusive proof' and nearly two million parents' signatures advocating reduced levels of television violence, the entertainment industry has little choice but to self-regulate.

The introduction of the V-chip provides a useful way for anti-violence campaign groups to gain increased responsibility from the entertainment industry, and
government legislation at the same time. The Canadian government must provide new legislation to implement this television classification system, and, most importantly, this places accountability with Canadian programmers who ‘will be responsible for encoding the programs they broadcast in order to activate a V-chip pre-set at whatever level of televised violence each family considers acceptable for its children’.30 This also means that the entertainment industry can transform its ‘mistakes’, i.e. gratuitous sex and violence, into ‘development opportunities’, i.e. new television sets fitted with the V-chip (Beck, 1992, p.160).

This highly successful example of reflexive politicization also leads to what Beck (1992, p.80) calls a ‘legitimate totalitarianism of hazard prevention’. Like the introduction of the Criminal Justice Act (1994) in Britain, legislation regarding the V-chip in Canada involved an accumulation of causal proof through anecdotal evidence, public opinion, and scientific research. Indeed, Beck (1992, p.222) may argue that this is not an example of ‘hazard prevention’ but instead a step forward in ‘the moralization of industrial production’, something he advocates as a form of social development in the coming years. However, in the case of the mass media both concepts induce the same results: the censorship of creative freedom.

With the USA about to follow in the footsteps of Canada and introduce the V-chip as a television classification system, ‘hazard prevention’ and ‘the moralization of industrial production’ will no doubt become widespread, at least when it comes to the commodity of television. Criticism of the V-chip as back door censorship has had little effect on Bill Clinton's decision to advocate its uses (see Variety, 1996, Time, 1996). Nor have very real concerns as to the logistical problems of operating a centralized ratings system for television been properly addressed. Rating crime programmes like Law and Order, or sitcoms like Seinfeld, could prove extremely problematic because
sex, violence and language occur at different levels and in different contexts every week: how can one rating do justice to the complexity of these programmes?

The lack of concern by the Canadian and American governments as to whether the V-chip will actually prove effective only serves to reveal that the risk of screen violence has become a political issue that can win votes. It is no coincidence that the findings of the National Television Violence Survey (NTVS, 1996), discussed in the previous section, were publicised at the same time as President Clinton's advocacy of the V-chip and call for a 'violence summit'. In the run up to the presidential election, magazines like Time (1996) and Variety (1996) were quick to highlight the significance of President Clinton's decision to introduce the V-chip just as the NTVS revealed that TV violence is widespread and poses risks to young viewers. The picture of a young boy with a smashed television on his head makes the message loud and clear: television is to blame (Time, 1996, p.45).

**The Social Amplification of Risk**

We began this chapter by considering the dominant discourse of media violence. Controversies over films such as *Child's Play 3*, *Natural Born Killers*, or *Crash* can be seen to be constructed around a familiar rhetoric: these films are morally depraved and they can corrupt innocent children and vulnerable members of our society. Researchers have shown that this dominant discourse taps into 'an archaeology of popular anxieties' (Murdock, 1997, p.67) and reveals class conflict and public anxiety of new, unknown technologies (Pearson, 1983; Petley, 1997b). This spiral of anxiety and fear is commonly referred to as a 'moral panic' (Cohen, 1972; Cohen and Young, 1973).
David Gauntlett in *Moving Experiences* (1995, p.107) outlines the spiral of panic about television violence. This has been modified by Barratt (1997), who argues that the media violence debate is not only an example of a 'moral panic' but rather can be also be understood as a carefully constructed moral crusade by Christian campaign groups such as CARE and the MCD. We can see from the organization and commitment of such campaign groups as CARE and the MCD, that the role of non-governmental organizations are significant to our understanding of the media violence debate. It is not the case that the media manufacture 'moral panics' but rather that the media, politicians and non-governmental organizations campaign together to regulate and control the mass media. From the evidence presented so far, it is possible to see that Christian campaign groups are often a catalyst for 'moral panics' This theory of moral crusades and moral panics is a significant one, and has implications for the way in which the media violence debate and anti-violence campaign groups can be linked to risk and environmentalism.

Moral crusades and moral panics are an example of risk consciousness and conflict. Thus, it is significant to bear in mind that moral crusades and moral panics are intricately caught up in risk evaluation and management. We cannot discuss the 'effects' of media violence without considering the effects of risk and environmentalism if we wish to understand the construction of this debate. One way to open up the discussion of media violence is to consider the theory of the social amplification of risk (Kasperson, Renn, et al., 1988).

Kasperson (1996, p.161) states: ‘The social amplification of risk refers to the cultural, social and individual structures and processes that shape the societal experience with risk’. This societal experience is a dynamic process, taking into account ‘the continuing learning and social interactions resulting from social experience with

The concept of the social amplification of risk is based on the thesis that events pertaining to hazards interact with psychological, social, institutional and cultural processes in ways that can heighten or attenuate perceptions of risk and shape behaviour. Behavioural responses, in turn, generate secondary social or economic consequences. These consequences extend far beyond direct effects to human health or the environment to include significant indirect impacts such as liability, insurance costs, loss of confidence in institutions, stigmatisation, or alienation from community affairs...

Thus, the social amplification of risk is concerned with the dynamic processes which shape our understanding of a risk event. The risk event is not confined to one primary source, but, rather involves many different factors and processes, and the consequences of the risk event have direct and indirect impacts on social and cultural practices.

As with Beck, in Risk Society, the social amplification of risk is about real risks and the cultural and social construction of risk. Kasperson writes (1996, p.159):

The experience of risk is therefore both an experience of physical harm and the result of culture and social processes by which individuals or groups acquire or create interpretations of hazards. These interpretations provide rules of how to select, order and explain signals from the physical world. Additionally, each cultural or social group selects certain risks and adds them to its strand of worry beads to rub and burnish even as it selects out other risks as not meriting immediate concern.

In the case of media violence, the ‘creative interpretations’ of the ‘risks’ of media violence are defined by anti-violence campaign groups, the media and politicians. Kasperson, Renn et al. consider the individuals or groups who are involved with the production and dissemination of knowledge as ‘amplification stations’. Kasperson (1996, pp.159-160) explains this as follows:
Amplification stations can be individuals, groups or institutions. It is obvious that social groups or institutions can amplify or attenuate signals only by working in social aggregates and participating in social processes. But individuals in groups and institutions do not act or react merely in their roles as private persons, but rather according to the role specification associated with their positions. Amplification may therefore differ among individuals in their roles as private citizens and in their roles as employees or members of social groups and organisations...We term these larger social units *social stations of amplification*. Individuals in their roles as members of employees of social groups or institutions do not only follow their personal values and interpretative patterns; they also perceive risk information and construct the risk 'problem' according to cultural biases and the rules of their organisation or group.

Social stations of amplification resemble the way in which campaign groups, politicians and the media work together to intensify the perceived negative effects of media violence. Cultural biases, religious beliefs, personal values, and political persuasions all influence the way in which the 'risks' of media violence are constructed as an environmental 'problem' which must be solved.

A primary risk event can set in motion a roll call of secondary effects. These effects include:

- Enduring mental perceptions, images and attitudes towards risk;
- Political and social pressure;
- Changes in risk monitoring and regulation;
- Repercussions on other technologies and social institutions.

These secondary effects (adapted from Kasperson, 1992, p.160) can be directly related to the moral crusade and moral panic concerning media violence. They can also be related to the risk paradigm, as outlined by Beck in *Risk Society*. Campaign groups and the mass media encourage perceptions of media violence as risky and hazardous; this creates political and social pressure, which leads to changes in the monitoring and regulation of media violence; this also has repercussions on other technologies, such as computer games and the internet, and other institutions, such as the BBFC. Figure 1
will illustrate the relationship between the social amplification of risk and the media violence debate.

Figure 1 reveals that there is a ripple effect to the social amplification of risk and media violence. The primary effects of media violence are alleged to be harmful. Despite the fact that there is no convincing evidence to support this, a tragic event such as the murder of James Bulger is used as a catalyst to set in motion a roll call of secondary effects, such as political and social pressure, changes in risk monitoring and regulation and repercussions on other technologies. We can see from Figure 1 that social amplification stations, such as CARE, or MCD, are directly linked to risk consciousness and conflict. What I would like to add to the theory of the social amplification of risk is the fact that sub-political groups can choose to set the ripple effect in motion, actually using a tragic event to create links between real violence and media violence in order to achieve their own political and social agenda. Thus, campaign organizers become social actors in the drama of risk controversy and create an emotional and intellectual experience that taps into the roots of existing public anxiety about the need to 'exert control over the unknown and uncontrolled' (Palmlund, 1996, p.199).

Consequently, rather than attempting to understand media violence controversies from the point of view of 'moral panics' and the manufacture of news, which in many ways only offers a limited interpretation of the significance of such controversies, it is better to take into account the wide ranging and dynamic processes at work in the 'social drama' of risk consciousness and conflict. Moral crusades and moral panics are significant to the construction of media violence controversies, but these two factors alone do not explain either the strength or the range of effects on social and political institutions that these controversies set in motion.
Figure 1: the social amplification of the risks of media violence
By using an adapted form of the theory of the social amplification of risk, we can see the primary and secondary processes at work, and we can understand the implications of the construction of media violence as an environmental risk. It is possible to see that media violence has very little to do with the risk controversy; it is the production and dissemination of knowledge that is at stake. As Ortwin Renn (1992, p.191) points out, in the social arena of risk, risk has become a symbol for other issues: ‘The risk as such may not be the trigger for entering the stage but rather as its symbolic meaning for decision-making processes in society and for existing power structures’. This is why social actors, such as anti-violence campaign groups, social commentators and politicians become involved in the social amplification of risk. What is at stake is the control of economic and social values.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the paradigm of risk in relation to violence and the mass media. Anti-violence activists have formed sub-political groups which use the risk paradigm to successfully argue the case for causal links between media violence and real-life violence. As has been shown, sub-political groups such as the Parliamentary All Party Family and Child Protection Group (PAPFCPG) utilize the rhetoric of risk in order to draw parallels with other industrial products, such as leaded petrol, or organophosphate pesticides, which are known to cause a serious threat to the health of the environment and the general public. Once the risk paradigm has been put into place, it is very difficult to counteract any arguments that media violence presents a risk to
viewers, and, in particular, to children, who are perceived as most vulnerable to the side-effects of watching television violence. The risks are visible in the faces of the dead children who are the victims of media violence.

The risk argument has a number of factors which make it successful: anecdotal evidence, public opinion, and scientific research mean that there are three forms of evidence that can be used to provide causal proof, the most important stage in illuminating risk. What is more, the influence of media publicity, and the judiciary ensure that the government will not be hesitant in taking steps to legitimate hazard prevention. It is far more difficult and costly to reduce levels of real crime by tackling social problems such as poverty, than to blame the entertainment industry for harmful side-effects which can lead to real crime. Politicians can take steps to reduce levels of media violence without actually dealing with the real causes of crime. And, the risk argument ensures that anti-violence campaigners and politicians appear as moral crusaders: if media violence is presented as an international health hazard, then whoever successfully campaigns for its elimination is presented as no less than heroic. It is no wonder, then, that the risk paradigm is utilized in order to achieve changes in legislation with regard to the mass media: it has a proven track record for success.

With the risk paradigm so firmly in place with regard to violence and the mass media, it is my suggestion that we need to change the terms of reference if we are to counteract the growing support for the 'legitimization of hazard prevention': the Criminal Justice Act (1994) and the V-chip are only two recent examples of this. In the next chapter I want to argue that watching television is not comparable to injecting drugs: the effects of television cannot be measured in the same way that the effects of organo-phosphates can be measured. Television viewing is a complex and sophisticated process that does not lend itself to scientific measurement.
Notes


2 Crash won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes 1996 for 'audacity, courage and daring'. See Screen International, Friday, August 16 1996, p.22. It was also screened at the London Film Festival, 9th November 1996.

3 Evening Standard, 3/6/96, p.16.

4 Crash was released on 6th June 1997. It was given an 18 certificate and passed uncut by the BBFC on 18th March 1997. The City of Westminster chose to ban the film from all cinemas in its catchment area. This meant that most West End cinemas in London could not show the film. See press release for Crash, BBFC, 1997, and the Guardian, June 6th 1997, pp.2 and 3, the Independent, June 5th 1997, pp.4 and 5 for reviews and discussion of this film.


6 The Big Story: Crash, first screened on ITV 14/11/96, 7.30pm. The Big Story made a direct link between fantasy car crashes and real car crashes. A clinical psychologist talks about the causal link between watching screen violence and real violence; Sony, the makers of 'Destruction Derby' are blamed for inciting 17-25 year old males to kill and injure innocent people. Here is the presenter Dermot Murnaghan on the subject: 'Nearly 4000 people a year are killed on our roads, hundreds of thousands are injured, and as Christmas approaches the toll rises. But, far from being horrified by car crashes, we seem to love them. We even bring up our children to enjoy crashes, giving them toys and computer games...And people say it's all just entertainment, but there are serious consequences.'

7 Daily Telegraph, Saturday 9 November, 1996, p.1. It is worth pointing out that as the Heritage Secretary Virginia Bottomley had no reason to call for local councils to ban Crash; the Heritage Secretary controls broadcasting, not film, which is the responsibility of the Home Office. Thus, it can be seen that Bottomley was speaking for herself, not in her official capacity as an MP, when she denounced David Cronenberg's new film.

8 In November 1996 Michael Howard, the Home Office Minister, asked the British Board of Film Classification to report on their policy to reduce levels of screen violence. The BBFC's reply asked for a 'cool headed look at current facts' and claimed that whilst 'censorship can cut gratuitous acts of violence...(the BBFC) cannot change the culture of violence which permeates much mainstream film making' (BBFC, 1996, p.1-2). The Daily Mail, always quick to respond to such matters, interpreted the BBFC's 'cool headed' reply as an act of cowardice. The BBFC is 'powerless to stop the rising tide of sickening screen violence' it said, and, on a more ominous note, suggested: 'The Home Office is understood to be examining ways of scrapping the BBFC - a private company funded by the film industry - and establishing a new watchdog', Poulter, S. and Burt, J., Daily Mail, Monday, December 23 1996, p.1 and 7.

9 See the Daily Telegraph, Wednesday November 6, 1996, p.1.


11 The General Election was on the 1st May 1997.

13 *Daily Telegraph*, Saturday, November 9, 1996, p.3.

14 For examples of research into moral panics, see Cohen (1972), Cohen and Young (1973), Pearson (1983), Barker (1984), and Martin (1993).


16 *Visions of Ecstasy*, directed by Nigel Wingrove, lost its battle to obtain a certificate, when the European court upheld the BBFC's decision to ban this film which they believe to contain blasphemous images. See the *Guardian* Tuesday November 26, 1996, p.5 and the *Evening Standard*, Monday 25 November, 1996, pp.1 and 2.


19 See the *Guardian*, Wednesday December 11, 1996, p.1, for news coverage of Government acceptance of the condition Gulf war syndrome.

20 Christian Action Research and Education (CARE) has been involved in assessing the impact of the mass media on society for over 20 years. The Movement for Christian Democracy (MCD) grew out of the Epiphany group, and has only been in existence since 1990. The National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVALA) was set up by Mary Whitehouse in 1950 and is a voluntary organization which aims to campaign against pornography, violence and bad language and promotes the portrayal of moral behaviour. For an interesting article on Mary Whitehouse's views see French (1996, pp. 52-61) and for more information about these campaign groups see Barratt (1995, pp.22.23) and Thompson, 1992. Other citizens groups include the Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV), and the Consumers Association but the VLV is less concerned with campaigning against anti-violence and more interested in educating the public. The VLV is an independent non-profit making association which aims to educate the public about all broadcasting issues.

21 Thompson discusses the campaign tactic of 'the protection of children' in relation to CARE and NVALA by tracing this tactic to the ABUSE campaign in 1978, and the NVALA's decision to link the existence of the Paedophile Information Exchange to pornography, see Thompson, 1992, p.86 for more details.

22 Thompson (1992, p.64) and Barratt (1997, p.8) both argue that moral crusades and the moral majority have been neglected by academics. Their research shows that more work is needed in this area.

23 See the *Daily Telegraph*, November 6, 1996, p.4 and for earlier citation of this report see the *Daily Telegraph*, June 26, 1996.


25 The NTVS uses four research sites: the University of California; the University of North Carolina; the University of Texas; the University of Wisconsin. It involves a three part assessment of television violence, involving content analysis, a study of the effectiveness of the current US ratings system, and a review of anti-violence educational initiatives for television.

26 America plans to introduce the V-chip to 50% of all new TV sets larger than 13 inches by July 1st 1998. Television sets under 13 inches will not be equipped with a V-chip, see Reuters Limited, Friday 26th September 1997. For discussion about the V-chip in Canada and the USA see *Variety*, February 19-25, 1996, pp.1, 61, 62; *Time*, February 19, 1996, pp.44-45; Klive, A, 1996, 'Chips with Everything', in *Broadcast*, 3 May 1996, pp.18-19, and also several other reports on the V-chip in the same issue of Broadcast. There were many reports of this in the press during March 1996, as Virginia Bottomley, the National Heritage Secretary, ordered an Enquirer into the introduction of the V-chip in Britain. For discussion see Prober, A, 1996. 'When

27 For discussion of this see *Broadcast*, 3 May 1996, pp.17-19; *Screen International*, 22 March 1996; Prober (1996); the *Independent*, 19 March 1996, amongst others.

28 See press release attached to the CRTC (1996) report on helping families deal with screen violence (no page references given).


Cultural Insecurities

In the previous chapter I outlined the relationship between social theories of risk and the debate concerning the alleged harmful effects of media violence. I demonstrated that anti-violence campaign groups, social commentators and politicians utilize a risk approach in order to achieve success in regulating and controlling levels of media violence. In this chapter I would like to analyze this risk approach in more detail in order to reveal its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand a risk approach can, for example, highlight unacceptable levels of toxic waste, and this is a welcome and necessary critique in relation to the power and impact multinational corporations might have on our global environment. However, when the risk argument is used in relation to the mass media, it can distort and filter evidence so that the mass media, a complex and diverse area, is made to appear threatening and ultimately harmful. Whilst this is not to say that aspects of the mass media shouldn't be open to criticism, this does point out a failure to differentiate between acid rain and the mass media. Clearly, the effects of watching television cannot be measured in the same way the effects of acid rain can be measured. In fact, when scientists do attempt to measure the effects of environmental hazards, such as acid rain, their research shows that it is remarkably difficult to measure effects at all. Adams (1995, p.167) argues: 'the greenhouse debate...(is) yet another case of people arguing furiously in the dark'. And yet organisations, such as CARE, or MCD, who use the risk argument, fail to make this
distinction, and fail to recognise the difficulty of finding scientific proof of negative
effects, whether these be the effects of global warming or the effects of media violence.

Therefore it is necessary to critique how the risk argument is used in relation to
media violence, and this will be done in two stages. First, the introduction of seat belt
laws will be analyzed in order to reveal that even when we are dealing with a case that
appears conclusive and favourable to scientific measurement, the facts are not what
they seem. Once individuals and organisations apply the risk argument to the mass
media, it is even more apparent how evidence can be selectively filtered and
manipulated. Secondly, although social theories of risk take into account the political
and cultural construction of risk, such theories often fail to acknowledge that all
societies have a propensity to take risks and that individuals engage in risk-taking
behaviour.

The Risk Argument Revealed

The risk argument has many strengths. Sub-political groups who use the risk
argument can campaign against the hazardous effects of a variety of modernization
products, ranging from nuclear waste to breast implants. Such organisations argue that
industrial modernization is always concerned with money not morality, and sub-
political groups, such as Greenpeace claim that morality is not only important, but
essential to our individual and global well being. Thus, risk awareness, a significant
factor in the risk argument, signifies a heightened concern for moral, social and
ecological issues. For example, buying a particular brand of coffee may not only affect your personal health and well being, but have repercussions on a global scale. If the coffee is mass produced it can contain dangerous chemicals that can harm the consumer's health, the health of the workers who farm the coffee beans, and the stability of the land on which it is produced. Growing coffee can be a national and international environmental hazard, and every time you buy a particular brand of coffee you contribute to this destruction. Thus, citizen's campaign groups who use the risk argument can highlight potential dangers and serve to alert the implications of unrestrained growth; they can strive to regulate and control industrial modernization, which, if left unchecked, will ultimately destroy more than it promises to produce.

There are clearly some cases where citizen's campaign groups who use the risk argument can serve as a champion of human rights. For example, the case highlighted in the previous chapter, where the National Gulf Veterans and Families Associations (NGVFA) finally forced the British government into admitting that organo-phosphate pesticides were extensively used throughout the Gulf war, would not have reached its successful conclusion without the benefit of the risk argument as used by the NGVFA. Emotive pictures of babies affected by their fathers' exposure to organo-phosphate pesticides helped highlight the unethical treatment of British soldiers by the British government. Clearly the government should take responsibility for these tragic events, and if it is only through a utilization of the risk argument that this can be achieved, then the risk argument has served a useful purpose.¹ A similar case can be made in relation to intensive farming and the BSE scare, where official scientific reassurance that there is no harm in eating British beef has been flatly contradicted by cases of death due to eating contaminated beef (Grove-White, 1997, pp.20-21). By using the risk argument, campaign
groups can highlight the dangers of intensive farming and further encourage industry accountability in the face of public mistrust of industrially generated risk.²

Yet, when the risk argument is applied to other modernization products such as cars, computers, or violent movies the same logic is used, a logic which cannot allow for the actual complexity of these products in the market place. What campaign groups who use the risk argument do not take into account is the fact that some modernization products have positive and negative attributes. In the case of organo-phosphate pesticides this product encourages healthier crops and yet is it also capable of harming the health of human beings, now and in the future. As the NGVFA have pointed out, in this instance, the negative attributes far outweigh the positive attributes of this modernization product. However, in the case of products such as the automobile, or popular entertainment, the positive rewards to be gained from using these products are as strong, if not more so, than the negative attributes. Driving a car, or watching television, are popular activities that are used for work and for pleasure. Driving a car also provides the consumer with a certain status that is socially recognized by his, or her peers. Similarly, watching television enables the consumer to take part in a social activity that ensures communication and status amongst his or her peers. In the light of the risk argument, which has been used in relation to both of these products, the car industry and the entertainment industry are perceived to be only interested in money not morality. As Beck (1992, p.21) states: 'Risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself'. Thus, according to Beck, and campaign groups such as CARE, the very concept of risk is bound up with the concept of hazards and dangers associated with modernization.

Beck himself perceives television to be symptomatic of the modernization
process. Like Theodor Adorno (1991), and the Frankfurt School of critical theory, Beck considers the mass media to be part of the workings of capitalist domination. The 'culture industry' (Adorno, 1991) lures people into believing that they are making individual choices when it comes to entertainment, but this is an illusion: the culture industry reinforces its capitalist ideology and discourages free and critical thinking. Thus, Beck writes: 'Television isolates and standardizes...Everyone sits isolated even in the family and gapes at the set. Thus arises the social image of an isolated mass audience' (1992, p.132). It is quite clear that, like Adorno, Beck does not see television as capable of positive attributes; it reinforces social structures and erodes independent thinking: it creates zombies of us all. And yet, of course, television can be both entertaining and stimulating and individual and social. It can be any number of things to different types of viewers. There is a great deal of complexity of response to television programmes which is also reflected in the sheer variety of programmes on offer to the normal household. And, as David Gauntlett has pointed out (1997, p.31), Beck, like Adorno, fails to recognize that there are different pleasures to be gained from popular culture, pleasures that appeal to a wide audience.

I want to consider this concept of the 'culture industry' in more detail in a moment. What I want to point out here is that if groups such as CARE or MCD perceive television to be part of the entertainment industry, which is in turn part of the modernization process, then they assume that television can be subjected to the same type of scientific analysis. Indeed, as soon as the risk argument is in operation, the 'hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself' (Beck, 1992, p.21) ensure that television will be perceived as negative. It follows that research which attempts to investigate this product will focus on how to minimize hazards and reduce
insecurities commonly perceived to be associated with this product. As the previous chapter indicated, this is exactly what the American effects tradition aims to achieve in its systematic research into the risks of media violence (Gauntlett, 1995; Murdock, 1997; Rowland, 1997).

Before I examine the mistaken presumption that the effects of television can be measured like any other modernization product, let me provide an instance of the risk argument in action in order to reveal that even when we are dealing with a product which, in theory, has a greater propensity to be measured for side effects than the mass media, there are still considerable problems with this approach.

**Road Safety: the Risk Argument in Action**

The car industry is a prime example of industrial modernization in action. Large growth, economic progress, heavy advertising; the automobile industry is one of the success stories of twentieth century capitalism. Henry Ford is not just the name of a car manufacturer; he is a metaphor for economic success. And the automobile has come to represent social status and mobility. It is no accident that Elvis possessed a compulsive urge to buy Cadillacs; a Cadillac signified the success and style of Elvis Presley's music career.

In the late twentieth century, the automobile also represents the risks and hazards associated with industrial modernization. Cars kill, both on the road, and through the emission of pollutants which affect the environment. In 1991 over 4000 people in Britain died due to road death, and in America the figure was over 40,000 (Adams, 1995, p.136). The car industry has responded to this concern by developing a
large bureaucracy to deal with safety management. The USA, the world's leading car manufacturer, now has a National Highway and Traffic Administration which is capable of enforcing vehicle safety regulations. Since the mid 1960s it has ensured that cars must have tougher windscreens and energy-absorbing steering columns to help protect drivers in road accidents. In effect, the car industry has turned the risks and hazards associated with the modernization process into what Beck (1992, p.176) terms 'developmental opportunities'. The original cause for concern, i.e. that cars can kill, is subsumed in this new development of the consideration and treatment of the risks associated with driving a car: thus, rather than suggesting that the number of cars should be reduced, safety regulation becomes the solution.

It is this emphasis on safety that led to the introduction of the seat belt which has become a significant symbol of risk reduction around the world. As John Adams (1995, p.114) states in Risk:

Around the world hundreds of millions of motorists are now obliged by law to belt up. The seat belt law, with minor national variations, probably affects more people than any other single piece of safety legislation. The first seat belt law came into effect in the state of Victoria in Australia in 1970, and by 1991 over 80 jurisdictions worldwide had laws compelling drivers and some passengers to wear seat belts. It is now a 'truth', almost universally acknowledged, that these laws have saved thousands of lives. It is a 'fact' endlessly repeated, not only on television in the popular press, but in scientific literature. Seat belts feature routinely in discussions of safety as an example of a measure that yields enormous benefits for minimal cost. The 'success' of seat belt legislation in saving many lives is frequently cited by advocates of other public health measures as an example of the way legislation and regulation can reduce risk.

And yet despite the wealth of information in the press and by other researchers about the success of this safety regulation, Adams (1992, p.116) maintains that 'the strength of convictions about what this legislation has achieved is remarkably independent of
objective evidence’. How can this be so? It seems to be ‘common sense’ that wearing a seat belt can help save lives. Only a fool or villain would suggest otherwise (Barker, 1997a, p.16).

Adams’ argument about seat belt legislation is worth considering in some detail because of the parallels between this debate about road safety and the debate about media violence. First, it is important to examine the basic assumption that seat belts save lives. Adams does not deny that a seat belt could prove to be life-saving if a driver or passenger were involved in a car crash. Adams (1995, p.119) cites Evans (1991) who has calculated that wearing a seat belt can reduce the chances of death from a car crash by 41 per cent. Obviously, if travelling at high speed, a seat belt would help prevent a driver or front passenger from crashing through the windscreen. We all remember those adverts admonishing us to wear seat belts that showed dummies flying through the windscreen at high speed: this is what happens when cars collide. This knowledge of what happens when cars collide is called the ‘lay perspective’ (see Slovic, 1987, 1992, 1995; Durant, 1997): it is public awareness of risk assessment.

After the seat belt legislation came into effect in Australia in 1970, seat belt campaign groups used an integration of expert and ‘lay perspectives’ to present claims for the life saving benefits of wearing a seat belt. In a congressional inquiry by the Department of Transport in 1978, British campaign groups claimed that wearing a seat belt could save up to a potential of 89,000 lives over the next ten years; it also referred to other studies in France and Sweden, as well as Australia, where seat belts have reduced fatalities by up to 60-70 per cent (cited in Adams, 1995, p.115). In 1981 campaign groups and the car industry itself were united in advocating seat belt usage, and that same year, the British seat belt law was passed by Parliament, adding Britain to
a long list of countries that had already passed similar laws.

However, despite this ‘large body of evidence’, from expert and lay perspectives that seat belt usage can reduce road fatalities, there was in actual fact very little real evidence that wearing a seat belt could encourage people to be safer on the roads. All the scientific evidence that the seat belt campaign groups referred to was based on original research conducted in Australia in 1970 which monitored the effects of seat belt legislation on road accident deaths. This research found that the number of road accident deaths was significantly reduced after the seat belt legislation was introduced. However, what this original research failed to do was show an awareness of risk compensation. Risk compensation is a phenomenon whereby ‘people modify their behaviour in response to perceived changes in risk to their personal safety’ (Adams, 1995, p.114). According to Adams, this means that people drive more dangerously when they are wearing a seat belt. Thus, if people are forced to wear seat belts, more rather than less accidents will occur, particularly towards those who are more vulnerable, such as cyclists and pedestrians.

Thus, Adams found that the original evidence conducted in Australia would have to be discounted because of its failure to incorporate risk compensation. As early as 1981 Adams found that: ‘Available data for eight western European countries which introduced a seat belt law between 1973 and 1976 suggests that it has not led to a detectable change in road deaths’ (1992, p.120). In fact minor accidents, and the death of pedestrians and cyclists had increased in all eight countries in this same period. This research, and countless others inspired by the original ‘success’ of Australia’s road safety record after seat belt legislation, failed to incorporate the human element into their statistics regarding road safety. These researchers had used test dummies; they had
measured the effects of wearing a seatbelt, and yet they had failed to take into account that human beings act differently under different circumstances: most importantly, they had failed to take into account that human beings have a propensity to take risk.

Adams' research came at a time when the risk argument was in full operation. The car industry had been found responsible for selling dangerous products. Seat belt campaign groups had lobbied in the press and in parliament for the introduction of seat belt laws; they had produced 'overwhelming evidence' that appeared irrefutable; they had gained prominent support from the Department of Transport, the British Medical Association, and the Automobile Association. What is more, they had 'common sense' on their side; driving a car can be dangerous, and wearing a seat belt can reduce this danger: this is the 'lay perspective' of risk assessment in relation to driving. It did not take long for the government to agree and pass legislation enforcing seat belt usage. Adams' report on risk compensation and the misinterpretation of European statistics regarding seat belt law and numbers of road death (Adams, 1981) was suppressed by the government and seat belt campaign groups because it did not fit with the dominant discourse on road safety.

Adams refers to his own experience of this selective filtering of the evidence in Risk, and, in keeping with Barker and Petley's comments on the same type of selective reportage of evidence in relation to the 'effects' of media violence (1997), Adams refers to the 'vehemence' (1995, p.126) with which the press argued their case for the efficacy of seat belt legislation, and the almost 'evangelical' (1995, p.131) attitude of road safety researchers towards the efficacy of seat belt usage. Adams (1995, p.126-7) writes: 'This belief is now so widespread, profoundly held, and insistently repeated that it is difficult to imagine any way in which it might be altered. The contrary view is
Thus, the most successful piece of legislation regarding the prevention of the risks and hazards associated with modernization products is successful because of the way in which campaign groups utilised the risk argument, not because of the ‘overwhelming evidence’ about seatbelt usage and road safety. Whilst there is evidence to suggest that wearing a seat belt can reduce the risk of death by car crash, there is also evidence that wearing a seat belt actually increases the chances of minor accidents, and accidents which involve pedestrians and cyclists. Such evidence should have received proper hearing when the introduction of the seat belt was debated in parliament in 1981 but, because seat belt campaign groups utilized the risk argument, any evidence refuting the need to wear seat belts was routinely suppressed and/or ignored. As Adams points out, cars can kill, and the causal link between the automobile and death on the road is something we would all accept as part of the hazards associated with this type of risk-taking behaviour. However, how this behaviour should be regulated should be the subject of open debate; other safety regulations should be offered as alternatives; and the very question of how much human behaviour can be regulated at all should be one that is routinely explored.

What I want to point out here is that the social and cultural construction of the automobile as a symbol of economic and social success ensured that the car, and those people who drive a car, could not be perceived as a hazard in itself. It was the way it was designed that was the problem. Thus, steps to ensure that cars were designed to be safer, and roads designed to prevent accidents circumnavigated the fact that people drive cars, and people like to take risks. These two very important factors - one, that cars can kill, and two, that people like to take risks - rarely come together. Joyriders
symbolize risk-taking behaviour and the car's potential to kill, but here, the joyriders are perceived to be criminals from troubled, often single parent, backgrounds; other reasons are found for their behaviour. More often than not, when a traffic accident hits the headlines, as in November 1993 when ten people were killed in a coach crash on the M2 motorway in Kent (Adams, 1995, p.126), it is the call for safety measures, for seat belts to be made compulsory for coaches, that hits the headlines, rather than the thought that this might be a result of risk-taking behaviour.

I will return to an individual's propensity to take risks in the following chapters. However, the theoretical position outlined above in relation to road traffic accidents highlights the link between safety and regulation and industrial and political management of risk. Once the causal link had been made between the car industry and road accidents and death, the industry had to take responsibility. The easiest and most cost effective way for it to do this was to add safety measures to its existing product, effectively creating another potential for economic growth but, this time, in the interests of safety. The introduction of the seat belt, an extremely inexpensive safety measure, was a viable symbol of the car industry's new risk awareness policy. The government also welcomed the introduction of the seat belt as a road safety measure. The seat belt legislation would ensure that the government was seen to care for citizens' lives, whilst at the same time it meant that road extensions and improvements could still take place.

No one wanted to rid society of the automobile: it is popular with the industry and with the general public. However, no one wanted to appear to advocate risk-taking behaviour which could lead to accidents and death. Thus, the seat belt came into being.

This effective and extremely clever management of risk obfuscates the real issues of concern in relation to road traffic accident and death. The safety belt is a
product of effects research; it does not address the role of the automobile industry, or the role of the driver in any way. A comparison with similar practices in relation to environmentalism will substantiate this point. Hajer (1997, p.248) notes that environmental debates highlight the role between nature, technology and society. He writes:

The popular movement wanted to save nature from the effects of industrialization but did not address the practices of industrial society head on, focusing instead on the effects of nature. In the end it thus paved the way for a programme that focused on the application of new technologies and scientific management techniques to ‘conserve nature’. Here the concern about the immorality of society was matched by a renewed appeal to forms of technoscientific management that were very similar to those industrial practices that had motivated the moral outcry in the first place.

Thus, whether it be cars, television, or ecology, the risk argument ensures that causes of concern and anxiety about a product become a concern about the ‘effects’ of this product, and thus are inextricably linked with ‘the industrial practices that motivated the moral outcry in the first place’.

In the next section I want to show how the risk argument is inappropriate for research into the effects of television. If it is difficult to measure the effects of seat belt regulation in an accurate and reliable manner, then it is even more difficult to measure the effects of watching film and television. People watch film and television in a variety of complex and contradictory ways. This means that any attempt to measure the effects of television (Donnerstein and Berkowitz, 1981; Lefkowitz et al, 1972, 1977) automatically fails to take into consideration the fact that people rarely view programmes in a systematic manner, and that people alter their viewing habits according to socio/cultural and individual factors. Effects research is a form of technoscientific management and fails to consider the significance of social practice and
social structure. It may purport to be concerned with 'the immorality of society' but is instead an example of 'scientific management techniques' (Hajer, 1997, p.248).

**The Search for 'Undeniable Proof'**

We have already looked at the cause-effect paradigm in Chapter two, and the way that it is constructed on the belief that television has negative effects which can be objectively measured and calculated in relation to the impact of television on contemporary society. The cause-effect paradigm in media research has two significant flaws. First, it is based on early research into the effects of television that has been found to be unreliable and invalid. This early research methodology relied on laboratory experiments which failed to take into account the difference between surrogate actions and real actions, and that experimenter expectations and demand inevitably colour results (see, for example, Gauntlett, 1995, p.18, and his criticism of studies by Bandura, 1963).

Secondly, the cause-effect paradigm assumes that all viewers are the same, i.e. that their behaviour can be standardized and measured. Once again, despite the fact that there has been a wealth of research to suggest that viewers have complex and contradictory responses to film and television programmes (see for example, Gauntlett, 1997; Buckingham, 1993b, 1996) research studies searching for a causal link between watching violence and aggressive acts continue to see the television viewer as passive and standardized (see for example, Barlow and Hill, 1985; Van Evra, 1990).

These two flaws indicate that, as with the study of seat belt usage in Australia and Europe discussed earlier, the effects of using a product, whether it be cars or
television, cannot be objectively measured so that the results can be used as 'undeniable proof'. Time and again studies have shown that the social and cultural contextualisation of viewing is significant to our understanding of viewing practices, and viewers respond to the mass media in a variety of different ways. Studies by Ann Gray (1992) Schlesinger et al. (1992), David Buckingham (1993b, 1996) and David Gauntlett (1997) indicate that children and adults possess an amazingly complex and contradictory response to the mass media. There may be patterns and themes which emerge in these studies, for example that children and adults know the difference between fiction and reality and this affects the way they respond to representations of violence (Buckingham, 1996, pp.213-251), but these patterns and similarities have not been objectively measured: human behaviour, especially something as complex and subjective as watching television, does not lend itself to scientific measurement, and this is what makes audience research especially challenging.

To refer to Beck once more, under the risk paradigm, all modernization products must be made accountable for the risks and hazards they produce. This means that scientific measurement must be used if causality is to be proven. Thus, quantitative research methods, 'the effects tradition', dominates the media violence debate, despite the fact that more sophisticated qualitative and quantitative research studies are far more likely to help us understand why and how viewers choose to watch media violence.³ It is assumed that modernization products are part of an industry that is unethical and amoral. This also means that those research studies which attempt to prove causality may already have an outcome in mind. The risk argument and experimenter expectations and demand can be seen to be of direct relevance here. Even though the effects of watching film and television cannot be measured, anti-violence
campaign groups demand that research prove there are negative effects to this modernization product. When viewed from this perspective, most research in the effects tradition can be seen to be caught in a paradox of its own making, where the reason for conducting scientific research on media violence is not to learn more about viewer response, but to vindicate anti-violence campaign groups in their fight against ethical malpractice, and to reinforce the practices of techno-scientific management.4

**Popular Culture: the Risks and Hazards**

The most common research methodology used in relation to media violence focuses on proving causality, and in this respect, can be seen to locate popular culture with the modernization process. This means that popular culture has become defined as a ‘social risk position’ (Beck, p.23) where the distribution and growth of risks is channelled through capitalist development. There are ‘definitional struggles over the scale, degree and urgency of risks’ (Beck, 1992, p.46) in relation to popular culture, but there is no doubt that, according to campaign groups such as CARE, and politicians such as David Alton, entertainment is perceived to be a commodity that must be controlled and regulated.

Theodor Adorno's concept of the 'culture industry' is of direct relevance here. Like the Frankfurt School, Beck critiques the concept of the enlightenment; writing about science, Beck says: ‘its claims to truth and its claims to enlightenment are demystified’ (1992, p.155); part of the function of a risk society is to demystify a belief in science and progress. Adorno (1991, p.92), in The Culture Industry, writes:
the total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, in which...enlightenment, that is the progressive technical domination, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means of fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves...

This concept of the 'culture industry' is very close to Beck's understanding of popular culture as a 'social risk position', where a product such as television 'isolates and standardizes' (Beck, 1992, p.132). What is more, the concept of the 'culture industry' makes an important link between industry as the primary force of capitalism, and culture 'as a basic causal factor in its own right' (Strinati, 1995, p.55). Thus, the term the 'culture industry' already signifies the fundamental concerns and anxieties of a risk society: these are industrial modernization and 'a permanent ration of collective standardized poisoning' (Beck, 1992, p.65).

However, where Adorno saw the culture industry as the location of power, encouraging conformity and consensus, and perpetuating a passive, dependent consumer, Beck sees the consumer as a subject of resistance. The consumer becomes a site of 'cultural risk consciousness' and conflict (Beck, 1992, p.73) and this leads to a formation of a risk society. Thus, rather than an individual being lulled into a false sense of resistance whilst, for example, listening to popular music, an individual is forced into a very real position of resistance as the perceived risks and hazards of popular music come to light. Witness the public reaction to rock and roll in the USA in the 1950s; this was a direct response to the perceived risks of this type of popular music on youth and the community (Guralnick, 1994). Therefore, on the one hand Beck perceives popular culture as a product that isolates and standardizes, it is something
negative and ultimately harmful to society, and yet on the other hand he sees this harm as the actual catalyst for resistance.

This is not to say that fears about media violence are based only on this breakdown between high/popular culture, nor is this to suggest that such fears about new and popular forms of entertainment can only be located in the twentieth century. Pearson (1983) in *Hooligan, a History of Respectable Fears* has certainly shown that there is a long and complicated history to fears and anxieties about a variety of entertainment activities. The point I wish to make is that the risk argument situates media violence as part of popular culture which is produced and distributed by the entertainment industry. Media violence, therefore, is a product which is perceived as having negative effects. Whether one uses Adorno's critique of popular culture as infantalizing and standardizing the consumer, or Beck's concept of popular culture as symptomatic of a risk society that wishes to be spared from poisoning, media violence is perceived to be hazardous and dangerous. It is therefore treated in such a way.

**Class Society vs. Risk Society**

It is in the identification of risk that Beck re-assesses the significance of a class society, as first outlined by Marx, and, in relation to popular culture, further examined by Adorno and the Frankfurt School. For Adorno, popular culture only serves to highlight class barriers: 'The select and enlightened few, by undertaking their intellectual and cultural practices, can cut themselves off from mundane activities of the masses and thereby resist the power of the culture industry' (Strinati, 1995, p.76). For Beck, risk breaks down barriers. Beck (1992, p.49) writes about a transition from a
class to risk society in some detail:

Class societies remain related to the ideal of equality in their developmental dynamics...Not so the risk society. Its normative counterproject, which is its basis and motive force, is safety. The place of the value system of the 'unequal' society is taken by the value system of the 'unsafe' society. Whereas utopia of equality contains a wealth of substantial and positive goals of social change, the utopia of the risk society remains peculiarly negative and defensive. Basically, one is no longer concerned with attaining something 'good', but rather with preventing the worst; self-limitation is the goal which emerges. The dream of the class society is that everyone wants and ought to have a share of the pie. The utopia of the risk society is that everyone should be spared from poisoning.

Beck's concept of the transition from a class society to a risk society is worth dwelling on here. Gone are the traditional class barriers; society unites in ridding its community of 'poisons' (of whatever type): it wants to create a safe world. For Beck, a class society and a risk society cannot exist side by side: one cannot dream of having a 'share of the pie' and wish to be 'spared from poisoning'. However, as the food metaphors suggest, it is possible to wish to share the pie, and be spared from poisoning.

In relation to anti-violence campaign groups, we can see that although such groups suggest that they wish to spare everyone from poisoning, what we actually find is that their perception of 'everyone' is based distinctly along economic factors. For example, when Beck argues that traditional class barriers break down when a community resists the hazardous effects of industrial modernization, this can at first appear true in relation to media violence. Media violence affects everyone; children and adults are perceived to be at risk, and the individual and the community are adversely affected. This perceived threat of media violence means that people from all types of economic backgrounds form an opinion that the negative effects of media violence can harm our society. They unite to create a safer environment. The example of the
introduction of the V-chip in Canada, cited in the previous chapter, is a good case in point; over 1.5 million Canadians signed a petition to help parents protect their children from excessive television violence (CRTC, 1996). This social and cultural construction of media violence means that anti-violence campaign groups, utilizing the risk argument, can appeal to all citizens in their campaign to prevent a dystopian society. For example, the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA), one of the largest British anti-violence campaign groups says in a recent advertisement that: 'Violence on television contributes significantly to the increase in violence in society and should be curtailed in the public interest'. Having made the point about cause and effect the NVALA goes on to say: 'Improving programme standards would benefit everyone and harm no one'.\(^5\) The very clear reference to a class-less society is made obvious in the pronoun 'everyone'.

However, critics of the argument against media violence have shown that the discourse used in the debate is highly class conscious. Julian Petley (1997, p.87) argues: 'lurking behind these fears about the "corruption of innocent minds" (in relation to media violence) one finds time and again, implicit or explicit, a potent strain of class dislike and fear.' As Petley notes, Geoffrey Pearson (1983, p.208) has examined middle class dislike of working class culture, from eighteenth century bawdy houses, to the Music Halls of the 1890s, to television now, and found that 'popular entertainments of all kinds have been blamed for dragging down public morals in a gathering pattern of accusation which remains essentially the same' (cited in Petley, 1997, p.87). Petley finds similar kinds of class-based rhetoric in association with 'video nasties', which since the 1980s have been used as an example of the alleged risks and hazards of television viewing. Petley writes:
...the connection between the 'underclass' and 'video nasties' came very much to the fore at the time of the Alton amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill, aimed at tightening video censorship still further. Thus in the *Sunday Times* of 3 April 1994 we find one Margaret Driscoll arguing that 'the children most likely to be damaged are those being brought up in sink estates where family values no longer hold sway - the products of an "anything goes" society', whilst a *Times* editorial of 11 April 1994 held forth that 'horror-video addiction is part of socially-disadvantaged sink culture in which lack of parental supervision is endemic'.

What these press comments indicate is that whilst anti-violence campaign groups such as the NVALA assert that public response to modernization products is about the safety of the community, not about capitalist values, social commentators in the national press reveal the exact opposite. This concept of safety is concerned with controlling those people who consume media violence, and the perception of these consumers is distinctly class based.

*The Mythological Viewer*

The paradox of the product and the consumer as the cause of harm is reflected in the risk argument itself. Campaign groups who use the risk argument are concerned with controlling and regulating a product. As with the introduction of seat belt legislation, methods of regulation, such as film certification, government sanctioned censorship and the introduction of the V-chip, all focus on ways of controlling and regulating the product. No one wants to ban entertainment altogether; neither the entertainment industry, nor the government, nor the general public wants to get rid of television. Thus, the introduction of the V-chip in Canada and the United States is a
simple, cost effective way for the industry and the government to be seen to be reducing
the risks of violence on television. It is a seatbelt for the mind. And yet, it is people who
consume media violence. And it is a notion of a dangerous underclass addicted to
watching sex and violence that filters through the media as an expression of the fears
and insecurities this product evokes.\textsuperscript{5} Despite this connection between media violence
and its viewers, the risk argument paradoxically remains fixed on proving causal
connection and regulating the product.

The reason this is the case is that real viewers of media violence are made up of
a wide cross section of the public. The Cinema Advertising Association undertakes
film profiles which are representative samples of the British population and serve to
highlight such demographic patterns as age, gender and the social background of
moviegoers. Tables 1a, 1b, and 1c reveal that consumers of media violence, in this
instance films such as \textit{Reservoir Dogs} and \textit{Natural Born Killers}, are representative of
the public. Table 1a shows that although more men (62\%) than women (38\%) chose to
see a movie such as \textit{Reservoir Dogs}, there was still a substantial proportion of women
who chose to see this movie, something that is rarely, if ever mentioned in the press, or
by anti-violence campaign groups. Similarly, Table 1b reveals that consumers of the
ABC1 bracket (upper and middle class) outnumbered those of the C2DE bracket
(skilled and unskilled working class) sometimes by 40\%, as in the case of \textit{True
Romance}.\textsuperscript{7} In Table 1c, although the 20-35 age bracket appears the most popular in
relation to viewing violent movies, there are still substantial numbers of movie goers
who are aged from 18 to over 45. Thus, with a movie like \textit{Pulp Fiction}, 12\% of movie
goers were aged 18-19, 10\% were over 45, and the remaining 78\% were aged between
20-35.
Table 1a: CAA Film Profiles – Gender
Total British cinema goers 51.76million: male (25.25m), female (26.50m), Caviar 14/BMRB International/CAA 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reservoir Dogs</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>1344000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulp Fiction</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>4330000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Romance</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>343000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Born Killers</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>1846000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man Bites Dog</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>286000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing Zoe</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>250000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures supplied by Cinema Advertising Association, August, 1996.

Figure 1b: CAA Film Profile – Class
Total British cinema goers 51.76million: ABC1 (25.42m) C2DE (26.33m), Caviar 14/BMRB International/CAA 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>ABC1</th>
<th>C2DE</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reservoir Dogs</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>1344000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulp Fiction</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>4330000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Romance</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>343000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Born Killers</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>1846000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1c: CAA Film Profiles – Age
Total British cinema goers 51.76million: 15-24 (7.19m), 25-34 (9.16m), 35+ (29.63m), Caviar 14/BMRB International/CAA 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>18-19</th>
<th>20-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R D</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1344000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P F</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4330000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T R</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3430000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N B K</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1846000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M B D</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2860000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K Z</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2500000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures supplied by Cinema Advertising Association, August, 1996.

The CAA film profiles reveal a quite different image of consumers of violent movies than the press and anti-violence campaign groups would have us believe. These figures compare with similar studies in television audience figures for films such as *Reservoir Dogs*, and television series such as *Cracker* or *Millennium*. An audience breakdown for *Reservoir Dogs*, transmitted on Channel Four, Saturday 31st of May 1997 shows that out of a total of 2.68 million viewers, 61% of men and 39% of women chose to watch
This film, the majority of which were aged 25-44 (47.1%), and in the C1 social group (32.3%).

This disparity between the popular image of a consumer of media violence, and the actual reality should give us cause to question the social and cultural construction of media violence. A myth of working class, teenage boys from single parent families as the dominant consumers of media violence has been perpetuated in the press. And a focus on the regulation and control of media violence as a product of industrial modernization has dominated the campaign to reduce levels of media violence. Both of these factors have ensured that how people actually respond to media violence is of no consequence to the risk argument. Hajer (1996, p.257) comments in his examination of ecological modernization that 'ecological modernization "freezes" or excludes some aspects of reality while manipulating others...and that the creation of discursive realities are in fact moments at which cultural politics is being made'. As Hajer points out:

Whether or not the actors themselves are aware of this is not the point. Implicitly, metaphors, categorizations, or definition of solutions always structure reality, making certain framings of reality seem plausible and closing off certain possible future scenarios while making other scenarios 'thinkable'.

What this reveals is that campaign groups who use the risk argument are primarily concerned with channelling society's anxieties and insecurities into campaign causes. This is because environmentalism, or as Hajer (1997, p.256) calls it, 'ecological modernization' is part of cultural politics, and any debate about conserving nature and regulating industries is really a debate about 'the social relationships between nature, society and technology' (Hajer, 1992, p.257). In such a debate, there is only room for dominant discourses and 'discursive realities' (Hajer, 1997, p.257). Methods for
structuring reality, i.e. effects research, make the future scenario of a 'safe' environment 'thinkable' by excluding aspects of reality.

In the next chapter I want to consider further explanations as to why society wishes to control media violence. If anti-violence campaign groups are not concerned with real viewers or real social practices, then this suggests that the social relationships between the media, technology and society are open to interpretation. The cultural construction of risk and the taboo practice of watching media violence is one such interpretation that should be explored from an anthropological and sociological perspective.

Notes

1 The New Labour government has also promised to investigate Gulf war syndrome and has ordered a review into this area. See, the Guardian, Monday 12 May, 1997, p.6.

2 In a pamphlet advertising the 'key green issues' for the 1997 British General Election, the Green Party highlighted the need to keep the food industry in check. They write: 'intensive farming is bad for food and animals, and has led to tragedies like BSE. But, the industry has not learned, and we are now being forced to eat genetically modified foods with unknown consequences.' This election pamphlet was sent to my door two days before the general election, on May 1st 1997. It was part of election communication for Hackney North and Stoke Newington. The candidate, a fitting one in relation to risk and the environment, was Yen Chit Chong, an engineer who works in the industry, reducing pollution. For an opposing view see Derek Burke, 'Immoral Maize?' in The Times Higher Educational Supplement, March 14th 1997, p.20.


4 Two good examples of this type of 'effects research' is the Newson Report (Newson, 1994), and the PAPFCPG (1997) report on 'Violence, Pornography and the Media'. See Barker and Petley (1997) for a critical examination of the Newson Report, and Barker (1997b) and Barratt (1997) for discussion of the PAPFCPG.
5 Advertisement for the NVALA, p.3, which encourages citizens to join its organization and donate money.

6 Indeed, it is ironic that the introduction of the V-chip into new television sets over 13 inches will effectively exclude this 'dangerous underclass' from benefiting from risk reduction, as it is only people who can afford a large new TV that will actually be able to use the V-chip, see Reuters Limited, Friday September 26th 1997.

7 The Cinema Advertising Association uses the following codes to represent class structures: A = Upper Middle Class; B = Middle Class; C1 = Lower Middle Class; C2 = Skilled Working Class; D = Working Class; E = Lowest Level of Subsistence. The CAA Film Profile provides figures for ABC1 and C2DE.

8 The audience breakdown for Reservoir Dogs also shows that 18.4% of the AB category and 24.1% and 25.2% of the C2, DE categories watched this film on Channel 4 on Saturday 31st May 1997. 19% of 16-21 year olds, and 13% of 45-54 year olds also watched this film. Figures supplied by BARB (British Audience Research Board) June, 1997.
The Production of Risk

In the previous chapter I suggested that when anti-violence campaign groups utilize the risk argument, they obfuscate the real issues associated with media violence, and they do so through focusing on the negative, capitalistic tendencies of modernization products. Now I want to consider the socio/political and cultural construction of risk in order to attempt to understand why certain activities are perceived to be positive risk-taking activities, and why others are perceived to be negative.

The socio/political and cultural construction of risk ensures that some risk-taking activities are perceived to be more acceptable than others. For example, provided one is a responsible person, buying and selling stocks and shares on the exchange market is considered to be positive and rewarding risk-taking behaviour. However, whether one is responsible or not, consensual sadomasochistic sex is considered to be negative and hazardous risk-taking behaviour (Adams, 1995). Why this is the case is of direct relevance to the issue of media violence: an active consumer of films such as Reservoir Dogs (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) or Crash (David Cronenberg, 1996) is commonly considered to be involved in anti-social and hazardous risk-taking behaviour and this has a direct impact on the way violent movies are considered to be harmful to the environment.

Anti-violence campaign groups like Christian Action Research and Education (CARE) and the Movement for Christian Democracy (MCD) consider media violence
to be hazardous to the moral and social fabric of our society. Because these campaign
groups advocate a society based on the laws of the Bible, there is a link to be made
between the notion of risk and the notion of sin in contemporary social structures. Mary
Douglas' work on the anthropology of risk-taking and risk averse cultures and sub-
cultures is of direct relevance here. Douglas, along with other researchers in this field
(Adams, 1995; Robbins, Bales, and D'Andrea, 1996), believes that all cultures have a
propensity to take risks; however, socio/political and cultural constructions of risk
ensure that some activities are perceived to be more 'sinful' and 'dangerous' than
others, and that those activities that are labeled as 'dangerous' are activities which the
dominant culture wishes to control and regulate.

Thus, this chapter will show that the risk argument ensures that certain
entertainment products will be associated with risk-taking behaviour. However, certain
risk-taking activities are perceived to contain rewards; appearing on a talk show such as
Oprah Winfrey involves a certain amount of risk, i.e. confessing to an adulterous affair
on prime time television, but this is offset with the perceived rewards to be gained from
confronting such issues. And certain risk-taking activities are perceived to be hazardous
and dangerous; films and programmes which contain sex and violence, especially of a
graphic and realistic nature, fall into the second category. It is my contention that the
programmes themselves have very little to do with the dominant discourse on media
violence (see also Martin Barker, 1984a, 1989; Julian Petley, 1997). In this chapter I
want to separate the product of violent movies from this negative perception of risk-
taking behaviour in order to focus on the socio/political construction of risk and how
this relates to the causes of insecurities in contemporary society.
Beck acknowledged in Risk Society that risks are open to social definition and construction; there are ‘definitional struggles over the scale, degree and urgency of risks’ (1992, p.46) and these definitional struggles can be seen in the way certain risks can be changed, magnified and altered by, what Beck calls, ‘risk producers’ (1992, p.45). However, Beck fails to consider that the social definition and construction of risk is a consolidation of hierarchical power, and that when we see risk awareness in action, we see hierarchical power in action (Adams, 1995, p.182). What is more, Beck does not acknowledge that some social risk positions are defined as either positive or negative, and that the construction of these social risk positions emphasizes the benefits and drawbacks of risk-taking activities.

For example, the nuclear industry is perceived by the British public to be a negative social risk position, and research has shown that the public are extremely distrustful of the nuclear industry as an ‘imposed’ and scientifically ambiguous risk (O'Riordan, 1997, p.21). The nuclear industry has taken this distrust of the risk-taker into account. It has taken great trouble to counteract this negative perception of nuclear power by focusing on the rewards to be gained from this risk position. Recent advertising focuses on products which help enrich our lives and our natural environment; one advert in particular showed a farmer rounding up his sheep, suggesting that nuclear power is another way of working the land, and is as traditional as farming. Whether or not this advertising is effective, it shows that the possibility of alternative risk positions is an option that even the nuclear industry is prepared to explore. Another company, Shell UK, has run discussion groups with the British public.
in order to assess what the public think of their proposal to dump the Brent Spar oil storage platform into the sea.\(^3\) According to Shell UK's 'corporate issues and reputation manager': 'Shell UK is developing strategies to try to avoid generating unnecessary public outrage'. Shell UK want to demonstrate how 'corporate ethics and wider societal values are incorporated into our decision-making' (Wilkinson, 1997, p.21). Thus, the negative perception of Shell UK as a risk-taker and/or risk-maker is offset by highlighting positive social and ethical values. The very fact that Shell UK have a 'corporate issues and reputation manager' is a sure sign this multinational corporation is aware of the positive and negative perceptions of risk-taking behaviour.

Adams (1995, p.183) points out that Beck's theory of risk is constructed upon dark, foreboding perceptions of nature in danger. Beck warns about apocalyptic danger, of a 'catastrophic society' where the 'state of emergency threatens to become the normal state' (1992, p.79). As Adams (1995, p.181) points out, this perception of technological risk is as much to do with Beck's own 'personal myth of nature', and is in actual fact an example of the definition and construction of risk.

Aaron Wildavsky (1988) is also a risk theorist who believes that perceptions of risk are bound up with social and cultural definitions of risk, and yet Wildavsky believes that technological improvement has been of benefit to nature. He says:

Overwhelming evidence shows that the economic growth and technological advance arising from market competition have in the past two centuries been accompanied by dramatic improvements in health - large increases in longevity and decreases in sickness. (cited in Adams, 1992, p.183)

This is the exact opposite to Beck's perception of industrial modernization. Wildavsky (1991) believes that environmental risks have become the causes célèbres of the past
two decades. These dangers to the environment have been constructed, and as such have been exaggerated and demonized in the press. There is a general propensity for ‘government regulators, politicians, the media and the general public to construe evidence of environmental harm in an alarmist way’ (Adams, 1995, p.183). Thus, both Beck and Wildavsky believe in the social definition and construction of risk, and yet they have very different views on which risks are dangerous to our environment. What this means is that risk positions are produced by social and cultural definitions, and that some risk positions are more politically effective than others. Environmental risks have become the causes célèbres because over the last two decades they have become a useful symbol of hierarchical power, and the definition of such risks is in the hands of the dominant hierarchies. By dominant hierarchies, I am referring in particular to government committees, campaign groups, and multi-national corporations. These groups represent symbolic and economic capital in our society and, in relation to environmentalism, they are the largest sponsors of scientific research into this area (see Adams, 1995, Douglas, 1992, p.107).

Beck and Wildavsky agree that science should be released from the constraints of hierarchical power; time and again, Beck and Wildavsky cite examples of political and industrial bodies using scientific evidence for their own ends. Science, whether it is perceived as positive or negative, should be a place of independent thought; it should be ‘liberated from the grip of dominant hierarchies’ (Adams, 1995, p.185). However, this is an idealistic and utopian view of scientific progress. Science, as Beck and Wildavsky are well aware, is part of industrialization, and even if certain scientific research were to be wholly independent the results of this research would still be filtered and manipulated for political, social and cultural ends. As Adams (1995, p.194) points out, there is no way of discovering ‘objective proof’: “‘Proof’ is notoriously elusive, and the
word is usually used, wrongly, to mean "unanimous agreement". But as we have seen...long-running disagreements about risk are long-running precisely because they are unresolved, and probably unresolvable, by science.' This means that ‘risks are culturally constructed not because people prefer make-believe to facts, but because, at the point of decision, sufficient "facts" are unavailable’ (Adams, 1995, p.194). ‘Proof’ is the management of available data. My point is that this management of available data is orchestrated by dominant hierarchies. In relation to media violence, it is dominant hierarchies such as anti-violence campaign groups, politicians, the judiciary, and regulatory bodies such as the BBFC which attempt to manage available data. Such organisations/institutions can be referred to as dominant hierarchies because they signify symbolic and/or economic capital in our society. It is these organisations/institutions which attempt to control and disseminate information about media violence. Later in this chapter I shall refer to Mary Douglas’ theory about the ‘centre community’ and the ‘status of knowledge’ and authority this centre community is given by society as a whole (Douglas, 1992, p.107). In this sense, ‘dominant hierarchies’ can be understood in relation to Douglas’ concept of the centre community, a community that has ‘ways of controlling access to wealth and influence’. Thus, what is perceived to be ‘undeniable proof’ of the negative ‘effects’ of watching media violence is not ‘proof’ in any scientific sense, but rather evidence of the way in which political and social institutions/organizations wish to control consumer tastes.

**Controlling Risk Effectively**

In the last twenty years safety literature and cost-benefit analysis have come to govern our understanding of risk. A risk society is a society concerned with preventing
the worst (Beck, 1992, p.49), and in such a way that is cost effective. For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are employing economists to attempt a cost-benefit analysis of global warming; even such a massive and indefinite risk as this is being managed so that ‘all costs and benefits of global warming and the control of global warming be expressed in monetary terms’ (Adams, 1995, p.170). All risks are socially defined and constructed, and as risk producers are part of the dominant hierarchy, it is not surprising that contemporary risks, such as media violence, traffic pollution, or nuclear reactors are managed by industrial, or state corporations. These corporations are in turn part of industrialization, and are interested with the most cost effective way of reducing risk in the environment. They are also concerned that they do not damage their own professional status. Their job is to damage another organization, and re-define it as a social risk position. It does not matter if they are right or wrong, only that they do not damage their own professional reputation. Henderson (1977) has written about ‘the unimportance of being right’ (cited in Adams, 1995, pp.190-92), and his study of British Government decisions reveals that little importance is attached to being right; what is important is the way risks are successfully managed to re-enforce dominant hierarchies.4

Scott Lash (1992, p.4) sums up this concept of risk at a societal level when he discusses Beck's work in his introduction to *Risk Society*:

A small group of sociologists and anthropologists... have made three observations...First, such physical risks are always created and effected in social systems, for example by organizations and institutions which are supposed to manage and control risky activity. Second, the magnitude of physical risks is therefore a direct function of the quality of social relations and processes. Third, the primary risk, even for the most technically intense activities...is therefore that of social dependency upon institutions and actors who may well be - and arguably are increasingly - alien, obscure and inaccessible to most people affected by the risks in question.
To relate this to media violence, it can be seen that dominant hierarchies, in this instance, anti-violence campaign groups, politicians, the judiciary and the media, have defined media violence as an example of industrial risk. It doesn't matter whether they are right, what is important is that they present the available data as evidence of 'proof' that they have identified a new risk. Once the risks of watching media violence have been defined and constructed, it is up to regulatory bodies, government committees, campaign groups and the judiciary to successfully manage to contain and reduce the probabilities of these risks occurring in the most cost effective way possible. If these dominant hierarchies can be seen to be actively engaged in safety precautions, then they are reinforcing the dominant social structure, and in turn, the dominant discourse on media violence. Media violence itself, and those people who consume media violence, are of little or no consequence to these types of dominant hierarchies.

Perceptions of Risk

Dominant hierarchies anticipate risks. Government committees, or institutions, like the Royal Society (Britain's leading scientific institution), anticipate the anxieties and insecurities of citizens, and they define, construct and manage risks, utilizing the risk argument as a way of successfully achieving this. Wildavsky (1991) believes that over the last twenty years environmental risks have come to dominate political, social and cultural debate. There are two reasons why this has taken place. The first is that post-war environmentalism has undergone a number of different phases (Jamison, 1996). The second is because the perception of risk has dramatically changed since the 1960s. As Beck (1994, p.183) has pointed out, risks such as personal loss or illness,
which can be insured against, have now been joined by uninsurable risks such as global warming, or the impact of factory farming. And these new risks are concerned with the future. Anthony Giddens (1994, p.59) writes that threats like global warming ‘will not yield a precise calculation of risks but rather an array of "scenarios" whose plausibility will be influenced, among other things, by how many people become convinced of the thesis of global warming and take action on that basis.’ Thus, the intensity of the current discourse on media violence can be understood in relation to shifting perceptions of environmentalism and risk and security. As long as enough people are convinced of the thesis of media violence as an environmental hazard, action will be taken. The introduction of the V-chip, and the politicization of media violence (see Chapter three) is an indication that this has already taken place.

**Media Violence: a Contemporary Concern**

Media violence has long been defined as a hazard of industrialization (see discussion of Beck and Adorno in previous chapter), and it has been subject to sustained attacks by anti-violence campaign groups, the media and politicians since the beginning of the moving image. However, the 1990s has shown itself to be a decade where media violence has been of specific interest as a modernization risk. Earlier chapters have discussed the intensity with which media violence has been constructed as a modernization risk, and I want to show that this intensity is specific to contemporary concerns about environmentalism and risk and security.
Andrew Jamison (1996, pp.224-245) has charted the different phases in post-war environmentalism, and found that these phases can be considered in two ways. First, they signify 'changes in strategic orientation and "collective identity" on the part of already established organisations'; and second, they signify 'the emergence of new groups, campaigns or organisations which identify new issues and new forms of activism' (Jamison, 1996, p.227). Table 2 illustrates these various phases (Jamison, 1996, p.227).

**Table 2: Phases in Post-war environmentalism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERIOD</th>
<th>EMPHASIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-1968: awakening</td>
<td>Public education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969-74: organisation</td>
<td>Institution building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975-80: social movement</td>
<td>Political controversy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-86: professionalisation</td>
<td>Environmental assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-: internationalisation</td>
<td>Incorporation/integration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jamison (1996, p.228) describes the period from the late 1940s to the late 1960s as 'a period of awakening'. This transformation incorporates the changes from conservation to environmentalism, where a localized protest against the destruction of nature became more international and organisational in framework. New environmental risks, such as industrial pollution, or atomic radiation, meant that
environmental protest became distinctly political. From the 1970s onwards, environmentalism has become both a criticism of industrialisation and an example of institutionalisation. Jamison sees a fundamental change between environmental knowledge interests in the 1970s and those exhibited in the 1990s. For example, the organisational dimension of environmental movements has altered from a participatory and anti-elitist standpoint, to a professional, and expert-dominated standpoint (Jamison, 1996, p.240). Similarly, what in the 1970s would have been holistic ecology, is now ‘sustainable development’, where environmentalism seeks to discover what levels of economic development the world can sustain now and in the foreseeable future.

This transformation in environmentalism is of significance to our understanding of contemporary anxieties about the effects of media violence. Environmentalism is not confined to organisations such as Greenpeace, but is now an institution in its own right which has been integrated and incorporated into other institutional frameworks. This means that as environmentalism transformed from a participatory to professional organisation, ecological discourse became a source of power. Anti-violence campaign groups have capitalized on this growth in environmentalism. They have done this by adopting a number of strategies which can be seen to be associated with environmental campaign groups. For example, they have transformed small scale citizen’s groups into professional organizations (see for example the growth in the NVALA, or CARE and its political lobby group CARE Campaigns, discussed in Chapter three). Anti-violence campaign groups have focused on the politicization of the ‘social problem’ of media violence, often using political commentators, such as David Alton, former Liberal Democrat MP, to communicate their message about the hazards of media violence to the general public. By using the risk argument, anti-violence campaign groups have successfully managed to integrate all the phases of post-war environmentalism - public
education, institution building, political controversy, environmental assessment, incorporation - into a sustained attack on media violence. Over the last twenty years, we have seen media violence become a political issue whereby the question is not whether it is appropriate or not to show representations of violence, but whether society can sustain this rapid growth in violence, both on screen and on the street. In the same way that environmentalism has become in the 1990s a global, and multinational issue, so too has media violence become a concern for everyone, everywhere.

Public Perception of Risk and Security

This transformation of environmentalism into a multinational concern is reflected in shifting perceptions of risk and security over the last twenty years. Robbins, Bales and D'Andrea (1996), in their article 'Illuminating the Modernization Process: Shifts in International Perceptions of Risk and Security', examine public opinion polls in order to monitor risk perception. Through analyzing the Gallup Polls, the British Social Attitudes Survey, and the British Crime Survey, Robbins et al., found significant trends in risk perception. For example, concern about the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war reduced significantly in the 1990s, coinciding with the Post-Cold War era. This meant that 'as populations move away from the perceived risks of the Cold War, the key concerns felt shifts from risks generated by nation-states to those occurring at either the personal or the global personal level' (Robbins et al., 1996, p.7). Thus, in the 1990s, rather than nuclear war being a significant cause for concern with the British population, 'the more personal threat of crime had become a predomate concern, with two thirds of the population being concerned "a great deal" about crime levels in 1995' (Robbins et al., 1996, p.8).
This shift from national conflicts to personal or global personal concerns means that anxieties about international and national risk and security have focused on social and economic threats, such as drugs, AIDS, global warming, unemployment, or law and order. The emphasis is on ‘personal threats’ (Robbins et al., 1996, p.9), whether this be on a national or international level. Different cultures may prioritize certain security issues more than others, for example nationalism is seen as a key problem by the Japanese, whereas the USA consider drugs as a cause for concern, but the focus is still on personal issues of security and how this relates to social and economic factors.

Robbins et al., have indicated that public opinion has dramatically shifted from concern regarding nuclear war, to concern of a more personalized nature. What is more, the perception of risk has shifted from something that is visible and therefore insurable, to include something that is invisible, and therefore uninsurable. Both of these factors mean that the definition and construction of media violence in the 1990s has drawn upon these shifting perceptions of risk. As Giddens (1994, p.59) outlined earlier, it is the amount of people who can be convinced that media violence is harmful to their personal and social environment that is more important than whether media violence is a modernization risk in itself.

Robbins et al. (1996) reveal that the public are concerned about social and economic issues like drugs, AIDS, unemployment, environmentalism and law and order in the 1990s. They chart a shift from concerns about national security, such as nuclear war to concerns of a specifically personal nature. This also reflects a shift in environmentalism, which Jamison (1996, p.227) illustrated as a change from localised awareness (conservation) to international and institutional environmentalism that ensured everyone, everywhere could potentially become involved in eco-politics.
Media violence has been defined as a risk that is directly linked to issues of environmentalism, personal security and law and order. For example, it is a risk that is uninsurable; it is a risk that crosses national and international boundaries; it is a risk that must be contained. Media violence threatens our environment; it threatens social stability and family values; it appeals to 'drooling, hormone-addled, violence prone sub-literate adolescent males'; it is harmful to children.

Anti-violence campaign groups, the media and politicians can identify those negative effects of the modernization process that specifically tie in with issues of environmentalism, personal security and law and order which are of most concern to the general public. Certainly, in Britain and America the perceived risks of media violence are 'filtered through the lens of (these) individual cultures' (Robbins et al., p.11). Therefore issues of environmentalism, personal security, economic stability, disease, drugs, family values, morality have come to dominate the discourse on media violence precisely because such issues are closely linked with perceptions of risk and danger in Britain and the USA. In a Gallup Poll conducted in 1993, 51% of the British general public, and 47% of the American public were concerned about diseases like AIDS, and 30% of the British public and 27% of the American public were concerned about drugs (cited in Robbins et al., 1996, p.12). Media violence is commonly discussed as a disease, and as a drug. Children are 'exposed' to movie violence; it is 'like eating salt, the more you eat, the more you will need to eat to taste it at all' (Medved, 1993, p.23).

The concerns regarding media violence are often phrased in relation to addiction, and exposure, as if media violence is both a killer virus and a widely accessible drug. These metaphors may be useful phrases for describing the perceived effects of media violence, but they are also metaphors which reflect current public opinion and international perceptions of risk and security. By focusing on media
violence, politicians and other dominant hierarchies, such as regulatory bodies, can implicitly refer to such social and personal issues as environmentalism, law and order, disease, or drugs. When they regulate and control media violence, the dominant hierarchies can appear to be dealing with public concern about these issues. Providing a V-chip in every new television set is far more cost effective and easier to enforce than reducing the production and consumption of drugs: it is a safety measure that is simple to install and can claim to reduce risk immediately. It is a vaccination for the television against the virus of violence.

**Structuring principles**

Thus, the politicization of risk (Beck, 1992, pp.76-80) is closely linked with public perception of risk, which is in turn linked with the construction and management of risk in relation to environmentalism: each is inseparable from the other and is part of a dialectical process. This process can be understood in relation to agency-structure integration. The agency-structure issue suggests a link between the micro level of the human agent, and the macro level of large-scale social structures. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, as developed in the *Constitution of Society* (1984), highlights a dialectical process between agency and structure, whereby neither can exist without the other. Structure exists in and through the activities of human agents. Here we can see that the structuring principle of environmentalism exists in and though public perceptions of risk and security: without the available discourse of environmentalism, and the definition of the risk argument, individuals would be unable to express concern for the hazards of media violence; however, without an awareness of shifting public perceptions of risk and security over the past twenty years, institutions such as CARE,
or politicians such as David Alton would be unable to mobilize this public concern into a structuring principle for controlling levels of media violence. As Giddens' theory of structuration helps to critique modernity, and introduce the concept of reflexive modernization (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Beck et al., 1995), it can be seen that this dialectical process between micro and macro perceptions of risk is indeed part of a political and institutional process that is reflexive in nature.

For example, it is no accident that just as public perception of risk has shifted from external to internal dangers, politicians are highlighting media violence, and, I would argue, implicitly highlighting environmentalism, as part of their campaign on law and order. As was discussed in Chapter three, in the USA, President Clinton called a ‘violence summit’ (Time, 1996, p.45) in the run up to the 1996 presidential election campaign. On a smaller scale, in Britain, the then Home Secretary, Michael Howard, and the Heritage Secretary, Virginia Bottomley, consistently managed to appear to be ‘tackling’ the problem of the perceived effects of media violence by asking regulators and programme makers to report on their policies towards reducing levels of screen violence (BBFC, 1996) in the run up to the general election in 1997. Jack Straw, the Home Secretary for the new Labour government is also placing pressure upon the BBFC to become more accountable, and is said to be taking a ‘hands on approach to censorship’ (Hellen and Rufford, p.1). The reflexive nature of this politicization of media violence would not be possible without a dialectical relationship between structure and agency. Politicians could not know whether to include such an issue as media violence in their election campaigns without reference to opinion polls, such as Gallup, or the British Crime Survey, and their findings on perceptions of risk and security.
This awareness of shifting perceptions of international risk and security ensures that media violence is constructed and managed as a modernization risk which can be utilized by politicians as an example of social and economic concerns, shared by institutions and citizens alike. Mary Douglas (1992), in *Risk and Blame*, considers how political and cultural bias can be contained within the production of risk and in the political rhetoric of responsibility in public policy. In the next section I want to consider this concept of political and cultural bias in some detail in order to understand why media violence is perceived to be a risk-taking activity which is hazardous and dangerous.

*Risk and Blame*

Mary Douglas considers theories of organization in relation to perceptions of risk and blame. Like Beck (1992), Wildavsky (1988) and Adams (1995), Douglas believes that risk perception studies would do well to examine how institutions reinforce dominant hierarchies by defining and constructing risks and apportioning blame. She believes that ‘individuals always transfer the relevant part of their decision-making to the institutions in which they live’, and that ‘institutions mobilize moral concern to engage their members’ sustained support’ (Douglas, 1992, p.55, 56). Douglas (1992, p.63, 60) writes:

Physical disasters are keenly studied in every community deserving the name and occasion is taken to score the performance of community institutions: blame falls in such a way as to reinforce the local community ideal. Far from being steadily analysed, from the start danger is roped into the work of showing
up villains or maintaining morale... Processes of blame-pinning or exonerating from blame strengthen the pattern of the organization and are actually an integral part of it.

Thus, natural and man-made disasters trigger enquiries which 'trace the real distribution of power' (Douglas, 1992, p.77). For example, a rain ceremony is about changing meteorological conditions, but it is also about reinforcing group identity and the dominant hierarchy. If there is a dramatic change in the weather, a drought, for example, then the dominant organization must apportion blame. One such way is to accuse another of witchcraft, an 'other' that is part of the political process and a visible target of abuse. Douglas calls this a 'cosmic plot' (1992, p.76) which provides an opportunity to air hidden hostilities, and control factional discord. She argues: 'organizations which are most keenly alert to low probability, high consequence danger are religious sects...new political movements and public interest groups (1992, p.77).

She compares environmental movements with risk perceiving organizations who wish to secure authority and survive as a group; the methods with which they achieve this are closely linked with the interpretation of disaster and risk apportion and blame: a 'cosmic plot' is a 'low cost solution to their organizational problems' (Douglas, 1992, p.77).

**Sin, Danger and Media Violence**

Douglas' theory of risk perception and the micro-politics of a community are persuasive. It is certainly the case that religious sects, new political movements and public interest groups are the most active campaigners against media violence. Indeed, organizations such as Christian Action Research and Education (CARE) and the
Movement for Christian Democracy (MCD) are a combination of all of the above; CARE and MCD are evangelical Christian organizations, they both have political subsections, and both claim to be public interest groups (see Chapter three). It is also the case that CARE and MCD, like environmental groups, have utilized the risk argument and accused media violence of presenting a risk to the stability of the family and society in the late Twentieth Century. They blame media violence for the break up of the family, corruption of the young, and an increase in real life violence. This blame can be linked to other types of blame, like ‘the cosmic plot’, where a person closely linked to the political process and of high visibility as a victim is accused of witchcraft.

Here, Martin Barker's work on media violence is of direct relevance. Barker (1997a, p.12) traces the hysteria over the James Bulger murder and the accusations of the Newson Report (see Chapters 2 and 4) to medieval witchcraft accusations:

> When a ‘witch’ was denounced a whole array of evidences and proofs could be adduced; but these could only ever convince because those hearing them were already completely persuaded that these were the likely explanations. You can only believe someone to be a witch if you believe there are ‘witch events’.

This echoes Anthony Giddens (1994, p.59) when he suggests that it is the number of people convinced of the thesis of global warming that is more important than whether global warming actually exists. Action is based on what people believe to be the case, rather than what is actually the case.

Barker compares the rhetoric of the media violence debate with accusations of witchcraft because both involve the concept of sin. ‘Taboos and sins belong to the discourse of religious faith’ (Douglas, 1992, p.26) and both witchcraft and media violence are perceived to be taboo subjects which have been successfully targeted by religious organizations. However, the difference between witchcraft and media violence
comes in the way they are referred to. Witchcraft is a taboo subject, and a person being ‘in sin’ means that they are a danger to the community. In contrast, anti-violence campaign groups use the rhetoric of risk because ‘plain danger does not have the aura of science or afford the pretension of possible precise calculation’ (Douglas, 1992, p.25).

In Britain, in a society which is predominately secular, the term risk is far more persuasive than that of sin, or danger.

What is more, the rhetoric of risk reveals a fundamental shift in perspective. Douglas (1992, p.28) explains this as follows:

Being ‘at risk’ in modern parlance is not the equivalent but the reciprocal of being ‘in sin’ or ‘under taboo’. To be ‘at risk’ is equivalent to being sinned against, being vulnerable to the events caused by others, whereas being ‘in sin’ means being the cause of harm. The sin/taboo rhetoric is more often used to uphold the community, vulnerable to the misbehaviour of the individual, while the risk rhetoric upholds the individual, vulnerable to the misbehaviour of the community.

This is directly applicable to the media violence debate and the risk argument. Anti-violence campaign groups such as CARE and MCD believe that to watch media violence is to be ‘in sin’. However, under the risk argument, the construction of media violence as a modernization risk means that anti-violence campaign groups can present media violence as the cause of harm, and the individual as the person at risk. They never need use the sin/taboo rhetoric because it is implicit in the rhetoric of risk. In this case, no individual is accused of being ‘in sin’; it is the entertainment industry who are targeted instead. In a recent survey about perceptions of risk, the public were shown to trust scientists from environmental organizations precisely because such scientists are concerned with protecting the individual: ‘the science of protest...is believed to be conducted in the public interest and targeted against institutions that cannot be relied
upon' (O'Riordan, 1997, p.21). Anti-violence campaign groups use the ‘science of protest’ in order to gain public support for the protection of the individual and the community against the perceived negative effects of the entertainment industry.

As Mary Douglas (1992, pp.24-5) says, ‘The charge of causing risk is a stick to beat authority... to exact restitution for victims’ and it is also an opportunity to reinforce community ideals, to protect the community from harm. This is why there exists two dominant mythologies concerning viewers of media violence: the ‘drooling’ adolescent male (Medved, 1992), and passive, vulnerable victims of media violence. These mythological viewers have been created by anti-violence campaign groups in order to accuse media violence of harmful effects to the individual and the community. This rhetoric of risk and danger must be maintained in order to demonize viewers and draw attention away from actual consumers of media violence. As later chapters will reveal, real consumers of media violence are neither evil and depraved, nor passive and vulnerable; such viewers are not made aggressive by watching media violence and do not need protecting from a leisure activity they actively choose to experience.

As Douglas points out in *Risk and Blame*, the production of risk is to do with the reinforcement of dominant hierarchies, and an analysis of risk and blame in any given community will reveal political and social insecurities. The very fact that anti-violence campaign groups do not accuse consumers of media violence, but blame the entertainment industry itself, should alert us to the fact that there is something about the way consumers of media violence engage with these texts that is of specific concern to the dominant hierarchy and its management of power. In the final section of this chapter I want to focus on the concept of the risk-taker and the risk averse, because it is in these two cultural positions that we will find why the dominant hierarchy is concerned about media violence and its threat to society.


**Risk-Taker/Risk Averse**

Ulrich Beck (1992, p.49) argues that a risk society is one that must protect itself; it is concerned with limiting the risks and hazards of the modernization process. In a similar move, Mary Douglas claims that the central community is risk averse: ‘It is a symbolic system, attracting solidarity, capable of being mobilized in its own defence, holding strong views on correct norms of behaviour’ (Douglas, 1992, p.104). This means that, according to Douglas (1992, p.102), ‘the self is risk-taking or risk-averse according to a predictable pattern of dealings between person and others in the community’. This pattern of dealings involves an awareness of what are acceptable risk-taking activities, and what are not. As the central community is risk averse, there will not be many risk-taking activities that are commonly considered to be acceptable.

One such activity would be the setting up of personal businesses. This is perceived to be a risky enterprise, but one that is not without reward. Mrs. Thatcher, in the 1980s, understood that individuals needed encouragement to take this risk, and this is why personal businesses received financial incentives: at the same time as the ‘rolling back of the nanny state’, the central community encouraged personal responsibility, and the rewards to be gained from this type of risk-taking activity, although under Mrs. Thatcher the risks far outweighed the rewards, and small businesses failed at record levels. Similarly, the National Lottery is another example of a risk-taking activity that offers the chance of great reward. The chances of winning the National Lottery are very slim, and the risk of losing money is high, however, the rewards to be gained from playing the Lottery are also extremely high. Both these activities are related to
economic gain, and are not perceived as hazardous - setting up a business, or playing the lottery is about opportunity, and the chance of economic reward. Other activities such as skydiving or bungee jumping are less concerned with economic reward, and more about the excitement and exhilaration of taking part in a dangerous sport. Such activities are not enjoyed by everyone, but are generally looked upon as acceptable risk-taking behaviour, as long as safety precautions are taken.

However, there are many examples of risk-taking activities that are not accepted by the central community. Driving too fast, taking drugs, having more than one sexual partner, living alone, talking to strangers - these are just some of the risk-taking activities that the central community does not perceive to be acceptable. And, one can add to this list the activity of consuming media violence. Watching a violent movie, like *Reservoir Dogs*, for example, is perceived to be a risk-taking activity that has little reward. Indeed, it is a threat to the community, because to enjoy watching a violent movie implies that one must enjoy real violence, and this will have consequences on the safety of the family and community as a whole. This is why the hazardous effects of watching a violent film or television programme are emphasized by the central community; and this is why those people who persist in watching ‘video nasties’ are labeled as abnormal.

Douglas believes that once the central community has labeled certain activities as dangerous, it ensures that those people who insist on acting dangerously will become marginalized. Indeed, in most cases, risk-aversion is part of the community's method for protecting its own margins, the areas where it is most vulnerable (Douglas, 1992, p.117). This is why certain types of people, for example homosexuals, or immigrants, are associated with risk-taking activities that are a threat to the community. In the same way, the myth of working class, sub-literate, adolescent males, especially those from
single parent families, as the most common consumers of media violence ensures that such members of the community are marginalized and controlled by the central community. Douglas (1992, p.117) also contends that ‘groups at risk’, for example homosexuals, or consumers of media violence, ‘develop solidarity in shared adversity’.

Such sub-cultures may develop ‘an ethos that glorifies risk’ (1992, p.118), defining their own difference by embracing the very risk-taking activities they have been shunned for by the central community. Certainly skydivers, motorcyclists or bungee jumpers can be seen to develop ‘an ethos that glorifies risk’, and the practice of jumping from an airplane or over double decker buses for charity is an example of the way in which such risk-takers embrace the ‘ethos of risk’ whilst at the same time attempting to show that they are morally responsible members of the community.

There are similarities between this theory and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of taste in relation to field and habitus. ‘Taste’ is an acquired disposition which differentiates various cultural practices and our enjoyment of them. The relationship between habitus and field forms cultural practices, and taste gives an individual a sense of place in the social order: ‘Taste is a matchmaker...through which a habitus confirms its affinity with other habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p.243). Thus, an application of taste ensures the categorization of cultural objects, or practices, and a categorization of people by the tastes they manifest. Taste unifies those who share similar habitus and differentiates those who do not. When Douglas talks about sub-cultures sharing an ‘ethos of risk’ and developing solidarity through the categorization of their cultural practices as risk-taking activities that are undesirable by the central community, in many ways this is similar to the categorization of taste and forms of habitus which are in conflict with the social order. As class is defined by habitus as well, the fact that risk-taking sub-cultures are
commonly in conflict with the middle class sensibilities of the central community is a point that further illustrates the significance of agency and structure in relation to risk.

However, there are two problems with this theory. First, the central contention that there are risk-takers and risk averse people sets up a binary opposition. The risk society, or the central community may be risk averse, it may wish to prevent the worst, but people themselves like to take risks. Individuals can operate quite differently to the ideology of the dominant hierarchy. They may support this hierarchy in principal, but in their day to day activities, all people are risk-takers. For example, driving a fast car is a risk-taking activity that is without reward, according to the dominant hierarchy; there are speed limits, fines, car insurance penalties that highlight the negative aspects of this type of behaviour. And yet cars have the capability to drive at speeds well above the limits set by the law. This is because people like to drive fast; they like to engage in risky behaviour. The central community have responded to this by defining and marginalizing specific sub-cultures who are perceived to undertake this type of risk-taking activity. This sub-culture, young, working class, adolescent males, especially from single parent families, may indeed have a propensity to drive fast, but this does not mean that other members of the community are exempt from this type of activity. In fact, many people like to drive fast, and not solely because they wish to flaunt authority and break the law, although this is part of it, but because they like to arrive at work on time, or get home early, or impress their friends. A similar argument can be applied to consumers of media violence. Although the dominant hierarchy has identified and marginalized a sub culture who like to consume media violence, in actual fact, many people like to watch films and television programmes which contain violence, and they do so for a number of different reasons.
The second factor which makes Douglas' theory of risk-taking and risk-averse sub cultures weak is that although some groups of people may develop a feeling of solidarity in the face of adversity, this does not mean that they will necessarily develop 'an ethos that glorifies risk' (1992, p.118). Some groups may do this under specific circumstances, but it is also the case that many people will glorify risk under different circumstances and with different types of people that may or may not be part of their immediate social environment. This means that people do not belong within categorizations, or habitus in a manner that can be easily recorded and measured. One of the problems with Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field in Distinction (1984) is that he wishes to prove that culture can be a legitimate object of scientific study. On the one hand, this is useful to research in popular culture, but, on the other hand, as we have seen in previous chapters, scientific study can be a straightjacket in which responses to media violence are locked in the language of statistics and denied an opportunity for free expression. Barker and Brooks (1997) have commented on Bourdieu's 'epistemological polarity'; they contend that this theory of habitus 'is a theory of overwhelming determinants which masquerade as agency'. Similarly, Douglas' theory of risk-taking and risk-averse cultures fails to take into account that people are not necessarily determined by their activities, and that there are possibilities of action which are outside the remit of cultural theories concerned with agency-structure integration. For example, what someone hopes to achieve through engaging in a risk-taking activity, whether they undertake it or not, is as important as identifying and categorizing the activity itself. Empirical research is a means of highlighting such possibilities of action (Buckingham, 1996a; Gauntlett, 1997) and later chapters will illustrate this in some detail.
The fact that popular culture is perceived to be negative and part of the risks associated with the modernization process (see previous chapter) poses a problem for the central community. Most people enjoy aspects of popular culture. Therefore the suggestion that all popular culture poses a threat to the safety of the community would mean losing a significant number of supporters of those organizations that make up the dominant hierarchy. This is why it is only certain aspects of popular culture that are defined and constructed as modernization risks.

The debate about media violence has focused on fictional representations of violence that are perceived to be realistic and, therefore, disturbing. It is also the case that those texts which have been identified as of particular risk to the individual and the community are texts which could be interpreted as concerning themselves with social and economic unrest. Thus, films such as *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), *Child's Play 3* (Jack Bender, 1992), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), or *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996) could be seen to be concerned with social unrest. There is not space in this chapter to undertake a close analysis of any of these films, but I would like suggest one way of reading these films in order to highlight a pattern of social criticism and unrest which the dominant hierarchy finds particularly threatening.\(^{13}\)

One way of reading *A Clockwork Orange* is to see it as a dystopian view of a future society which is obsessed with violence, and has no control over its aggressive youth. Similarly *Child's Play 3* could be interpreted as a film about a young, working class boy's fight for survival in a world where the individual is threatened by corporate greed.\(^{14}\) *Natural Born Killers* could also be understood as a satire on the media's
obsession with mass murderers, and the condemnation and glorification of violence, and *Crash* could be seen as another dystopian view of a future society that glorifies and fetishizes technology. What can be seen in each example is a pattern of social criticism, and a reference to real social and economic concerns that are not concluded in any way; the boundary between what is good and evil has become blurred, and viewers are asked to examine critical perspectives of society, perspectives that are not part of our normal experience of life.

Martin Barker (1989) identified just such a pattern of social criticism and social realism in the comic *Action*, which was banned in Britain in the mid 1970s. Barker found that after closely analyzing an example of a comic strip which had been censored, it was not examples of ‘excessive violence’ that editors had taken out, but references to authority: ‘Authority was not allowed to be shown in compromised positions, or behaving unjustly, or doing wrong as a matter of policy’ (Barker, 1989, p.35). Barker also found that it was because *Action* challenged its readers to be part of something different, to knowingly take part in what is considered to be a risky activity, that it was also subject to criticism and censorship. It did not fit in with what society considered to be acceptable as a children's comic. *Action* had front covers with warnings such as ‘Bold! Bad!', ‘Not for the nervous!' and ‘You don't know the meaning of fear until you read...ACTION!' (Barker, 1989, p.46).

This self-conscious awareness of testing the boundaries of acceptable entertainment can also be seen in the advertisement of movies such as *Reservoir Dogs*, or *Natural Born Killers*. Adverts for *Reservoir Dogs* called it ‘An amazing, awesome, pumping powerhouse of a movie’, whilst reviewers ran headlines like ‘Drenched in Livid Shades of Violence’ and spoke of film violence having gone too far.15 Derek Malcolm (1993b, p.6) commented:
There is a point in *Reservoir Dogs* when it is difficult not to take the ultimate sanction against violence and walk out...I mention this because reviewers, perhaps anaesthetised by current horrors, sometimes fail to warn potential customers of what they are about to face in the cinema.

Similarly, when *Natural Born Killers* was released a flyer for the movie called it a 'rollercoaster ride of awesome evil', whilst one critic's comments on another advert, claimed: 'NBK succeeds in being the kind of risk-taking all-out visual experience that comes along all too rarely'. The 'tidal wave of hype' (Malcolm, 1995, p.10) surrounding these films means that they are self-consciously referring to their own notoriety; the advertising for these films deliberately asks consumers to take a chance, to become risk-takers. Derek Malcolm's warning to viewers about the excessive violence of *Reservoir Dogs* highlights the film's difference; it is a film that asks the consumer to join it in an 'awesome, pumping, powerhouse' of an experience, one that is unlike anything they have encountered before.

As Barker (1989, p.45) points out in his examination of *Action*, the objections to this comic were specifically political in nature. Barker (1984a, 1984b) also found the same case to be true of objections to horror comics of the 1950s, and objections to 'video nasties' in 1984: these texts are accused of being 'excessively violent', but the objections, and subsequent censorship of these texts point to a political bias. These texts deliberately invite the consumer to take part in risk-taking activities which the dominant hierarchy does not wish to support. The shocking realism, the criticism of authority, the unique and dangerous experience these texts offer to the consumer only serve to threaten the safe, risk aversive society that the dominant hierarchy does wish to support. To allow such texts to become popular with the general public would be to
allow criticism and conflict of the central community. Indeed, these texts, and others like them (for example *Crash*, or *Brass Eye*) represent everything that the central community fears: they encourage violence; conflict; criticism of the family and authority; anti-religious sentiments. These texts push the boundaries of what is acceptable, when it is the role of the central community to define and maintain acceptable behaviour.

The popularity of these texts is another good reason for the dominant hierarchy to control and regulate media violence. *Reservoir Dogs*, *Natural Born Killers*, and *Pulp Fiction* did extremely well at the box office with *Pulp Fiction* grossing over £10,000,000 at the box office in 1996 (see Table 5, Chapter eight), and television programmes such as *The X-Files*, and *Cracker* regularly attracting audience figures of 10 to 15 million viewers. The popularity of these film and television programmes means that the public are interested in risk-taking behaviour which has not been sanctioned by the dominant hierarchy. This is not welcome news for the central community, and one response has been to censor popular programmes such as *The X-Files*, currently shown on BBC1, so that they are centrally sanctioned and approved by 'official' outlets such as BBC1, a family channel.

**Popularity and Trust**

Recent research in public perception of risk and dominant hierarchies shows that public trust of institutions in authority is extremely low (Gallup, 1993; Slovic, 1992; Marris, Langford and O'Riordan, 1997). Tim O'Riordan (1997, p.21) writes:
Only 12 per cent (of the public) trusted the government, 20 per cent trusted businesses, 25 per cent trusted the media, and less than a third trusted religious organizations and trade unions...But the two most trusted sources were their friends (80 per cent) and their family (90 per cent) as well as scientists from environmental organizations, who had an 80 per cent ‘trust rating’.

The startling difference between these figures is revealing. Those organizations who represent the dominant hierarchy, the government, businesses, the media, and public organizations are the least trusted by the British public with regard to risk and the environment. However, friends, family and environmental organizations get a ‘trust rating’ of over 80 per cent. This clearly shows that the public trust their own responses, and the responses of their peers in relation to risk and safety, more than they would trust dominant organizations like the government. Marris, Langford and O'Riordan's research suggests that individuals no longer trust institutions to make moral and ethical decisions. This is because, as Douglas (1992, p.28) points out, ‘the risk rhetoric upholds the individual, vulnerable to the misbehaviour of the community.’ Environmentalism is therefore perceived to be trustworthy because it is protective of the individual.

Robin Grove-White (1996, p.279) points out: ‘fragmentation of public loyalties towards many mainstream "traditional" institutions in society’ has significant implications for the achievement of objectives of risk reduction within these institutions. The fact that media violence texts like Cracker, or Pulp Fiction are popular with the British public suggests that the public perceive watching media violence as an acceptable risk-taking activity and that they trust their own responses to media violence, more than mainstream, traditional institutions, such as the media, or the government. Attempts by these institutions to reduce levels of media violence will have to take this fragmentation of loyalty into consideration.
However, the fact that environmental organizations also get a ‘trust rating’ of 80 per cent has a significant effect on public perception of media violence. The problem with this growth of trust towards environmental organizations is that environmentalism has become a masterframe in its own right. Klaus Eder (1996, p.207) has pointed out that ‘ecological discourse (is) a major element in the legitimating ideology of advanced modern societies.’ Eder (1996, pp. 206-7) explains this as follows:

Environmentalism has become more than a mere symbolic package constitutive of a protest actor. It has become a new masterframe in public discourses which is addressed by non-protest actors as well. As a masterframe it concerns not only environmental issues..., but also other policy areas in which ‘ecological reasons’ can be evolved to mobilise legitimacy for the actions of non-protesters and decisions taken.

In this sense, environmentalism has become ‘a constitutive element of modern political discourse’ (Eder, 1996, p.207), and has in many ways come to replace the sense of a traditional religious community with an ‘associational community’ (Eder, 1996, p.213), one that uses environmentalism as a structuring principle. This is a far cry from the public perception of environmentalism as anti-institutional, as the discourse of the ‘protest actor’. According to researchers such as Eder, and Jamison (1996), ecological discourse legitimates the dominant ideology of modern institutions. Thus, what is perceived by the public as an example of counterdiscourse is in actual fact an example of the dominant discourse.

This ‘political ecology package’ (Eder, 1996, p.207) is a significant reason why the risk argument is so important to anti-violence organizations; without it the dominant hierarchy would be unable to gain the trust of the public. And without the trust of the public, there would be no opportunity to reinforce the ideals of the dominant hierarchy
through the control and regulation of media violence. What this means is that media violence has been defined and constructed as a social risk position that is unacceptable to the central community. It is unacceptable because it threatens the authority of the dominant hierarchy by exploring alternative risk-taking activities that are not sanctioned by the community. Examples of media violence, such as *Crash*, or *The X-Files*, contain social criticism and conflict that are unresolvable by the central community. In *Crash* the central characters are distanced from the rest of the community because they have express sexual desires that are perceived as unacceptable by society; in *The X-Files* emphasis is placed on the individual who can trust no one. The fact that these examples of media violence are popular because of the emphasis on the individual and the lack of trust in social institutions causes a problem for the dominant hierarchy. To counteract this, organizations like the media, the government and religious groups adopt the rhetoric of risk in relation to media violence because, with a risk approach, such organizations are no longer perceived to be part of the dominant hierarchy, but are instead perceived by the public as environmental organizations who target institutions that cannot be relied upon, who protect the individual from the risks of modernization: it is this type of organization that the public trust.

This ensures that despite the fact that a large proportion of the general public choose to consume media violence, media violence itself is constructed as a modernization risk that endangers the individual and the community. The fact that media violence actually poses a threat to the values of the dominant hierarchy is something that becomes subsumed under the rhetoric of risk, with its protest against institutions and its focus on the individual.

But what of the individual? It is the individual who chooses to become a risk-taker when they consume media violence. And, contrary to what the dominant
hierarchy says, these individuals are not part of a marginalized sub-culture, but are part of the central community. In the next chapter I want to examine the individual and the concept of the risk-taker. If, as O'Riordan's research suggests, people place their trust in friends and family when it comes to risk and the environment, then it stands to reason that they would also place trust in their own judgement with regard to risk. The next chapter aims to examine the self as risk-taker in relation to violence and the mass media.

Notes

1 By ‘hierarchical power’ I am referring to Mary Douglas’ concept of central communities, and social fields of symbolic and economic capital, see Douglas, 1992, p.107.

2 This advert for British Nuclear Fuel was shown regularly on ITV and Channel 4 January-March 1997.

3 For discussion of this in relation to risk, see The Times Higher Educational Supplement, March 14 1997, pp.18-21.

4 Henderson examined British Government decisions regarding Concorde and Advanced Gas Cooled Reactor projects. He found that their massive economic miscalculations did not have an adverse affect on those responsible for these mistakes. He identified four characteristics of British administration process: decorum; unbalanced incentives; anonymity; security.

5 See also Jamison et al, 1990, for further discussion of new phases in post-war environmentalism.

6 This table is taken from Jamison, 1996, p.227.

7 Eder talks of figures such as Rachel Carson and Fairfield Osborn as some of the first people to put this perspective in print. Interestingly, Jamison sees the development of television and popular culture as a significant means of bringing nature into the home environment, and therefore highlighting the need to save nature (see Jamison, 1996, p.228).


9 This is an extremely brief reference to Giddens' theory of structuration, and how structuration links in with human agents and social practices will be of interest to later chapters on audience response to media violence. Giddens' interest in modernity and reflexive modernization (see Giddens, 1990, 1991; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1995) also suggests further links with risk and the mass media.

10 See Buckingham (1996, p.33) for further reference to the ‘nanny state’ and anxieties about the
relationship between the personal and the private in relation to media violence.

11 These comments by Barker and Brooks are taken from an unpublished article on ‘Investing in Film’ which is based on recent ESRC funded research on teenagers’ responses to action movies.

12 In ‘Investment in Film’, Barker and Brooks (1997) discuss the concept of investment in relation to agency and structure, and investment is a means for possibilities of action which theorists are unaware of. Thus, the investment of engaging in risk-taking activity would be as important as identifying what activity this is.

13 Of course there are many other ways of reading these texts. For example, Child’s Play 3 could be read and understood as a successor to slasher films such as A Nightmare on Elm Street, with a strange and novel twist, that of the talking doll.

14 See Buckingham (1996, pp.34-39) and Barker (1997a, pp.18-21) for a detailed discussion of the content and context of Child’s Play 3.


16 Natural Born Killers was due for cinema release in the UK on 18th November 1994, but was withheld by the BBFC and eventually released on 24th February 1995.

17 See advertisement for the film and soundtrack available at West End cinemas February 24th, 1995, and advert in Time Out, March 1st, 1995, featuring a quotation from the critic Clark Collis of Empire magazine.

18 Brass Eye is a comedy series by Chris Morris that lampoons the media, particularly questioning whether what we read and see in the media is actually truthful. The programme attracted a lot of criticism in the press, particularly by spoof-victims, such as Noel Edmonds, who was tricked into condemning a mythical Czech drug, ‘cake’. In March, a sketch about Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, and a musical of his life was pulled from the series in response to media outrage (see Mulholland, 1997, the Guardian, Monday March 10th, 1997).

19 Exact figure £10,446,512. Figures supplied by Screen International, 1996.

20 Figures supplied by BARB (British Audience Research Board).

21 The X-Files has been shown in the UK on BBC1 for over nearly two years now – it began life on Sky One and then went to BBC2 – and with its increase in popularity over the last year, along with the rise in Hollywood alien films such as Independence Day (Roland Emmerich, 1996) or Men in Black (Barry Sonnenfield, 1997) the X-Files has been routinely censored by the BBC and Sky for violence. A good example is the episode ‘Home’ in season four, which contains scenes of a mutilated baby which were cut from the BBC transmission, 17th September 1997, 9.30-10.10 pm.
A technocratic view of risk has dominated the way in which risk assessment and communication have developed in our society. Risk theory highlights the divergence between the expert and lay perspective of environmental risk. How people understand and respond to modernization risks has, until recently, been of little consequence to those organizations involved in risk assessment. As Grove-White (1997, p.283) points out: ‘embedded in the relevant institutions is a knowledge culture which embodies a truncated and inadequate conception of the human subject - that is, of what real people are like.’

However, recent research (Slovic, 1992, 1995; Durant, 1997; Marris et al., 1997) has suggested that there are ‘systematic “mismatches” between expert and lay risk assessments’ (Durant, 1997, p.20). These ‘mismatches’ indicate that the public assess risk in relation to degrees of personal control, and degrees of trust. Thus, many people perceive that travelling in an airplane is more risky than driving a car, despite the fact that experts claim the exact opposite is the case; driving a car feels less risky than being in an airplane because there is a greater degree of personal control, and we can trust our own response to this risk-taking activity. Scientific experts may say that this is an example of public ignorance, but from a sociological perspective the lay person reveals some significant issues in relation to risk.
In this chapter, I want to focus on the risk-taker and examine John Adams' theory of the 'risk thermostat'. The risk thermostat hypothesis reveals that every person has a propensity to take risks, and every person balances their perception of risk in relation to the benefits and drawbacks of certain risk-taking activities. Thus, the complex and subjective nature of the lay person's risk assessment is as, if not more, important than the technocratic view. This new theory of risk will be of direct relevance to understanding viewer response to media violence, and the dangers and rewards associated with this risk-taking activity.

The Risk Thermostat Hypothesis

Adams (1995, p.1) believes that everyone is 'a true risk "expert"'. We all make decisions in our everyday lives that are to do with risk. However, 'the view that there is a distinction to be made between, real, actual, objective, measurable risk...and subjective risk inaccurately perceived by non-experts' (Adams, 1995, p.10) is a view that poses problems for this theory. If the mainstream position in risk assessment is that non experts are inaccurate in their perception of risk, this raises the question of who is 'accurate' in the definition and construction of risk?

In Chapter four, we considered Adams' criticism of the objective, 'accurate' measurement of road safety and the implementation of safety belt legislation. Briefly, Adams (1995, pp.113-157) found that the original research on seat belt usage and death by road traffic accidents conducted in Australia failed to take into account the concept of 'risk compensation'. In this case, risk compensation manifested itself in people's
propensity to drive at greater speed and to take more risks on the road because wearing a seat belt made them feel safer. Thus, although the number of deaths by road traffic accidents were reduced following the implementation of seat belts, the numbers of accidents, and deaths of pedestrians and cyclists increased. This is because people compensate for one risk by introducing another; they modify their behaviour according to their assessment of risk. Risk compensation means that there is no ‘accurate’ assessment of risk, because as soon as institutions attempt to manage risk, people alter their behaviour accordingly.

Adams has developed a model of risk compensation.1 Figure 2 illustrates the ‘risk thermostat hypothesis’.

Adams (1995, pp.14-15) explains the risk thermostat as follows:

- everyone has a propensity to take risks
- this propensity varies from one individual to another; this propensity is influenced by the potential rewards of risk-taking
- perceptions of risk are influenced by experience of accident losses - one’s own and others'
individual risk-taking decisions represent a balancing act in which perceptions of risk are weighed against propensity to take risk
accident losses are, by definition, a consequence of taking risks; the more risks an individual takes, the greater, on average, will be both the rewards and losses he or she incurs.

Adams states that 'everyone has a propensity to take risks'. This means that contrary to Ulrich Beck's concept of a risk society (1992, p.49), where everyone is concerned with preventing the worst, Adams maintains that risks are part of our everyday lives, and that we take risks because there are 'potential rewards' to risk-taking activities. Thus, unlike 'zero-risk man' (Adams, 1995, p.16), the rational and responsible person that most safety literature invokes, Adams asserts that people like to take risks: 'Homo prudens is but one aspect of the human character. Homo aleatorius - dice man, gambling man, risk-taking man - also lurks within everyone of us' (Adams, 1995, p.16).

The risk-taker, according to the risk thermostat, must learn to balance their behaviour. There are rewards, but there are also dangers in risk-taking activities. What is significant is the perception of risk and how the individual chooses to manage this risk. Adams (1995, p.19) asks us to imagine a driver negotiating the bend in a road. The rewards of driving fast might be to impress friends, or get to the church on time. However, the dangers might include damage to the car, personal injury or death. The speed of the car will be to do with the balance between the driver's judgement of road conditions, time of day, the capability of the car, and his/her perception of the rewards and dangers of driving fast.

Risk is also an interactive phenomenon. A person's propensity to take risks must be balanced with others who are also contemplating the rewards and dangers of risk-taking activities. And some risk-takers are capable of causing more harm than others. There are controllers of large risks. Adams explains: 'risky interaction frequently takes
place in terms of gross inequality. The damage that a heavy lorry can inflict on a cyclist, or pedestrian is great; the physical damage that they can inflict on the lorry is small' (Adams, 1995, p.20). These controllers of large risks are in a position of power, and everyday management of risk must negotiate risk inequality and conflict.

**Cultural Filters**

Another aspect of the risk thermostat which is of significance here is the inclusion of cultural filters. Adams asserts that perceptions of risk are culturally constructed and are made up of anticipations of the future based on past experience. Adams (1995, p.9) writes:

...the adverse nature of particular events and their probability are inherently subjective. Slipping and falling on ice, for example, is a game for young children, but a potentially fatal accident for an old person. And the probability of such an event is influenced both by the person's perception of the probability, and by whether they see it as fun or dangerous. For example, because old people see the risk of slipping on an icy road to be high, they take avoiding action, thereby reducing the probability. Young people slipping and sliding on ice, and the old people striving to avoid doing the same, belong to two separate and distinct cultures. They construct reality out of their experience of it. They see the world differently and behave differently; they tend to associate with kindred spirits, who reinforce their distinctive perspectives on reality in general and risk in particular.

For Adams, the way to examine the cultural construction of risk is to examine different rationalities. He uses a fourfold typology, as outlined by cultural theorists like Douglas and Wildavsky (1983), and Thompson et al. (1990); this typology combines the four myths of nature with the four myths of human nature to arrive at four rationalities: individualists; hierarchists; egalitarians; fatalists. Adams sees these four rationalities as a means to negotiate uncertainty in relation to risk perception and management. For
example, identifying that old people avoid icy roads and young people deliberately slip and slide on the ice is a means of aligning certain risk-taking and risk-averse activities in relation to specific sub cultures. However, this does not take into account that individual people operate in different ways when negotiating a slippery road. Adams postulates that by using the four types of rationalities we can come to an understanding about types of people within these sub cultures and the rationality they use for negotiating a slippery road.

Adams (1995, pp.40-41) outlines the four rationalities in relation to risk:

Individualists tend to view nature as stable, robust and benign...They are believers in market forces and individual responsibility, and are hostile to the regulators of the ‘nanny State’... Egalitarians cling to the view of nature as fragile and precarious. They would have everyone tread lightly on the Earth and in cases of scientific doubt invoke the precautionary principle... Hierarchists believe that nature will be good to them, if properly managed. They are members of big business, big government, big bureaucracy...They believe in research to establish ‘the facts’ about both human and physical nature, and in regulation for the collective good... Fatalists...believe nature to be capricious and unpredictable. They hope for the best and fear the worst...

These four rationalities can be applied to disputes about risk. Adams (1995, p.37) considers that when people argue about risks such as global warming, they are arguing from different views about nature: ‘These different rationalities tend to entrench themselves. Both the paradigms of science and the myths of cultural theory are powerful filters through which the world is perceived.’ Thus, when we define and construct risk, we anticipate a future event that is perceived through the filter of a rational discourse which is subjective rather than objective. What is more, when we balance our propensity to take risks with our perception of danger we do so through these cultural filters.
The risk thermostat is a simple, yet remarkable theory of risk management. It challenges the basic assumption of all safety research and literature which is concerned with risk reduction: according to the risk thermostat there is no ‘zero-risk man’. Until recently, the purpose of all risk research was the removal of risk. Once one risk has been removed, for example legislation to wear safety belts, other risks are identified and new campaigns are launched to control and regulate these new risks. Adams (1995, pp.30-31) points out that risk reduction is an enormous industry. For example, in Britain, the number of people proceeded against in court for motor vehicle offenses per year is over 2.5 million; this accounts for 75 per cent of court proceedings. Such court proceedings may include other types of ‘risks’, for example no MOT, no insurance, or unpaid parking fines, but such a figure still indicates that risk reduction is big business. And yet risk reduction fails to take into account the concept of risk compensation; it fails to understand that people have a propensity to take risks. The type of risks may alter over time, but levels of risk-taking activities will remain the same.

The risk thermostat has dramatic consequences on the efficacy of imposed safety measures. If people compensate for the reduction of one risk by incorporating another, this means that safety measures do not work in isolation. Adams (1995, p.215) explains this as follows:

Safety interventions that do not alter people's propensity to take risks will be frustrated by responses that re-establish the level of risk with which people were originally content. In the absence of reductions in people's propensity to take risks, safety interventions will redistribute the burden of risk, not reduce it.
Adams' research on safety belt legislation, discussed in the previous chapter, suggests that this is exactly the case. Further research adds validity to this hypothesis. For example, research into the rates of death by accident and violence indicate that despite the intensification of safety precautions and causality treatment around the world, the figures of death by accident and violence have remained the same. Benjamin and Overton (1981) conducted a demographic study of English and Welsh mortality rates into the 21st century and they found 'the risk of accidental death remains the same, as some improvements in the environment are balanced by the appearance of new hazards' (cited in Adams, 1995, p.61). Adams (1995, pp.60, 61) also found that over a 75 year period this century, the numbers of death by accident and violence in 31 countries remained 'remarkably flat' despite the profusion of safety regulations in this period.3

Similarly, Robbins, Bales and D'Andrea (1996) analyzed public perception of security issues over the last 20 years. Robbins et al. (1996, p.10) found that 'new risks or threats to security replace old ones, and there is not a corresponding reduction in the total level of concern or insecurity, only the focus alters.' For example, the numbers of people in Britain who felt that defence was a top security issue fell from 35 per cent in 1983, to 1 per cent between 1990 and 1995, and yet other security concerns such as nationalism, and AIDS began to become significant from the late 1980s onwards, just as defence declined (Robbins et al., 1996, pp.9-10). Thus, security concerns such as defence, unemployment, and law and order may peak at different periods over the last 20 years, but the levels of concern regarding risk and security remain the same: security concerns have not been reduced, instead they have been redistributed.

Such research supports Adams' theory regarding risk compensation. Although Adams is sceptical of any claim for 'conclusive proof' of this hypothesis, believing that risk compensation 'is an explanation of individual, not collective, behaviour' (1995,
p.62), the findings of researchers such as Robbins et al. (1996), or Benjamin and Overton (1981) would suggest that the risk compensation hypothesis does have some grounding in research. As Robbins et al. (1996, p.3) point out, contrary to Adams assertion that perceptions of danger cannot be measured objectively, ‘perceptions, like attitudes or other forms of the internal measurements people make of the world around them are measured with regularity by large scale public opinion polls.’ Adams may be right to distrust the use of objective measurements as evidence of ‘undeniable proof’ in relation to risk, but this does not mean to say that quantitative statistics do not have a place in our understanding of risk assessment. Indeed, here, they are an indication that further research into people’s perception of risk-taking behaviour will yield interesting results. Research by Marris, Langford and O’Riordan (1997) also suggests that this is the case. Marris et al. (1997, p.1) argue for qualitative and quantitative research in risk perception, using a psychometric paradigm and cultural theory approaches. This is an issue I will return to later.

The fact that Adams has himself noticed a change in the dominant discourse on risk over the last few years is also an indication that the risk thermostat hypothesis is beginning to be taken seriously by exactly the kinds of hierarchical institutions who rejected this type of hypothesis. For example, the Royal Society, Britain’s leading scientific institution, saw no reason to support Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis in its 1992 report. Indeed, the Royal Society’s 1992 report has become known for precisely this division between social scientists and statisticians: ‘the report consists of two sections written from different viewpoints which in parts flatly contradict each other’ (Hinde, 1997, p.18). However, five years on, Adams was chosen to start the 1997 debate on risk at the Royal Society. Lewis Wolpert, the chairman of the Royal Society’s committee for the understanding of science, has publicly admitted to the validity of risk
compensation (Hinde, 1997, p.19). This means that Adams' risk thermostat hypothesis has gained credibility with the Royal Society which, a few years earlier, was in deadlock with social scientists and theories of the social construction of risk.

In the next section I want to consider the risk thermostat hypothesis in relation to media violence. If people have a propensity to take risks, and risk management is undertaken by the individual as well as the state, then it is important to examine how the risk thermostat may help us to understand why people watch violent movies such as *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) or *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) despite the fact that the media, politicians and public campaign groups apparently believe these movies to be hazardous to the environment.

**The Risk Thermostat and Media Violence**

Adams (1995, p.66) suggests that there are 'degrees of volition in the taking of risk'. Some risks are imposed upon an individual, and others are taken by an individual. A consumer of media violence actively chooses to engage with this risk-taking activity. Watching a film or television programme which contains violence is a voluntary activity. It is voluntary in the sense that people pay to take part in this leisure activity in the same way people pay to play squash, or bingo. Media violence is not imposed upon members of the public; consumers have the choice to watch, or not watch representations of violence, and there are other leisure activities they can take part in if media violence is not to their liking.
The risk thermostat hypothesis is significant to our understanding of consumer behaviour. The previous chapters have explored how media violence has been defined and constructed as a modernization risk. This means that consumers of popular culture are very much aware that if they watch a film or television programme that contains representations of violence, they are engaging with risk on a personal level. This does not mean to say that consumers of media violence perceive all film and television violence as an environmental risk, similar to global warming, or car pollution, but rather that they are aware of the dominant discourse on media violence, and its definition of certain texts as environmental hazards which can harm vulnerable viewers, especially children. A consumer of media violence, therefore, is actively engaging in a risk-taking activity which they understand to be an interactive phenomenon.

According to anti-violence campaign groups, and researchers operating within the cause-effect paradigm, popular entertainment should seek to reduce risk. This follows the pattern of safety research and literature which strives to attain ‘zero-risk’; anti-violence campaign groups want risk-free entertainment. As the NVALA (National Viewers' and Listeners' Association) comments in its advertising pamphlet: "Not more violence?" "What awful language!" "Why should we just switch off?". These comments are made by father, mother and child, respectively; in the cartoon depicting this exchange in front of the television, even the dog is moved to cover its ears. The type of entertainment anti-violence campaign groups such as the NVALA wants to make available to the public is safe entertainment for the whole family. As the NVALA states, the association campaigns for: ‘wholesome family viewing helping to strengthen marriage and family life.’ A further cartoon shows the same family settling down to enjoy ‘wholesome family viewing’; the television depicts a family driving through the country, and father says: "I wish we could have more programmes like this." The
image of the car is an ironic one, given the perceived risk to the environment by cars and the construction of roads; however, perhaps this is shown in order to highlight a ‘successful’ exercise in risk management. The image of the car shows the family in another ‘box’, this time under the control of the father: he is the family’s risk manager in all aspects of life, whether at home, or in the social environment.

Previous chapters discussed the ideological reasons why the dominant hierarchy wishes to control and regulate popular entertainment. Here, ‘zero-risk man’ applauds the programme about driving in the country because it is perceived to be a safe activity that the whole family can enjoy; it strengthens family values: what could be more normal than taking your family for a Sunday afternoon drive? And yet there is no ‘zero-risk man’. Driving a car is a risky activity, just as playing bingo, water-skiing, and living alone are risky activities. Indeed, these activities are ‘actual risks’ (Adams, 1997, p.19), where the person involved can directly perceive the risks and balance these with the rewards to be gained from these type of leisure activities. Watching television is a risk that cannot be directly perceived: it is a risk that scientists have not yet objectively measured, and this means that efforts to reduce risk in relation to popular culture are based on insufficient knowledge of how and why people themselves define and understand this risk-taking activity. As there is no ‘zero-risk man’, people themselves do not consume zero-risk entertainment. This is a basic fact that anti-violence campaign groups do not understand.

All consumers of entertainment will make decisions about the different types of entertainment they wish to experience. Media violence is just one example, and the risk thermostat hypothesis is a means to understand why people choose this type of experience over another. The kinds of viewers who consume media violence will have set their risk thermostats to a higher level than those who do not wish to experience this
type of entertainment. To make entertainment risk-free would not stop people from choosing to engage in risk-taking activities. Risk compensation ensures that those people who like to watch film and television programmes which contain violence will find other activities which are also challenging to the imagination.

The risk thermostat hypothesis indicates that consumers of media violence perceive rewards to be gained from this type of behaviour. However, audience research in this area has repeatedly denied the possibility that watching violent movies can be an entertaining experience (see for example, Gerbner et al., 1980, 1986; NTVS, 1996). The next chapter will examine audience research and media violence in some detail, however, the point here is that the three types of effects most commonly associated with media violence - copycat effects; the desensitization hypothesis; cultivation effects (for more details see Gauntlett, 1995, pp.17-43) - are only concerned with dangers and accidents; there is no awareness of viewers' propensity to take risks, and their understanding of the rewards of this experience.

However, consumers have established a positive perception of media violence because they have had no experience of 'accident losses' (Adams, 1995, p.15). Watching violent film and television programmes has always been a 'safe' activity, where any perception of danger has been part of a response to the text, and concerned with the imagination of the viewer, not with real life violence. Thus, contrary to most effects research, and the beliefs of anti-violence campaign groups, active consumers of media violence do not associate watching violent movies with 'accidents'. If they did, very few people would actually choose to go to the cinema or rent a movie which they know to contain scenes of violence: to do so would be to actively place oneself in harm's way. What this means is that the construction of risk in association with media violence is very much concerned with consumers' perception of danger. This perception
of danger takes on two forms: first it is concerned with textual references to danger and the consumer's emotional responses to this fictionalized risk; secondly, it is concerned with the social construction of risk, and the lay perspective that 'accidents' can happen to other people. In the next chapter, research in consumers' beliefs that it is other people, not themselves, who are vulnerable to the effects of media violence will expand on this point.

**Cultural Filters**

This emphasis on different attitudes to risk is why the risk thermostat hypothesis has been modified so that risk can be considered as an 'interactive phenomenon' (Adams, 1995, p.20) which we perceive through cultural filters. Consumers construct a version of reality that is based on their own experience. However, this experience is also filtered through various different cultural perspectives. This is why consumers of media violence do not perceive any real danger to this risk-taking activity, but they are concerned that 'other people' may have a different experience from their own. The definition and cultural construction of media violence as a modernization risk that is harmful to vulnerable viewers has ensured that this cultural filter has some influence on individual perspectives of risk, even if personal experience proves that this is not the case.

The utilization of cultural groups to understand types of perception and patterns of social relationships is similar to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field. Habitus are mental or cognitive structures which are internalized within our everyday social structures. We may not be conscious of habitus but it is part of our everyday activities. We acquire it through occupying a position in society, and everyone has their own
habitus, although those people who occupy similar social positions share similar habitus. What is significant about habitus is that it both produces and is produced by the social world. Bourdieu (1977, p.72) explains it as follows: habitus is the 'dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality.' Habitus exists in the minds of actors, and fields, which are cultural and social arenas of struggle, exist apart from habitus but there is a dialectical relationship between the two.

Adam's utilization of four types of rationalities in relation to the risk thermostat hypothesis is far less plastic than Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Unlike the fourfold typology of cultural bias, habitus is multitudinous, not uniform. And although habitus provides some form of structuring principle to a person's life-choices, it suggests rather than dictates a course of action. The difficulty with the fourfold typology of cultural bias is that it can restrict rather than illuminate perceptions of risk. To use anti-violence campaign groups as one example, this sub-group can also be perceived as hierarchists and egalitarians, and consumers of media violence may use all four types of rationalities at different times and under different circumstances. Adams accepts that cultural types can be context-dependent (1995, p.134), and that people are capable of assuming all four types of rationalities. However, he does not consider the consequences of attempting to differentiate between cultural types, and what this actually tells us about individual perceptions of risk. Identifying different cultural types may help to clarify distinctive forms of rhetoric, but it does not tell us why and how people manage risk-taking behaviour in different ways and in different contexts.

Research by Marris, Langford and O'Riordan (1997) suggests that empirical research in perceptions of risk does little to benefit from using four cultural types to understand patterns of perception in relation to risk and the environment. In their recent study, Marris et al. (1997, p.47) comment that 'cultural biases could only explain 12%,
at most, of the variation of risk perception' in their sample. In fact, they found that respondents were more likely to display mixed cultural biases than a single cultural bias. Although Marris et al. (1997, p.48) are quick to point out that 'risk perceptions are not just about abstract ratings of "risk"' and that cultural bias 'does suggest an explanation of risk perceptions by showing how they fit coherently into worldviews held by respondents', the fact that cultural bias scored low as a predictor of perceptions of risk does suggest that researchers should be aware that there is little empirical evidence to support such a theory of risk perception.

In fact, coherent worldviews are difficult to discover. Even when applying Bourdieu's concept of habitus, it is possible to see that this is also restrictive in its application. Like the fourfold typology of cultural bias, Bourdieu's theory of field and habitus also suffers from a lack of empirical evidence, and an over reliance on structuring principles. In Distinction, one of the things that Bourdieu is attempting to do is to show that culture can be a legitimate object of scientific study. Whilst Bourdieu's theories are certainly useful in analyzing culture and the uses of culture in everyday life, the fact of whether such theories can be validated by empirical evidence remains to be seen. Recent research by Barker and Brooks (1997) suggests that 'people do not "belong" within a habitus in some mechanical, even manner' and that wanting or desiring to achieve a goal is just as important as actually achieving that goal - indeed, this generates 'possibilities of action not otherwise available'.

Thus, whether one uses Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field, or Adam's theory of four cultural biases in relation to the risk thermostat hypothesis, either theory can distort and restrict people's perceptions of risk and the environment, and should be treated as hypotheses rather than exclusive explanations. And what is more, cultural bias cannot take into account 'possibilities of action not otherwise available'. In the
model outlined above, the three cultural biases used in relation to the media violence debate failed to take into account political rationalities, which are not dependent on any beliefs concerning nature, but are rather concerned with public opinion and winning votes. This means that although the government can fit into the cultural bias of hierarchists, their perspective of media violence is dependent on the ideology of other dominant institutions, such as anti-violence campaign groups, and the media, which are in turn dependent on public opinion.

Klaus Eder (1997, p.209) talks about the institutionalism of environmentalism. He contends that 'ethical commitments and ethical theories have a become a central concern in legitimating the relationship between modern political institutions and environmental issues.' However, such ethical concerns have become subsumed in the masterframe of ecological discourse. Eder explains:

Without packaging information on the environment, nothing will be achieved: not legitimacy for the political institution, mobilisation for the environment, or rational attitudes (or even behaviour patterns) in the public as a whole. This claim is based on the assumption that it is the methods of communicating environmental conditions and ideas, and not the state of environmental deterioration itself, which explains the emergence of a public discourse on the environment, 'ecological discourse'.

Using a fourfold typology of cultural bias in relation to perceptions of risk and the environment would fail to take into account the distinctly reflexive nature of ecological discourse, which, rather than relying on one type of ethical identity, uses a masterframe of different types of discourse to achieve end results.

Consequently, whilst it would be foolish to deny that cultural theory, and its concern with risk perceptions and social patterns and relationships is significant to an understanding of risk and the environment, it is wise to recognize that cultural filters
vary according to individual perspectives, and the amount and type of cultural filters used in relation to the mass media should be determined by the individual, not by the researcher.

**Operational Problems**

The risk thermostat hypothesis is a useful means of understanding why media violence is a popular leisure activity, but, as Adams (1995, p.15) states, it is a 'conceptual model, not an operational one.' This hypothesis distinguishes between positive and negative responses to media violence, it places emphasis on the individual and, significantly, highlights the fact that people manage risk-taking activities, and that each person's propensity to take risks varies from one individual to another. However, researchers should be alert to operational problems with this hypothesis, and modify it accordingly.

For example, there are two problems in applying this hypothesis to the processes of viewing media violence. Firstly, the risk thermostat is concerned with risk-taking behaviour; if it is applied to media violence then this is also defined as a risk-taking activity. It is certainly the case that anti-violence campaign groups, the media and politicians perceive media violence as a modernization risk, but this implies that media violence is a product that can measured for side-effects, just like measuring the side-effects of car pollution, when this is clearly not the case. What is more, the term 'risk' implies vulnerability and the possibility of harm. Once again, this certainly defines the alleged effects of media violence, as anti-violence campaign groups and effects researchers would have us believe, but it has little to do with the actual responses to media violence by consumers themselves. As the next chapters will reveal,
individuals respond to media violence in complex and dynamic ways; they are far from vulnerable (for examples of research that supports this see Schlesinger et al., 1992; Buckingham, 1996; Hill, 1997).

It is important to make the distinction that with media violence, vulnerability, harm, danger, aggression are all emotions which are fictionalized, which are, as Noël Carroll (1990, p.79) would argue, concerned with ‘the thought theory of the emotional responses to fictions’. This means that viewers of a violent movie, for example, are entertained by the thought of vulnerability, danger, or harm, not by the actual experience itself. Carroll (1990, p.80) explains:

Standing on a precipice, though in no way precariously, one might fleetingly entertain the thought of falling over the edge. Commonly, this can be accompanied by a sudden chill or a tremor which is brought about, I submit, not by our belief that we are about to fall over the edge of the precipice, but by our thought of falling... We are not frightened by the event of our thinking of falling, but by the content of our thought of falling - perhaps the mental image of plummeting through space.

In a similar way, watching a violent movie involves the thought of violence, not the reality of violence; we are frightened, or thrilled, by the content of our thoughts, not the event of real violence in the viewing environment.

This poses some problem in the application of risk theory to the mass media. Adams (1997, p.19) has attempted to differentiate between ‘directly perceived risks, risks perceived through science, and virtual risks’. Watching television is a ‘virtual risk’. Scientists cannot agree about the effects of watching television, because any attempt to measure responses to representations of violence fail to take into account that media violence is imaginary. Adams (1997, p.19) writes: ‘Virtual risks are products of the imagination that work upon the imagination’. This means that the virtual risk of
watching film and television programmes which contain violence is offset by the virtual reward of stimulating the imagination. One way people choose to excite their imagination is by watching films like *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994).

Thus, the definition of media violence as a 'virtual risk' is one means of incorporating the distinctly fictional nature of responses to this perceived risk-taking activity. Virtual risk can symbolize the real, for example many films and television programmes depict violence in a realistic manner and viewers' responses reflect this, but it can also symbolize the illusory. Consumers of media violence manage risk because they understand that it is not real; they balance their behaviour in favour of a propensity to take risks because these are risks to the imagination, not to the real world. The kinds of rewards to be gained from consuming media violence, such as feelings of excitement, challenges to the imagination, opportunities for social criticism, are weighed against the 'dangers', for example, an increase in feelings of fear or unease, or the possibility of nightmares. Any decision to consume media violence is based on an individual's perception of the positive and negative. Those individuals who decide to consume media violence are those who feel they can manage this risk. Indeed, part of the pleasure to be gained from consuming media violence is in managing responses to fictional violence.

The second problem in applying the risk thermostat hypothesis to the process of consuming media violence is that individual perceptions of risk are difficult to quantify. Adams (1995, p.25) argues: 'Scientific uncertainty about the physical world, the phenomenon of risk compensation, and the interactive nature of risk all render individual events inherently uncertain.' Unlike Beck (1992) or Wildavsky (1991), Adams does not consider that long running debates about risk can be resolved by science. In the final chapter of *Risk*, Adams (1995, pp.197-215) discusses the pressure
on a risk theorist to suggest better ways of managing risk, to have the answer. Adams is quite right to resist this pressure because, as he points out, individual responses to risk are inherently uncertain, and if 'people do not wish to be safer, if they do not reduce the settings of their risk thermostats, they will frustrate the efforts of risk managers who seek to make them safer than they wish to be' (Adams, 1995, p.211). This seems to be good advice when considering the unresolvable nature of the media violence debate, as defined by the risk argument.

However, the results of research by Robbins et al. (1996) and Marris et al. (1997), discussed earlier in this chapter, suggest that despite the difficulties of measuring attitudes to risk, there are ways of understanding perceptions of risk, and the internal assessments people make when they consume media violence. Any research in media violence should emphasize individual responses to virtual risk. As recent research (Slovic, 1992; Slovic et al. 1995; Durant, 1997; O'Riordan, 1997) has suggested, there are 'systematic "mismatches" between expert and lay risk assessments' and until we understand what the lay perspective is, these 'mismatches' will continue to take place. What is needed is a shift from scientific analysis of risk to a more sociological understanding of risk, in all its varied forms. Traditionally, when social scientists have sought to understand individual feelings and perceptions they have turned to qualitative research methods. Qualitative research offers a means to aid an understanding of individual risk management. Qualitative research does not preclude an acknowledgement of the scientific elusiveness of risk, but it does allow for further knowledge of risk perception.

Two years after publishing *Risk*, Adams offers a more optimistic approach to researching risk. He writes (1997, p.19):
Debates about BSE, global warming and asteroid defences are debates about the future, which does not exist except in our imaginations. They are debates to which scientists have much to contribute, but not ones that can be left to scientists alone. An understanding of the different ways in which people tend to respond to uncertainty cannot settle arguments. It does offer the prospect of more coherent debate among those with a stake in such issues.

It is exactly this need to acknowledge the significance of individual responses to media violence that is the key to engendering a more coherent debate about this emotive subject. Qualitative research is one means of attempting to do this, and the next chapter will focus on recent research which offers some illuminating findings with regard to how and why children and adults choose to engage with the virtual risks of media violence.

Notes

1 The model was originally devised by Gerald Wilde in 1976. It has been modified by Adams (1995, p.14).

2 The four myths of nature are: nature capricious; nature perverse; nature benign; nature ephemeral. The four myths of human nature are: the fatalists; the hierarchist; the individualist; the egalitarian (cited in Adams, 1995, pp.34-5).

3 Adams charts the death by accident and violence in over 31 countries between 1900-1975, and his statistics are based on standardized mortality ratios. Wars and natural disasters were taken into consideration (Adams, 1995, p.60).

4 The 'psychometric paradigm' concerns 'cognitive maps' of risks and hazards and was developed by Slovic et al. (1980, 1985). This paradigm identified expert and lay people's perspectives of risk, but failed to allow for the fact that not everyone will respond to risk in the same way. Marris et al. (1997, pp.1-4) argue that
cultural theory can aid an understanding of social issues and relationships. Their research attempts to utilize both frameworks.

5 For further discussion of this see Adams (1995, pp.7-9).

6 Research by Fischhoff et al. (1981) attempted to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary risk, and found that people were far more prepared to accept levels of risk from activities that are voluntary.

7 All quotes taken from an advertising leaflet for the NVALA, 1996.

8 See Table 6.4 in Marris et al (1997) (no page number given). In two samples, respondents with single cultural bias were 22 and 42 respectively, whilst respondents with mixed cultural bias were 60 and 80 respectively.

9 See the unpublished article ‘Investing in Film’ (Barker and Brooks, 1997) which is a brief introduction to recent empirical research in audiences of action movies.
This chapter aims to link the risk thermostat hypothesis with new audience research. Watching films or television programmes which contain scenes of violence is a risk-taking activity. The risks involved are not real risks, but 'virtual risks' (Adams, 1997, p.19) which are part of our imagination. It is precisely because the virtual risks of media violence are located in our imagination that traditional audience research which focuses on measuring audience behaviour is unable to explore the variety of responses to media violence. It is through talking to children and adults that we can begin to understand risk-taking behaviour in relation to media violence.

There has been a great deal of current research in the ethnography of media consumption (Moores, 1993). Indeed, in *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* David Morley complains about the popularity of ethnographic research and cautions researchers to be aware that 'the account which the ethnographer can give must be conscious of its own partiality, incompleteness and structured gaps' (Morley, 1992, p.186). However, despite these misgivings Morley feels that talking to people about media consumption is still the most effective method of understanding viewer response. He writes (1992, p.181):

...should you wish to understand what I am doing, it would probably be as well to ask me. I may well, of course, lie to you or otherwise misrepresent my thoughts or feelings, for any number of purposes, but at least, through my verbal responses, you will begin to get some access to the kind of language, the criteria of distinction and the types of categorisations through which I construct my
Therefore, bearing in mind that no research, whether qualitative or quantitative, can offer the 'truth' with regard to viewing practices, this chapter will examine new, ethnographic audience research because, as Moores (1993, p.1) claims: 'critical ethnographic practice best equips us to map out the media's varied uses and meanings for particular social subjects in particular cultural contexts'.

The types of new research I want to explore are qualitative and quantitative studies that concentrate on understanding children's and adults' responses to media violence. There is not time, here, to offer an exhaustive overview of such current research, and for the purposes of economy I will focus on studies by Buckingham (1996), Schlesinger et al. (1992), Kieran et al. (1997), and Hargrave (1996) because these studies best exemplify the parallels between new audience research and theories of risk. What these studies will reveal is that new audience research has begun to address the processes of watching media violence from the point of view of risk. This is an important point because risk theorists and media analysts have been working in two distinct fields and are unaware of the existence of such parallels. For the purposes of this chapter, the similarities between Adams' risk thermostat hypothesis and this grounded research in media consumption suggests that perceptions of risk can be related to viewers' propensity to consume media violence. What we shall find is that the factors associated with the risk thermostat hypothesis, such as variation in risk-taking behaviour from one individual to another, an awareness of the rewards and the perceived dangers of certain types of risks, and the significance of personal experience
of accident losses in relation to perceptions of risk, are apparent in new ethnographic audience research.

Such findings will clarify and modify Adams' risk thermostat hypothesis, which, as Adams (1995, p.15) states in *Risk*, is an 'impressionistic, conceptual model, not an operational one'. In association with the theory of risk compensation, the theory of the social amplification and attenuation of risk (Kasperson, Renn, et al., 1988; Kasperson, 1992) will prove of particular interest in broadening our understanding of the social context in which people manage risk. By re-reading current audience research we can reveal new ways of understanding the complexity of response to media violence, situating such micro-processes of analysis in relation to the macro-processes of environmentalism and the politicization of risk.

**Children's Responses to Media Violence**

A great deal of research has been conducted into the alleged side effects of media violence and its potential harm to children. The Newson Report, 'Video Violence and the Protection of Children' (1994), the Home Affairs Committee report on 'Video Violence and Young Offenders' (1994), and the Parliamentary All Party Family and Child Protection Group (PAPFCPG) report on 'Violence, Pornography and the Media' all concern themselves with what are perceived to be the most vulnerable victims of the risks of media violence.

The majority of research associated with these parliamentary reports considers young television viewers to be passive and in need of protection and supervision from
adults (see Barlow and Hill, 1985; Cantor and Hoffner, 1990 amongst others).² However, the work of ethnographic researchers such as Palmer (1986), Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1993a, 1993b, 1996) helped change the nature of research in children's viewing practices. Moores (1993, p.56) comments:

In keeping with the aims and intentions of audience ethnography, they have concentrated on children's active engagements with TV and tried to dispel the myth of the 'square-eyed' juvenile - endeavouring to comprehend programmes and viewing practices from the child's own perspective.

I want to look at two studies, one conducted by the Broadcasting Standards Council (now Commission) (BSC, 1996) and the other conducted by David Buckingham (1996), in association with the BSC, in some detail. Both of these studies, to different degrees, reveal that children have their own individual risk thermostats, and, contrary to research which suggests that children must be protected from media violence, have a high propensity to manage their own risk-taking behaviour in relation to media violence.

'Young People and the Media'

The Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) is a statutory body which monitors the portrayal of violence, sex, and taste and decency in television, radio, and satellite and cable services.³ The commission works as an advisory body, monitoring the content of broadcasting, considering audience complaints and reporting on public opinion, which it tests by means of independent research.⁴ Research Working Paper
Young People and the Media uses quantitative and qualitative research to examine they way adolescents perceive the role of the media within society.

The introduction to Young People and the Media cites an article by the Daily Mail about ‘TV Tearaways’. The article reports the findings of a research study which claims that ‘television viewing is closely associated with corrosive and self-defeating behaviour by youngsters’ (Hargrave, 1996, p.3). Considering the title of the report, The Socio-psychological Profile of the Teenage Television Addict, it is not surprising that such results were found: to call a teenager who likes to watch television an ‘addict’ automatically implies that watching television is negative and socially unacceptable. The media coverage of this report highlights the context for the BSC's research in young people's perceptions of the media, which, as Hargrave (1996, p.3) herself points out, arises from the public's concern about television's negative influences on young people.

This popular perception of teenagers as ‘TV Tearaways’ has an effect on the way young people themselves perceive television consumption, particularly the consumption of media violence. The results of the BSC's research show that adolescents perceive media violence to be potentially harmful. For example, when asked if they felt violence on TV encourages violence, 58% of the sample group agreed (Hargrave, 1996, p.56). The teenagers in this study also shared the popular anxiety that it is young children that are most vulnerable to the perceived negative effects of media violence: as many as 88% of respondents feared young children might try and imitate dangerous behaviour they saw on TV (Hargrave, 1996, pp.54, 55). And, echoing the type of ‘TV Tearaway’ press coverage of media consumption and rising crime rates that Hargrave (1996, p.83) cited at the start of this study, 60% of the respondents felt that there was
more violence on the streets because of high levels of violence on TV and videos (Hargrave, 1996, p.55).

What these figures tell us is that children are very aware of the dominant discourses on media violence, and that watching media violence is perceived to be a negative risk-taking activity. This is further validated by the fact that the teenagers in this study wished to regulate and control the potential side-effects of media violence; 63% of the respondents thought that no sex or violence should be shown before the 9.00pm Watershed (Hargrave, 1996, p.52), and 87% thought that censorship was necessary to protect children younger than themselves (Hargrave, 1996, p.51).

However, the key factor to highlight here is that these teenagers are fearful of the perceived negative effects of media violence on other people, not themselves. Thus, although 87% of the respondents believed in censorship, this regulation was acceptable precisely because it protects children younger than themselves. Similarly, although respondents accepted the principle of the 9.00pm watershed, Hargrave (1996, p.52) notes that ‘the majority of these respondents went to bed after 9.00pm’. And when asked if the ‘18’ rating for movies should be disallowed, 75% agreed with this statement (Hargrave, 1996, p.53). Such results directly contradict the perception of media violence discussed in the previous paragraph.

When one turns to the amount of media violence which the respondents actually watch, the figures reveal that these teenagers are regular consumers of this type of programme. For example, 66% of the sample regularly watch violent material, and 44% regularly watch such material with friends, which suggests that the virtual risks of media violence can be part of a social event (Hargrave, 1996, p.42). What is more, watching violence can be entertaining. When asked if violence in films can be too gory to enjoy, 56% disagreed with this statement (Hargrave, 1996, p.43). Teenagers regularly
choose the genres of horror, action movies and thrillers when they go to the cinema or hire a video, although comedy is also a popular choice (Halloran and Gray, 1996, p.133). When it comes to a popular and notoriously violent film such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) 53% of the respondents had already seen the film, and 17% would like to see it in the future (Hargrave, 1996, p.83).

The point I wish to make is that teenagers do engage in this risk-taking activity because they see the rewards to be gained from these types of virtual risks. One of the central aspects of Adams' risk thermostat hypothesis is that everyone is a risk-taker and that everyone's propensity to take risks varies 'from one individual to another, from one group to another, from one culture to another' (Adams, 1995, p.15). We can see from this research that not all teenagers like to watch violence. Each of the respondents has their own risk thermostat, and some teenagers have their thermostat set higher than others. This helps to explain why the figures for the consumption of media violence varied in this study, not just from individual to individual, but in relation to age, gender, and genre.

For example, 58% of 15 and 16 year olds in the sample had already seen *Pulp Fiction*, whereas only 23% of 10 to 12 year olds claimed to have seen the film, and 52% of 10 to 12 year olds claimed they weren't interested in seeing the film at all (Hargrave, 1996, p.84). This tells us that *Pulp Fiction* is not popular with younger children, and if we look at examples of other '18' rated movies, we can see that young children have their risk thermostats set much lower than 15 and 16 year old adolescents. For example, 38% of 15 and 16 year olds had already seen *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992), 37% wanted to see it, and only 25% showed no interest in seeing the movie at all. In contrast, 18% of 10 to 12 year olds claimed to have seen the film, 25% wanted to see it, and as many as 56% showed no interest in watching *Reservoir Dogs* (Hargrave,
1996, p.84) at all. Thus, although a good proportion of the sample showed an interest in
'18' rated films like Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, and Natural Born Killers (Oliver
Stone, 1994), there was still a substantial amount of the respondents who showed no
interest at all, and this was more apparent in younger children.

It could be argued, as Hargrave (1996, p.84) does, that this is because younger
children cannot easily access '18' rated films, and also that these films in particular are
marketed at an older age bracket, thus making them less appealing to 10 and 12 year
olds. However, whilst both these factors are significant, it is also the case that these
films represent a type of virtual risk that younger children are simply not as interested in
as adolescents. A Nightmare on Elm Street (Wes Craven, 1984) is also an '18' rated
film, but the percentage of children who have either seen the film, or express a desire to
see this film could be expected to be higher than those figures cited for Pulp Fiction.
The fact that A Nightmare on Elm Street spawned so many different types of children's
merchandise aimed at a younger age bracket, for example, a Freddy Krueger pillow
case, or face mask, would suggest that a cross reference with other research would be
fruitful. David Buckingham (1996, pp.95-138) has shown that when researchers talk
to children about watching media violence they focus on the genre of horror, and it is
particularly young children who show a keen interest in such films and the special
effects they produce. Buckingham (1996, pp.98-99) explains this as follows:

Particularly among younger children, horror films clearly possessed considerable 'adult' status, and there was a great deal to be gained from
claiming to have seen them - even if one had only heard about them from older
children, or merely seen a trailer. This much was apparent from the excited
whispering and exchange of looks that often accompanied the initial mention of
such films. Yet from their retellings of horror narratives, it was clear that a
number of six-year-olds had in fact seen and in some cases actively enjoyed
such films. Most children who had developed a taste for the genre at least
claimed to have begun their viewing at around the age of eight or nine.
The reason why younger children do express more of an interest in horror films such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* than violent movies such as *Pulp Fiction* may suggest why different age groups set their risk thermostats at different levels. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* contains the kinds of virtual risks that are reliant on special effects and are consequently more simple and visual in nature; *Pulp Fiction* contains virtual risks that are reliant on characterisation, dialogue and direction and are thus more complex, and more psychological in nature. What is more, these types of virtual risks are part of particular genres and emphasise different levels of modality: a representation of a violent act in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* would be far less real, and far more playful than a representation of violence in *Pulp Fiction*. This is an issue I will return to later.

**Perceptions of Risk**

This re-reading of the results of the findings in *Young People and the Media* indicates that levels of risk are significant to how and why young people choose to watch certain types of media violence. However, levels of risk-taking behaviour are also dependent on perceptions of risk. For example, Hargrave notes that those children who perceived watching television violence to be harmful were less likely to express a desire to see ‘18’ rated films in the first place, whatever their gender, or age bracket. She writes (1996, p.85):

Those who agreed ‘Violence on television and videos encourages violence’ were less likely to say that they wanted to see any of the (‘18’ rated) films. Indeed those respondents who felt that televisual violence was in any way negative were far less likely to choose violent films even if they had achieved
cult status - a further argument that the adolescent regulated his or her own viewing.

This comment helps to validate Adams' risk thermostat hypothesis and his claim that perceptions of risk influence how an individual chooses to manage risk (Adams, 1995, p.19). Here, those teenagers who chose to watch/not watch a violent film such as *Pulp Fiction*, based their decision on their individual perception of this movie.

To ban teenagers from seeing '18' rated films would not mean that they would stop engaging in risk-taking activities. Hargrave (1996, p.85) touches on this point when she says: ‘Those respondents who had agreed with the statement "There's not much on TV or radio for people like me" were more likely to express an interest in the list of ‘18’rated films they were shown’. Hargrave hypothesises that films with violence and excitement provide exactly the type of interest these teenagers do not feel is available on mainstream television. If this is the case, Adams' theory of risk compensation is significant. Risk compensation means that as soon as a risky activity is made safer, people alter their behaviour accordingly (Adams, 1995, pp.113-157). These teenagers feel that mainstream television and radio has been modified to fit in with the concept of 'family entertainment', i.e. entertainment that is zero-risk (see Chapter six). However, '18' rated films give these teenagers the opportunity to engage in the virtual risks of media violence. Thus, even though the '18' rating is there precisely to stop young people from engaging in this perceived risk-taking activity, a good percentage of these respondents compensated for this restriction by watching what is, in theory, forbidden material. Given the fact that in this sample 75% of teenagers thought there shouldn't even be an '18' rating (Hargrave, 1996, p.53), Adams' theory of risk
compensation can be seen to be highly prevalent amongst teenagers and their choice of media.

What we can see already from this brief discussion of Young People and the Media is that Adams' theory of the risk thermostat and risk compensation is validated by an independent study in media consumption. The evidence here suggests that the risk thermostat is dependent on age and peer pressure as well as individual taste, and that media coverage of 'TV Tearaways' and the alleged side effects of watching media violence do influence teenagers' own understanding of this activity. However, this does not stop teenagers from actually consuming media violence. The next study that I want to examine will help further illuminate why this is the case.

'Moving Images'

This study is quite different from Young People and the Media (Hargrave, 1996). From the outset David Buckingham acknowledges in Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television that children like taking risks, and that children understand and engage in risk management when they watch media violence. Buckingham (1996, p.1) begins by describing his own son's negotiation of risk:

Between the ages of two and four, my older son Nathan was terrified by the character of Big Bird in Sesame Street. When Big Bird appeared, he would leave the room or turn off the set; and once he had mastered the remote control, he would rapidly skip past Sesame Street adamant in his refusal to watch it...
Even at the age of two, Buckingham's son is managing his perception of risk; by the age of six, Nathan watches the hospital drama *Casualty*, and now his risk thermostat can be seen to be set a little higher - characters dying in *Casualty* pose no problem to Nathan because he recognises that it isn't real, it's 'only tomato ketchup' (Buckingham, 1996, p.2). Buckingham uses this anecdote as an example of the ways in which children have complex emotional responses to television which cannot be simply labelled positive or negative. He explains:

Many people - including children - actively choose to watch or read things that they know will upset or frighten them: and the sadness or fear is often inseparable from the pleasure. Texts that generate such 'negative' emotions may also enable us to understand and deal with real-life anxieties and concerns. Because children are relatively powerless in our society, childhood is a period that is permeated with insecurity. Children are bound to be drawn to texts that speak to their fear of loss and abandonment, of disgrace and humiliation, and offer them ways of coming to terms with them...To dramatise such insecurities in a fictional form may provide comparatively 'safe' opportunities for children to learn to cope with them.

Thus, Buckingham is aware that people, including young children, take part in risk-taking activities because they perceive benefits to this experience. They may feel sadness or fear, but they also feel pleasure, and this pleasure is part of a learning process. Buckingham sees such risks as "safe" opportunities to explore what we fear the most. These risks are safe because they are not real; they are dramatised in a fictional form.

Although Buckingham does not use the term risk, he is in fact talking about exactly the same type of negotiation and management of experience that John Adams concerns himself with in relation to the risk thermostat hypothesis. Adams (1995, p.14) claims everyone has a propensity to take risks, but 'this propensity varies from one
individual to another', and, most importantly, people balance their behaviour: ‘individual risk-taking decisions represent a balancing act in which perceptions of risk are weighed against propensity to take risks’ (Adams, 1995, p.15). The children in Buckingham's study discuss how individual risk-taking behaviour is part of a balancing act, where a desire to watch horror films is weighed against a fear of the consequences of this risk-taking activity. Buckingham talks of children calculating the risks and rewards of viewing horror. He explains: ‘Was it worth running the risk of being scared - or, more accurately, of experiencing something that went beyond your ability to cope - in the hope of gaining some more intense pleasure?’ (Buckingham, 1996, p.114). For some children, this was a risk they did not wish to take: ‘Many children reported how they would leave the room or turn off the TV when things got too hard to handle’ (Buckingham, 1996, p.114). However, for others, specifically horror fans, Buckingham (1996, pp.114-5) notes ‘this risk was ultimately worth it’. Here we can see children managing risk, and for those who see the benefits of watching horror, their perception of this risk as positive outweighs their knowledge of the negative side to watching horror, i.e. the process of fear.

Local Communities

In relation to Kasperson, Renn et al. (1988) and the theory of the social amplification of risk, it is possible to see direct connections between the children who are familiar with and enjoy the genre of horror, and the concept of a local community. In contrast to the social amplification of risk at national levels which I discussed in
Chapter three, communities can experience risk attenuation at a local level because they can perceive the benefits to a local risk - a nuclear plant, for example, is a very real risk to the local community, but at the same time it offers employment and economic incentives to its workforce and their families (Kasperson, 1992, p.174). This attenuation of risk takes place because, as Kasperson (1992, p.174) explains: ‘the economic benefits associated with the risky activity (act) as a significant impediment to the emergence of negative responses and activism at the local level.’

Children and adults who enjoy watching horror movies are part of a sub culture, linked by taste and consumer choice. Even though they may live around the world, they share a taste for a specific type of entertainment, and this taste in horror leads to the forming of a sub culture, built on shared knowledge, and perpetuated by magazines, fanzines, web sites, festivals, and of course by social interaction, at home, at school and at work. In this sense, the way in which Kasperson, Renn et al. (1988) conceive of local and national or global communities can help us to understand the way in which people who are part of a sub culture take on aspects of a ‘local community’; in other words, such consumers wish to attenuate the ‘risks’ of media violence. Thus, horror fans are prepared to take the risk of being scared, or ‘not being able to cope’ (Buckingham, 1996a, p.114) because they recognise the intense pleasure to be gained from responding to horror: in fact, they attenuate the negative aspects of horror and amplify the pleasurable rewards to be gained from this risk-taking activity. They do not see the risks of horror as a ‘burden to society’ (Kasperson, 1992, p.161), but rather as a benefit to a sub culture who shares this specific experience of risk.

Other children (and adults) who do not like horror to the same degree can be seen to reject this sub culture, or localised community; they do not perceive the benefits to such a risk-taking activity and they therefore amplify the perceived danger of
watching horror. Such non-consumers, or partial consumers of horror can be seen to be part of a larger culture, or social community. Kasperson (1992, p.161) explains this when he makes the point: ‘the social amplification of risk refers to the cultural, social, and individual structures and processes that shape the societal experience with risk.’ This shaping of the societal experience of risk serves to enlarge the ‘risk burden to society’ (Kasperson, 1992, p.161). Non-consumers of horror share a social fear of the perceived danger of this product, and this fear helps to activate the secondary processes that are part of the social amplification of risk. Such secondary processes include: enduring mental perceptions of horror fans as ‘sick’, and ‘juvenile’, and ‘stigmatised’ by their taste for violence. There can be political and social pressure to change this climate of violence and social disorder, in the form of protest groups and media generated moral panics about ‘video nasties’. This can lead to changes in risk monitoring and regulation, in the form of new and amended proposals for censoring and controlling media violence (see the Video Recordings Act, 1984, and the Criminal Justice Act, 1994); and repercussions on other technologies and social institutions, in the form of the public and political concern about computer games and the internet, and in a lack of trust in such regulatory bodies as the BBFC. As Kasperson (1992, p.160) points out: ‘The concept of the social amplification of risk is...dynamic, taking into account the continuing learning and social interactions resulting from social experience with risk’, and as such there is a ‘ripple’ effect which spreads the social amplification of risk to other locations and future generations. This can be seen most clearly in the wave of moral panics that have accompanied the ‘video nasties’ scare, and the Child's Play 3 controversy in Britain, an issue that was discussed in Chapter three.
And what are the benefits of watching horror movies? In his study Buckingham shows that children like horror films because they clearly aren't real. In an illuminating discussion of *Child's Play 3* (Jack Bender, 1993), Buckingham talks about modality and the significance of our perception and judgement of realism in relation to horror. Earlier in this section I discussed the difference between levels of risk and levels of realism. If younger children, in *Young People and the Media* (Hargrave, 1996) did not seem interested in the types of virtual risks in *Pulp Fiction*, a film that is part of the genre of crime, I suggested that horror is a genre which would appeal to their imagination because the types of virtual risks in horror are often deliberately unrealistic and playful in nature. In *Moving Images*, children talk of the implausibility of the killer doll in *Child's Play 3*. I want to consider some of the children's responses to questions of modality in horror films because this helps to highlight how children manage risk, and why risk management is part of the pleasures of watching media violence.

One boy, Steven, aged 15, finds Chucky, the 'evil' doll in *Child's Play 3* somewhat comical: 'It's like a little, like a cartoon thing / it makes me laugh', and other children comment on the special effects used in the film and its deliberate use of humour. This is one method of managing risk: Steven questions the modality of the film, emphasising the fact that it isn't real, and focusing on the specific features of the film, the special effects, or the humour, that help to substantiate this. However, two younger children, Carol and Alison, aged 12, utilise different methods of managing their perception of risk. Carol comments:
I used to play with dolls and stuff, and it was about a doll coming to life and he was really evil, so I used to have, it did scare me a bit I suppose 'cause I used to have bad dreams, that my dolls came to life and they were really evil and they were trying to kill me. But I suppose any young girl that watched it and they played with dolls, they'd probably have the same nightmares. But it didn't scare me. It wouldn't scare me now. I've seen the other two, they don't scare me.

Buckingham (1996, p.44) explains: 'Carol attempts to disclaim her fears, both locating them well in the past, and by generalising them'. This can be seen in the way that she emphasises that she 'used to play with dolls', and that 'any young girl' would be frightened by Chucky. Despite that fact that she explains in some detail why the film scared her, Carol then stresses that 'it didn't really scare me', even taking the trouble to watch the other two films in the same series (Buckingham, 1996, p.44). However, another girl, Alison, displays a different reaction. She 'reflects a desire to see and not look' revealing 'a dynamic but ambiguous relationship between distress and delight' (Buckingham, 1996, p.44). Alison explains: 'I sit there with my hands over my eyes just peeking out, which is really, I know it's really stupid because you can still see, but I just feel safe...I have to hide my eyes. but I still watch it all with my eyes covered' (Buckingham, 1996, p.44).

What these examples reveal is that in this study younger children show a greater fear of the virtual risks in *Child's Play 3* than older teenagers. What is significant is that both young girls respond to this fear by managing their perception of risk. They are clearly aware that the film is not real, and they are clearly frightened by it; this is part of the pleasure of watching *Child's Play 3*, and this is the reason why both girls returned to watch more: the fact that they can manage their perception of risk means that they are capable of adjusting the setting on their risk thermostats, and this is part of the reward to be gained from this type of risk-taking activity.
There are two points to be made here. The first is that perceptions of risk-taking activities in relation to media violence are influenced by perceptions of modality. For many children in Buckingham's study, *Child's Play 3* is comical; 'the film appears to discourage the viewer from "taking it too seriously"' (Buckingham, 1996, p.37), and this is in part dependent on the type of genre that the film belongs to. Children who are familiar with the genre of horror will know what to expect and know when a film is self-consciously parodying elements of the genre. However, for many adults, including the Honourable Mr Justice Moreland, the film appears shockingly real. This is why Justice Moreland linked the film with the murder of James Bulger: elements of the film, in his view, appeared very similar to the real-life killing of a young child (see Buckingham, 1996, p.22; Barker, 1997a, pp.17-19). Thus, the virtual risk of *Child's Play 3* is perceived to be a real risk by other members of the dominant culture. To children, it is a humorous film; to adults a dangerous risk to the safety of the community. This means that when we apply Adams' risk thermostat hypothesis, or Kasperson's theory of the social amplification and attenuation of risk to media violence, we must take into account the fact that genre and perceptions of modality are also significant to people's understanding of risk. For consumers of horror films, what is perceived to be entertaining and unrealistic can be perceived by others, outside this subculture, or local community, to be hazardous and far too realistic for the safety for the community as a whole.

The second point is that children (and adults) take pleasure from adjusting the setting of their risk thermostat when they watch media violence. Alison talked about feeling 'safe' (Buckingham, 1996, p.115) and the more she felt safe peeking through her fingers, the more she wanted to continue taking risks. For Buckingham, just as for Adams (1997, p.19) and Noel Carroll (1990, p.80) these risks are not real. And it is
because these risks are not real that children like to watch a genre that deals with 'social, sexual and physical taboos' (Buckingham, 1996, p.116). They can test their response to these taboos, and adjust the setting of their risk thermostat safe in the knowledge that these are virtual risks to the imagination.

Buckingham (1996, p.111) refers to Carroll and his theory of meta-response, which is that viewers 'indulge in a self-satisfied belief that they are capable of withstanding such heavy doses of shock and disgust', and this creates a 'self-conscious pleasure in one's ability to cope with such experiences' (Buckingham, 1996, p.111). Here is one of Buckingham's participants talking about such a self-conscious awareness of levels of risk: 'You have to be a person that, like, doesn't care and just wants to watch anything, doesn't care what happens, they want to see the end of it' (Buckingham, 1996, p.111). This process of testing responses to media violence is part of managing risk, and in this case, the more one can raise the temperature of the risk thermostat, the more one can 'see the end of it', both in terms of the film, and in relation to individual thresholds for risk.

**Social Contexts**

Buckingham's study makes the distinction that 'the social context of viewing is clearly a key factor in the pleasure of horror' (Buckingham, 1996, p.109). Children often talk of group viewing and describe their own responses in relation to others, often amplifying their response, i.e. screaming, or attenuating their response, i.e. laughing, depending on who is in the room with them at the time. This means that risk-taking behaviour is part of a social activity, and these children set their risk thermostats lower or higher depending on who they watch a film with at a given time. For children, being
able to watch a horror film is part of growing up. This type of risk-taking behaviour serves to indicate how ‘adult’ children can be. In this study, peers or older siblings offered ‘instruction in coping strategies’ (Buckingham, 1996, p.109); some mocked those who were unable to cope with their fear, whilst others reminded those younger than themselves that the risks were not real. As with the BSC's study (Hargrave, 1996), these children were fearful of the negative effects of violence on younger children, on ‘other people’, and this in turn enabled these risk-takers to appear knowledgeable and capable of coping with high levels of violence.

The point is that the benefits of this type of risk-taking behaviour are bound up with perceptions of individual and social environments. On the one hand, these risk-takers define their behaviour in relation to others, and gauge their response accordingly. However, these same risk-takers see other people as more vulnerable, and less capable of managing risk in a safe manner. Here, it is the factor of age that signifies this distinction; but in terms of adult viewers of media violence, age, gender and social class operate as factors in people’s perception of ‘other’ people who cannot manage risk (see Gauntlett, 1995, Barker and Petley, 1997).

This contradiction highlights the public/private divide of the acceptability of risk-taking behaviour. For children who like to watch horror films, there is little risk in engaging in this activity. They themselves know this because they have not experienced the type of ‘accident losses’ feared by the community as a whole. However, on the other hand, these children believe that there is a perceived danger to watching media violence for other children, younger than themselves. Thus, every time a child adjusts their risk thermostat to a higher level, they are consciously taking a step away from childhood and towards a perception of adult behaviour. They attenuate their own perception of risk, but amplify their perception of risk in relation to other children who
are younger and more vulnerable than themselves. This attenuation and amplification can in turn be seen to affect their role in the public/private domain. Being a horror fan celebrates individual risk-taking behaviour and the rewards to be gained from this experience: these rewards can be shared with other members of the same sub culture; being fearful of the perceived danger of horror films on younger, more vulnerable viewers re-affirms one's position within the community as a whole: the perceived danger can be shared with everyone.

This is a good example of Kasperson's concept of the layering of risk processes (Kasperson, 1992, p.173). Kasperson may talk about this in relation to the media and geographical communities, but the way that these children discuss their own and other people's perceptions of risk is most certainly part of a complex layering of individual and social experience of risk. Buckingham (1996, p.312) attempts to consider this when he claims: 'we need to regard (emotional responses) as forms of social action, which are used to achieve particular social purposes.' However, the political and social construction of risk and environmentalism should direct us to a more concrete understanding of what types of social action, and what kinds of social purposes people have in mind when they balance individual risk-taking activities in relation to social perceptions of safety in the community. In the next section, I want to look at how adults manage risk in relation to media violence, and how they adopt both individual and social positions that are part of a complex layering of perceptions and experience of risk.
Adult Responses to Media Violence

Earlier in this chapter I discussed how anti-violence campaign groups and media coverage have focused on what are perceived to be the most vulnerable victims of the hazardous effects of media violence: children. This has meant that the majority of audience research in the 'effects' of media violence has concentrated on children (see Buckingham and Allerton, 1996; Gauntlett, 1995). Research into adult responses to media violence has not been as prominent, or as eagerly received by the press. What is more, research which attempts to examine audience response to media violence from a 'critical ethnographic perspective' (Moores, 1993, p.140) has not been forthcoming.

Traditionally, audience research has assumed that "watching television" is a one-dimensional activity which has equivalent meaning for all who perform it' (Morley, 1992, p.176). This assumption of television audiences ensured that two types of research dominated the field for some time. The first, audience measurement, relied solely on head-counting. As Ang (1991) has argued, 'television watching is a complex and variable mode of behaviour, characteristically interwoven with other, simultaneous activities' (cited in Morley, 1992, p.177). This means that attempting to measure audience response from a binary opposition of watching/not watching simply does not take into account that television audiences are engaged in multi-dimensional activities. The second, 'effects' studies, has been well documented in Chapter two, but here we can see that the mistaken assumption that television audiences can be measured has also ensured that attempts to understand responses to media violence have traditionally been dominated by research into aggression, using the 'hypothesis that the viewing of acts of
aggression or violence on the television screen causes people...to act in similar ways’
(Gauntlett, 1995, p.2).

More sensitive research methods into audience research have begun to pave the way for a greater understanding of the complexity of response to media violence. Notably, research by Gunter (1987) Gunter and Wober (1988), Morrison and MacGregor (1993), Hill (1997), Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash and Weaver (1992), and Kieran, Morrison and Svennevig (1997) have used qualitative and quantitative methods to understand people's attitudes and responses to media violence: such research goes beyond the ‘effects’ tradition in search of how and why people respond in a variety of different and often contradictory ways to representations of violence. In this chapter, I wish to focus on two studies in particular. The first, Women Viewing Violence is a study in gender and the media, and Schlesinger et al. (1992) consider how experience of real violence may effect responses to fictional violence. The second, Regulating for Changing Values assesses public attitudes to media regulation in a rapidly changing social environment. Both studies use quantitative and qualitative research, and both were funded by the BSC.13

'Women Viewing Violence'

Women Viewing Violence is an interesting study in how women respond to fictional and factual representations of violence. Schlesinger et al. divided their sample group into half and monitored how women with experience of violence compared, or differed from women without experience of violence in relation to watching media violence.14 For the purposes of this study, Women Viewing Violence is a good example of Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis. The women used in this study are not identified
as active consumers of media violence, and based on their responses to the selected programmes used in this study, it is possible to suggest that these women are not regular consumers of media violence at all. The participants have set their risk thermostats at a low level, and do not perceive media violence as entertaining in any way. For example, when discussing the film *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988) Schlesinger et al. (1992, pp.138-139) note: ‘almost universal were sentiments of repulsion, distress and shock...it was simply not acceptable to define the experience of seeing *The Accused* as pleasurable’. Thus, I would suggest that the title to this book is misleading: the women who view violence in this study are almost wholly women who would not normally perceive any benefits to watching media violence: they are therefore women who view violence as disturbing, perceive it as dangerous, and are not active consumers of media violence.

This is, of course, compounded by the fact that the central purpose of this study is to examine whether women with experience of violence perceive media violence in different ways to women without experience of violence. If we refer to Adams' risk thermostat hypothesis, it is possible to see that ‘perceptions of risk are influenced by experience of accident losses’ (Adams, 1995, p.15). The women in this study have experience of real violence, one of the ‘accident losses’ associated with certain types of risk-taking activities, and to be a victim of the risk of real violence ensures, as Adams suggests, that an individual's perception of risk will alter, and this negative experience will affect an individual’s risk-taking behaviour.

The results of this study do suggest that experience of violence is a key factor in an individual's understanding of media violence (see also Docherty, 1990; Hargrave, 1993). Schlesinger et al. (1992, pp.168-169) explain this as follows:
In particular, women who have experienced violence expect the depiction of violence against women to be realistic, in order that it may best serve as an educational purpose for the general public and for violent men who thereby might better understand the experiences of women who are abused...It is not surprising, therefore, that, for the most part, the violence on television portrayed in this study was not defined as ‘exciting’ or ‘entertaining’, but rather as ‘educational’ or ‘relevant’, while at the same time as ‘disturbing’ and sometimes ‘offensive’. Thus the importance attributed to what was viewed was not in terms of pleasure, escape or fantasy but in terms of relevance and social importance.

There are a number of points to be made here. The first is that the risk thermostat can be seen to be in operation; for the women in this study, personal experience of the negative effects of risk has meant that media violence is not exciting or entertaining for these viewers. However, these women do see some benefit to screening media violence, but it is how they define ‘benefit’ that is significant: benefit is perceived in an educational sense. It is the benefits of social instruction, not entertainment or excitement, that concerns these women because it is only through education that programmes which contain violence can justify their existence as a form of social communication. Thus, as Schlesinger et al. (1992, p.169) point out, it is the social importance of media violence that becomes the most significant factor in the acceptability of media violence; and individual viewers see their response as part of wider social concerns about levels of real violence: they do not perceive any personal benefits to this form of entertainment.

The issue of social concern and perceived danger is something I will deal with in a moment. What I want to consider at this point is the type of programmes which were used in this study, as this has some impact on women's perceptions of the risks and hazards associated with media violence. There were four programmes used: Crimewatch UK, EastEnders, Closing Ranks and the film The Accused. All of the programmes shown are concerned with violence against women, and show women as
victims at risk to physical violence. The research team considered other types of media violence, for example *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), or *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1987), but these programmes were either thought to be too unrealistic (*Friday the 13th* has a female protagonist who commits multiple murder), or too disturbing (*Blue Velvet* was thought to be offensive) (Schlesinger et al., 1992, pp.19-20). What can be seen is that all of the chosen programmes are concerned with realistic depictions of violence against women; all of these programmes aim to treat violence in a serious manner and provide some form of educational relevance to the depiction of violence. For the women in this study, watching these programmes and discussing their responses to depictions of violence would only serve to emphasise perceptions of women as victims at risk to physical violence, and perceptions of violence, both real and fictional, as serious and disturbing, with dramatic consequences for the victim of a violent act.

This is a very specific type of media violence that is being viewed and discussed in this study. Whilst such research is both important and revealing about gender and violence and the mass media, it would have been interesting to have seen how women would respond to a film such *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991) in which a female protagonist protects herself against violent male characters. This film aims to depict violence as unrealistic and entertaining; and, significantly, it aims to show that women are not always victims in the face of risks: women take risks too. What this means is that, in relation to Adams' risk thermostat hypothesis, *Women Viewing Violence* only considers half of the balancing act performed by everyone who manages risk. Here, these women are encouraged by the researchers to focus on 'accidents' and 'perceived danger'. It is significant that despite this negative perception of risk, the women in this study, including those who had experienced violence, did not
wish to ban such risk-taking activity. However, they did wish to control and regulate the screening of media violence so that any 'benefits', or 'rewards' to watching screen violence would have social, rather than individual importance.

Social Contexts

With only half the risk thermostat in operation, the women in this study do not present a balanced picture of viewing media violence. What they do represent is a social group that amplifies risk, and clearly differentiates between risk-takers, and victims of risk along gender lines. Given the evidence to support the case made by Schlesinger et al. (1992, p.9) that women are subject to rape, sexual assault and domestic abuse far more than men, and that the media presents a distorted view of women, sexuality and violence, it is not surprising to find that women fear violence by men, and perceive men as the risk-takers and women and children as victims at risk. However, in terms of crime rates overall, women are less likely to become victims of physical violence than men. Schlesinger et al. (1992, p.169) point out that this disparity between real crime and fear of crime can be linked to people's perceptions of the severity of a crime: being a victim of random street violence does not have the same repercussions as being a victim of rape by a stranger. This attitude towards gender and acts of violence can seen in the media and press coverage of rape, child abuse and sexual assault. Soothill and Walby (1991, p.156) comment: 'the regular presence of a sex fiend on the front page is a phenomenon' of our media reportage of violence, and this only serves to strengthen fear of violence towards women by men in the community as a whole.
The women in this study were asked to watch programmes that emphasised this particular fear of crime and, not surprisingly, the results showed that women distrust male responses to media violence. As with the two earlier studies discussed so far, these participants did not see themselves as subject to the negative effects of media violence; their fear was directed towards male viewers who may be encouraged to copy the violent behaviour they see on television. This is most clearly seen when the women discussed the acceptability of the rape scene in *The Accused*. For these women, the scene was acceptable only if it was shown in an educational context; they did not trust male viewers to respond to this scene in the cinema or home environment precisely because they believed male viewers may find it entertaining and may be encouraged to rape women (Schlesinger et al., 1992, p.154). Thus, a distrust in male viewers of media violence and an amplification of fear of real violence means that for these women, the risk of violence is everywhere, it is part of their social environment. This explains why these women, both with and without experience of violence, do not see reactions to media violence on an individual scale; they do not see themselves as part of a sub culture which enjoys this type of entertainment. Instead, they see themselves as part of a larger community and they share the fears of the ‘central community’ (Douglas, 1992, p.107) with regard to media violence and real violence.

Schlesinger et al. (1992, p.170) propose three findings in relation to their study:

Women's concern that televised violence against women be portrayed realistically and sensitively and used to effect some positive outcome, such as public education or crime prevention; women's fear that such portrayals may have negative effects upon women and children; and indications by women that there are some limits beyond which the portrayal of violence against women should not go.
If we interpret those findings in relation to the risk thermostat hypothesis and the theory of the social amplification of risk, it is possible to see that for non risk-takers whose risk thermostats are set at a low level in relation to media violence, the risks of media violence are amplified, and the desire to control and regulate both the product and the consumer of such a product is directly linked to a strong distrust of risk managers, in this instance men and the entertainment industry. The women in this study perceive themselves as better managers of risk, despite the fact that they are not risk-takers and can see no reason why some people may choose to watch media violence for the purposes of entertainment. They trust their own responses to media violence, and emphasise the shared communal experience of womanhood and fear of violence; they distrust ‘other’ male responses to media violence, and the entertainment industry.

Thus, in this study, the women form perceptions about private risk-taking activities which are not based on experience of viewing violence but on the cultural and political construction of risk, i.e. all men are violent and cannot be trusted. Despite the fact that these women do not regularly watch media violence, they are prepared to make value judgements and policy recommendations precisely because they share a perception of media violence as an environmental hazard. What we can see from this is that the public and the private are closely linked to levels of individual risk-taking. For these participants their private response is very much linked to public attitudes to media violence, and how viewers respond to media violence can now be seen to be a political, social and moral environmental issue. The last study to be examined in this chapter is a research project that considers what the public have to say about the role of the media in society, and in particular the significance of regulation to consumer choice and television viewing.
‘Regulating for Changing Values’

Kieran, Morrison and Svennevig (1997, p.7), in Research Working Paper 1, *Regulating for Changing Values*, set out to examine how people perceive ‘the cultural and moral issues that broadcasting presents’. Using a large, representative sample of British respondents (aged 16 or over), this study employs a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research techniques. The two national surveys involved 1,062 and 535 adults respectively, and the focus groups involved fourteen in-depth discussions, with respondents from the BC1/C2 social grade. The researchers focus on social and media concerns; concerns about crime; concerns about morality; a decline in individual, moral and social values; and a concern about invasion of privacy by the media.

*Risk Managers*

One of the interesting issues the study raises in relation to the public and private divide is that programme makers are certainly not seen as moral or ethical media practitioners. Kieran et al. (1997, p.6) write: ‘Programme-makers were believed to be willing to flaunt accepted rules of conduct in relation to privacy in order to make programmes’. The respondents saw themselves as more likely to make moral and ethical decisions which take into account what is best for society as a whole. Thus, Kieran et al. (1997, p.101) find that: ‘Respondents aspired to tolerance but supported management of the culture through regulation. Three out of every four responses by the majority in the national surveys were concerned with the common rather than individual good.’
It is possible to see that respondents desire regulation and legislation in order to keep media practitioners in check. Kieran et al. (1997, p.119) write: ‘Unregulated broadcasting was believed to pose risks to society as a whole...and to the individual.’ This is why risk ‘experts’ are trusted by the public to help control and regulate the entertainment industry: ‘62 per cent said a programme should not be shown if experts thought a programme with disturbing scenes "might trigger violent behaviour in a few unbalanced people”’ (Kieran, et al., 1997, p.119). Kieran et al. (1997) fail to clarify exactly what type of ‘expert’ the public has in mind here. However, it is probable that the public have in mind the idea of an ‘expert’ who is professional and objective and can be trusted by the community as a whole. The fact that such an expert does not exist is not important, what is significant is that the public believe such an expert to be a better ‘risk manager’ than themselves or programme makers, even though television audiences are probably the best equipped to deal with such an issue precisely because they actually watch the programmes in question. This is an issue I will return to later.

Despite misgivings about the alleged negative effects of media violence, the viewers in this study do not support the banning of such risk-taking behaviour outright, but, instead concentrate on regulating and controlling such behaviour. Adams’ theory of risk compensation, as discussed in the previous chapter, has demonstrated that people like to feel safe in order to engage in risk-taking activities. Kieran et al. (1997, pp.80-82) note in one of their key findings that many people in their study believed that media violence would be acceptable if shown on a pay per view, or satellite channel. If viewers were willing to pay for a service, respondents felt that such risk-taking behaviour would be safer for the community as a whole. For example, in one discussion of the representation of homosexuality on television, some participants objected to the ‘contamination’ of a programme (EastEnders) that was widely available to the general
Such a depiction of homosexuality could be shown on a minority channel, but was not acceptable on terrestrial television. One participant comments: ‘If it's something that's not incorporated into everyday situations then it's something that stands apart because it is something that should stand apart’ (Kieran et al., 1997, p.55).

The researchers are clearly puzzled by this. They write (1997, p.82):

The entry of direct payment is therefore seen to change not only the public's relationship to regulators but also its attitude towards each other as viewers. It is almost as if what one did in one's own home was nobody else's business. What people are overlooking here is that, whilst one might pay directly for a service, so do other people, thus other homes are still culturally connected as theirs. It is as if the act of payment creates private space which the state or some other agency cannot enter...Perhaps ill equipped to make moral judgements in a systematic way, then money, and what that means for access to goods and privileges in a consumption society, becomes the judge of what is right.

Quite apart from the lack of specificity – what does ‘other homes are still culturally connected as theirs’ actually mean? - Kieran et al., fail to consider the implications of pay per view and the issue of media violence. To pay for different types of entertainment is to open up the notion of what is acceptable risk to incorporate the concept of a free market. However, this does not necessarily mean that viewers believe that what one does in the private space of one's own home is 'nobody else’s business’, but rather that these viewers do not want to see certain types of representations available to the general public without certain regulation in place. This does not seem to be evidence of an ‘unsystematic’ approach to moral judgements. Table 20 in Regulating for Changing Values shows that the researchers asked respondents if 'unedited versions of...films should be available for adults to watch if they want to' (Kieran, et al., 1997, p.116). 51% said yes, and when they were asked: ‘which of these places, in your view,
could have such films available' the respondents turned to a list of outlets: the most popular outlets they chose were private film clubs, video rental shops and mail order catalogues. Thus, the public perceive other forms of private consumption of media violence acceptable, if part of a controlled environment. The point is that, as with the children in *Young People and the Media*, people like to have some degree of regulation and control of ‘risky’ film and television programmes. Pay per view means that certain types of media violence are contained and controlled whilst still made available to the public as a whole.

Kieran et al.,(1997, p.32) call this option regarding pay per view an example of ‘democratisation’, but it is not clear what they actually mean by this term. I have shown throughout this chapter that there is a complex layering of perceptions of risk by viewers of media violence. On the one hand people, children and adults, want to regulate ‘risk’; they want the social community to be a safe place. On the other hand, people like to take risks, and they want to have the option to do so on an individual and localised level. How do viewers work with these two contradictory beliefs? They use the risk thermostat to balance their behaviour and perceptions of risk. People trust their own individual taste with regard to ‘risky’ types of entertainment, but they do not trust other people and other institutions to respond to such ‘risky’ entertainment in a safe and ethical way.

Management of risk is the key to our understanding of this; and to control and regulate the social context of media violence, whilst allowing for individual freedom of choice seems a logical balance to take. This is an example of democratisation at work. Without distrust we could not have trust. In the final section of this chapter I would like to examine the concept of democratisation and pay per view in more detail.
Democratisation of Risk

Theodore Lowi (1990, p.30) has shown in ‘Risks and Rights in the History of American Governments’ that risk management has transformed from individual responsibility of risk, as characterised in the Industrial Revolution, to a social and democratic responsibility towards risk. Even though Lowi is writing about the USA, where insurance has quite a different meaning and context given the lack of government welfare provision, his points about the socialisation of risk and insurance illuminate the significance of ‘social costs’ in relation to the ‘social problem’ of media violence in America and in Britain. Lowi (1990, p.30) explains the transformation from individual responsibility to a socialisation of risk as follows:

To summarise, the direction of development (in governmental statutes) was from individual responsibility to interdependence, from individual blame to distributional balance, from liability to risk, and from negligence defined as ‘no liability without fault’ to the dropping of negligence altogether in favour of ability to pay, spread through insurance and through customer mark-up, toward the concept of ‘social costs’. All this can be understood as the socialisation of risk and the democratisation of the costs of risk taking.

Thus, the development of governmental statutes ensured that, rather than an individual being liable for all injuries resulting from risk creating activities, responsibility for any injuries would lie with whichever ‘party’s carelessness had brought the injury about’ (Lowi, 1992, p.27). This meant that risk became a social issue and as governmental statutes made risk more of a democratic procedure, the cost of injuries from risk
creating activities was spread across the community as a whole. This is what Lowi calls the ‘socialisation of risk’.

The concept of insurance is significant to an understanding of the democratisation of risk. Lowi lists three reasons why this is so. Liability insurance ‘is a mechanism of risk management’ and it signifies that ‘risk control and risk taking are directly rather than inversely related’ (Lowi, 1990, p.31). Liability insurance helps to ‘translate moral questions of responsibility into instrumental questions of cost’ (Lowi, 1990, p.31). And thirdly, liability insurance places emphasis on the larger universe; it focuses on past and future injuries so that everyone can help pay for the social cost of risk. This is the opposite to risk regulation, which focuses on individual responsibility and narrows the universe so that ‘a particular person and set of causes are located’ (Lowi, 1990, p.31).

The issue of liability insurance and the socialisation of risk are of significance to the debate about media violence and the way in which people respond to this risk-taking activity. As we have seen from the research examined in this chapter, viewers of media violence are simultaneously engaged in risk control and risk-taking behaviour. Viewers like to take risks and balance their behaviour with regard to what types of violence they are prepared to watch, or not watch in film and television programmes, but they will only do so if they feel in control of the situation. Thus, when one teenage girl in Moving Images (Buckingham, 1996) says that she likes to watch horror films though her fingers she is simultaneously engaged in risk control and risk-taking behaviour. All of the research examined in this chapter supports the case that risk control and risk-taking behaviour are interlinked, and this is of particular interest when we consider the role of responsibility in relation to risk and media violence. This would suggest that people are responsible for their own actions when it comes to the consumption of media violence.
The question of cost and the socialisation of risk is a more complicated issue. The results of *Regulating for Changing Values* shows that pay per view is one way of interpreting the moral responsibility of media violence into a question of cost. This takes the emphasis away from individual blame, and more toward a question of ‘distributional balance’ (Lowi, 1990, p.30). On the one hand viewers realise that individuals have the right to take risks, but on the other hand they do not wish such risks to jeopardise the safety of the social community. This is why many viewers of media violence hold contradictory views; they are attempting to make a transition from individual responsibility to a more balanced view of the ‘socialisation of risk’.

However, there is an ambivalent relationship between individual and social responsibility; individual responsibility and the costs, i.e. economic, of watching media violence represent one aspect of people's perceptions of media violence; and a desire for a larger, more social control of the costs, i.e. negative effects, of media violence represents another.

If viewers choose to support pay per view as an option that will reduce the risks of media violence on the community as a whole, then they are choosing to support the concept of a free market. The problem is that as the research discussed in this chapter has shown, few people will take risks unless certain pre-conditions are met beforehand. This means that teenagers like to take risks and watch ‘18’ rated movies precisely because they feel assured that certain pre-conditions have been met. Teenagers like to watch ‘18’ rated movies, but they do not like to know that ‘other’ children, younger than themselves can also watch ‘18’ rated movies. This is why regulation and the concept of the socialisation of risk are both present in people's understanding of the risks of media violence. People want to have the opportunity of watching ‘risky’ entertainment, and yet they wish to control who watches and when.
In fact, the ‘social costs’ of media violence would not be so democratic if pay per view were to become a viable option in the future. Pay per view channels are at the moment only available to those members of the public who have a satellite dish or cable receiver, and if the example of Sky Sports is anything to go by then we can expect pay per view channels showing the latest Oliver Stone movie to be rather expensive. The cost of watching the latest heavyweight boxing match on Sky Sports is over ten pounds per event, and this is on top of the regular monthly payment (currently £34.99 at Cable London) for other satellite and cable channels. In a sense, Rupert Murdoch, the media mogul behind Sky Sports, is anticipating that people who like to watch sport do so because it is a social activity. This means that for people who like to watch horror movies, for example, the cost of watching such programmes at home may have to be met by a number of horror fans. This would make pay per view an example of a free market where risk-takers cluster together, as part of a sub culture, in order to meet the costs of this type of risk-taking behaviour. This is of course already taking place when people rent videos, but to extend this to television viewing would place a different dynamic on the role of broadcasting and home entertainment.

The suggestion of pay per view is not an example of liability insurance, but the way in which viewers discuss media violence and the links between risk control and risk-taking behaviour shares some similarities with Lowi’s outline of the basic points of interest regarding liability insurance and the development of risk. Certainly, I would suggest that the way in which anti-violence campaign groups such as CARE, or the MCD lobby for the control and regulation of media violence is more similar to the concept of liability insurance than anything the general public have to say about this issue. CARE and the MCD campaign to regulate and reduce existing levels of media violence in our society on the basis that media violence may harm people in the future.
Therefore the debate about media violence is a debate about the probability of future outcomes. CARE and the MCD would like to see the government take responsibility for reducing the probability of the unwanted outcome of media violence. This may not, as yet, be an example of liability insurance in action, but it is certainly a step in the evolution of risk. Lowi (1990, p.31) writes that 'once injury becomes a matter of indemnification and insurance and once it is recognised that the larger universe is to be preferred for the purpose, the step to governmentalization of part or all of the responsibility - or, underwriting part or all of the risk - is not a very big one at all.' We can see from the way in which CARE, the MCD, or John Grisham (1996) focus on the significance of causal proof as a factor in the debate about the alleged negative 'effects' of media violence that the move from proving the negative 'effects' of media violence, to insuring oneself against some or all of the negative 'effects' of media violence is a small step to take. Certainly Oliver Stone (1996) would be wise to take out an insurance policy against the likelihood of further litigation. Risk indemnification may mark the future of media violence.

Perhaps what is more to the point is the link between risk regulation and the role of the government in controlling and managing media violence. To allow the government to take responsibility for the alleged effects of media violence would mean that media regulation would become far removed from the individual risk-taker, and part of a political and social agenda that has little to do with trust and safety, and more to do with power and control. Previous chapters have shown that this is exactly where the media violence debate is heading. The debate is less and less about people's individual practices in relation to risk, and more to do with the probability of risk and the protection of the social community from the costs of such risks. The V-chip is a good example of this. The V-chip is a 'social cost' which we all must pay for and yet
we are paying for a risk that does not exist, because risk ‘is a name we give to unwanted outcomes’ (Lowi, 1990, p.38).

It is the unwanted outcome of increased violence in our society that fuels the campaign for the control and regulation of media violence, and yet of course media violence has very little to do with real violence in our society. The real reasons for violence are not part of the future, but already present in unemployment, alcohol, poor housing and living conditions. The ‘masterframe of environmental discourse’ (Eder, 1996, p.207) means that media violence is perceived to be an environmental hazard that we must take steps to reduce; and yet media violence is not concerned with real risks, but virtual risks. It is this regulation of a virtual risk that does not yet exist that is having a dramatic effect on our understanding of public and private space. The socialisation of risk, and the masterframe of environmental discourse are two factors which have initiated a restructuring of public space (see Eder, 1996, p.216). In relation to the virtual risks of media violence, it is the private space of our imagination that is being opened up to incorporate a public concern for real risks to the environment.

Thus, it can be seen that the democratisation of risk is a hollow concept when it comes to the issue of media violence. However, risk analysts such as Kasperon et al. (1992) and Slovic et al. (1992) have pointed out that the issue of trust and distrust is very significant to democratisation and the way in which people choose to manage risk. As we have seen from the way in which viewers talk about media violence, people trust their own responses to media violence, more than they trust politicians or programme makers. In the next chapters I want to consider how individual risk-takers interpret and understand media violence, with particular emphasis on self-regulation. If we cannot trust governmental agencies and insurance companies to regulate risk, then let us turn to
individual response to risk in order to understand how people manage risk and media violence.

Notes

1 Other studies which prove interesting to examine are Hagell and Newburn (1994) and Gauntlett (1997).

2 For a very good overview of research into the negative emotional responses to television see Buckingham and Allerton (1996b).

3 The Broadcasting Standards Council and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission merged on 1 April 1997 to become the Broadcasting Standards Commission.

4 This quotation is taken from the front cover of the BSC's complaints bulletin.


6 This report by the Revd. Professor L, J, Francis and Professor D, J, James is published by Trinity College, Carmarthen, Wales, 1996. Hargrave says that the *Daily Mail's* coverage of this research over emphasized the results of the research, see p.3.

7 The BSC report *Young People and the Media* is compiled as two compatible reports; the first by Hargrave (1996), and the second by Halloran and Gray (1996).

8 *Pulp Fiction* had its cinematic release in Britain in 1994, and it followed hot on the success of Tarantino's first movie *Reservoir Dogs* which became notorious for its violence (see amongst others Usher, 1992; Sigal, 1993; Andrew, 1994 for discussion of the extreme violence in these films).

9 '18' rated films used in the study were: *Silence of the Lambs; Pulp Fiction; Reservoir Dogs; Seven; Natural Born Killers; Trainspotting* (Hargrave, 1996, p.84).

10 For analysis of the phenomenon of Freddy Krueger and his popularity with younger children see Conrich (1997, pp.118-131) who suggests that Krueger is a substitute father figure.

11 Kaspenson (1992, p.114) is talking specifically of field studies into the effects of accidents such as the Ginna Nuclear Plant accident (1982); the Gorbleben radioactive accident (1987); the WIPP brine leak (1987-88), see Kaspenson, 1992, pp.170-174 for more details.


13 *Women Viewing Violence* was actually funded by the then Broadcasting Standards Council (1992).

14 Just over half of the sample group (52) were identified as having had previous experience of violence. There were fourteen viewing groups, and the study took into account national background, ethnicity and class, see Schlesinger et al (1992, p.23).
Crimewatch UK uses drama-documentary techniques, and it reconstructs crimes that have taken place in order to appeal to the public to come forward with information pertaining to a case shown on the programme. It is followed by Crimewatch UK Update which reports on the public reaction to police appeals for help. Programme transmitted on BBC1, November 10th 1987. EastEnders is a British soap opera, popular for its realistic treatment of social issues, episode transmitted on BBC1, 18th July 1989. Closing Ranks is a single play made for television, transmitted on ITV January 1988. The Accused is a Hollywood film by Jonathan Kaplan, 1988, transmitted on BBC1 in January 1992. See Schlesinger et al., 1992, for more details.

Crimewatch UK featured a rape of a woman by a stranger; EastEnders involved an ongoing dramatic portrayal of domestic violence; Closing Ranks involved issues of domestic violence and police brutality; The Accused featured a gang rape of a woman by strangers, and her fight for legal justice. See Schlesinger et al., 1992, for further details.

This quotation is taken from the press release for Regulating for Changing Values, see p.2.

See Marris et al. (1997) for further research in the public trust of environmental experts, and see Chapters four and five for further discussion of this issue in relation to the mass media.
Audience Research: a Case Study

The object of researching responses to viewing violence is to understand why people choose to watch violent movies and why they respond to violence in particular ways. This is a simple objective but nonetheless significant to any study which attempts to explore the process of viewing violence. Unless researchers actually talk to consumers of violent movies they will not be able to explain the appeal of such movies. Consequently, this case study tests certain hypotheses about the process of viewing violence by conducting qualitative research in this area.¹ These hypotheses incorporate elements of John Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis, discussed in Chapters six and seven, and are concerned with the reactive mechanisms of self-regulation and management of risk in relation to media violence. It is my hypothesis that consumers of violent movies self-regulate their responses to media violence and this is part of a learning process. As is common in qualitative research, I soon discovered that the nature of participants’ insights generated hypotheses as much as tested them, and in this respect the results of the qualitative research proved more rich and diverse than I could have hoped for.

David Gauntlett (1995, p.103) has pointed out in his book Moving Experiences: Understanding Television's Influences and Effects that listening to the audience goes beyond simple surveys and provides valuable research into the uses and interpretations of media consumption:
The more sophisticated, qualitative...research which engages respondents with the focus of study, such as television depictions of violence, (is) more likely to reveal their actual feelings, concerns, interpretations and preferences about television output, than simple surveys which seek to keep television separate from the other questions in respondent's minds.

Thus the models for this research are drawn from media studies and social psychology, not from film theory, or psychological 'effects' research. Following in the footsteps of similar qualitative research studies into viewer response, such as Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology, Ann Gray (1992), Video Critical: Children, the Environment and Media Power, David Gauntlett (1997), and Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television, and David Buckingham (1996), this study attempts to understand the complex and sophisticated response to viewing violence. The focus of this research is the discourses employed by active consumers of media violence. It is not the aim of this study to find the 'truth' about media practices, nor is it the aim of this study to focus solely on cognitive processes; rather, this case study is concerned with how emotional and interpretative strategies are used by viewers of media violence. It is these strategies that will help us to understand risk perception and management on a localised level and it is these strategies that will show how people trust their own responses to media violence rather than the responses of politicians and social commentators precisely because they perceive benefits to this type of risk-taking behaviour.

The methodology which I have used to analyse the data is that of qualitative data analysis. Micro-sociology allows the researcher to focus on individual practices of viewing violence and is concerned with micro-levels of analysis and critical ethnographic practice (see Morgan, 1988; Moores, 1993): this can be seen most clearly in the use of self-contained focus groups as a means of understanding media usage both
on an individual and contextual level. Qualitative data analysis allows the researcher to focus on language use, and looks for repetition, contradiction and emergent themes in the raw data. My analysis of the focus group transcripts shows qualitative data analysis techniques in action.

**Designing the Focus Groups**

My research into viewing violence began as a series of pilot studies, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Individual interviews and questionnaires were completed during a period of six months (January-June, 1995) and a total of 70 consumers of violent movies were either interviewed (20) or asked to fill in a questionnaire (50). Participants were recruited either by poster, direct address outside cinemas, or through the snowball technique. Whilst the results from these pilot studies were relevant to the question of why people choose to watch violent movies, both methods of questionnaire response and individual interviews were found lacking. For the purposes of this study, questionnaire response would only be useful if conducted on a large scale, and as this was not possible, it was thought better to turn to other more self-contained and manageable methods of collecting data. What is more, the purpose of this study is to explore the complex and sophisticated response to viewing violence, not attempt to survey a cross section of the general public on their viewing tastes. Individual interviews proved a more successful method; however they lacked an interaction of ideas, and over time I came to recognise this interaction is necessary to understanding the process of viewing violence, an activity which is more social than individual.²
Consequently, I chose to conduct self-contained focus groups, as the advantage of focus groups is that they provide an opportunity to collect data from group interaction (See Morgan, 1988; Krueger, 1988; Greenbaum, 1987). This group interaction takes the basis of lively and informal conversation which explores specific topics and reveals emotional responses and cognitive processes at work. It is this ability to register discourses, identify emotional and cognitive positions and generate hypotheses which makes focus groups the most productive method of collecting data for this research. As David L. Morgan states in *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research* (1988, p.25): 'Focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating what participants think, but they excel at uncovering why participants think as they do.' The term 'self-contained' signifies that the results of these focus groups can stand on their own; however, this qualitative data can also be incorporated into a larger body of research if and when this should be undertaken.

Therefore, the aim of this study is not to reach statistical conclusions about who watches violent movies but to test and to develop my own hypotheses regarding the process of viewing violence. A triangulation of methods have been used to design this study; this is a system of using a number of sources, encouraged within the sociological field, particularly in areas of micro-sociology (Denzin, 1978). These triangulation methods can be seen in the way in which data was generated using three different methods: individual interviews; questionnaires; and focused group discussions. Careful reference to the pilot questionnaires, interviews and focus groups revealed that self-contained focus groups proved to be the most effective methods of generating data for the purposes of this research. Further triangulation was used when collecting data: here, taped recordings of the focus group discussions, notes made by the moderator during the discussion, and additional notes made by the assistant moderator concerning facial
and body movements, proved helpful in building up a clear and comprehensive picture of the focus group discussions.

‘New Brutalism’ and Films Used in the Study

This case study focuses on active consumers of violent movies and explores the reactive mechanisms of thresholds and self-censorship and the issue of gender in relation to the viewing process. The movies considered in the focus groups are films which have been given a theatrical 18 Certificate release, and (in all but one case) are available on video. Three of the target movies (Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, and Natural Born Killers) have been screened on terrestrial television.

Eight movies were chosen as exemplifying societal/cultural consensus of extremely violent films, an important consideration when considering risk-taking behaviour in relation to media violence, particularly perceptions of risk and the decision making processes involved in consuming media violence. These films are:
Table 3: Films used in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Director/Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reservoir Dogs</td>
<td>Quentin Tarantino, 1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulp Fiction</td>
<td>Quentin Tarantino, 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Romance</td>
<td>Tony Scott, 1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Born Killers</td>
<td>Oliver Stone, 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man Bites Dog</td>
<td>Belvaux, Bonzel, Poelvoorde, 1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad Lieutenant</td>
<td>Abel Ferrara, 1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing Zoe</td>
<td>Roger Avary, 1994</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These films were released in Britain during 1990 to 1995, however, it was the release of *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992) which attracted media interest in what began to be described as a ‘new wave’ of violent movies. This prompted the media to discuss the target films as extreme, and uncompromising in their depictions of violence on screen. When *Reservoir Dogs* was released in the UK in January 1993, journalists and film critics highlighted Tarantino's ‘cinema of viscera.' Alexander Walker, in the *Evening Standard*, ran an interview with Tarantino, titled: ‘Shooting the Dogs of Gore’; whilst Shaun Usher, in the *Daily Mail*, wrote a review of *Reservoir Dogs* titled: ‘Deadly Dogs Unleash a Whirlwind of Violence.’

Consequently, it is the release of Tarantino's first film and the popularity of Tarantino's 'cinema of viscera' (Dargis, 1994) which fuelled debate regarding contemporary violent movies. Quentin Tarantino is involved as director, writer or producer in five out of the eight target films: he wrote and directed *Reservoir Dogs* and
Pulp Fiction; he wrote the screenplay for True Romance; he wrote the original script, and subsequent story for Natural Born Killers; and he was executive producer for Killing Zoe. Not surprisingly, it is his reputation as 'The Gun Guy' which has affected societal/cultural consensus of these films. Ephraim Katz describes Tarantino as a film maker of 'blistering, uncompromising dramatic fare' (1992, p.1329); the Guardian Weekend magazine describes Tarantino as 'a connoisseur of cruelty' (Sigal, 1993, p.24), whilst Quentin Tarantino himself tells Geoff Andrew (1994, p.26) in Time Out: 'I don't think you can go too far with violence if what you are doing is right for the movie. What's too far?'

With regard to the three target films Tarantino is not involved with, each of these movies have been marketed as extreme and disturbing. Derek Malcolm (1993a) describes Man Bites Dog as follows: 'it makes Reservoir Dogs look like muzzled mongrels', a quote displayed on the video cover of this film. Similarly the video cover for Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer, which was released not long after Reservoir Dogs in 1993, carries the warning: 'This film contains scenes which may be disturbing to some viewers' (Electric Pictures, 1993). Bad Lieutenant is described by Jonathan Romney (1993, p.34) as a 'One way ticket to hell', with even the Sun referring to the movie and its star (Harvey Keitel), who also appears in Reservoir Dogs, as 'Gore Blimey Keitel's Back.'

Quite why the Sun could refer to Keitel in such a way must be attributed to the cluster of violent movies released at the start of 1993. A week after the UK release date of Reservoir Dogs (January 8th 1993), Man Bites Dog was released, and only a few weeks after that Bad Lieutenant gained its theatrical release (19th February 1993). This prompted journalists to speak of a 'new wave' of visceral films which fuelled the debate about screen violence. Hence, the Daily Telegraph ran an article, 'Are These
Films Too Violent?\textsuperscript{12} where it interviewed James Ferman of the British Board of Film Classification and asked whether he could be held responsible for releasing such a wave of violence. Similarly, an article by B. Ruby Rich in \textit{Sight and Sound} comments on the intense and individualised violence which is a hallmark of these films: she describes these movies as a ‘wave of neo-violence’ (Rich, 1992, p.5) specific to the 1990s. Another journalist, Jim Shelley (1993a, p.7, 1993b, p.12), refers collectively to these films as ‘heralding the arrival of “the new brutalism”’ twice in two separate articles early in 1993.

It is because of the notoriety of these films as uncompromising violent movies that I have chosen to use the term ‘new brutalism’ to differentiate these films from other movies of similar content.\textsuperscript{13} “New brutalism” is a term that usefully encapsulates social perceptions of media violence as a risk-taking activity; it is new, and therefore part of a specifically modern technological development within the entertainment industry that is seen by some as immoral and unethical; and it is brutal, implying that such new forms of entertainment \textit{brutalise} innocent viewers. This term, and other related terms, therefore ensures that consumers of such movies will be well aware of the negative and ‘risky’ connotations that accompany such films as \textit{Reservoir Dogs}, or \textit{Man Bites Dog}. What these movies share, in terms of content, is a preoccupation with violence towards the individual, as opposed to the state, and, in terms of style, the use of realism when representing violence. These eight films were chosen to represent a current cultural trend in violent movies. There were many films that could have been added to the list, but it was these eight that served the purpose of prompting participants to discuss why they choose to watch violent movies that are marketed and discussed as a risk to individuals and the social environment as a whole.
‘Violent Movies’ and ‘Desensitisation’

A note on the terms ‘violence’ and ‘desensitisation’ is applicable here. The term ‘violent movies’ is used to refer to societal/cultural consensus of the target films. Care was taken in the focus groups not to introduce the terms ‘violent movies’ or ‘desensitisation’ until participants had done so of their own accord, lest an air of condemnation derived from the term ‘violence’ coupled with ‘desensitisation’ descend onto the focus group discussions before they had even begun. As societal/cultural consensus of the target films and consumers of these films is so overwhelmingly negative (see the above section, and Chapter 3 for examples of this), it was only practical to allow participants to introduce the terms of reference themselves, as it would not do for the moderator to appear anything other than neutral in this regard.

The term ‘violent movies’ with reference to the target films did not prove problematic within the discussion groups. Participants appeared comfortable using this term, and if they wished to differentiate between different types of fictional violence they did so of their own accord. The term ‘desensitisation’ was used on occasion by participants, yet those few participants who chose to use this term were careful to qualify what they felt it signified to them and their personal experience of viewing violence. The reactive mechanisms common to participants’ viewing experience deal in some detail with the concept of boundary testing, which is not aligned with the notion of ‘desensitisation’, as used by the media, but is defined as a term of reference in its own right. Here, it is clear ‘desensitisation’ is being re-defined by participants, and it is their examination of this phrase which indicates that a separate term of reference should be used in order to differentiate between ‘desensitisation’, as used by the media, and boundary testing, as a means of interpreting and responding to violence.
Consequently, the term ‘violent movies’, and other related terms, such as ‘viewing violence’, have been adopted in this study in order to accurately reflect the content of the discussion groups and participants' response to the target films. In contrast, the term ‘desensitisation’ has not been adopted in this study, and the term ‘boundary testing’ has been employed in order to accurately reflect participants' response to the viewing experience.

**Criteria and Recruitment**

The criteria for selecting participants for the focus group discussions were kept very simple. The criteria were:

- Participants must be over 18 years old;
- Participants must have seen three or more films on the target list;
- Participants must not be engaged in any research in this field.

These straightforward criteria enabled me to recruit current consumers of violent movies who did not have a clear agenda, but who did have an active interest in the research subject.

Male and female participants were recruited equally in order to ensure that all male, all-female and mixed gender focus groups contained a balanced mix of participants. The decision to ensure this balance of focus groups reflects the nature of this study which is to examine why people watch violent movies: ‘people’ includes male and female consumers, a fact often overlooked when considering the role of the
Recruitment was conducted using the snowball technique, with follow up phone calls and letters explaining the nature of the focused discussions. This proved to be time-consuming and difficult to achieve, but it did produce a collection of participants who were not specifically self-selective, and who, although interested in the research subject, would not go out of their way to openly discuss their opinions. Telephone calls helped to select participants who fitted these criteria. There were particular problems recruiting female consumers of violent movies, who, although available in theory, were difficult to persuade to join the discussions. Many women would only come to single sex discussions, and if they could not make the suggested dates, were lost as potential participants. Similar difficulties did not occur when recruiting male participants, who exhibited a confidence in choosing to become part of the focus groups that many female participants lacked. The end result reveals a slight gender difference in recruitment, with 20 male participants and 16 female participants contributing to the discussions.

**Background Characteristics of Participants**

The sample used in this research does not constitute a representative survey, and consequently macro-sociological patterns, such as class, or ethnicity (with the exception of gender, see this chapter, ‘Criteria and Recruitment’), do not feature as part of this research. This is because this is a small-scale independent study that is primarily interested in a specific type of viewer. Studies such as *Women Viewing Violence* (Schlesinger et al., 1992) may offer a large-scale representative sample of British women, but significantly they do not offer a representative sample of active consumers.
of media violence. My study focuses on active consumers of media violence rather than a representative sample of the British population precisely because its central research question concerns how active consumers of media violence respond to this leisure activity: to consider how people respond to media violence is not the same thing at all. However, certain basic demographic data were collected during the focus group discussions and are documented here as a source of information to be used in future research in this area.

The Cinema Advertising Association undertakes film profiles that are representative samples of the British population and serve to highlight such macro-sociological patterns as age, gender and the social background of moviegoers. Tables 1a, 1b, and 1c in Chapter four reveal that participants who took part in the focus groups share similar macro-sociological patterns to those outlined in the CAA's representative sample. For example, in the CAA Film Profile the average age of moviegoers who went to see *Pulp Fiction* is between 20 and 34, which corresponds with the average age of those participants in the focus groups who went to see *Pulp Fiction* (See Table 1c). Similarly, the CAA Film Profile reveals that although there is some difference in figures between the numbers of male and female participants who went to see this film (65% and 35% respectively) the number of female moviegoers still represents a substantial amount (see Table 1a). Although the number of female participants in the focus groups who saw this film is higher that the CAA survey, this cross reference still indicates that female consumers of violent movies are a force to be reckoned with. Where relevant, cross-references will be made between the Cinema Advertising Association's representative sample, and my own breakdown of the background characteristics of participants in this study.
Participants were asked to fill in a short registration form (see Appendix 3). Information given in these registration forms provides a useful indicator of participants' age, ethnic background, education, cinemas frequented, and magazines/newspapers most often read. Other information regarding the target films has been used in the main body of this study and will not be repeated here.

Participants were aged between 18 and 50. The most common age bracket was between 18-30, with 10 participants aged between 18-20, and 16 participants aged between 20-30, making a total of 26 participants aged 30 or under taking part in the discussions. Only 10 participants were over 30, and only one out of that figure was over 40. This corresponds with those figures supplied by the CAA Film Profile, which indicates that the average age of moviegoers for the target films is 18-34 (see Table 1c for cross-reference). The majority of participants were British (33), with only 3 participants being of a different ethnic origin (1 Indian, 1 Australian, 1 Chinese). All participants were educated to GCSE level/A level standard, with 21 participants having finished a technical or vocational course or part of a university course and three participants who had completed a post graduate course. Although there is no breakdown of figures for the education of moviegoers in the CAA Profile of the target films, Table 1b reveals that the target films are more popular with the ABC1 bracket, which includes middle class workers, than the C2DE bracket, which includes the working class. Whilst this is not offered as substitute information, the class breakdown does offer some indication that the target films are more popular with middle class (educated) moviegoers, although some films, such as Reservoir Dogs, attract similar figures from both social brackets.

Response to the 'cinemas most frequented' question on the registration form was varied, and indicates participants use their local cinemas as frequently, if not more
than West End cinemas. There was no common cinema mentioned, but reference to various local and independent cinemas in the London area. Response to which newspapers/magazines participants read reveals participants read a variety of broadsheet newspapers and magazines, the most common being the *Guardian*, *Empire*, *The Face* and *Time Out*. For a breakdown of these reading figures see Table 6: Reading Figures for Popular Newspapers/Magazines.

**Conducting the Focus Groups**

A pilot focus group was conducted in order to test the suitability of questions and viewing material during the discussion period and to give an indication of time requirements and group interaction. Participants in the pilot study were from Roehampton Institute, London. A series of six focus groups were conducted at *The Green Door Cafe* in London, between November to December 1995. Numbers of the focus groups were kept relatively small, between 4-6, although one focus group did include seven participants. The reason why the focus groups contained small numbers was to encourage group interaction and in-depth discussion of the process of viewing violence. Small groups fostered an intimate atmosphere, and enabled all participants to reflect and consider their complex and sophisticated response to violent movies. The success of this study is not dependent on sample size, but rather on the variety and depth of discourse employed. As Potter and Wetherell (1988, p.161) point out: ‘If one is interested in discursive forms, ten interviews might provide as much valid information as several hundred responses to a structured opinion poll.’ The research question is how active consumers respond to media violence, and in order to answer
this question I have concentrated on small scale, informal discussions; these discussions generate a variety of linguistic patterns, and it is this variety of patterns that provide the rich source of data here, not the amount of participants involved.

The discussions took place on Saturday afternoons in a restaurant hired solely for the purposes of this study, and this location was a deliberate choice because I felt it was important to provide a neutral, safe environment for participants who were being asked to consider a sensitive issue, an issue where the concept of safety is very important. Wine, soft drinks and light refreshments were made available, and once again, the decision to provide alcohol was designed in order to relax participants and foster a more social environment. Offering wine in a restaurant seemed a logical step to take.

The format for the focus group discussions was standardised, although, where appropriate, allowance was made for specific issues raised by participants in a given group. Pilot interviews and focus groups allowed me to consider and modify questions and to make sure that the overall organisation of the focused discussion was operational. Discussion was opened with a request for brief biographical information, and participants were invited to offer their opinions concerning the target films. Initial reactions were followed by a more focused discussion guided by a series of questions posed by myself, acting as moderator (see Appendix I). I used probe and follow-up questions to generate variation and diversity in accounting practices, and this led to more informal conversation which makes the interviewer an active participant in the focused discussion.

Three cues were used: a list of target films (see Appendix II), a scene from the film Reservoir Dogs, and a scene from the film Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer. Both film clips were shown during the discussion, and timed to coincide with specific
questions related to these two scenes. The two scenes chosen were: the eye-stabbing scene from *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* directed by John McNaughton, 1990 (produced 1986) (see Hill, 1997, pp.39-50 for more details) and the ear-amputation scene from the film *Reservoir Dogs* directed by Quentin Tarantino, 1992. The ear-amputation scene was chosen because it exemplifies an infamous scene of extreme violence which challenges notions of acceptability and therefore proves a useful visual prompt when discussing issues of risk and reactive mechanisms of self-regulation and management of risk.

The discussions lasted two and a quarter hours. A short break occurred after the screening of the eye-stabbing scene from *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*, approximately half way through the discussion, and once again this was designed to encourage participants to relax and interact with one another. The question of interaction is of particular significance to this study. It was noted by myself and the assistant moderator that male participants were less likely to express their thoughts and explore the process of viewing violence than female participants. In male-only focus groups, stiff body movements, and an unwillingness to expand on responses to questions posed by the moderator meant that a great deal of prompting and follow up questions were needed to ensure group discussion ran smoothly. In contrast, female-only focus groups positively thrived on group interaction, and very little follow up questions were needed to ensure group discussion was relaxed and lively.\(^\text{17}\)

Male-only focus groups proved more difficult to run. A marked difference could be seen when mixed gender groups took place and this was because the presence of female participants visibly relaxed those male participants present. However, as the focus groups progressed it became easier to break down initial barriers, and, through experience and observation, provide as open an atmosphere as possible in all focus
The presence of a male assistant moderator was a significant means of relaxing male participants and encouraging informal discussion.\textsuperscript{18} During the breaks, in particular, it was noticed that male participants were naturally drawn to the assistant moderator to make casual conversation, and this proved important in breaking down barriers when discussing self-regulation, which occurred directly after the break.

**Data Collection Instruments and Analysis**

As moderator, I adopted a neutral role and posed the same questions in each group to ensure a systematic protocol. Every necessary step was taken to ensure reliability and validity; the same questions were asked in the same order, the same cues were used at the same time in the discussion, and the same location was used each week. Three data collection points were used in an attempt to triangulate the data. These data collection points were:

- The moderator;
- The assistant moderator;
- Audio recording equipment.

The data collection points aided an important validity check; by the fourth focus group, material was found to be substantially repeated by participants, and focus groups 5 and 6 served to document the reliability of participants' observations over a period of time.

Each focus group was fully transcribed. Preliminary readings of transcripts assessed emergent themes and useful categories for analysis. Report writing proved a useful preliminary stage for analysis of the data, and a short report was made after each
focus group was conducted. Similarly, discussions with my research supervisors and the assistant moderator aided the development of interpretation and analysis of the transcripts. A systematic approach to the presentation of themes has been adopted and quotes have been chosen as those best served to represent the range of discourses arising in the focus groups.

Participants have not been identified as male or female unless the data analysis is directly concerned with gender issues. Quotations are attributed to individual participants but the code of reference is anonymous, detailing the number of the group member in each focus group, and the number of which focus group this participant attended, for example (Participant 1 - FG1). The reason for this anonymity is to best represent group comments as a whole and not to single out individual participants unless a specific point is made regarding an individual's response. The issue of gender is only significant at certain stages in the data analysis; to indicate the gender of every illustrative quote would be to highlight this issue unnecessarily, and in certain instances bias the study towards the issue of gender when the first object of this study is to examine the processes of viewing violence.

An Overview of the Study

The qualitative research conducted in this study demonstrates that active consumers of violent movies possess ‘portfolios of response’. This means that viewers utilize a number of reactive mechanisms and ‘interpretive repertoires’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1988, p.156) in order to interpret and emotionally engage with fictional violence. These methods include:
- Situating media violence in a social context;
- Anticipating violent images/scenes;
- Self-regulating fictional violence;
- Testing of established boundaries.

Central to the processes of viewing violence is the context of the viewing event as a social activity. This means that active consumers of media violence possess a social awareness of the risks associated with this type of leisure activity; there is a shared social knowledge of types of people who like to watch media violence, and viewers gauge their responses according to their perception of other risk-takers as well as their own personal experience of risk behaviour. The social activity of viewing violence and the significance of public and private perceptions of risk-taking behaviour will be outlined in Chapter nine. Another significant aspect of the processes of viewing violence is that viewers test boundaries safe in the knowledge that this is a fictional context, separate from their awareness of real violence in contemporary society. Boundary testing is a good example of the risk thermostat hypothesis at work; viewers of media violence balance and self-regulate their risk-taking behaviour by managing levels of risk. This risk management is essential to the enjoyment of viewing media violence and will be discussed in detail in Chapter ten.

By developing ‘portfolios of response’, consumers of violent movies demonstrate how complex and dynamic the processes of viewing violence can be. It is possible to construct a model of the viewing process, based on the notion of ‘portfolios of response’ and risk management. The model of the viewing process and the notion of ‘portfolios of response’ are discussed in depth in Chapter twelve. The model indicates
that contextual and individual factors form the viewing experience. It is this theory of ‘portfolios of response’, and the subsequent model of the viewing process, which breaks the circular nature of the ‘effects’ debate so far. Rather than endlessly debating whether watching violent movies makes you violent, let us try to understand the complexity of response to the processes of the viewing media violence. Let us explore why violent movies are shocking and entertaining.

Notes

1 For discussion of qualitative research see Kirk and Miller (1986), Krueger (1988), Morgan (1988).

2 Other research in media studies confirms this. Recent ethnographic work by Gray (1992), Gillespie (1995), Palmer (1986), and Gauntlett (1997) explores media texts and social relations as a primary focus of research.

3 For discussion of qualitative research and focus groups see, Denzin (1970), Giddens (1976), Goldman and McDonald (1987), Hughes (1990), Greenbaum (1987), May 1993) amongst others.

4 See Fielding and Fielding (1986) and Denzin (1970).

5 *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) is still awaiting a video release, despite the fact the BBFC has passed this film for its video certificate. After the Dunblane massacre in March 1996, Warner Brothers, the producers of this film, withdrew the release date, claiming it would not be appropriate to release the film in the light of the Dunblane massacre. See Wintour and Bunting (1996), the *Guardian*, Thursday March 14 1996. This decision places *Natural Born Killers* in a problematic position that in many ways links it to the cause and effect of screen violence. Warner Brothers are signaling their extreme anxiety in relation to the video release of this film, by withholding its release date, and conferring with David Alton, the former Liberal Democrat MP, who wishes to see this film banned.

6 Channel 5 screened *Natural Born Killers* on November 8th 1997 (the BBC hold the rights to show *Natural Born Killers* on terrestrial television, but so far have not chosen to screen this movie). A week earlier BBC2 screened *Pulp Fiction* uncut on Sunday, November 2nd, 1997. See Culf, 1996, the *Guardian*, Wednesday March 27 1996, p.7. Channel Four hold the rights to show *Reservoir Dogs*, and after waiting some time before screening this film, finally transmitted it on Saturday 31st May 1997, 22.40pm. See
Goodwin, 1994, 'You've Been Framed', Broadcast, 22 April, p.15. Pulp Fiction, True Romance and Killing Zoe have all been broadcast on satellite channels from 1995 onwards.


10 Cox, Peter, 1993. 'Gore Blimey Keitel's Back' in the Sun, 19 February 1993, p.19. The same week Bad Lieutenant was released in the UK, Mean Streets (Martin Scorsese, 1993) was re-released at the cinema. As Harvey Keitel stars in both films, and was also in Reservoir Dogs, only released a month before, this no doubt prompted the Sun to comment on his appearance, though why "gore" is mentioned can only be attributed to the 'New Violence' current in the press at the start of 1993.

11 Soon to follow in 1993 was the re-release of Mean Streets (Martin Scorsese, 1973), and the UK release of Hard Boiled (John Woo), the Australian film Romper Stomper, and the video release of Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer. All referred to in Guttridge (1993, p.18).


13 As far as I can tell, the term originates from Jim Shelley who is the only journalist I have found who refers to these films as "the new brutalism" in two articles at the start of 1993. See Shelley (1993a, p.7, 1993b, p.12). David Gauntlett (1995, p.5) also uses this term when discussing Reservoir Dogs, and Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer.

14 There have been a number of studies into 'the desensitization hypothesis', and David Gauntlett (1995) discusses these in Moving Experiences (pp.39-40). As Gauntlett points out, although some studies claim to find examples of 'desensitized' viewers (see Van Evra, 1990, pp.96-97), this does not necessarily suggest viewers are numb to real violence, only more used to fictional representations of violence. In any case, research by Belson (1978) and Hagell and Newburn (1994) find no evidence to support 'the desensitization hypothesis'.


16 The terms 'Indian', 'Australian', and 'Chinese' were used by participants themselves when filling in the ethnic origin section in the registration form for focus group participants.

17 The fact that I was a female moderator undoubtedly influenced participants' interaction in the focus group discussions to some degree. However, the presence of a male assistant moderator went some way towards achieving a balance of gender in this regard. For discussion of this issue, see Padfield and Procter (1996), Bell, Caplan and Karim (1993), Finch (1993), McKee and O'Brien (1983).

The Social Activity of Media Violence

Watching media violence is a social activity. There are a number of factors which participants take into account when they choose to watch a violent movie and these factors are based on an individual and social awareness of media violence as a form entertainment that is ‘problematic’, that is perceived to be negative by certain sections of society. Thus, the discourses used by participants highlight these negative perceptions of media violence. In relation to social theories of risk, we can see that this awareness of media violence as a social ‘problem’ allows participants to categorise themselves in relation to what we can call ‘risk-takers’ and ‘risk products’; there are specific types of products, for example, Hollywood action movies, and specific types of risk-takers, for example young males, which participants are aware of. Indeed, participants gauge their responses to media violence by their awareness of types of movies and types of viewers. When watching a film such as Reservoir Dogs (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) viewers have actively chosen to associate themselves with a particular category of product and consumer, in this instance a film that is part of a new breed of violent, realistic and intelligent movies that attracts intelligent and sophisticated audiences.

In this chapter, I want to consider how participants are aware of the marketing of certain violent movies as ‘risks’. This is not to say that participants themselves used the term ‘risk’ in the focus group discussions to signify their understanding of the process of watching media violence. ‘Risk’ and other related terms such as ‘risk-taking
activity’ are theoretical terms that I have used in order to understand participants’ responses in relation to social theories of risk, in particular the risk thermostat hypothesis and the social amplification of risk (Adams, 1995; Kasperson et al., 1988). This in this chapter, I want to consider how participants use categories such as ‘Hollywood action movies’ to differentiate between different types of representations of violence, or what we can term ‘virtual risks’. This decision making process leads to a distinctive social awareness of other viewers, and of a shared social knowledge of the types of responses appropriate to the viewing experience. I want to consider in some detail the way participants regulate their responses according to perceptions of other people and their reactions to media violence. And I also want to consider the significance of physical and emotional responses to media violence and how these are part of the perceived benefits to this ‘risk-taking activity’. This combination of a social awareness of perceptions and categories of media violence and the importance of physical and emotional responses to media violence bears light on the significance of the public and private discussed in the previous chapter. Here, we have an awareness of viewing media violence as a social activity, and yet at the same time an interest in individual responses: the private experience is part of a public understanding of the alleged ‘risks’ of media violence.

Types of Movies, Types of Viewers

There are a number of reasons why participants in this study choose to see the target films: media hype; peer pressure; personal experience: these are all factors which
influence participants to watch, or not watch violent movies. The number of target films participants have seen is indicated in Table 4. Figures reveal Pulp Fiction, Reservoir Dogs, True Romance and Natural Born Killers (in that order) are the most popular films to have been seen by participants, and Bad Lieutenant, Man Bites Dog, Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer, and Killing Zoe (in that order) are the least popular films to have been seen by participants. These figures correlate with the official UK box office grosses for 1996 (see Table 5). The most popular target films with participants are also the most popular target films at the cinema, with a film such as Pulp Fiction grossing over £10,000,000 at the box office, while a film such as Man Bites Dog grossed just over £73,000 (Screen International, 1996). There is a slight difference in figures, with True Romance scoring higher with participants than at the box office, and Killing Zoe scoring lower with participants than at the box office, but over all it can be seen that participants' viewing figures for the target films correspond with the official UK box office figures for the target films. For a more detailed breakdown of participants' cinema and video viewing figures, see Chapter ten, Tables 7 and 8 and 9.

Table 4: Viewing Figures for Target Films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reservoir Dogs</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulp Fiction</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Romance</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Born Killers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man Bites Dog</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry, Portrait of...</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad Lieutenant</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing Zoe</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5: UK Box Office Grosses, 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Box Office Figures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reservoir Dogs</td>
<td>£5,900,719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulp Fiction</td>
<td>£10,446,312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Romance</td>
<td>£2,179,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Born Killers</td>
<td>£4,849,685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man Bites Dog</td>
<td>£73,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry, Portrait of...</td>
<td>£72,598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad Lieutenant</td>
<td>£373,634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing Zoe</td>
<td>£465,997</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures supplied by Screen International

Group members commented on media hype and peer pressure as determining factors in their choice of movie. The most popular magazines and newspapers cited by participants are the Guardian; Empire; The Face; Time Out; the Independent; The Times; New Musical Express (see Table 6). This indicates participants read the broadsheet papers and popular cultural magazines, in particular, the Guardian and Empire, and in doing so are kept in touch with current movie news and movie hype.

Table 6: Reading figures for popular newspapers/magazines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empire</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Face</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Independent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Musical Express</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Out</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Times</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is because the target films attract a specific kind of publicity that participants are drawn to view a film in order to test their own response to that of the media. Therefore, in the case of a movie such as *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) its cinematic release attracted controversial publicity, and consequently the film was subject to rumours and scandal, not just in the media but as a cultural phenomenon in itself. Many participants claimed they were drawn to see this film precisely because they wished to enter the cultural debate, and judge whether the controversy was justified. Participants explain their reaction:

These films have a particular reputation and I think I've got to see them and form my own opinions. If there is a controversy then I'll make a special effort to watch the film and see what it's all about.

(Participant 3 - FG4)

Finding out about these films isn't too hard because any violent film gets a lot of publicity. If a film is getting a lot of publicity then I'll try and make an effort to see it; if it's making that much of a difference to other people it must be worth seeing.

(Participant 4 - FG6)

You hear all these rumours and scandals about these films and you think, what's the fuss all about? You go and see the films just to find out whether it's worth all the hype and bullshit.

(Participant 3 - FG6)

Many participants linked media hype with peer pressure. Two group members comment on this:

I'm swayed by media hype. Films like *Reservoir Dogs*, everyone's talking about it, and if you haven't seen it you're not in the gang.

(Participant 2 - FG4)
One reason I didn't see *Reservoir Dogs* was because people had said they'd seen it and even though they said it was a good film, for some reason I didn't want to go and see it because I knew it was violent. I think probably this was because it was one of the first films of that genre that was very publicly known, very much talked about and for that reason I didn't want to see it. When I did, I thought it was a great film.

(Participant 5 - FG3)

Both participants cite media hype as a significant factor in relation to peer pressure. In the first example, this participant claims he feels left out, not part of the gang who have seen the movie, and his desire to be part of this gang is such that he chooses to see the film. The second participant cites an opposite reaction. It is because the film has attracted so much interest that she resists becoming part of the phenomena of *Reservoir Dogs*. She perceives this film as the start of the 'new brutalism' movies to appear at the cinema in 1992, and avoids the film because it has attracted controversy for its violent representations.

What has become apparent in all focus groups is that *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* are two films participants consider necessary to see: in Table 4 viewing figures for these target films reveal each movie has been seen by all participants, and Table 5 reveals how popular both these films were (and still are) at the box office. The films are signs of social and cultural success, and there is a cachet in being part of such cultural events, part of a zeitgeist. None of the other target films can compete in terms of popularity and cultural significance. As one participant says: 'How can you go to a dinner party if you haven't seen *Pulp Fiction*?' (Participant 7 - FG2).

Evidence from the focus groups reveals participants are very aware of the hype and cultural significance of the target films in their immediate society. The target films are discussed, praised, and vilified by the media and peers alike, and although participants did not claim they chose to see the target films because they were violent,
evidence indicates the heightened awareness of participants to the controversy surrounding the target films and their representations of violence is a contributing factor in their decision to see the films. These participants can be seen to be a type of consumer who chooses to see the target films out of cultural curiosity. Their comments indicate that it because of the hype surrounding these movies, and because these ‘new brutalism’ movies are discussed in the press as something ‘new’, something different to Hollywood action movies that these participants are curious to see for themselves what they think of this new cultural phenomenon.

There is another type of consumer of ‘new brutalism’ movies. Chapter three considered how films such as *Natural Born Killers*, *Reservoir Dogs*, or *Crash* are marketed as ‘dangerous’, and this promotion of these films in adverts, trailers, reviews, interviews and front page news items does ensure that those people who choose to see such films are aware of the hype and controversy surrounding them. This hype and controversy, however, is more concerned with extreme representations of violence, with ‘risky entertainment that sets out to shock the viewer. These type of consumers may also be curious about the cultural phenomenon of a movie such as *Natural Born Killers*, but, as the following comments suggest, they are also curious to see just how violent and disturbing such movies really are.

Here are two participants who discuss how they deliberately test their response to infamous representations of violence:

I'm interested in my reactions to violent films because I think I don't like them. So, I put myself through it to see if I can tolerate the violence. It's a purposeful position. I adopt this kind of bunker mentality, like I'm steeling myself to not be shocked.

( Participant 1 - FG4)

Yeah, I think I would agree with you there as well and quite often with violent films or movies like this I sort of put myself through seeing the film, to see can I
brave this you know. Everyone else has gone to it, you're a wimp if you don't sit through it. ‘Reservoir Dogs oh yeah, very very violent you know’, like you have to get…

(Participant 2 – FG4)

Yeah, it definitely feels like a bit gruelling... I feel like I've got to see if I can tolerate it...

(Participant 1 - FG4)

This illustration serves to highlight the preparation and conscious desire of certain male participants to not be shocked by the violent content in the target films. This is of interest when male attitudes to thresholds and self-censorship are analysed in the next chapter. Here, it indicates that the concept of monitoring response is one factor that influences male participants to choose to view the target films. And it is a very specific kind of response that these two participants consider here. They use such words as 'tolerate', 'steel', 'brave', to establish the position of the risk-taker as a tough personality, and they augment such words with phrases like 'steeling myself to not be shocked' and 'you're a wimp if you can't sit through it' in order to accentuate the masculine aspect of the risk-taker. The second participant follows up the comment made by the first participant, echoing his point about a 'bunker mentality', and inviting him to feel that he is not alone in his desire to monitor his own response. The second participant re-enforces the position of a masculine risk-taker, but as we can see from the first participant's rejoinder, he is not necessarily agreeing with this point. The fact that he begins his sentence with 'it definitely feels like a bit gruelling' should tell us that he is actually introducing a slightly different approach to the position of the risk-taker. On the one hand, the risk-taker steels himself to tolerate the violence, but on the other hand, the violence can be gruelling, and indeed this participant goes on to say: 'I think I'm not going to be shocked, whereas it does still get to me' (Participant 1 – FG4). Thus, whilst
this participant does choose to see violent movies in order to monitor his own (masculine) response, at the same time he is aware that he is sensitive to media violence.

What this example reveals is that there is a complex series of negotiations taking place when someone chooses to watch a violent movie. Participants engage in a balancing act, where they weigh their perception of the risks of media violence with the reality of their experience of media violence. Indeed, I would argue that for these types of consumers of media violence, their decision to watch a ‘dangerous’ film is based on their wish to engage in a risk-taking activity. I want to talk about this in more detail in a moment. However, in the next section I want to briefly consider the way in which participants construct categories, or types of risk products and risk-takers in order to position themselves in relation to these definitions of media violence.

**Hollywood Versus ‘New Brutalism’**

Participants clearly differentiate between Hollywood action movies, such as the *Die Hard* series, or *Terminator 2*, and the target films. All participants agree dialogue is significant to the target films and their appreciation of them. Evidence of sharp, incisive and intelligent dialogue in such films as *Pulp Fiction* is one of the most significant differences between the target films and Hollywood action movies. In particular, Tarantino is praised for witty, intelligent dialogue and characterisation in his films. One participant explains:
Hollywood action movies are too cartoony at the moment. Something like the *Terminator*, it's just straightforward kind of kids' comic adventure. There is no sophistication in the text, in the dialogue. There's no irony.

(Participant 1 - FG4)

Hollywood action films are considered good fun, but the target films possess more thought provoking representations of violence. The target films are more disturbing and challenging because they are more realistic in their depiction of violence. A number of examples will serve to highlight this:

I went to see *Die Hard with a Vengeance* at the cinema. It was very, very violent but it was so funny, so stupid that it made me laugh. It didn't trigger the same as either *Reservoir Dogs* or *True Romance*. They scared me far more.

(Participant 2 - FG3)

In a lot of Hollywood action films thirty people fall over and that's it, it means nothing: it's violence without consequences.

(Participant 1 - FG3)

*Die Hard with a Vengeance* or *Terminator 2* are very mainstream Hollywood films, whereas these films are more off beat, more on the fringe, so they can get away with saying more. There's nothing that really, really makes you scream inside about those films, whereas *Reservoir Dogs* and *Man Bites Dog* definitely do.

(Participant 3 - FG6)

Participants discuss their heightened levels of fear and adrenalin when viewing the target films as opposed to viewing Hollywood action movies. To be scared, or ‘scream inside’ is a desired response by Participant 3, and other group members imply they know what to expect from Hollywood action movies whereas the target films can take them by surprise. What is more, the target films represent the consequences of violence; these representations of violence are more real and this difference is praised. Two participants discuss this:
I think Hollywood movies are far more offensive personally because of the way they portray violence. There's a total lack of reality. I mean - in *Pulp Fiction* compare John Travolta, when he accidentally blows a guy's head off in the car. In *Die Hard* Bruce Willis never gets covered in bits of bone and brain; his clothes fall off so we get to see a bit more of his body, he gets beaten to a pulp and then gets up and scales an elevator shaft or something.

(Participant 4 - FG3)

People like Schwarzenegger or Stallone don't even look real. They look fantastical. Whereas in *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*, Henry is someone you could see walking down the street. You don't know.

(Participant 1 - FG1)

Thus, realistic representations of violence are subject to praise because they cannot be anticipated, because they are not formulaic, but based on participants' perceptions of real life experiences: it is because of these factors that participants take these films more seriously than their Hollywood counterparts.

However, although participants consider the target films as different to other Hollywood action movies of similar content, this does not mean they do not like to watch Hollywood action movies. As one participant says: ‘The *Terminator* films are mainstream, but they're still interesting and a lot of fun to play around with’ (Participant 4 - FG6). The phrase ‘play around’ serves to highlight the differentiation made by participants between fun films and serious movies. This categorisation of Hollywood action movies as fun, playful and unrealistic works as a way of distinguishing other violent movies as the direct opposite: serious, intelligent and realistic. It is certainly the case that Hollywood action movies are quite different from films such as *Reservoir Dogs*, or *Man Bites Dog* but this does not mean to say that viewers do not ‘play around’ with the textual representations of violence. Indeed, judging from participants’ repeated praise of characterisation, dialogue, direction and acting in the target films it is possible to see that it is their aesthetic appreciation of such films that is one of the reasons for
their enjoyment of this type of risk-taking activity. Aesthetic appreciation is another way to ‘play around’ with responses to violent movies.

The point is that the categorisation of ‘new brutalism’ movies as different from Hollywood action movies ensures that those consumers who choose to see ‘new brutalism’ movies are positioning themselves as a specific type of viewer. By saying that these films are intelligent, sophisticated and realistic in their representation of violence, these participants are associating themselves with types of consumers who can appreciate such films, i.e. intelligent and sophisticated audiences. The pleasure that these participants gain from this type of risk product is a pleasure that they share and agree with in general principle; this pleasure does not involve ‘playing around’ with media violence, but rather involves aesthetic appreciation. This is a particular type of risk-taker; one that is not uncritical of media violence and one that is not uncritical of the benefits of this type of risk-taking behaviour. This deliberate categorisation and definition of types of risk-takers is a means of ensuring that these risk-takers are part of a localised community. Members of this community like violent movies which are not mainstream, which are perceived to be independent and challenging, which do not cater for the masses. Modes of response are based on this social and cultural construction of the target films as different from more mainstream products. We shall see in the next section how viewers of media violence are very aware that there are acceptable and unacceptable responses to viewing violence and that specific types of risk-takers must be conscious of socially acceptable modes of response.

**Audience Awareness**
The process of viewing violence is a conscious activity. Evidence from this study indicates that participants are aware not only of why they choose to see a movie, but also of the specific environment associated with viewing violence. Environment signifies an awareness of context, both in relation to cinema or home viewing and in relation to the context of violent representations themselves. Participants gauge their own response to violence by monitoring audience reaction to violent scenes/images, and they do so whilst at the same time acknowledging the specific context of violence on screen: both activities are comparable. This reveals that viewers of media violence utilize categories, and are sensitive to the social and textual contexts of media violence, situating their own responses in relation to pre-existing types of responses.

Audience awareness is closely linked with physical and emotional responses to violent movies. Participants experience a range of physical and emotional responses, such as anger, fear, excitement, disgust: there is no one response to viewing violence. A key factor in the range of response available is the role of anticipation when viewing violence. Anticipation heightens response, increases excitement and emphasizes the significance of preparation: participants anticipate the worst that can happen and prepare themselves for just such an imaginary event. The significance of real experience emerges as central to understanding fictional violence; in this section the activity of viewing violence can be seen to be influenced by personal experience, and the types of discourses employed by participants would suggest that constructions of the self as sensitive and socially responsible are significant to our understanding of the viewing experience.

Thus, in relation to risk it is possible to see that consumers of media violence self-regulate their responses according to how other people react to virtual risks; here, perceptions of risk influence how viewers perceive themselves and other people in the
viewing environment and a delicate balancing act takes place, similar to the balancing act of John Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis (see chapters 6 and 7). The risk thermostat hypothesis shows how people balance their behaviour according to their perception and understanding of risk. Thus, an understanding of the significance of personal experience of risk, and an exploration of the perceived benefits to risk-taking behaviour combine to influence the outcome of viewing violence. What is more, Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis postulates that ‘risk is an interactive phenomenon’ (Adams, 1995, p.20). Consequently, the way in which people balance risk-taking behaviour has consequences for others. In relation to media violence, this balancing act reveals a number of significant issues, such as public and private responses to violence, trust of self and distrust of others, that help to illuminate why people like to take risks, and why people find violent movies shocking and entertaining.

**Collective Responses**

The majority of participants are aware of audience reaction to violent scenes when at the cinema. Participants mime audience response: placing hands over their eyes, turning away from the screen, squirming in their seats. One participant recalls: ‘In *Pulp Fiction* when they do the insulin shot the whole cinema just erupted’ (Participant 2 - FG6). Two participants discuss a collective response to *Reservoir Dogs* and the infamous ear-amputation scene:

We spent the first hour waiting for the ear-slicing scene, then during this scene the entire cinema was saying oh, oh, this is it, and then after that everyone is oh no, wow....

(Participant 3 - FG4)
The cinema was packed, there was definitely an atmosphere, like going to a gig or a play. There was a tangible tension and then people definitely relaxed a lot after the ear scene.

(Participant 1 - FG4)

For one participant, one of the reasons he chose to watch _Natural Born Killers_ was to monitor his own reaction:

I think with these films, you go in the cinema and are very aware of other people's reactions, you're expecting it. Especially with _Natural Born Killers_. It was banned, and so you're watching the film partly for yourself and partly to see how others react because it has been hyped up. You want to see how your friends react to all the killings. (Participant 1 - FG1)

Participants were aware that viewing violent movies can be a self-conscious activity and that the nature of a film, and in many cases the media hype surrounding its release, contributes to audience awareness. Most participants recall audience response to infamous scenes from movies such as _Reservoir Dogs, Natural Born Killers_, or _Pulp Fiction_ precisely because participants are alert to the shared anticipation and excitement specific to viewing such films. What is more, participants consider how types of people may respond to infamous scenes of violence both within the viewing experience and before and after the viewing experience. For example, one participant discusses his perception of types of risk-takers who choose to watch _Reservoir Dogs_ as follows:

I don't think I've actually ever heard or seen anybody scream or stand up in the cinema and go, 'ah no look they've just cut his ear off and run out the cinema. So, I think everybody's sort of socially prepared for these type of films but obviously when you come out of the cinema you all have to shout all at once until you get to the pub as quickly as possible. I think everybody always starts talking about it and then they all get to the pub and they all start going, 'oh yeah what about that bit', you know, like - when he was going to shoot him in the head or something like that... I think people tend to analyze films too much.
They can't be real, but I think people's reactions - I think people do react differently. I think some people sort of say 'oh yeah I didn't really like that and I wouldn't go and see it again or recommend it to anybody'; and then other people take it quite light heartedly - aren't too bothered about violence, right.

(Participant 2 - FG4)

What about the person sitting next to you - what about (Participant 3) sitting next to you in the cinema?

(Interviewer - FG4)

Yeah, she has to cover her eyes occasionally because, perhaps, I don't know, in China it's a different culture so perhaps they don't have violent films like this. Although having said that I was going to bring in at this point that I've seen a lot of martial art films years ago and they were pretty violent.

(Participant 2 - FG4)

For this participant, there is a particular type of consumer of media violence that he associates himself with; someone who is light hearted, socially prepared, and the kind of person who doesn't scream, or react excessively to scenes, or images of violence. The fact that this participant claims that he is unaware of other people's responses to notorious scenes of violence within the cinematic environment is in many ways an indication of the types of risk-takers he does not wish to associate himself with. When he is asked to consider his female partner's responses to media violence, her, in his view, different response to his own is explained by the fact that she is not socially prepared for this type of excessive violence. However, this participant then goes on to discuss the gory violence in martial arts films, and his partner confirms this; she thinks that martial arts films are 'more gory' (Participant 3 – FG4) than the target films. There is clearly a contradiction here, and what this serves to highlight is this participant wishes to align himself with the socially prepared, with the types of viewers who do not cover their eyes, or scream, or take representations of violence too seriously. These are the types of viewers who can go to the pub, who this participant would wish to socialize with. He explains his own partner's different response in relation to her lack of social
awareness or preparation for the violence in the target films, and yet this leads him to
c onsider the ‘gory’ violence of martial arts films, exactly the type of risk product which
his partner is familiar with. The point is that this denial and contradiction serves to
highlight how this participant does not wish to acknowledge that his partner belongs to
a different type of consumer; she is someone who is ‘bothered about violence’,
someone who isn’t ‘right’ in this context.

The Significance of Context

Context is a key issue when considering the activity of viewing violence. Context is closely linked to environment. Certain films and certain friends do not go
together. One participant cites an example of seeing the film Braveheart (Mel Gibson,
1995) with a friend who called out and laughed at the violence. Whilst this may have
been appropriate to a film such as Pulp Fiction, this participant felt embarrassed at his
friend’s inappropriate response to this movie. He explains:

I went to see Braveheart not long ago with a couple of mates and thoroughly
enjoyed it. But, what really annoyed me was that one of my friends sat through
all the battle scenes saying: ‘oh yes, see his head come off, oh brilliant, oh look
at all that blood’, and I was thinking ‘shut up’. This is not the sort of film where
you want to be doing this. You should be saying: ‘oh those poor people laying
down their lives’, not ‘oh cool, did you see his arm fly off’.

(Participant 3 - FG4)

Another participant comments on the ear-amputation scene in Reservoir Dogs:

The TV we watch is so aggressive and Tarantino’s films are like that too. The
films are TV in the way they move at a fighting pace. People my age don’t really
dwell on the ear-slicing scene, but when older people see that they think it was a graphic scene, and then they walk out and ask the reaction of kids and they say: ‘Great, I loved it’.

(Participant 3 - FG1)

For this participant, an older generation is not equipped to respond to the movie in the same way his peers are: they have not been taught what to expect, or told how to anticipate the ‘fighting pace’ of this film: an older generation does not understand the cultural context of the movie. Whilst this comment is not validated by other group members, it highlights a notion of individuality and distinctiveness concerning this participant’s own ‘generation’ and a desire to retain the cult (i.e. youth) status of Tarantino's movies. Terms such as ‘aggressive’ and ‘move at a fighting pace’ help to situate these films with a particular type of risk-taker, someone who is alert to this new type of entertainment, who, to refer to the earlier participant in the previous section, ‘aren’t too bothered about violence, right’.

As the first example illustrates, laughter is a common response participants notice and question. Certain movies generate acceptable laughter, such as *Pulp Fiction*, whilst others, such as *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* or *Braveheart* do not, and to laugh at inappropriate places risks censure from other members of the audience. Two participants discuss how sensitive they become to unwanted noise and inappropriate laughter:

I get hyper-sensitive when I'm watching a film and I can hear the slightest noise anywhere - it drives me absolutely mad. The worst film I ever saw was *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974). Everybody in the audience just seemed to be laughing constantly, as loud as possible, just to impress their mates; to say: ‘I'm not affected by this, it doesn't upset me at all’. I wished they'd just shut up and watch the film. It is a social activity but, you know, keep your (social side) out.

(Participant 4 - FG6)
There's also something, for example in Braveheart. A guy falls to his death and everybody laughed at that and I felt as if maybe I should laugh with them, and I did. I can't understand why I did that. I suppose you try to fit in with everybody else so you're not left out.

(Participant 3 - FG6)

It is the social context of the viewing experience that sets up this understanding of appropriate/inappropriate responses to media violence. The first speaker wants to disassociate himself from normative responses to horror films; he is aware that certain risk-takers perceive such films as an opportunity to show how 'lighthearted' types of media violence can be, and, significantly, how 'socially prepared' (Participant 2 – FG4) they are for the accepted response to such a horror film. Once again, it is this sense of testing responses, of identifying categories of audiences and situating oneself in a specific category by responding in certain ways, in this instance laughter, that is most apparent here. For the first speaker, it is his identification of this type of young male horror fan who wishes to impress his mates with his lighthearted responses to media violence which allows him to situate his own response as opposite to this, i.e. mature and sensitive, even 'hypersensitive' to the social activity of viewing violence. It is interesting that the second speaker follows up this comment with a personal example of the significance of context. He too wishes to show that he is a sensitive and mature risk-taker, only this time this participant does not offer an example of his observation of others, but rather shows that in his ability to recognize his own weakness he is demonstrating that he has learnt the correct mode of response. This participant clearly does not want to associate himself with this type of immature and insensitive risk-taker; he confesses to a moment of weakness where he wished to 'fit in with everybody else', but now sees that there are other types of risk-takers, as exemplified by the first participant.
Participants place specific emphasis on the correct way to respond to certain violent films; sensitivity to the context of violence is significant, and an awareness of those moviegoers who do understand this significance places all the more emphasis on the moviegoer who knows how to respond appropriately to specific scenes. In the case of laughter and the context of violence, participants cite their annoyance and disgust at inappropriate laughter because it signifies the fine line between legitimate and unacceptable response to fictional violence. Aware of societal/cultural consensus of consumers of violent films, and conscious of their own perceptions of risk-takers participants become hypersensitive to how they should respond, and show an ability to monitor other responses and censure that which is inappropriate to a specific category of risk-taker, or to the context of representations of violence. In all the examples cited, no participant compared an awareness of laughter and screen violence with laughter and other movie genres. This laughter is accompanied by a visually violent scene, and is recognized as different. Indeed, as the above example illustrate, even within the context of media violence, there are further distinctions to be made. As one participant says: 'That kind of response is alright in Pulp Fiction, but if everybody starts going "ah, please" in the middle of Man Bites Dog you'd go mental' (Participant 4 - FG6).

**Gender Awareness**

It is possible to see in the previous section that some male participants associate types of responses with types of risk-takers, in this instance young males. Other participants also use certain types of categories to distinguish between the way men and
women react to representations of violence. Men are perceived as having little reaction to violence, whereas women are more voluble and physical in their response to violence. Two participants explain:

I pay a lot of attention to the way other people react in the cinema. I think there is a difference between the way men and women react to violence and I think a lot of it is a conditioned response. It's okay for women to scream but a lot of men don't feel comfortable doing that kind of thing.

(Participant 4 - FG3)

I really loved Braveheart; it was very violent, very gory, but I really enjoyed it - we were hiding under our coats - it was very gory. I noticed other people, especially men sit there and have to watch it. We were like this – 'Oh my god that's disgusting' - they were like (mimics serious expression, pursed lips). I was looking around at people and they were half-watching me.

( Participant 2 - FG3)

This conscious awareness of other moviegoers and the issue of gender becomes a subject groups debate at length. For example, in one all-male group, one participant said he knew of a female friend whose response was noticeable because it was extreme, and other group members laugh at this comment, also citing examples of other women they know who have similar responses when viewing violence. One participant claims if he goes to the cinema with male friends he is aware that their reaction is a positive reaction, i.e. 'that's cool', whereas if he goes to the cinema with his girlfriend, or in mixed gender company, he is aware that female reactions are different: 'Girls don't like it when someone gets shot' (Participant 3 - FG1).

Some male participants claim they do not notice audience response to violent scenes, however on closer inspection these admissions reveal how aware male participants really are of the shared activity of viewing violence. For example, one male participant comments:
If I'm watching a film, I don't notice what other people are doing. The only time I do notice is when I feel something like a jump, you know, you feel everyone else doing the same thing. But other than that I don't actually look at what other people are doing. I get the impression they're not doing anything except watching the film. (Participant 3 - FG3)

This participant concentrates on his own non-responsive state when viewing violence. He speaks as an individual member of the audience, and for the audience as a whole. He claims to not notice audience response, yet shows just such an awareness; as soon as he claims not to notice other moviegoers, he mentions audience fear and shock; if 'everyone is doing the same' then surely everyone, despite his claims to the contrary, must be aware of the social activity of viewing violence.

A further example will illustrate this point. One couple debate the issue of audience awareness and the process of viewing violence. The male partner claims:

I don't find myself shocked very often by violence in films. I think if you're shocked you might look around for a reinforcement of your feelings. But, I'm not aware of why I should be looking to see other people's reactions if I'm not reacting myself. (Participant 1 - FG3)

Because he is not shocked by violence, this participant does not feel the need to monitor his response in relation to other moviegoers. In contrast, his partner verbally and physically responds to violence on screen. She replies to his comment as follows:

If I see something which is shocking then I'll yell out or laugh. It's the shock that makes me laugh. I'll bring my knees up or I'll hide under a coat and then I'll look around to see if anyone is looking at me or other people are doing the same. (Participant 5 - FG3)
His partner's comment of her reaction to violent scenes suggests this male participant is aware of the person sitting next to him when watching the target films, if only from the perspective that his reaction is the opposite to his partner's response. This participant claims he focuses on the movie alone - yet when engaged in conversation with his partner about this subject, he reveals an acute awareness of her reaction to violent scenes and his own non-responsive viewing process. Indeed this may suggest that this participant models his own behaviour on what he perceives as opposite to his partner's reaction to violence in the target films: by reacting in an opposite way to his female partner this participant highlights his own male behaviour.

Thus, it can be seen that participants construct types of risk-takers based on their perceptions of audience reactions to media violence. These types of risk-takers are subdivided into levels of response, for example those who laugh at inappropriate moments, or those who take representations of violence too seriously, and into male and female response, for example, those male risk-takers who show no response to media violence, and those female risk-takers who squirm and squeal at representations of media violence. It is possible to see from the types of discourses used by participants that this categorization of risk-takers confirms gender stereotypes and helps to situate participants' own responses to media violence within a desired category of risk-taker. Male participants wish to be perceived as sensitive, mature, unresponsive, and socially prepared in their reactions to media violence; female participants wish to be perceived as sensitive, mature, responsive and socially prepared in their reactions to media violence. There is only one difference between both sets of risk-takers. This should alert us to the possibility that the issue of gender may appear clearly defined, but on further inspection proves complex and variable and that participants construct a definition of types of risk-takers in order to mask other responses to media violence.
Such is the case when physical and emotional responses are examined in the next section. Here, participants reveal very different responses to those charted above.

**Physical and Emotional Responses**

In this section I want to examine the perceived benefits of risk-taking behaviour. Such benefits include the significance of physical and emotional responses to viewing violence, and the importance of anticipation, a preparatory mechanism that aids participants’ enjoyment of media violence. Here, we can see that despite the fact that in previous sections participants discussed types of viewers along gender lines, when it comes to actual responses to viewing violence there is little noticeable difference. The perceived benefits of this type of virtual risk-taking behaviour blur category distinctions.

Participants commented on a range of physical and emotional responses to viewing fictional violence. For example, participants note their heart beats faster; they feel hot and cold; tense; nauseous; angry; satisfied; fearful; excited. Group members may flinch; curl up in their seats; close their eyes; half cover their eyes with their hands; cover their mouths with their hands or bury their head in a coat. Such comments were substantiated when participants viewed specific scenes in the discussion. For example, when participants saw a scene from *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* they exhibited distinctive bodily reactions: participants touched their eyes, ears, covered their mouths, steeled themselves and showed tense facial muscles. Not only did participants exhibit such responses during screenings, the memory of certain violent images was so strong
many participants re-enacted their physical response during the discussion. One group member even claimed she felt a specific sense of smell, a smell that made her put her hand to her mouth as she described it in the discussion.

A number of examples will help to illustrate the variety of response when viewing violence. In the following extract, participants consider how increased adrenalin levels lead to feelings of excitement, dizziness, nausea, and alertness. Participants discuss these responses as if they are natural reactions to risk-taking behaviour:

What physical emotions do you feel when you see a violent scene in a film – do you sweat, does your heart beat faster, that kind of thing?

(Interviewer – FG3)

I guess my heart beats faster. I have never really tried to describe it really - if I had the feeling now I'd know it immediately but I guess it is based around my heart beat - don't sweat though.

(Participant 1 – FG3)

One woman last week said she smelt things.

(Interviewer – FG3)

That's a natural reaction, yeah, yeah. Senses are heightened =

(Participant 4 – FG3)

= If I see something really violent I start to feel ill, my stomach feels like its going to be sick. If it is really gory and horrible then I'll feel quite dizzy. When you get that horrible dread-like feeling and your stomach just sinks, that's what I feel.

(Participant 2 – FG3)

Sometimes I cringe slightly if I can - say a particular body part is being violated, then I cringe at that time, especially.... it's a sort of physical shrinking of some kind.

(Participant 3 – FG3)

More especially that particular body part.

(Participant 1 – FG3)

Testicles mainly.

(Participant 4 – FG3)
I get palpitations; it's quite awful to admit but I often feel a sense of excitement when I watch violence. If I'm totally truthful it's suppressed anger working its way out. When I go to see a violent film I often feel quite high after I've seen it...The films can breed excitement.  

(Participant 4 - FG3)

It makes me quite alert as well. I sit up and sort of take notice as well.  

(Participant 3 – FG3)

Yeah, you do feel that kind of heightened awareness, I think, after you've seen violence.  

(Participant 4 – FG3)

These participants discuss their physical and emotional reactions to media violence in a relaxed fashion. As one person speaks, another joins in to confirm or add to the discussion. Neither male or female participants attempt to differentiate their responses along gender lines; instead, feeling nauseous, alert or excited are considered to be natural reactions to this type of risk-taking behaviour. Categories are no longer important in this instance; heightened senses are the key to understanding the shared awareness of the perceived benefits to risk-taking behaviour. The significance of the personal pronoun, the attention to the body and the use of descriptive details to communicate the feelings of excitement and tension these participants feel within the viewing experience all point towards a shared understanding of the physical experience of viewing violence. This experience may be uncomfortable at times, but this is acknowledged as part of the enjoyment of risky entertainment. As one participant explains when watching *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*:

I can just feel a prickly sensation on my neck, feel the colour just draining out of you. I mean it's just awful. There is a slow, really obvious build-up to the film - you know what's going to happen, you just know you can't stop it. It's kind of fascinating.  

(Participant 4 - FG6)
What participants describe here, are a range of physical and emotional responses which are very powerful and memorable. Certain scenes from specific films produce intense responses, and part of the process of viewing violence is to anticipate and explore such feelings. From the range of examples cited here it is possible to see participants gain different levels of enjoyment from experiencing intense physical and/or emotional responses. Evidence suggests participants may expect, even desire, to be shocked or excited, to feel a rush of emotions when viewing fictional violence.

Although both male and female participants discussed response to viewing violence equally, there were one or two noticeable differences in methods of response. For example, many female participants use their hands to cover their eyes, mouth, or ears when watching a violent scene. Whilst some men discussed and exhibited similar signs during the focus groups, there were far fewer male participants who responded in a similar fashion: protecting the face with hands appeared to be more specific to female participants. Another difference to emerge from the focus groups was the way in which female participants often responded in a more emotive way to images of violence than male participants. At first this appeared to be a stark difference in response, but as the groups progressed, more male participants revealed emotive responses to fictional violence and appeared to share what had at first appeared to be a specifically female trait in the discussions. What this may suggest is that whilst other areas of discussion highlight gender difference, the immediacy of discussing physical and/or emotional response to viewing violence proves to be an area which male and female participants feel confident and uninhibited in discussing. Indeed, participants can be seen to trust their responses to media violence because these responses are based on personal experience. The next chapter will reveal how personal experience is a key factor in management of risk, and viewers balance their behaviour placing weight on their
perceptions of risk, both on a social and individual level. Here, the balance can be seen in favour of individual experience of the benefits of risk; whereas earlier, the balance was in favour of social perceptions of risk-takers and acceptable responses to viewing violence.

*The Role of Anticipation*

In the last section of this chapter I want to consider how the preparatory mechanism of anticipation is significant to our understanding of the benefits to risk-taking behaviour. Evidence from the focus groups reveals that anticipation has a key role to play in physical and/or emotional responses to fictional violence. Group members emphasize the importance of anticipation when experiencing physical emotions, and they claim this can be part of the enjoyment of viewing the target films. When at the cinema, participants recall placing their hands over their eyes, turning away from the screen, and gripping their companion's arm to both alleviate and heighten their sense of excitement and fear. When at home, participants recall running out of a room when they anticipate certain violent scenes in a film and such an experience is both exciting and frightening, and is specific to home viewing.

When anticipating violence, participants imagine possible outcomes of events, attempting to guess how far the director will go in utilizing the visual effects of violence. One participant explains: 'I anticipate something violent is going to happen all the time. The worst, you know, like they're going to decapitate someone and eat their brains' (Participant 2 - FG4). Many participants imagine the worst possible outcome for
a violent scene, playing a game with individual expectation and the director's imagination.

Media hype and friends' response can influence anticipation, and many participants claim they had heard about the violence in certain target films before seeing them - *Reservoir Dogs* and the ear-amputation scene being one example. However, this does not necessarily lead to an attenuation of response. Certainly, comments detailed in this chapter would indicate knowing the outcome of an infamous scene can add to the excitement and range of emotions participants experience when viewing violence. Although this is not the case for all participants, many spoke of the build-up of tension and anticipation in the audience when viewing *Reservoir Dogs* or *Pulp Fiction* and this was seen as part of the excitement of viewing such movies. Prior knowledge of a violent film can engender shared anticipation which in turn heightens physical and emotional response.

Discussion of specific scenes reveals the way in which participants fuse anticipation and emotional response with close attention to the aesthetic constructs in a film. The male homosexual rape scene in *Pulp Fiction* produced a number of responses. Here is one extract provided as an example of the ways in which anticipation of a rape scene can affect male responses to this type of risk:

In *Pulp Fiction* there's the bit where Marcellus and Bruce Willis are taken by these people and put into a pawn shop, and you feel 'oh shit, they're going to be tortured to death' and you're tensing up and you're feeling what's happening in this room is going to be terrible. And then Marcellus is taken away and you hear this squealing voice and you feel he's being killed. This is like hell, I can't stand to look, and when you realize what's really happening you laugh to release the tension because what you were expecting hasn't actually happened.

(Participant 3 - FG6)
Basically we're boys together and the two characters are unwilling participants and that scene gets you to sit back and think, fuck this. It's a relief that they actually get out of it and you think ah ha, your comeuppance.

(Participant 1 - FG6)

But you do get a sense when watching, that whole anticipation bit - it's not like a sudden shock like - I mean much more than these films - a film that I found really scary was *Silence of the Lambs*. I mean, just the way like towards the ending...you think 'oh my God'. I was shaking a bit.

(Participant 4 – FG6)

And that's because you don't anticipate it coming?

(Interviewer – FG6)

Well that's basically a horror film I think, whereas these, I mean the unpleasantness you feel is because you kind of know what's going to happen and you see it and you're going to go 'oh my God, oh', you know, and then you get a sense that somebody is going to get their comeuppance, as you say, and you say 'hey it's going to happen, come on, get a bit of this' and that's a real different kind of experience altogether.

(Participant 4 – FG6)

I think it's just a case of what's implied is worse than what happens. The scene gets your mind going and then pulls back and you think, god, thank goodness for that.

(Participant 2 - FG6)

In this scene two heterosexual men are captured and one is raped by two sadomasochists in a pawn shop. Here, the rape scene is discussed as unpleasant and hell-like; participants note their increasing sense of anticipation and dread as the scene reveals the extent of what both heterosexual characters can expect: rape and torture. When Butch (Bruce Willis) escapes during the rape of Marcellus (Ving Rhames) it is a matter of honour that he kill his potential torturers and save Marcellus any further degradation. Anticipation and expectation are heightened when it is none other than Bruce Willis, well known for his action roles, who retaliates with force and such action creates a sense of satisfaction and excitement for these participants. The fact that these participants have prepared themselves for an act of violence far worse than is shown only increases their sense of anticipation and adrenalin. Other films may operate in
different ways, but here these male participants consider their anticipation of the retaliation and revenge by the two central characters. Thus, these participants feel a sense of dread and horror to begin with and this is heightened by the fact that they can anticipate the successful outcome, indeed anticipate their own sense of relief when Bruce Willis stabs one rapist, and Ving Rhames shoots another in the groin. This build up of anticipation and heightened physical and emotional responses to this scene serves to emphasize the benefits of viewing violence; it is a rollercoaster ride, with fear and dread at one end of the scale, and relief and elation at the other.

When these male participants discuss their anticipation and responses to this scene, they do so by comparing their sense of relief with what they expected to happen. It is clear that they expect something worse that male rape. What this something worse is is not discussed here; it is left unsaid. For other participants, that sense of ‘something worse’ is more easy to articulate in relation to personal experience. One participant explains her reaction to the use of knives in individual scenes and this reaction is based on her personal experience of violence which involved knives:

If it is a knife scene, it really makes me feel very confused and upset. If it is a gun, then I feel very different. It is the context of the violence - (with a knife scene) I kind of freeze and it gives me an all over feeling of great distress.

( Participant 5 - FG3)

Other group members agree; their physical emotions are heightened when knives, or familiar, household weapons are used to torture someone and this is because participants can relate to a knife as a weapon, and can also relate to the pain such a weapon inflicts, whereas participants consider guns to be unfamiliar and
depersonalizing when used in the target films, and this is because guns are so rarely seen in the United Kingdom. Two participants explain:

I don't like one-on-one violence when it looks like it really hurts, and they use knives. Shooting's not the problem - it's torture or instant pain.  
(Participant 2 - FG3)

Guns are something that no one here has any experience of, I certainly don't, but knives - everybody's cut themselves. The idea of being attacked by a knife is something everyone can visualize.  
(Participant 1 - FG3)

What such comments reveal is that participants will consider individual scenes, sequences within scenes and choice of weapons in relation to real life experience. This has implications for methods of response to violent movies, for participants' physical and emotional reactions to viewing violence are dependent on context and reference to individual experience. Response to fictional violence is collateral with a personal understanding of violence in real life, and although participants may not directly relate to acts of fictional violence, they bring personal knowledge, such as cutting oneself with a knife, to their interpretation of violent acts. In the next chapter it is possible to see that participants regulate and manage risk based on personal experience and understanding of violence. We shall see that participants have thresholds in relation to violence, and that once this threshold is reached, self-regulation becomes a key reactive mechanism to balancing risk-taking behaviour.

**Conclusion**
Viewing violence is a social activity. Societal/cultural agreement about the target films as extreme and brutalising ensures that most participants are drawn to see these films precisely because of this factor: participants chose to see a film such as *Natural Born Killers* because it is perceived as 'risky' entertainment. There is a cultural cachet attached to movies such as *Pulp Fiction*, and peer pressure is prominent. However, other factors such as characterisation, dialogue, and direction indicates participants are active consumers, and not wholly influenced by media hype and peer pressure. No participant claimed they chose to see the target films because they were violent; many other social and cultural factors influenced their decision-making processes. One of the most significant considerations for consumers of media violence is that the target films are perceived as different to the usual Hollywood fare, and participants specifically praise the intelligence, humour, dialogue, acting and direction of 'new brutalism' movies. They may enjoy Hollywood action movies, but the target films are more intellectually satisfying, and more demanding of the viewer.

This categorisation of risk products also leads to a categorisation of risk-takers, and participants align themselves with a specific type of risk-taker, one that is intelligent, sensitive and mature. This is an example of 'social competence' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p.57). Participants understand that there are correct acts one can perform in social situations, and the competence of a risk-taker depends on their understanding of methods of response to media violence. Participants make choices and there are rules and conventions to talking about and actually watching types of media violence; these rules and conventions must be followed if participants are to justify their risk-taking behaviour.

Participants are aware of other moviegoers' responses to fictional violence and monitor their own response according to perceptions of risk-takers and risk products.
Participants appear to distrust other risk-takers, particularly types of risk-takers who do not fit in with participants’ own perception of acceptable responses to media violence. However, participants do trust individual responses, and this leads to a greater degree of trust in other people’s physical and emotional responses to media violence. Perceptions of risk-takers may be dependent on a social awareness of correct and incorrect responses to risk, but, conversely, an understanding of individual responses to risk serves to highlight the shared experience of physical and emotional responses to fictional violence. This is an example of balancing behaviour in relation to risk and media violence (Buckingham, 1996; Adams, 1995). It is also an example of the way in which consumers of media violence situate their own private responses in relation to the public arena of risk. In a sense, participants are social actors, and they shift between social perceptions of risk and personal understanding of risk. These two factors, rather than working against each other, compliment risk perception and management, and illustrate that risk is an interactive phenomenon.
Testing Boundaries

The management of risk is a complex and sensitive process. Risk-takers are engaged in a delicate balancing act, one which involves personal and social perceptions of risk. Viewers of media violence are also engaged in this balancing act; they balance personal experience of media violence with an understanding of the social consequences of watching a form of entertainment that is perceived to be 'risky'. This balancing act enables consumers of media violence to test their responses and to recognize boundaries to what they perceive to be acceptable representations of violence. The process of recognizing such thresholds is part of the management of risk, and this serves to highlight the significance of self-regulation, or self-censorship of representations of violence.

In this study, the reactive mechanisms of thresholds and self-censorship prove to be central to the process of viewing violence. 'Thresholds' signify different types and contexts of violence which participants find personally disturbing. 'Self-censorship' signifies methods of choice in relation to watching/not watching violent movies. Both areas are fluid and dependent on context, and both areas denote complexities of response to fictional violence. Examples of types and contexts of violence participants find disturbing reveal there are social and personal thresholds to viewing violence. Social thresholds indicate participants identify a type of violence they find personally disturbing, but this violence is a common fear shared by a number of other participants; the process of identifying this threshold is collective rather than subjective. Personal
thresholds indicate participants identify a type of violence they find personally disturbing, but unlike social thresholds, reasons for this can be traced to a subjective experience unique to that individual.

Participants use a number of different methods with which to self-censor, ranging from self-censoring types of movies, for example horror, to types of images, for example knives. Self-censorship involves physical barriers, where participants use their body to withdraw from viewing violence, and mental barriers, where participants choose to concentrate on anything other than violent depictions on screen. There are also methods of not self-censoring, where participants prepare for violent representations they wish to watch uninterrupted. The two factors most significant to self-censorship are preparation and anticipation, and these factors enable participants to take an active role in the process of viewing violence.

Thresholds and self-censorship demonstrate boundary testing. It is through testing boundaries that thresholds are identified and self-censorship utilized. Anticipation and preparation are part of boundary testing, enabling participants to activate consumer choice. It is through boundary testing that participants experience a sense of achievement and/or liberation and this experience is significant to why participants choose to view violent movies. This chapter will outline these reactive mechanisms to media violence and consider the range of discourses used by participants to differentiate between types of consumers, or 'risk-takers'. John Adams' risk thermostat hypothesis (Adams, 1995, p.15) will prove to be of particular relevance here. The risk thermostat 'is analogous to the behaviour of a thermostatically controlled system' (Adams, 1995, p.15). Individuals adjust the setting of their risk thermostat according to their individual and social perception of risk; a propensity to take risks is balanced against the perceived danger of the risk act: each individual varies their risk-
taking behaviour according to this set of principles. Evidence from the discussion groups will indicate participants utilize the reactive mechanisms of thresholds and self-censorship in order to test the setting of their risk thermostat. Indeed, the function of these reactive mechanisms is to highlight risk and reward and to place emphasis on the pleasure to be gained from risk management. This chapter will explore why boundary testing is inherent to the process of viewing violence.

**Social/Personal Thresholds**

*Male and Female Response to Rape: A Social Threshold*

Social thresholds are part of the management of risk. When an individual shares a fear of a violent act with another individual, and when many individuals express a dislike of such violent acts being depicted on film or television programmes then this is an example of a social threshold. Social thresholds are usually concerned with social taboos, for example rape, child abuse, or incest. What these collective thresholds share is the way in which participants identify a level or type of violence they find personally disturbing, yet these thresholds cannot be traced to subjective experiences; they are social taboos, reinforced by the very existence of the social threshold itself. Thus, social thresholds enable participants to share a collective fear which is recognized and validated by other group members.

For example, one group member comments: 'I'm really not convinced it's safe to portray violence against children and animals on film' (Participant 2 - FG5). For many participants it is the thought of a film which exhibits cruelty to children or
animals, rather than specific instances themselves, which defines this threshold. As one participant explains: 'If I knew that there was going to be a kid tortured in a film I wouldn't go and see it in the first place' (Participant 3 - FG1). The implicit question is: would anyone choose to see such a film if it did exist? For all participants, the answer is negative, and by identifying such an emotive threshold, participants can share in a feeling of social responsibility and group acceptance.

The most common type of violence participants identify as personally disturbing is violence towards women, in particular rape. For heterosexual male participants, rape is a complex issue, and manifests itself as a desire to protect fictional female characters who are attacked/sexually attacked, a desire which can be traced to social/cultural typecasts of the male as protector and the female as the protected. Rape is also a complex issue for female participants, generating both fear and anger at fictional and real incidents of rape. As with male participants, social/cultural typecasts of women as victims influence female participants' response to the issue of rape.

Many male participants refer to the scene in *True Romance* (Tony Scott, 1993) where Alabama (Patricia Arquette) is beaten, and in turn beats and kills a gangster. As men, these participants wish to save Alabama. Seeing a woman brutally beaten brings out strong feelings of anger and a practical desire to protect the character. However, this scene also brings out feelings of guilt; Alabama is a beautiful woman, and many male participants are attracted to Alabama, yet at the same time angry that she is treated in such a brutal way in this scene. Such ambivalent feelings provoke complex responses to this scene. Two participants comment:

In *True Romance*, when Patricia Arquette is getting beaten up, you get to see a bit too much violence. It's really hard to watch because you really like her at that point in the film. You want to help her but you can't. You're helpless.
You fall in love with Alabama. Or at least I did. She's so sweet and nice and caring. You don't want to watch her getting beaten up, and when you're watching the violence you expect another character to beat up the bad guy - not just punch him, but cut him in half. The violence provokes a reaction.

(Participant 3 - FG1)

Here, these two male participants comment on their attraction to the character of Alabama, whilst at the same time referring to a strong desire to protect her from other male characters in this fictional setting. The scene itself provokes such a reaction because Alabama is depicted as both sexual and aggressive in this scene; her clothes are torn to reveal her body in a provocative way, yet the violence towards Alabama is extreme and unsettling, and as she herself becomes violent, she is transformed from a stereotypical female victim to an atypical female aggressor. This provokes a complex reaction from both participants. They feel 'helpless'; they will another male character to 'beat up the bad guy' so that Alabama can be saved, and yet she is the one who saves herself. It is possible to see from the way that they describe her as 'sweet and nice' and the way they express their attachment to this character, 'you fall in love with Alabama', that both male participants are situating their own responses in relation to distinctive gender stereotypes, in this instance the beautiful victim and the protective male.

The same desire to protect the female victim from sexual violence can be mapped throughout the discussion – 'the violence provokes a reaction' (Participant 3 - FG1). Two male participants discuss their response to fictional representations of rape:

In *Man Bites Dog* the rape scene was very simple, in black and white, and for some reason I just kept trying to look away. I almost felt like I wanted to jump in the film and get the woman out.

(Participant 3 - FG6)
Rape scenes affect me two ways. I either don't like it because they diminish the effect of a rape by titillating it, but at the same time if it is done horrifically, like I believe it should be, it fucking horrifies me.

(Participant 1 - FG6)

Do you feel that you want to protect the victims involved in the scenes?

(Interviewer – FG6)

Well yeah, that was the point with Henry (in Henry Portrait of a Serial Killer), that was why I said I couldn't identify with him but I could identify with his actions, because basically it is a masculine trait you should protect women, you know... I'm not saying it's right, you know, that masculine construction, but to me that was the only decent thing that he did do in the film... that was to me the only time that he behaved in a way that I would accept as normal, he went in and he did protect her and at the same time I thought it was good that they showed that he lost the fight technically when he got hit with a bottle and she was actually the one that sort of saved the day as it were.

(Participant 1 – FG6)

What we can see from this discussion is that male participants have a complex reaction to representations of female rape. The first participant is struck by the realistic representation of rape in the film Man Bites Dog and feels so strongly about this that he describes wanting to ‘jump in the film’ and save the female victim. It is his disturbed reaction to this scene that provokes this strong reaction. The second participant discusses the validity of showing female rape scenes at all; rape is not titillating, rape is horrific; and he emphasizes his position by saying ‘it fucking horrifies me’. Once again this is a strong reaction to this type of violence. However, although this participant wishes to act out the role of the male protector, he is aware that he is being positioned in this role; the ‘masculine construction’ he refers to shows an awareness of manipulation and of categorization of males as protectors and females as the protected. The reference to the character of Henry shows this participant’s ambivalent response; he identifies with the serial killer at one point in the film, the point where he attempts to protect the female victim, and yet he celebrates the female victim’s ability to rescue herself from
this situation; she is not so helpless after all. Thus, there is a sense of acceptance and rejection of this ‘masculine construction’ in this discussion.

Female participants discuss the issue of rape from an emotional and critical perspective, both exhibiting fear and anger, and questioning the validity of filmic representations of rape. One female participant actively chooses not to watch films which contain rape and feels this is not a subject for film makers to portray. Watching rape scenes in films such as *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988) or *Man Bites Dog* (Belvaux et al., 1992) has had a lasting effect on this participant. She says: ‘I hate the personalization of violence: I watch a film like *Man Bites Dog* and think it's me, and it makes me scared for weeks’ (Participant 5 - FG2). She echoes many female group members when she criticizes the common occurrence of rape in movies: ‘Let's slot in a rape scene’ (Participant 5 - FG2) and fears women and men will become desensitized to violence towards women.

*The Accused* attracted a number of comments by female participants, comments which highlight female participants' fear of rape in real life and their criticisms of the way in which rape is represented on screen. A number of illustrations will serve to highlight this:

I watched *The Accused* and I was upset for about two weeks afterwards. It was terrible. I don't like the feeling I get from it. I don't like my personal reaction: 'oh God if I watch the rape it could happen'. I don't want to picture what happens. It puts me in a bad mood and makes me feel annoyed and upset.  
(Participant 2 - FG3)

*The Accused* is the only film I can think of that I've not seen on purpose because I knew it was all about rape. I don't want to see Jodie Foster get raped because she's someone I admire. I think she's a strong person.  
(Participant 4 - FG3)

I don't particularly enjoy watching women being raped, but for me it depends so much on context. I found *The Accused* very, very, very upsetting but one of the
reasons I found it upsetting is that we only get to see the rape through the eyes of a man. It's only when the guy stands up in court and says: 'I'm the hero, I'm the saviour' that the rape happens. Something like Straw Dogs is very distressing; it's about ownership and territory and that extends to women in the film. I think any threshold I have is based on context. I mean, I'm far more offended by Pretty Woman than I am Straw Dogs.

(Participant 1 - FG5)

The first female participant identifies the social threshold of rape as an act of violence she fears will occur in real life; watching The Accused has dramatic repercussions. The second female participant cites this film as the only film she deliberately chose not to see because it contained the threshold of rape; building a relationship with the central character in this film would prove problematic and serve to highlight women as victims, not a role this participant associates with Jodie Foster, who is someone she admires – 'a strong person'. The third female participant contextualizes the issue of rape and criticizes specific films - Straw Dogs (Sam Peckinpah, 1971), Pretty Woman (Gary Marshall, 1990) - for their misogynistic portrayal of women; representations of fictional rape are distressing, but certain contexts are more offensive than others. All three examples indicate how participants identify the social threshold of rape, and choose to self-censor, a reactive measure which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. What these three participants also share is an understanding of the categorization of women as victims and a rejection of such a categorization. They all uses terms which emphasize their impatience with this type of victim. For example all are annoyed or angry with having to consider representations of rape; and for two of the participants it is the strength of women, rather than their weakness that they wish to emphasize: Jodie Foster is a ‘strong person’, she does not need a man as her ‘saviour’.

Thus, it is possible to see that as with male participants' discussion of female rape, female participants also question the validity of this masculine and feminine
construction; not all women are victims and not all women need to be saved by a male in movies which depict female rape. However, this questioning of gender constructs did not lend itself to a consideration of representations of male rape in movies. Neither male or female participants discussed fictional representations of male rape as a social threshold. One male participant, when referring to Marcellus (Vick Rhames) in the male rape scene from *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) considers the impact of this rape far less disturbing than representations of female rape. He explains: ‘I suppose technically I didn't bleed for him as much as I would for a woman, I think women are more vulnerable’ (Participant 1 - FG6). Another female participant comments: ‘I thought, thank God it's not a women being raped. Isn't that terrible?’ (Participant 2 - FG3).

Such comments serve to highlight how participants anticipate representations of female rape, and anticipate they will be disturbed by such scenes. This anticipation does not occur with regard to representations of male rape and it is the lack of representations of male rape which participants highlight as a reason why they do not experience such anticipation. Two female participants comment:

Two guys getting raped - we never see that. It's very, very rare you see it. And young men in the audience are going to be embarrassed and uncomfortable and laugh at what is a distressing rape scene.

(Participant 1 - FG5)

It's strange because in *The Accused* I obviously empathized with Jodie Foster, but with the two men in *Pulp Fiction* I didn't empathize with them at all because they were men. I mean it was disturbing and horrible to watch but I didn't have the same feelings as I did when Jodie Foster got raped. It was a different kind of rape, a rape for a reason.

(Participant 3 - FG5)
Here, two participants comment on a lack of empathy or engagement with the male characters in *Pulp Fiction* and they trace this lack to the unfamiliarity of male representations of rape. It is because female representations of rape are more common in movies that these participants can engage with events, understand the ‘reason’ for the rape. The first participant’s perception of male members of the audience and their embarrassed response to this scene corresponds with an absence of response by male participants in the discussion groups to this scene, despite the fact that *Pulp Fiction* is considered to be the most popular movie by participants.

Male rape is not a shared fear because male participants do not express a fear of such a violent attack, and female participants do not express a desire to protect male victims of rape. Indeed it appears as if there is not a discourse participants can share when discussing male rape; fear of such a rape and a desire to protect male victims of rape is not a common topic for discussion. It is female rape which attracts a collective interest and participants’ response to female rape confirms societal/cultural fears of this act of violence. Thus, most male participants wish to act as the protector when viewing female rape scenes and most female participants wish to eschew the subject of rape altogether. However, a resistance to this social construction of female rape can be seen in the way participants’ discuss their uneasiness with this masculine construction. Thus, the social threshold of rape serves to confirm and question social taboos.

**Personal Thresholds**

Personal thresholds re-affirm the effects of personal experience. They also have a significant effect on the way that participants continue to manage risk; personal thresholds influence perceptions of risk because personal experience of violence,
whether involving oneself or other people, is a key factor in how people balance risk-taking behaviour. As John Adams' points out in *Risk*: ‘individual risk-taking decisions represent a balancing act in which perceptions of risk are weighed against a propensity to take risk’ and ‘perceptions of risk are influenced by experience of accident losses – one’s own and others’” (Adams, 1995, p.15). In this section, participants discuss personal experience of violence and how this has shaped the way in which they watch media violence.

The transition from social to personal thresholds reveals that many participants' personal thresholds involve the same types of violence identified as social thresholds in the previous section. An example will illustrate this. One participant reveals:

I really don't like rape scenes now. I have a friend who described her experience of rape; I had no idea it was so traumatic. I used to love *A Clockwork Orange* but now I'd find it difficult to watch it knowing the realities of rape for women.

(Participant 3 - FG1)

The threshold of female rape has been identified as a collective fear by other group members; however, what makes this example different to participants' comments in the previous section is the way in which this participant uses a friend's personal experience to shape his own viewing habits, i.e. he finds it difficult to watch *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) because it contains graphic depictions of rape. The impact of a specific instance of violence has a vivid and lasting effect on this participant, and this personal experience is a main factor in the identification of this threshold. It is this which makes the threshold individual rather than collective.

Many participants have childhood memories which affect personal thresholds. One participant recalls an incident as a child whereby he saw an image of a throat being
cut on TV; the memory is vague, but the impact of seeing this image is such that he will not watch any scene involving this type of violence. He says:

I don't like to see people having their throats cut. You can always tell when that's coming because someone from behind puts a hand over the victim's mouth. I always look away - that is the one thing I don't like to see. I saw something as a child on TV. I remember being quite young and seeing it after school. I'm sure I saw someone get their throat cut. It's the only thing I know I can't really watch.

(Participant 1 - FG3)

Another participant finds the visual effect of blood disturbing. She recalls:

My mum was a nurse in a Chinese hospital, and I saw a lot of blood. I'm always scared of blood, you know, seeing my mother come home and she had been in an operation and sometimes blood would be on her clothes. It makes me scared to see things like that - seeing blood affects me more than anything else.

(Participant 4 - FG4)

This participant does not say what she feared as a child - perhaps that her mother was hurt in some way - however the effect of this memory is such that she identifies the visual effect of blood as a personal threshold.

Real life experience affects thresholds and the viewing process. A number of group members experienced real life violence and this influenced participants in different ways. For example, one participant witnessed a knife attack not long before the discussion and she made a decision not to watch any violent movies after this attack. She explains: 'I have got to the point where I do align violence with the real act and it bothers me' (Participant 1 - FG2). Another woman was attacked and threatened with a knife, and she identifies any violence involving knives as her threshold. Here, personal
experience leads to self-censorship, yet unlike the first participant she does not class all violence as personally disturbing, only specific types. She explains:

I was attacked, and any violence involving knives physically repulses me. It really brings up all sorts of very strange emotions that I never feel at any other time. If there is a knife involved I get quite angry, and it has definitely affected me as a person. I have a lot of violence in me. I kind of will my attack to happen again so that I can act it out. I keep thinking ‘I wish I could have fought back’, and so if I see a rape scene I think, ‘wouldn't it be great if she could just do something violent - do this and fucking do that’.

(Participant 5 - FG3)

Although this participant experiences anger and fear when viewing fictional violence involving knives, and this is directly related to personal experience of violence, as a consumer she re-lives her attack through watching violent movies where the female victim fights back. Anger is deliberately channeled into a fictional scene of violence where women are seen as aggressors – ‘do this and fucking do that’. This participant identifies a personal threshold related to real experience of violence, but it is through this personal threshold that she continues to watch other types of violence, making the process of viewing violence traumatic in certain instances and cathartic in others.

Another participant witnessed real violence but this experience did not effect her viewing habits to any substantial degree. She explains:

I was on the bus one time when a guy was stabbed. I tried to tell the driver to do something about it but you're on a bus and there's very little you can do. I was shaking and in a state of shock after the attack because I knew I had a responsibility and I couldn't fulfil that responsibility. I mean, I've seen violence against friends in the past. I think you learn to avoid violence. I avoid it at any costs. But I go and see these movies because I know it's fiction.

(Participant 3 - FG5)
For this participant, the experience of seeing real violence is traumatic and ensures she avoids potentially violent situations at all costs. However, this experience does not lead to an identification of any specific personal threshold when viewing fictional violence. Violent movies are not real and do not equate with real experience of violence. For a more detailed discussion of participants' response to real violence and their perception of fictional violence see Chapter eleven.

There are two points to be made regarding personal thresholds. First, whilst participants may share similar thresholds to others, i.e. rape, or blood, which could be considered social taboos, personal experience means such thresholds have added significance and re-affirm relationships between personal experience and choices and values made in real life. Second, participants who have experienced/witnessed real violence do not necessarily react in similar ways: some may eschew all violent movies, others self-censor specific types of violence, whilst some participants notice no marked difference in their viewing habits. Clearly, examining personal thresholds produces varied results, and the experience of real violence does not necessarily lead to anti-violence attitudes, although in some instances this is the case. What participants' discussion of personal and social thresholds reveals is that a delicate balancing act takes place, a balancing act that involves participants re-adjustment of their responses to media violence based on perceptions of risk at a social and personal level.

Self-censoring Violence

Self-censorship of representations of violence is also part of the management of risk. The way that participants self-censor reveals two types of reactive mechanisms, one physical, the other cognitive. Both of these reactive mechanisms rely on
anticipation and preparation; without such groundwork participants would be unable to identify thresholds and choose to self-censor, or not self-censor. The activity of self-censoring violence is one that participants perceive as distinctive to particular types of risk-takers. Male participants perceive female viewers of media violence as types of risk-takers who do not wish to test boundaries; female participants perceive male viewers of media violence as types of risk-takers who enjoy testing boundaries: there is a definite sense that participants construct particular types of discourses in order to categorize risk-takers. However, through an examination of the variability of these discourses used we can see that risk-takers, whether male or female, share the same goals when it comes to watching media violence: all wish to test responses and successfully manage individual risk-taking behaviour.

Methods of Self-Censorship

Participants choose to self-censor violent movies in four ways:

1. Self-censor all violent movies;
2. Self-censor violent movies which contain thresholds;
3. Self-censor violent scenes which contain thresholds;
4. Self-censor violent images which contain thresholds.

There are a number of methods to self-censorship. For example, some participants half watch the screen, covering their face with their hands, or mentally switch off and stare at a corner of the screen, movie theatre, or home environment when choosing to self-censor. Other participants may choose different measures and place their head in their
hands, hide under their coat, hide behind sofas, or offer to make the tea when a key scene occurs. An extract from a discussion of horror movies will help to illustrate this:

I can't watch horror films. I can watch realistic violence but people with white faces coming in and chewing lumps out of one another, they frighten me so I don't watch them. I'm outside the door, watching through the crack: 'Is it over yet? Fuck me, I'll make the tea'.

(Participant 1 - FG6)

I watched *Twin Peaks* the other night on video, and they found this body and they were lifting her veil and I couldn't watch. It was a dead body, she couldn't feel anything, it was obviously special effects, but I just couldn't watch it.

(Participant 4 - FG6)

Some people can't stand to see like a needle going in...

(Participant 2 – FG6)

It very much depends on the individuals themselves. For example, I see nothing wrong - I'm not afraid of cadavers or anything like that, or if somebody is getting up from graves or stuff but I do get affected by really deep rumbling voices, like in *Candyman* or *Evil Dead*. I'm more afraid of possession and stuff like that. *The Exorcist* would be my nightmare, it's something I couldn't really watch. But it really does depend. It depends on your lack of experience in what you're used to and not used to and what kind of beliefs you have and what happened to you when you were a kid - it really depends on the individual.

(Participant 3 - FG6)

What can be seen from these extracts is that each participant has their own tale to tell about what they don’t like to watch. There are different gradations for each participant and their consideration of thresholds and self-censorship. One participant won’t watch zombies, another doesn’t like dead bodies, another is afraid of demonic possession. Each gives an example of the type of violence they do not wish to watch, and from the comment made by Participant 2 – ‘Some people can't stand to see like a needle going in’ – it can be seen that this is a common experience, something everyone can talk about and provide examples of. The way in which the last participant moves from a first person account of his own experience of self-censorship to a generalized account of
how ‘you’ and ‘your’ experience and beliefs shape responses to media violence suggests that self-censorship is shared experience that is part of the management of risk.

And as this participant points out ‘it really depends on the individual’. If a type of violence is identified as a threshold by a participant, then self-censorship is a means to personally control the viewing experience, however, how a participant chooses to self-censor depends on the individual. Based on the way that participants discuss this reactive mechanism it is possible to divide the process of self-censorship into physical and cognitive responses, although both responses can be activated whilst viewing violence.

Cognitive responses signify the methods by which participants choose to concentrate on something other than the events taking place on screen. Two participants explain:

When something’s too violent for me I switch off- I’ll step back and say: ‘this is a film, I can step out of it’. (Participant 7 - FG2)

I was telling myself ‘it’s not real, it’s a film, I’m with my friends and we’re having a good time’. (Participant 2 - FG5)

This form of self-censorship focuses on the division between fiction and reality when viewing violence: the violence is not real and therefore through highlighting its fictional status these participants are able to dis-engage with events taking place. In relation to risk, these participants are able to re-assure themselves that they are in control of this risk-taking activity, and, as the second example illustrates, viewers are able to emphasize what is safe and entertaining about watching violent movies – ‘it’s a film, I’m with my friends and we’re having a good time’ – although the fact that this participant has to say this to herself is an illustration of just how delicate the balancing
act of risk management can be. This participant is clearly emphasizing the benefits of this type of risk-taking behaviour, but at the same time she is also working through a perceived danger to this risk. In fact, what this participant does is to emphasize that this is a virtual risk; such a cognitive response to a media violence acts as a successful filter, allowing this participant to adjust her response to this film.

Physical responses signify the methods by which participants use their own body, or immediate environment to filter the impact of a violent image or scene, and to allow participants time to manage their response to this virtual risk. Two examples will illustrate this:

I always watch a film to the end, but I have covered my eyes in a film. One film I can't watch is *Outbreak* because to me it is a real threat which affects everybody. I find that disturbing and difficult to watch.

(Participant 3 - FG4)

The first time I watched *Reservoir Dogs* I hid my face and stood up and said, 'no, I don't want to watch that'. I was imagining the cop's face, while I was listening to the music and when I came back into the room he had no ear and his face was slashed. I was relieved he didn't do anything more horrible. The ear scene put me off watching the whole film.

(Participant 2 - FG3)

What these examples illustrate is the active decision-making which takes place when viewing thresholds of violence. In each instance a physical barrier is created in order to self-censor a threshold to violence. The first participant uses his hands, the second participant uses a variety of physical responses - standing up, hiding her face, running out of the room - in order to self-censor. What the second example also illustrates is the way mental and physical barriers can be combined. This participant mentally and physically dis-engages with the scene; she walks out of the room and also concentrates
on events that are not taking place in the film itself, using her imagination to distance herself from the actual violence depicted.

When participants choose to self-censor a violent image or scene they can physically using their bodies as a barrier, and as a filter to events taking place. A common response by participants is to hold their hands over their eyes, but peek through their fingers in order to see the rest of the film. For example, one participant considers her response to the threshold of violence involving eyes; she would half-watch such scenes if they appeared in a film. She explains: ‘I would definitely want to see the scene, I wouldn't want to not see it at all; but I would be protecting myself, I guess, by watching it through my fingers’ (Participant 1 - FG5). Here, curiosity is fuelled by the knowledge that this participant can self-censor, but also remain partially engaged with the film; covering her own eyes is an act of self-preservation as it is eyes which are subject to violence on screen, yet eyes also register what is taking place and they are the means to satisfy the curiosity of the viewer.

Self-censorship is a reactive mechanism which relies on anticipation and preparation in order for a viewer of media violence to choose a specific type of response. In this sense self-censorship, or self-regulation of media violence helps to highlight consumer choice. If a consumer of media violence has identified a personal and/or social threshold to violence and they wish to monitor their response to this type of violence by self-regulation, then what type of film or television programmes are chosen depends upon an individual’s propensity to take risks. If, as many of the above examples indicate, an individual chooses to watch a film or television programme knowing that it contains scenes of violence they will find disturbing, then their behaviour reveals a desire to take risks. In the next section I want to consider what
exactly these risks are, and I want to examine the perceived benefits to watching types of media violence that viewers know in advance they will find disturbing.

**Boundary Testing**

John Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis is concerned with people’s responses to risk. Risk compensation is when someone modifies ‘both their levels of vigilance and their exposure to danger in response to their subjective perceptions of risk’ (Adams, 1995, pp.14-15). In Chapter six it was shown that researchers have discovered that risk-takers modify their behaviour depending on their perception of risk and on their control of the risk activity. Therefore the perception of a risk product or risk activity and the degree of personal control over this product or activity is significant to the way people manage risk.

In relation to media violence, we can see that viewers’ perceptions of the virtual risks of media violence are in many ways balanced by an understanding of the high degree of control viewers has over this material. Thus, a viewer of media violence may perceive violence involving knives as personally disturbing, but they may choose to watch such scenes of violence because they can control how much or how little they see on screen. In this section I want to consider how participants test their responses to media violence, and how this boundary testing is part of the perceived benefits to watching media violence. What we shall see is that it is an individual’s perception of risk and their personal control of risk that shapes their responses to media violence.
In this study, the reactive mechanisms of thresholds and self-censorship highlight the way in which participants test boundaries whilst viewing violence. Boundary testing involves participants identifying a threshold of violence and choosing whether to self-censor or not. The way in which participants utilize this consumer choice is through anticipating and preparing for violent scenes to occur; participants anticipate a threshold whilst viewing violence and prepare for their choice of self-censorship. Although male and female participants perceive a difference between the way active consumers of violent movies test boundaries, anticipation and preparation are intrinsic to all participants, and boundary testing applies whatever levels of self-censorship are chosen.

Anticipation and Preparation

Evidence from the focus groups suggests participants are aware of the role anticipation and preparation have to play in the process of viewing violence. One participant describes the effect of anticipation on the viewing process. He says: 'I have a harder time watching the build-up to violence than the actual incident. I get so tense. I don't mind the actual violence itself, it's the build-up to it; you can feel the fear in your seat' (Participant 3 - FG1). Another group member describes her response to the ear-amputation scene in Reservoir Dogs:

This is one of the most disturbing scenes I've ever seen. The guy's completely defenceless, there's a knife, the atmosphere is completely electric. I looked up twice, once when he wiped the blood on his shirt, and once when the music
came on because I felt relaxed. Then I felt the atmosphere again and I just didn't want to watch it. It has a horrible effect on me.

(Participant 5 – FG3)

What was going through your mind when you were looking down?

(Interviewer – FG3)

I was thinking that I need to lose weight [she laughs]. I was thinking what are the others thinking about me? Am I over-reacting? Should I watch it? I felt my heart pounding. I could almost cry actually, that's how I felt.

(Participant 5 - FG3)

The way this participant describes her response to this scene highlights the close attention she pays to her own sense of anticipation. Because the cop is defenceless and there is a knife, this participant anticipates torture and therefore chooses to self-censor those moments in the scene she believes to contain representations of torture. She notes the atmosphere, and looks up to view the scene only when she anticipates the atmosphere has altered, i.e. the torture has ended.

This example of self-censorship took place during a discussion group and this participant's body language was such that she showed her anticipation for the violence by covering her ears with her hands as the scene was screened, an appropriate response considering the type of violence portrayed in the scene itself. This participant is very conscious of her own response to this scene and how other group members perceive her. She thinks of her physical appearance; she questions the intensity of her reaction; she focuses on her heightened emotions: her response reveals the vulnerability she feels whilst self-censoring, and her conscious awareness that other people will be watching her reaction to viewing violence.

Thus, anticipation and preparation are conscious activities which serve to highlight participants' awareness of other moviegoers. This awareness is most apparent when participants consider specifically male and female methods of self-censoring. In
the next section, the way in which the issue of gender and the two factors of anticipation and preparation come together can be linked with perceived notions of male and female consumers of violent movies.

**The Issue of Gender**

The types of discourses used by participants when discussing methods of response to media violence would suggest that perceptions of risk-takers are constructed along gender lines. As in the previous chapter, when we discussed the social activity of media violence, it is possible to see that viewers of media violence utilize categories in order to associate themselves with specific types of risk-takers and risk products. In this instance, the way that participants discuss perceptions of male and female responses to violence indicates that participants associate themselves with either a responsive or non-responsive method of response. Male participants perceive female consumers of violent movies to physically and vocally respond to representations of violence, and liberally self-censor, actions which male participants consider the opposite to their own non-responsive state when viewing violence. Female participants perceive male consumers of violent movies to brace themselves when representations of violence occur, and rarely, if ever, self-censor whilst viewing violence. As one participant explains: 'I don't want to be sexist but I know a couple of women who wouldn't like to watch these films. All the geezers I know feel "I'm too hard not to watch it", but women tend to react a bit more' (Participant 5 - FG1).

This construction of types of male and female risk-takers shapes the way in which participants discuss self-censorship. For example, the majority of male
participants claim they do not self-censor violent representations, even if they find the violence disturbing and it is identified as a threshold. Methods for not self-censoring centre around the two areas of anticipation and preparation. Most male group members prepare to sit through a violent scene in its entirety and one of the ways to prepare for viewing violence is to anticipate the worst and most violent scenario that could occur: thus when watching a scene, participants can imagine an act of violence far worse than is in actual fact depicted. One participant comments:

I sort of put myself through seeing a film to see if I can brave it. You know, everyone else has gone to see it and you're a wimp if you can't sit through it. Perhaps there are some things that make me nauseous, but I would try to watch it, I wouldn't cover my eyes, I would say: 'oh I've got to see this'. It's a bit like going to the dentist. (Participant 2 - FG4)

The description of going to the dentist is apt; most male participants view violence as if they have the drill in their mouth: to interrupt events may be fatal. Many male participants possess a serious attitude to viewing violence, they feel a responsibility to watch events, no matter if they find these events disturbing.

Other participants consider a non-responsive state desirable when viewing violence and this non-responsive state is part of testing boundaries. Two examples will illustrate this:

You pay your money and you want to see the whole film. You may find certain things distressing but you still watch the film. (Participant 4 - FG1)

I don't think I've ever looked away from anything. I just want to watch the film. I don't really take the violent aspect into consideration when I want to watch a film, it's not something I think about. (Participant 3 – FG3)
These participants emphasize their non-responsive state when viewing violence; looking away, not watching a film, thinking about the violent content in a movie are all activities which these participants do not take part in. They perceive themselves as distanced from violent representations, and even though, as the first example reveals, these participants may find certain scenes disturbing, they choose to watch the ‘whole’ film rather than self-censor.

When asked why they did not wish to self-censor, comments indicated many male participants feel a duty to watch the ‘whole’ movie if they wish to take film, a form of art, seriously. Two participants explain:

I know people who react in different ways to violent scenes and I think it would be very wrong to get so far into a film and then go, ‘no’, and turn the film off. If someone wants to close their eyes during a scene fair enough but to just turn it off and say: ‘oh no, that's too bad, I can't watch any more of it’ is detrimental to an overall opinion of the film. You can't comment on something unless you've seen it all the way through.

(Participant 3 - FG4)

You know a film’s going to be bad, you think it's going to be bad but you watch out of respect for the art, I hope. You're preventing the film maker from presenting his message. The proper approach to art is one of humility and openness. Acting as a censor is a proud action not a humble action.

(Participant 4 - FG1)

Both participants are adamant films need to be watched in their entirety, and violent movies are no exception. For the first participant, certain forms of self-censorship he has observed in others, not himself, are acceptable forms of behaviour when viewing violence, however to choose to switch off a film is a method of self-censorship which is perceived as unacceptable to this participant. Why this form of self-censorship is perceived as unacceptable can be related to the concept of watching the ‘whole’ film, This concept implies that there is a contract entered into by the film maker and the
filmgoer. Here, this filmgoer will not breach the contract; he will be a professional and watch every part of the film. For the second participant, to not watch a violent film, even though the film may be 'bad', i.e. extreme, is an act of disrespect for the film maker, a proud action not a humble action. For this participant self-censoring is a form of sacrilege.

What is common to both participants is an awareness that it is other viewers, not they, who self-censor. This is exemplified when the second participant replies to a comment that female consumers of violent movies over-react to scenes of violence. He says: ‘I took a woman friend to see one of these films and I couldn't tell her reaction. Well, her reaction was no reaction. She didn't move, I didn't hear her say anything, and she wasn't in a state afterwards. She was super cool’ (Participant 4 - FG1). Her reactions mirror this participant's own response to violence, i.e. no response, and this method of viewing violence is associated with male rather than female consumers of violent movies - it is 'super cool'.

For many male participants not self-censoring a violent scene or image is part of their interest in choosing to see violent movies in the first place. It is an enjoyable ordeal. Two participants comment:

The worst thing I can remember doing is if a film gets really gross then maybe I'll look away, but there is that thing that you're still kind of curious.  
(Participant 1 - FG4)

If I'm watching a film, I don't want to miss any of it. I'm aware that it's not necessarily the right thing to watch in terms of how it has an effect on me but I don't seem to turn away easily.  
(Participant 1 - FG3)
As these participants highlight, it is the challenge of viewing the ‘whole’ film which draws certain participants to not self-censor; they may desire to look away, but by anticipating violence they can prepare to test their own boundaries of response, to test endurance levels. This aspect of male participants' response to self-censorship serves to indicate that for some participants, to be desensitized to violent representations is not a negative reaction, indeed in many ways it is a desired reaction.

Sensitivity is a term applied to perceptions of female consumers of violent movies. Female participants provide examples of self-censorship where they have used anticipation and preparation to deliberately eschew specific types of fictional violence, and this is something male consumers of violent movies are perceived as unlikely to undertake. Two examples will illustrate this. One participant actively chooses not to watch horror films. She explains:

I do self-censor. I don't go and see films like Nightmare on Elm Street. I find them quite scary and there tends to be a predominance of violence against women and I don't like that. I know a lot of people don't find them scary but I find them absolutely terrifying. I self-censor because I don't want to see women get it as victims. I went to see The Shining when I was quite young and this film scared me so much I just decided never to go and see another horror film. The thrill while you're in the cinema isn't worth the risk when you get home, when you can't sleep. And if you live on your own then you certainly don't need that kind of thing, you really don't need to feel that scared when you're at home.

( Participant 3 - FG5)

This female participant identifies thresholds and uses self-censorship in a way which highlights her sensitivity to violence towards women. She is afraid of violence in real life and acknowledges that watching horror films where, as she puts it, ‘women get it as victims’, only serves to highlight the danger of violence for this participant: the ‘thrill’ of fictional violence isn't worth the ‘risk’ of real fear of real violence. Personal
experience, reference to her fear of horror films, reference to her awareness of other moviegoers who are not disturbed by this type of violence are factors which indicate this participant has a low threshold for this type of violence and liberally self-censors in order to control her viewing experience. She does not test her response because she is aware of how fearful she will be if she watches horror films.

Another participant does not like to see violence towards women. She will not watch films which contain such representations because she fears the same violence may happen to her. She recalls watching True Romance and choosing to self-censor a specific scene because it contained violence towards women:

In True Romance, when Alabama is fighting with that guy and she gets the corkscrew, I thought it was going to be a surprise and she was going to plunge it into his heart, but she stabbed him in the foot instead. I thought, oh no, he's going to rape her and she was in the bathroom with glass everywhere and I couldn't watch it after that. I didn't watch the rest of the film.

(Participant 2 - FG3)

This participant anticipates Alabama (Patricia Arquette) will be raped and killed. She prepares herself for this event and self-censors, yet by self-censoring she is unaware that Alabama violently and successfully defends herself against her attacker. Therefore, this participant highlights her sensitivity to violence towards women in film by choosing to self-censor, but through doing so is not able to watch the ‘whole’ film and consequently does not realize Alabama is not raped and killed. For many male participants, this form of self-censorship would be a sacrilege, revealing a low threshold for violence and an inability to comment on the entire film. Once again, this participant does not wish to test her response because she is aware how disturbed she will be if a female character is raped and killed in a fiction film.
Participants' response to self-censorship and boundary testing so far reveals there is a perceived gender division in the way participants view violence. However, subtle variations and contradictions in participants' response to self-censorship indicates that the way participants perceive response is very different to the actuality of response to thresholds of violence. What can be seen is that participants borrow methods of response from what are perceived as traditionally male or female domains. Thus, participants undermine the gender division they themselves perceive, by reacting differently to the perceived notion of male and female viewing methods. What is more, all participants utilize context, characterization and the role of anticipation when choosing whether to self-censor or not, and these shared methods may be used to achieve different goals, but they also serve to highlight how similar male and female participants' response to violence can be.

For example, many male participants at first indicated they did not self-censor and wished to 'endure' fictional representations of violence. However, once this distinction had been made contradictions occurred within male attitudes to self-censorship. Once having stated: 'I do not self-censor' rare examples of self-censorship ensue: 'I do not self-censor, but there was this one occasion...' Two participants comment on rare instances of self-censorship:

I went to see Misery and when James Caan's legs are broken it made me want to put my hands over my eyes. I watched it the first time, and when I knew she was going to hit him I put my hands over my eyes. What made me watch it again was to try and keep my eyes open the second time.

(Participant 2 - FG1)

The only time I would consciously glance away is if the violence is to do with the phallic - it just hits a spot, my crutch - but normally I try not to self-censor. I actually do prefer to watch and try to take on board the message of a film.

(Participant 1 - FG6)
Here, these two participants identify thresholds and choose to self-censor. Both participants point out this is not a common occurrence; the first example emphasizes he watched the same scene again in order to test his own boundaries; the second example states that most of the time, apart from this exception, he will always watch a film in its entirety and ‘try not to self-censor’. However, despite these considerations it is still possible to see how these male participants utilize elements of what is perceived to be female response to viewing violence. It is the exception to the rule that is of significance here. These male participants construct their responses based on perceptions of a specific type of risk-taker they wish to associate themselves with, i.e. a non-responsive male viewer of media violence. However, they also discuss rare occasions when they have acted against type, when they have shown a sensitivity to an act of violence. The fact that both male participants emphasize the exception to the rule – ‘try to keep my eyes open the second time’, ‘I do prefer to watch’- is an indication that they wish to remain associated with male types of risk-takers, and yet, there must be a purpose to recalling such exceptions to the rule: the purpose of such recollections is to show that male risk-takers can be sensitive, and that a non-responsive state is something that is cultivated, that is constructed by the risk-taker.

This utilization of different methods of response can be found in female participants' discussion of self-censorship. A number of female participants adopt what is perceived as specifically male attitudes to viewing violence. As one participant explains:

I do try to make myself watch things. It's interesting to me why people don't watch violence. Why is it that men make themselves watch? I find I've got an element of that in my personality and I will force myself to watch things; it's
kind of like a test. I'm a person who has a great need to know a lot of things. I try to watch because I need to know.  

(Participant 4 - FG3)

Another female participant comments on her desire to not self-censor violence:

I can't think of anything that would make me say: 'No, I'm not going to see that' because it has something I don't like in it. I don't like eyes and injections, but I wouldn't turn away completely and I wouldn't not go and see a film just because I hear somebody gets their eye gouged out. Some films are really awful and I think I don't really want to watch any more of this, but I do try to stick with things, just so as I can talk about them.  

(Participant 1 - FG5)

As with male participants who recall instances of self-censorship, certain female participants utilize what are perceived as specifically male responses to viewing violence. These two female participants actively try to not self-censor because they wish to watch the 'whole' film, and even if they find certain representations of violence disturbing they will still try to test their own boundaries and steel themselves to watch fictional violence. The way that these two female participants adopt the same type of rhetoric used by male participants when discussing their responses to media violence suggests that having a desire to know the outcome, and wanting to 'stick with things' is perceived to be part of the repertoire of male risk-takers.

There is a conscious crossing over taking place here that reveals that consumers of media violence can adopt methods of response which best suit their purposes in a given situation. Therefore, although participants construct specific types of risk-takers in order to associate themselves with types of responses to media violence, they also transfer methods of response from both categories of risk-takers into their individual repertoire of responses to media violence. Thus, whilst a male consumer of media
violence associates himself with a type of risk-taker that is strong, capable and able to endure representations of violence, he will also draw upon other types of responses, such as sensitivity, in order to present an alternative portrait of a male risk-taker. This is because, although consumers of media violence associate themselves with types of risk-takers, individual practices vary from person to person. In the final section of this chapter male and female participants highlight the significance of boundary testing to the process of viewing violence, and we shall see that testing boundaries and going against type can be an exhilarating experience, an experience that participants deliberately seek out as one of the benefits of risk-taking behaviour.

**Testing Reactions**

Evidence from the focus groups suggests there are three factors which are of significance to thresholds and self-censorship and the process of viewing violence. These factors are:

- Consumer Choice;
- Expectation;
- Boundary testing.

The function of thresholds and self-censorship is to utilize these three factors and test response to viewing violence. Whilst watching violent movies, participants identify individual thresholds, anticipate and prepare for these thresholds to occur, and choose
whether to self-censor or not. It is through consumer choice that participants test boundaries. It is the way in which participants utilize boundary testing that indicates there are strong similarities between the way male and female participants respond to violent movies. Whether self-censoring or not self-censoring, participants employ consumer choice, expectation and a desire to test individual response. Consumer choice signifies the methods by which participants choose to watch/not watch specific films or scenes containing violence; expectation signifies the way in which participants identify thresholds and choose to self-censor; boundary testing signifies a strong desire to monitor individual response when engaged in the social activity of viewing violence.

A number of examples will serve to illustrate this. One participant actively self-censors, using all methods available. When watching the ear-amputation scene from *Reservoir Dogs* during the discussion, this participant forced herself to watch the scene a second time. She explains:

> When the scene started I thought 'oh God, no I can't watch any of this' but because it wasn't the exact bit where the cop gets his ear cut off and I knew this wasn't for a while I watched the scene right up until Mr. Blonde got the knife out and the music came on. Then, I thought, 'oh, this is the bit where I wouldn't watch last time'. This time, I was sitting there thinking 'oh no' but I carried on watching. I saw Mr. Blonde stand in front of the cop and chop his ear off and I felt physically sick while he was doing it. I watched the bit afterwards when he talks into the ear. That was disgusting. But I think I was more disturbed the first time when I didn't see him doing it.

(Participant 2 - FG3)

This participant tests herself to see how long she can watch this scene without self-censoring. She anticipates and prepares for the violence to occur, using her past knowledge of the scene to influence present viewing. Her reasons for doing this can be attributed first to the environment she is in; as part of a discussion group there is some
pressure on her to watch the scene so that she can talk about it later. However, it is also clear from her body language and excited retelling of key stages in the scene that she gets a certain amount of satisfaction from testing her own thresholds with regard to violence. She recalls each stage in some detail. First, she thinks ‘oh God, no I can't watch any of this’, then she thinks ‘oh, this is the bit where I wouldn't watch last time’. Already, her response has altered; no longer is it the whole scene, but only a small portion of it that she remembers as disturbing. Thus, the violence becomes more manageable, and she tests her reaction to the scene a second time round. This time, the violence is not so disturbing. Each stage in the scene is accompanied by a testing of boundaries, and it is methods of self-censorship which aid this complex response.

As this example reveals, there is an excitement to be gained from boundary testing. As one participant describes it: ‘I love the thrill of daring yourself to watch a violent scene - that's a real kick. No, I'm not going to watch and then yeah, just do it, make yourself watch it’ (Participant 7 - FG2). Part of the pleasure to be gained from watching media violence is to daring oneself to watch scenes, or films, to go against type and take risks in the viewing environment. For some participants, this risk is part of a conscious decision to alter their perception of risk-taking behaviour. An extract from a discussion of reasons for boundary testing and choosing different types of entertainment will help substantiate this point.

One participant describes the satisfaction to be had from changing consumer tastes, and being ‘open’ to seeing films this participant has never before wished to see.

A friend and I both ended five year relationships at the same time and were extremely miserable. I've always said I hate violent movies but I just thought, well, what the hell - I'll go and do something really horrible now because I want to counteract the relationship. So, for a four or five month stint we only saw violent films to prove we could do it.
How did that make you feel?

I felt achievement that I'd got myself out and I'm doing things because I did feel that I was better able to define boundaries between myself and the cinema. I felt exhilaration because of the action on the screen, and also because I was doing something which wasn't anything that I had done before. New areas, you know. Also, we were kind of laughing at the whole thing which was extremely—me and my mate—we were feeling really awful but we were going out and seeing these horrible films. I wanted to see these films for my own benefit, you know, kind of use the system. It was very therapeutic. So with a long, particularly drawn out scene like the ear scene in *Reservoir Dogs* I say to myself: 'I will see this and I will get something out of it and I will test myself'.

(Participant 2 - FG5)

I'm really interested in this. I know you've got very personal reasons for wanting to monitor these films but how far is it to do with your gender, or your personality. For example, are you the kind of person who isn't particularly into violence or is it because you're female? I've never had a conflict with—you know, I'm a woman, I shouldn't be watching these films.

(Participant 1 - FG5)

No, I don't think it's a gender thing, I think it's just me. I thought I was a sensitive person who didn't like violent films. I shied away from them. I thought they were morally wrong. And then you go through a stage where all your boundaries just dissolve and you don't know where the hell you are, and you feel liberated at the same time. I think film is a good medium for doing that because it is so realistic, it enables you to use your brain and feel immediate catharsis. It's very therapeutic.

(Participant 2 - FG5)

The first participant uses the process of viewing violence for her own benefit. She identifies the three areas the reactive mechanisms of thresholds and self-censorship are primarily concerned with: consumer choice; expectation; boundary testing, and relates these factors to her reasons for choosing to see violent movies: 'I will see this and I will get something out of it and I will test myself'.

We can see from this extract that this participant takes some time to explain the change in her perception of risk-takers and risk products. Prompted by another female
participant, she claims that it is not because of her gender but because of herself that she chose to not watch violent movies before. However, the way that she describes herself as a 'sensitive person who didn’t like violent films' is very similar to the construction of female viewers of media violence, as discussed by participants earlier in this chapter. Not only that, but this participant describes herself in the past as a non-risk-taker, someone who used to perceive the dangers of media violence, who used to consider it to be ‘morally wrong’. It is significant to Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis that it is her personal experience that alters her perception of this type of risk product. The metaphor of boundaries dissolving is significant because it is as these conceptual boundaries dissolve that the real experience of viewing media violence takes over. Testing boundaries and monitoring responses is a satisfying experience. This participant describes it as exhilarating; she feels a sense of achievement, and she perceives very real benefits to this type of risk-taking behaviour. For her, the benefits are therapeutic; she feels ‘liberated’. What is clear is that in her explanation of her risk-taking behaviour, this participant perceives herself as taking risks in a safe environment; violent movies may appear real, but part of her attraction to this type of entertainment is that they are virtual risks, and can therefore be controlled and used for personal benefit.

**Conclusion**

Boundary testing signifies consumer response to violent movies. There is no one method of self-censoring representations of violence, and participants utilize a range of methods from not self-censoring at all, to peeking through fingers, to eschewing specific types of violence altogether. Various methods of self-censorship are available because participants have complex and contradictory responses to viewing
violence. Various methods of self-censorship are employed because participants' responses are fluid and dynamic.

In relation to risk, it is possible to see that consumers of media violence balance their behaviour according to perceptions of risk and real experience of risk. Thus, social and personal thresholds to violence are an example of the way in which perceptions of risk and real experience of risk shape the viewing process. Methods of self-censorship are a means to manage risk and remain in control of the risk experience. This management of risk involves physical and cognitive responses to media violence and it also involves testing boundaries. Boundary testing is an example of the way in which risk-takers adjust the setting of their risk thermostat. As the thermostat reaches a certain level, the risk-taker tests past and future settings; they dare themselves to watch a violent scene they know they will find disturbing because it is exciting and rewarding: testing boundaries is one of the perceived benefits to this type of risk-taking behaviour.
Safety Precautions

John Adams (1997, p.19) points out that ‘people…persist in being their own judges of what is safe’. In this chapter of this study I want to consider how responses to media violence are shaped by perceptions of safety. In the previous two chapters, we looked at how the social activity of media violence and the significance of testing boundaries are central to our understanding of how and why people choose to watch media violence. Viewers of media violence monitor their own responses in relation to others and this is because, according to Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis, perceptions of risk are influenced by one’s own and other people’s risk behaviour. It is also the case that one of the perceived benefits to watching media violence is the opportunity to self-regulate risk and to test boundaries, both of which are methods of response that rely on a delicate balancing act between perceptions of the dangers and benefits of media violence. This is why the concept of safety is so significant to the management of risk and media violence. If viewers of media violence feel safe and in control of their risk-taking behaviour then they are more inclined to take risks and test boundaries. However, if viewers of media violence do not feel safe and in control of their risk-taking behaviour then they will be more likely to regulate their response and even withdraw from the perceived threat completely.

Safety precautions, therefore, are important to our understanding of the management of risk, and in this chapter evidence from the focus group discussions will suggest that consumers of media violence are the best judges of what is ‘safe’
entertainment. It is once viewers feel 'safe' that they can enjoy certain types of violent movies. There is a balance to be found in relation to how much 'risk' a viewer wishes to take, and how much enjoyment they wish to have from watching a movie. The greater a viewer's sense of control of the viewing experience, the greater will be their sense of enjoyment at engaging in a 'risk-taking activity'. Certain types of movies are perceived to be more entertaining than others, and there are certain types of violence that is considered to be not entertaining in any way, for example realistic representations of female rape, however for movies such as *Pulp Fiction* of *Natural Born Killers* it is important to point out that participants did enjoy seeing such movies. These films may be distressing and shocking in certain scenes, but they are also perceived to be entertaining. This is something that should not be forgotten in discussion of the perceived benefits of engaging in a 'risk-taking activity'.

**Safe Environment**

In the focus group discussions a great deal of attention was given to the safety of the viewing environment. Participants discussed the way in which the type of viewing environment had a substantial effect on they way in which they chose to respond to media violence. Different viewing environments have an effect on participants' attitudes to self-censorship. For example, most participants do not walk out of the cinema, but do switch off videos if they find a violent scene too disturbing. Two participants explain:
It's much easier to switch off a video. We do that all the time. There's lots of videos I've not watched to the conclusion but there is only one film I've ever walked out of in my life. There is a difference.

(Participant 4 - FG3)

There was something the other day I recorded and I was watching it and it was horrible and I turned it off. Then I thought I'll watch it again a bit later and I turned it on and started watching a bit more of it but I couldn't watch it and turned it off completely.

(Participant 3 - FG5)

Participants self-censor more freely in the home environment than at the cinema. They feel more able to identify thresholds and choose to self-censor because the home environment is familiar and time is flexible. As both examples illustrate, participants can return to a film many times in the home environment and self-censor a film in stages, whereas at the cinema this would not be so easy to undertake. Participants consider the cinematic environment to offer less diversions, and less opportunities to self-censor; they invest time and money into a social activity where the wide screen demands attention and the darkness silence.

Certain films are deliberately chosen to be watched in the home environment because there are more opportunities to self-censor. Therefore, although participants acknowledge that concentration is attenuated in the home environment, certain participants still choose to view specific violent movies on video. As one participant explains:

If you're watching something on video you're more likely to shout things out and scream and talk and make stupid comments which I would never do in the cinema. And, of course, there is that sort of line when you're in your own home and you might not accept certain things.

(Participant 1 - FG5)
Certain participants utilize self-censorship when the line has been crossed and they do not wish to ‘accept’ certain levels, or types of fictional violence in their own home.

Two participants discuss why they choose to watch certain violent movies at home rather than at the cinema:

I was prepared to see *Reservoir Dogs* on video rather than at the cinema because I knew that I could obviously walk out of the room or I could feel comfortable averting my eyes, or switching off, pick up a magazine if it did have a bad effect on me, if I wasn’t happy watching it.

*(Participant 5 - FG3)*

*Pulp Fiction* I saw at the cinema because I knew what was going to be in it, and it was quite funny rather than being gory and violent and disgusting. But, *Reservoir Dogs* and *True Romance* I wanted to watch on video rather than at the cinema so that I could not watch it.

*(Participant 2 - FG3)*

Both participants cite specific films which they wish to watch at home because they can self-censor what is ‘gory and violent and disgusting’. Methods of self-censorship involve certain types of filters, such as reading a magazine whilst remaining in the viewing environment, and more physical barriers to media violence, such as walking out of the room or switching off the television. Indeed, for one participant the knowledge that she can not watch *True Romance* or *Reservoir Dogs* (i.e. she can self-censor) is a significant reason in her choosing to view these films in the home environment. The cinema would not allow such freedom of self-censorship.

Implicit in participants’ comments so far is the impression that the home is a safe environment for certain types of violent movies. However, other participants perceive the home as the opposite to a safe environment, and choose to watch specific violent movies at the cinema because they do not wish certain violent
movies to *enter* into the home environment. For example, one participant berated her partner for renting *Man Bites Dog*. She explains:

It was a Saturday night at ten to nine and I said, shall we watch a video tonight, and he came back with *Man Bites Dog*. I thought: 'it's not a Saturday night film'. I got really angry with him for putting it on, and I just said 'I'm not fucking watching this' and I walked out of the room. It's the only time I've ever done that. It's the only time I've ever reacted like that because I knew what it was like, and I wonder whether maybe it was because of a stubbornness in me because – oh – once you hired this film I knew that we couldn’t take it back and I just said ‘why the fuck have you got that for?’, and I walked out the room and spoilt the whole thing...

(Participant 5 - FG3)

Having heard about the violent content of the movie before hand, this participant became angry with her partner for assuming she would enjoy such a movie at home on Saturday night. The time and day are significant; in her opinion this movie is not an entertaining film - something she anticipated for a Saturday night. What is more, she is sensitive to the fact that the movie is *in* her home in the first place: her home is not a safe place to watch the movie. The way that this participant repeats her angry response to her partner – ‘why the fuck have you got that for?’ and ‘I'm not fucking watching this’ – serves to emphasize how frustrated this participant is to not take part in the decision making process; and the fact that she cannot take the film back because it is too late in the evening only serves to frustrate her even more – the film has to stay in her house until the next day and is a visible risk to the safety of her home environment.

Other participants comment on the way in which they wish to highlight the virtual risks of media violence by viewing certain violent movies at the cinema. Two examples will illustrate this:
Watching a film in the cinema is a very safe place to be because you are surrounded by people all having the same effect, they're all scared: then you go out of the cinema and it's a completely different world. When I'm watching a film in my own home it's a completely different experience - it doesn't feel very safe. If I'm the only one there I can't watch certain films because I will become too frightened to carry on watching.

(Participant 6 - FG2)

I prefer to see something at the cinema; it makes it more formal. To see a film on video - I may find that more disturbing. I like a formal separation between my life and what I choose to go and see.

(Participant 2 - FG5)

It is possible to see how these participants, unlike the earlier examples, do not find their home environment safe, and do not wish to use methods of self-censorship to establish a safe environment. A 'formal separation' between the fictional world of the film and the real world of the viewer is of primary importance here.

Audience viewing figures indicate participants choose to watch the target films at the cinema and at home in roughly equal amounts. Tables 7 and 8 reveal *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* are the most popular movies to have been seen at the cinema, with 25 and 32 participants having viewed each film respectively, and *Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction* and *True Romance* the most popular movies to have been viewed at home, with 22, 17 and 19 participants having seen each film respectively. Figures for cinema viewing are higher than those for home viewing in the case of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, but *True Romance* scores higher on home viewing, whilst *Natural Born Killers* has roughly the same figures (12, 13) in each table, despite the fact that it is not legally available on video in this country.

The Cinema Advertising Association's Film Profile of *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* for August 1996 (see Table 1a-c, Chapter four) estimates the total
number of people who claimed to see these films at 4,330,000 and 1,344,000, in comparison with *Killing Zoe* or *Man Bites Dog* which only attracted 250,000, and 286,000 moviegoers. Table 8 reveals that the number of video retail units sold of the target films corresponds with the difference in figures noted for cinema viewing. *Pulp Fiction*, for example, sold 371,394 video retail units in 1995, whilst *Killing Zoe* sold approximately 30,000 in 1996, and *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* only sold just under 7,000 in 1996. What such cross referencing reveals is that participants' preference for *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* at the cinema and on video is typical of other moviegoers in the Great Britain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Reservoir Dogs</em></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pulp Fiction</em></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>True Romance</em></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Natural Born Killers</em></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Man Bites Dog</em></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Henry, Portrait of...</em></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bad Lieutenant</em></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Killing Zoe</em></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 8: Video Viewing Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Reservoir Dogs</em></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pulp Fiction</em></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>True Romance</em></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Natural Born Killers</em></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Man Bites Dog</em></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Henry, Portrait of...</em></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bad Lieutenant</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Killing Zoe</em></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 9: Video Retail Unit Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film/Distributor</th>
<th>No.of Units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Reservoir Dogs</em> Polygram Film Entertainment*</td>
<td>250,000 Aug.1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pulp Fiction</em> Beuno Vista Home Entertainment*</td>
<td>371,394 Sept.1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Henry, Portrait of...</em> Electric Pictures*</td>
<td>6894 Aug.1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bad Lieutenant</em> Guild Film Distribution*</td>
<td>24,718 Aug.1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Killing Zoe</em> Polygram Film Entertainment*</td>
<td>30,000 July 1996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No figures for *Man Bites Dog* or *True Romance*
Cross tabulation (Tables 7 and 8) reveals *Man Bites Dog, Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer, Bad Lieutenant* and *Killing Zoe* score more highly on home viewing, and these are all films participants consider realistic and in many cases not entertaining. In contrast, *Pulp Fiction* is considered the most entertaining, and this is the film most participants have seen at the cinema. This may reflect comments made earlier by participants that certain films are chosen to be watched at home because there is more opportunity for self-censorship. However, it may also reflect the availability of certain films on video rather than at the cinema. *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* received widespread cinematic release for a long period of time (*Reservoir Dogs* was released in January 1993 and is still showing in selected cinemas), whereas other target films received short cinematic release, and quickly became more widely available on video.

Comments made regarding the home and cinematic environment and methods of self-censorship were made by female participants. No male participant claimed to choose one form of environment over another in relation to the violent content of a film. Table 7 indicates there is no substantial difference between the figures for male and female participants' cinema consumption of the target films. 13 male participants and 12 female participants chose to watch *Reservoir Dogs* at the cinema; 6 male participants and 8 female participants chose to watch *True Romance* at the cinema; and, whilst *Pulp Fiction* reveals some difference in figures, 19 male participants and 13 female participants, all other target films attract similar viewing figures regardless of gender. However, Table 8 indicates there is a substantial difference between the numbers of male and female participants who choose to watch the target films in the home environment. 16 male participants as opposed to 6 female participants chose to watch *Reservoir Dogs* on video; 14 male participants
and 5 female participants chose to watch *True Romance* on video: each target film scores substantially less in the column for female video viewing figures.

Taking into account comments made exclusively by female participants regarding the home environment as unsafe, these figures would indicate many female participants actively choose to watch the target films at the cinema because they perceive the cinematic environment as presenting a formal separation between fiction and reality. The fact that home viewing provides more opportunities for self-censorship does not influence the majority of female participants to choose to watch violent movies in the home environment. This is of significance to our understanding of John Adam's risk thermostat hypothesis in relation to media violence. Adams (1995, p.15) claims that the 'setting of the risk thermostat varies from one individual to another, one group to another, one culture to another'. Whilst this variability is apparent in the focus group discussions, it is also possible to see in this instance the type of environment is just as important to the way people perceive the risks of media violence. At the cinema, viewers can emphasize the virtual risks of media violence; at home, viewers may perceive these virtual risks as more real and they may feel more threatened and perceive more danger in the home environment. The fact that participants used a variety of different discourses and chose to vary their responses to media violence depending on types of film and types of viewing environment would also suggest that in this instance the function of self-censorship is to highlight consumer choice. What participants seem most concerned with, whatever their choice of viewing environment, is whether they would feel safe, and this is an issue that I want to consider more closely in the next section.
Safe Entertainment

If there is a right environment for viewing media violence, then there is also a right type of entertainment to be viewed in this environment. Not all aspects of media violence are perceived to be the same, and, indeed, participants in this study made a clear distinction between different types of ‘safe’ entertainment. Just as participants perceive a type of risk taker who is sensitive and mature and above all ‘safe’ in their responses to media violence, so too is there a type of risk product which is perceived to be intelligent, sensitive and ‘safe’. What ‘safe’ signifies in this instance is a risk-taker who is aware of the difference between real violence and fictional violence, and a risk product which makes a clear distinction between real violence and fictional violence.

In Chapter nine participants considered the social activity of media violence, and discussed different types of risk-takers in some detail. What is significant here, is that the construction of different types of risk-takers and risk products allowed participants to associate themselves with the type of risk-taker they felt most did justice to their responses to media violence. This type of risk-taker is an intelligent, sensitive and safe consumer of media violence. The types of participants who took part in the focus group discussions would also classify themselves as intelligent, sensitive and safe moviegoers, moviegoers who like different types of entertainment, some of which can be classified as media violence. The point is that participants in this study do not wish to be associated with popular perceptions of viewers of media violence who are the type of risk-takers who are neither intelligent, sensitive or safe,
who do not know the difference between reality and fantasy, and who do not know that real violence is abhorrent and painful and in no way entertaining.

In other words, there is a learned social behaviour for moviegoers to respond to films or television programmes in an appropriate manner. For the purposes of this study, the type of moviegoer is an active consumer of media violence, and therefore the learned social behaviour for moviegoers of media violence is very specific. So far, we have seen that within the categorization of media violence, there are many different types of risk-takers and risk products, and there are many different responses to media violence. Participants in this study are primarily middle class and educated; this reflects the type of moviegoer of the target films (see Chapter eight for further details), and we can see that this particular consumer of the target films chooses to see this type of risk product because it is intelligent and sensitive and safe. The risk product reflects the consumer tastes of the risk-taker. Thus, when participants discuss the difference between Hollywood action movies and 'new brutalism' movies in Chapter nine, they differentiate between these types of media violence in order to differentiate between types of risk-takers. The participants in this study enjoy Hollywood action movies but are not nearly so enthusiastic or so full of praise as they are towards the target films. The target films are intelligent, they have good scripts, they are well directed, they are well acted, they are subtle in their treatment of violence. Participants in this study appreciate such qualities and perceive themselves as best equipped to respond to such films in an acceptable manner. If this study were concerned with consumers of action movies, we would have a different set of criteria and a different perception of what are acceptable and desirable responses to this type of media violence (Barker and Brooks, 1997).
What we shall see in the following sections is the way in which participants construct particular types of discourses that serve to highlight the intelligence, sensitivity and safety of types of risk-takers and risk products. The participants in this study are the type of risk-takers who perceive real violence to be abhorrent and not entertaining in any way; it is because real violence is so horrific, that participants turn to fictional violence in order to explore the virtual risks of media violence: media violence is only truly entertaining when it is far removed from the reality of violence in our everyday lives.

**Real Violence is Not Entertaining**

All participants clearly differentiate between real violence and fictional violence. Participants are deeply affected by real violence, whether they have been a witness to violence or experienced violence themselves. Two participants explain their response to real violence and mediated images of violence:

If I see people fighting it upsets me more than anything I can tell you, more than anything I could ever watch at the cinema. I can't believe anyone is more sensitive to violence than I am in a real life situation.

(Participant 1 - FG3)

Real violence has a much more lasting impact. These are real people, that could have been a friend of mine, this could have been someone from my family, you know. I was thinking of some news footage of a massacre in Rwanda. That was much more shocking than these films. Real violence is really, really disturbing and really hard to take because it's so relentless. There are no clever one-liners, there are no little bits of humour to let you off the hook - the violence is raw.

(Participant 1 - FG4)
In both instances, each participant uses fictional violence to differentiate between the impact of real violence and viewing fictional violence: real violence is intense and shocking because it is real - it has a lasting impact, an impact fictional violence does not possess.

Participants do not find real violence, or mediated images of real violence entertaining. Many participants avoid watching news/documentary footage of violence and self-censor mediated images of real violence. One group member comments:

There are certain things on the news I've avoided. When there was the Hillsborough disaster, the last thing I wanted to see was people getting crushed, it's not necessary. There are things like that I definitely avoid at all costs.

(Participant 1 - FG3)

Participants point out real life experience of violence influences their response to fictional violence. For a few participants this leads to active self-censorship of specific types of fictional violence, however for others it can highlight how unreal fictional violence is in comparison to personal experience of violence. The following extract is an example of how participants consider the impact of real violence and the role fictional violence has to play in an understanding of violence in our society:

Unfortunately, the lower down you are on the economic scale the more chance you have to witness violence whether you agree with it or not. You actually do witness the extent of violence and the damage it does, whereas the higher up the social ladder you climb the more likely you are to depend on the telly to portray what you accept as an image of violence... If someone gets glassed or slashed or whatever else - you have a gaping wound, there's an awful lot of blood and you see parts of tissue and everything else and it is not pleasant. In a film, at best they show blood and all of a sudden it's covered - they don't actually show you the extent of it. I mean there's a
programme I'm watching about the battles up in Scotland between different gangs, and they just showed one bloke who had been taken into hospital who had been done with a machete, but I mean you're talking about absolute gaping wounds, you know. I mean this was real life. They don't show it in films and they don't show it on the news. This was one documentary over a hospital where it just actually showed - only for a few seconds - but it showed the extent of the wounds and they were horrific. I don't think people realise the damage that weapons do and anything else - whether it's warfare or whether it's just gang warfare - people are anaesthetized to the effects of it.

(Participant 1 - FG6)

What about those pictures on TV when that lad who got burnt, that was obviously quite traumatic - he was obviously going to die and that was disturbing. I think you have to sort of have a self-preservation thing don't you? If you expose yourself to all manner of violence everyday you would just - it would be intolerable for a normal person to carry on. I mean, in a lot of these films - Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction for instance - there is a lot of humour in these films which is I think - I don't know if that is really to show the humour in it or show the violence - I mean, I don't really know what direction he's [Quentin Tarantino] coming from but what came through, especially in Pulp Fiction - it was a really funny film, that was my -

(Participant 2 - FG6)

Which is even more - more dangerous in many ways.

(Participant 3 - FG6)

Here, mediated images of real violence are implicitly criticized for their inability to show the consequences of first hand experiences of real violence. For the first speaker, experience of real violence is linked to his social upbringing, and he claims such an upbringing brought him into contact with real violence, a contact which serves to highlight the unreality of fictional violence and mediated images of real violence. It is the 'extent' of violence and the consequences of violent acts which are significant to this participant; without knowledge of real violence, middle to upper class viewers 'accept' mediated images of real violence as real, when clearly, for this participant, this is not the case. He calls for more graphic images of real violence so that everyone will become less 'anaesthetized to the effects of it'; and it is the details of real violence, the size of the wounds, the amount of blood, that are significant. If
more people saw what real life was like, then the more people would understand the consequences of violence and how horrific it really is.

The first speaker constructs himself as the type of consumer of media violence that abhors real violence. Indeed, he draws upon his experience of violence, whether first hand, or through what he has seen on factual programmes, in order to show that his responses to fictional violence are shaped by this. To him, fictional violence, and mediated images of real violence are too safe; no one will know the consequences of violence if it is so sanitized in its fictional form. However, for the second speaker, it is the very humour and the very fictional nature of certain types of media violence that is important. It is humour that makes them safe. Words such as ‘expose’ and ‘self-preservation’ help to emphasize that for this participant, media violence is not there to remind the viewer of the reality of real violence, but to help preserve the viewer from the impact of real violence. No ‘normal’ person would wish to be exposed to real violence; it would be ‘intolerable’.

What we can see from this discussion of the safety of fictional violence is that participants construct their responses around perceptions of the safety of media violence and the horror of real violence. There is no doubt in participants’ minds that real violence is not entertaining; but there is some room for discussion about how realistic fictional violence should be. The first two speakers utilize two different types of discourses; both of which serve the purpose of highlighting how sensitive and aware these participants are to the debate about the function of media violence in society. When the third speaker interrupts the discussion with the comment that films which treat violence in a humorous way are perhaps ‘more dangerous’, he is picking up on the hesitancy of the second speaker to define what it is he actually likes about the humour of Pulp Fiction. As he stumbles for words, the third speaker steps in to
remind him of the function of media violence – it must be safe, but it must also be responsible. And yet, the second participant has a point. What is wrong with shocking entertainment? In the final section we shall see that when participants discuss the question of entertainment, they do indeed single out the fictional nature of media violence as a key factor in their enjoyment of such movies. Thus, although participants wish to point out that they are the type of risk-takers who know the difference between real violence and fictional violence and do not perceive real violence to be entertaining in any way, many participants then go on to point out that safety of media violence lies in its fictional status.

**Types of Entertainment**

The way that participants discuss perceptions of entertainment and perceptions of safety serves to highlight the function of media violence which is to be shocking and entertaining. How successful the target films are in relation to this criteria is one that each participant gauges according to personal and social perceptions of risk, safety and entertainment. Participants openly debated the validity of the term ‘entertainment’. Participants note different films are more entertaining than others and how they choose to define the term ‘entertainment’ depends on taste, individual preferences, critical appreciation, stylistic representations of violence, and, above all, the fictional status of a movie.

A number of examples will serve to illustrate how participants debate the issue of entertainment:
It depends on what you mean by entertaining. *Reservoir Dogs* I found entertaining because it was completely different to anything I'd seen before and quite exciting for all that, but at the same time quite disturbing and horrific. So, there was an entertainment side and another side which isn't what I'd call entertaining. *Pulp Fiction* I found thoroughly entertaining in every way. (Participant 3 - FG5)

I think you would have to define what you meant by entertainment. I think in the old fashioned sense *Pulp Fiction* was the only film that I thought entertaining, I engaged with the other films on certain levels but I don't think I would use the word entertaining. There is entertainment that is disturbing and entertainment that is funny. (Participant 1 - FG4)

There are different aspects of entertainment. I mean for me *Pulp Fiction* was fun, but *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* - you haven't had a huge giggle watching it, but it's made you think a bit more. (Participant 4 - FG6)

These three participants consider what the term 'entertainment' signifies for them. There are different aspects of entertainment; some movies are fun to watch, others are disturbing but can still be termed entertaining, and some films aren't entertaining at all, but can be considered thought provoking. Individual experience is significant and helps to define what participants consider to be, or not to be an entertaining violent movie.

This recourse to individual experience links with the reactive mechanisms of thresholds and self-censorship, discussed in the previous chapter. One participant defines which target films are entertaining by considering her role as a consumer. She says: 'I think *Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction* and *True Romance* are entertaining because you can choose what sort of level you become involved in. I have a choice' (Participant 4 - FG5). Another participant examines the issue of thresholds and her role as a consumer:
I find Tarantino and *Natural Born Killers* entertaining. My friend and I really liked *Natural Born Killers*, we even adopted the names of Mickey and Mallory for a while. Watching these films is something I did in defiance of what people thought I should be doing. Previously I'd seen cinema as an extension of reality and I didn't want to become involved in that, but now I'm prepared to see it because it's fiction and I want to test boundaries. It's good to see intelligent and constructive films which also include elements that I wouldn't normally have thought I wanted to see. I like the idea of questioning entertainment. What does it mean? Is it something that makes you think or feel in comparison with what's real and not real? Does it make you feel able to cope with more situations than you thought you'd be able to see?

(Participant 2 - FG5)

Here, the reactive mechanisms of thresholds and self-censorship combine in a complex way to inform the question of entertainment. At first, this participant chose not to see violent movies because she thought this was an area she would not find entertaining: violent movies are ‘an extension of reality’ and she did not want to become involved in such an area of reality. However, through a desire to push boundaries and test perceived thresholds of violence, this participant alters her opinion and considers movies such as *Pulp Fiction*, or *Natural Born Killers*, entertaining because they are *fictional* representations of violence, not an ‘extension of reality’. This participant transforms a fear of real violence into an enjoyment of fictional violence, and her enjoyment is defined by the very fact that she is surprised at her own response - viewing violence can be an entertaining and safe experience.

Certain violent movies are clearly more entertaining than others and why this is so is closely linked to a conscious awareness of real violence. As one participant explains:

I think *Reservoir Dogs* is very entertaining. I think *Pulp Fiction*, *True Romance*, *Natural Born Killers* and to an extent *Man Bites Dog*, except for the rape scene, are entertaining. *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Bad*
Lieutenant I just think are so relentless I can't possibly find them entertaining in any way. I think they are good films, and have a lot to say about the nature of violence and our response to it but I wouldn't say I enjoyed them and I wouldn't encourage people to see them - I wouldn't say: 'oh yeah, if you want a nice, unchallenging Saturday night movie just go to the pictures and see these films'.

(Participant 1 - FG5)

Pulp Fiction is entertaining because it is fictional and distanced from real violence by its stylistic presentation. Its very stylishness separates the film from other violent movies such as Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer, Man Bites Dog and Bad Lieutenant because even though a film like Man Bites Dog is fictional it utilizes realistic devices, such as documentary style footage, which makes it appear real. The closer a fictional film comes to real images of violence, the more difficult it is to watch, and the less entertaining it appears to participants.

Here are three participants criticizing the realism of Man Bites Dog:

I don't think Man Bites Dog is entertaining. It's done in black and white; it's sub-titled; it's French. It's just too realistic. It's depressing visually, and it's not Hollywood.

(Participant 5 - FG3)

The way Man Bites Dog is shot, the whole kind of documentary nature of it makes it hard to sit down and think 'oh, I'm really enjoying this film', someone's telling a story, and it's visually entertaining. It's not like that; it's not like you're being told a story. I actually switched off for a while. I wasn't bored - the violence just didn't have an effect on me anymore; it was violence for its own sake and it was trying to be more and more graphic each time, just to upset me.

(Participant 1 - FG3)

In Man Bites Dog there were some funny scenes, but there were bits that did get too much. Like the rape scene. I can see they're trying to have a joke and I just couldn't find it funny. It was too horrifying. It was a bit too much like a documentary, you couldn't really laugh at it.

(Participant 1 - FG4)
These participants criticize the movie for its lack of narrative drive, its lack of Hollywood style, and its realistic depiction of violence. These are aesthetic and personal criticisms which draw upon an awareness of real violence to define what is not entertaining about this violent movie. The fact that participants continually refer to the way Man Bites Dog or Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer appear too similar to viewing mediated images of violence is a clear indicator participants do not desire to be reminded of the horror of real violence. As one participant explains:

When I watched Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer, it wasn't so much the scenes themselves that I considered extremely violent, as the way in which they came across. I felt I had actually witnessed violence. Most other films the violence is glossed over, or done with a sense of humour to take the edge off it so that it doesn't leave you too shell-shocked. The thing is, if you actually see violence for what it is, it is horrific.

(Participant 1 - FG6)

The safe, protective environment of a fiction film is only present when the film itself takes steps to distance the viewer from an awareness of real violence. Thus, aesthetic constructs such as characterization, dialogue, and the fictional style of a movie allow room for participants to feel safe. Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer or Man Bites Dog are not ‘Saturday night movies’; they leave viewers with the sense that they have actually witnessed violence, whereas the point of certain types of media violence is that it allows viewers to respond to violence in a safe environment, to actually feel distanced from real violence in society.

One participant discusses why they perceive media violence to be a safe form of entertainment which is separate from their experience of real violence in society:
If you're living in the suburbs, violence does happen regularly in the pubs. Where I was brought up there was always violence on a Saturday night. So, if you want to avoid violence you come to London and you go to the cinema. Real violence is horrible but we'll go to the cinema to see it because it's a safe way. I avoid real violence at any costs, but I'll go and see violent movies because the violence isn't real. (Participant 3 - FG5)

This participant escaped small town violence by coming to the city, yet she chooses to watch films about violence because it is 'safe', it 'isn't real'. Therefore, although this participant wishes to avoid real life violence, and left her own suburban town in order to do so, she does not eschew all interest in violence. Her awareness of real acts of violence is transformed into a desire as a consumer to watch movies which depict fictional representations of violence.

This conscious awareness of real violence when viewing fictional violence is of specific interest when considering the question of entertainment. Evidence suggests that although participants differentiate between real violence and fictional violence, and do so in a number of varied ways, a conscious awareness of real violence when viewing fictional violence is present in each case. What is more, evidence indicates that it is precisely because participants in this study abhor real violence that they choose to see violent movies. As one participant explains:

When you're watching violent films they're just a safe way of experiencing the things you might be really, really frightened about in real life. I don't want to be beaten up, I'm scared of real violence, but I'm not as scared when I watch a violent film because I feel I can safely get out all my fears - it's a legitimate way for me to deal with violence. (Participant 1 - FG5)

Perhaps one of the most distinctive issues to emerge from the focus group discussions is the way in which participants consider 'legitimate ways...to deal with
violence'. The function of violent movies is to shock and entertain viewers. And yet for participants in this study, it is not acceptable for a consumer of media violence to dwell solely on these two factors. Consumers of media violence must associate themselves with a type of risk product and a type of risk-taker. There are clearly defined responses to media violence. Thus, for participants in this study, to associate themselves with the type of consumer of media violence who enjoys such films as *Pulp Fiction* or *Reservoir Dogs* is to choose legitimate ways of dealing with violence. It is legitimate because the types of risk-takers participants associate themselves with are intelligent and sensitive and safe; and the type of risk product these risk-takers engage with are also perceived by them to be intelligent and sensitive and safe. It may be that other, non risk-takers do not perceive these risk products in a similar way, but what is important is not the social construction of risk but individual risk-taking behaviour. For these risk-takers, watching media violence is a safe activity. The reason it is perceived to be safe is due to a number of presuppositions on behalf of consumers of media violence. Participants in this study pre-suppose that other viewers, including themselves follow certain codes of behaviour; these risk-takers gauge their response according to others; these risk-takers know the difference between reality and fantasy; these risk-takers can self-regulate risk. These are perceived to be legitimate ways of dealing with violence.

The functional pre-requisites for the safety of media violence are numerous and diverse. These pre-requisites will differ from risk-taker to risk product. But what is clear is that participants in this study wish to be in control of the virtual risks of media violence. They can be in control of these risks because they are not real; this is one of the pre-requisites of watching media violence, to know that it isn't real. When participants discuss their responses to real violence, or movies which appear
too realistic in their depictions of violence, we can see that their reactions are quite different. Thus, it is significant that viewers of media violence discuss its function as a responsible and safe form of entertainment. They define what is safe about media violence because as consumers of media violence they know, more than anyone else, why they choose to watch this form of entertainment.
Summary and Conclusion

Throughout the course of this thesis I have shown that a relationship exists between social theories of risk and theories of the mass media. I have used the media violence debate as an example of the way in which risk and environmentalism intersects with effects research and the control and regulation of media violence. We have seen that media violence is treated as if it is an environmental hazard. This means that anti-violence campaign groups attempt to measure the effects of watching media violence, using scientific research methods as a means of testing negative effects, and attempting to prove that a causal link exists between media violence and aggressive acts. This construction of media violence as an environmental hazard leads to an overwhelmingly negative perception of media violence as dangerous and hazardous to individuals and to the community as a whole.

I have shown that the process of watching film and television programmes which contain violence does not lend itself to precise scientific measurement: the viewing process is not an example of stimulus-response but, rather, is a complex and sophisticated experience that cannot be measured or tested in the same way that the effects of carbon monoxide can be measured. New audience research suggests that viewers of media violence are engaged in a delicate balancing act, whereby the perceived ‘risks’ of media violence are offset by the benefits of watching shocking entertainment.
I have spent some time outlining the construction of media violence as an environmental hazard and the reality of the ways in which people themselves manage ‘risk’ and understand and respond to media violence. It is now time to see what relationships exist between the production of risk and individual risk-taking behaviour. What I want to show in this final chapter is that despite the success of anti-violence campaign groups and their treatment of media violence as an environmental risk, there are other methods of understanding this type of entertainment. The problem with anti-violence campaign groups and effects researchers is that they conceptualise media violence as an environmental hazard, and this means that they use the wrong conceptual and methodological tools to study this phenomena. It is time for researchers to change the terms of reference. This thesis presents an appropriate response to the issue of media violence. It offers a conceptual breakthrough on the way in which the ‘risks’ of media violence can be seen to be used by viewers as developmental opportunities, and by this I am referring to the ways in which viewers of media violence develop a range of personal responses to media violence that can be seen to be part of a learning process.

*Media Violence: a Social Drama*

We began this study with an examination of Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society* (1992) and the utilization of the risk argument by anti-violence campaign groups, politicians and the media. According to Beck, we now live in a risk society, where industrial modernization products threaten the health of our friends and loved ones. Risks which were once invisible have now become visible, the side effects speak up. Multi-national
corporations may deny the existence of such side effects, and scientists may say that there are ‘acceptable levels’ of toxicity, but citizens know that it is multi-national corporations who are to blame. In the face of such denial non-governmental organizations, such as Greenpeace, fight to prove that a causal link exists between, for example, environmental pollution and certain types of industrial waste. If their campaign is successful, then they will place pressure on the government to produce new legislation to control and reduce risks. This is an example of the risk argument in action; campaign groups come together and utilize a set of practices that can lead to political and social change.

However, there are many factors which make up a ‘risk society’. As Ortwin Renn (1992, p.179) points out: ‘knowledge of physical consequences, the handling of risk information by individuals and social groups, the social and cultural meaning of risk causes and effects, as well as structural and organizational factors, shape the social experience of risk.’ This means that risk is not only a real issue, but a symbolic one as well. Individual and social groups who intend to influence collective decisions or policies which are concerned with risk issues mobilize resources so that what are considered to be media friendly risk issues become vehicles for other causes for concern. This is what Renn (1992, p.191) calls the ‘symbolic nature of risk’. Campaign groups use a particular risk as a symbol for other issues. Renn refers to anti-nuclear power groups as an example of the symbolization of risk; these social groups ‘view the debate over nuclear power as a surrogate for larger policy questions about desired lifestyles, political structure, and institutional power’ (1992, p.191). However, in this thesis, I have used anti-violence campaign groups as an example of the symbolic nature of risk. Here Renn and Palmlund’s theory of the ‘social drama’ of risk (1992, p.199) come together. Anti-violence campaign groups such as CARE, or the MCD view the
debate over media violence as a surrogate for larger policy questions about desired
lifestyles that are modeled on the teachings of the Bible (see Barratt, 1997; Thompson,
1992). These citizens groups come together in order to generate risk consciousness and
certainty, but they are not concerned with the ‘risks’ of media violence per se, but rather
in what media violence symbolizes, i.e. secular entertainment that is not concerned with
family values. This is why such groups also campaign against media which contain sex
and bad language. These types of entertainment symbolize all that groups such as
CARE, or the MCD despise about modern, secular society.

Thus, the social drama of risk is such that campaign groups choose to fight
against nuclear power, or media violence because these ‘hot’ risk issues provide the
‘social resources they need to fight their “real” battle’ (Renn, 1992, p.191). An
examination of this ‘real’ battle reveals that individuals and social groups who
campaign against media violence are in fact arguing for Christian values, middle class
values and elitist power structures. Time and again, anti-violence campaign groups,
politicians and the media argue for the control and regulation of media violence based
on the assumption that media violence is morally wrong, can corrupt innocent minds,
and encourage working class, adolescent boys, from single parent families, to commit
crime. It is only elitist power structures such as the BBFC, or government approved
regulatory bodies that can control and reduce existing levels of media violence.

It is the production and dissemination of knowledge in relation to the media
violence debate that is significant to this study. Anti-violence campaign groups,
politicians and the media construct a negative and inaccurate picture of media violence
as harmful and dangerous. Kasperson, Renn et al. (1988) and the theory of the social
amplification of risk can help us to understand this. Campaign members such as David
Alton, the Liberal Democrat peer, or newspapers such as the Daily Mail, amplify the
negative effects of media violence, creating enduring mental perceptions of media violence as evil and depraved, over-emphasising the harmful ‘effects’ of media violence, and demanding changes in risk monitoring and regulation. The social amplification of risk does not only refer to the manufacture of news, but is also concerned with ‘the cultural, social and individual structures and processes that shape the societal experience with risk’ (Kasperson, 1992, p.161). In relation to media violence, we can see that the structures and processes that shape societal experience with risk serve to amplify the threat of direct risks to the individual and to the environment, i.e. ‘negative effects’ such as copycat violence or desensitization, and the threat of symbolic risks, i.e. harm to social institutions, or values. What is considered ‘harmful’ is socially and culturally determined, and the characteristics of the social amplification process ensures that media violence is seen to pose a large threat to society, despite the fact that other issues such as unemployment or poor housing have been shown to be more important in relation to levels of real violence in our society.

These real issues are attenuated by politicians, the media and anti-violence campaign groups in favour of the social amplification of media violence. It is far easier to amplify the negative effects of media violence and suggest short term, cost-effective solutions, such as the V-chip, than to address the problem of unemployment or poor living conditions neither of which could be solved by short term, cost-effective solutions.

We can see from the way in which groups such as CARE, or the MCD, and newspapers such as the Daily Mail campaign against media violence that risk conflicts are political events. The recent controversy over Crash (David Cronenberg, 1996) is a good example of this. And yet, there is very little evidence to support the social amplification of media violence as a modernization risk. Detailed examination of ‘effects’ research which claims to show a direct causal link between watching media
violence and negative ‘effects’, such as copycat violence, shows that such research is neither reliable or valid (see Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989; Gauntlett, 1995; Buckingham and Allerton, 1996). This type of research which dominates the media violence debate is based on the inaccurate assumption that the effects of watching media violence can be measured in the same way the effects of carbon monoxide can be measured. It is precisely because ‘effects’ research has pre-conceived ends and fixed assumptions that it is an inappropriate scientific response to the phenomena being studied. Watching television is a complex and sophisticated process and therefore if researchers wish to understand this process, they must use complex and sophisticated conceptual and methodological tools.

In the last section of this study, I have concentrated on individual risk-taking behaviour and new audience research because it is here that progress can be made in our understanding of media violence and why it is that despite the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of media violence as hazardous and dangerous, people still choose to watch films and television programmes which contain scenes of violence. John Adams’ theory of the risk thermostat hypothesis (1995) has proved useful as a means of understanding the delicate balancing act that takes place when people choose to engage in a risk-taking activity. According to Adams (1995, p.15) people balance their propensity to take risks with their perception of the rewards and dangers of certain types of risk-taking behaviour. Everyone has the setting of their risk thermostat set at different temperatures: some like it hot, others like it cool, but, according to Adams, no one wants to be ‘zero-risk man’: everyone has a propensity to take risks of one form or another. Media violence is one example of such a risk, although, as Adams is quick to point out, not every risk is to do with real danger. Portrayals of violence in the media
are examples of 'virtual risks' (Adams, 1997) which are part of our imagination, not part of our experience of everyday life.

We can see from a detailed examination of new audience research into children and adults' responses to media violence that Adams' risk thermostat hypothesis is a conceptual model that has some grounding in empirical research. Of particular interest is the way in which viewers provide examples of 'risk compensation' (Adams, p. 114), which is when an individual takes more risks because they feel safer. For example, many of the viewers in recent audience research say that they believe there is too much violence on television and they support the regulation of media violence, but at the same time these same viewers show that they themselves watch a number of films and television programmes which contain violence (see Hargrave, 1996; Buckingham, 1996). These viewers are prepared to watch media violence precisely because they feel safe in the knowledge that a regulatory body has some control over the transmission of media violence.

New audience research also suggests that viewers' experience of real violence is significant to their perceptions of media violence. Viewers who perceive dangers to watching media violence are less likely to engage in this type of risk-taking behaviour (see Schlesinger et al., 1992). This means that people with experience of real violence are more likely to set their risk thermostats at a low level. What such research also reveals is the fact that people do not trust other viewers to respond in the same way as themselves. Thus, women with experience of violence do not trust male viewers, and fear media violence may negatively effect male viewers, for example, making them 'desensitized' to violence towards women, or, in extreme cases, encouraging them to be violent towards women (see Schlesinger et al., 1992). My own research would suggest that the exact opposite is the case, as male viewers in this study could be seen to be
sensitized to representations of female rape, and in no way encouraged to be violent towards women. However, such research findings have done little to counteract public distrust of other viewers of media violence. In *Regulating for Changing Values* distrust of other people in relation to media violence led to some viewers suggesting that media violence should become a pay per view activity, which would ensure that this type of risk-taking behaviour is controlled and regulated, but is still available for those people who wish to watch media violence and can afford to pay for this option (see Kieran et al., 1997).

Such individual reactions to media violence suggest that the construction of media violence as 'risky' and dangerous to certain types of vulnerable viewers has had some effect on the way in which people perceive this type of entertainment. Viewers may feel that they themselves can manage the 'risks' of watching media violence, and indeed when viewers talk about individual viewing practices they can be seen to attenuate such 'risks', but, when it comes to 'other' people, viewers amplify the 'risks' of media violence and exhibit fear and anxiety about vulnerable viewers. Here we can see how the theory of the social amplification of risk intersects with individual viewing practices. Before I move on to discuss the implications of this relationship with the social construction of media violence and individual perceptions of risk, I would like to summarize the findings of the qualitative research conducted for this thesis.

*Audience Research and Portfolios of Response*
Qualitative research is a useful means to generate insights into the way in which people think and act in social situations. It has been used in this study as a research tool which can best aid an understanding of viewing practices and the issue of media violence. However, the results of qualitative research are difficult to summarize, and it would be foolish to attempt to offer a series of grand claims: this is not the aim of this research. Therefore, I would like to outline a number of patterns and emergent themes that suggest ways of understanding media violence and point to suggestions for new research in this area. The results of this research are as follows:

1 **Violent movies test viewers, and consumers are aware of this.**

   Media hype and peer pressure ensure consumers of violent movies are very much aware that violent movies test viewers. Testing signifies the way in which ‘new brutalism’ movies challenge audiences with unflinching and realistic portrayals of violence: violence with consequences. It also signifies the way in which ‘new brutalism’ movies contain intelligent dialogue and direction. It is precisely these factors which draw moviegoers to see these films and to make up their own minds about movies which are perceived as dangerous and unhealthy by moral watchdogs in the media and government. Viewers can be seen to categorize types of media violence and associate themselves with specific ‘risky’ movies. This means that viewers also align themselves with specific types of risk-takers, in this instance viewers who are intelligent, sensitive and mature.

2 **Viewing violence is a social activity**

   Awareness of media hype and peer pressure surrounding these movies ensures that the activity of viewing violence is social. Most viewers I spoke to watched these
films either at the cinema or at home, and did not do so alone. Part of the enjoyment of viewing violence is to monitor audience reaction, as the films themselves provoke reaction. Individual response is part of a much wider awareness of the variety of responses available to consumers of violent movies.

3 The issue of trust and distrust is significant to media violence

Participants were very much aware that there are 'acceptable' responses to types of media violence, and here, viewers can be seen to monitor their own physical and emotional responses in relation to others. This is an example of the way in which consumers of media violence situate their own private responses in relation to the public arena of risk and media violence. In this study, participants are social actors, and they shift between social perceptions of the 'risks' of media violence and personally understanding media violence. This means that participants trust their own response to media violence but are distrustful of 'other' types of consumers of media violence.

4 Anticipation is a key factor in determining response to violence

It is through anticipation that consumers of violent movies are able to choose which method of response they wish to use in order to interpret a violent film or scene. As there are a variety of complex and sophisticated responses to violence, the choice is large, and those viewers I spoke to deliberately anticipated scenes of violence in order to be prepared for individual reactions to violence. This cognitive response of anticipation and preparation is essential to the enjoyment of viewing violent movies.

5 Thresholds re-affirm social taboos and individual experience
Thresholds are part of the way violent movies test the viewer. Movies use thresholds to provoke reactions, and it is part of the process of viewing violence that participants identify thresholds to violence. Some thresholds are social; they re-affirm social taboos (such as female rape) and signify collective fears. Others are personal and re-affirm individual experience, often based in childhood memories or personal experience of violence. Identifying social or personal thresholds does not necessarily lead to self-censorship. Moviegoers can anticipate and prepare for specific types of fictional violence but choose to not self-censor. Social and personal thresholds to violence are an example of the way in which perceptions of risk and real experience of the ‘risks’ of media violence shape the viewing process.

6 **Viewers use a variety of methods to self-censor violence**

There is no one method of self-censoring violence, and viewers draw upon individual preferences, perceived notions of consumers of violent movies, and audience reactions to shape their own method of self-censoring. Those viewers I spoke to activated any number of methods of self-censorship at a given time, looking away from the screen, peeking through their fingers, thinking of the ironing, running out of the room and switching off a video. The way in which viewers prepare to self-censor is the same whether they choose to watch a violent representation or not. Methods of self-censorship are a means to manage the perceived ‘risks’ of media violence and remain in control of the viewing experience.

7 **Boundary testing is part of the process of viewing violence**

Testing boundaries is a key factor in why people choose to watch violent movies. Through thresholds and self-censorship, and the roles anticipation and
preparation have to play in that process, viewers test their own boundaries whilst viewing violence because it is a safe way of interpreting violence in a fictional setting. Boundary testing is not comparable with 'desensitization'. It arises from reactive mechanisms associated with specific viewing experiences. Boundary testing is an example of the way in which viewers adjust the setting of their risk thermostat. As the thermostat reaches a certain level, the viewer tests past and future settings; they dare themselves to watch a violent scene they know they will find disturbing because it is exciting and rewarding: testing boundaries is one of the perceived benefits to watching media violence.

8 **Real violence is raw and brutal and not entertaining**

Active consumers of violent movies do not find real violence in any way entertaining, and they differentiate between real violence and fictional violence. In many ways, it is because they abhor real violence that those viewers I spoke to chose to watch fictional violence. Once again, it is a safe way of understanding response to violence, without having to experience violence in real life.

9 **Fictional violence is entertaining**

One of the reasons people choose to see violent movies is because they are entertaining. This does not mean consumers of violent movies find all violence entertaining, but the process of watching a film which is composed of acting, soundtrack, direction, dialogue, *as well as* representations of violence, is meant to be entertaining because violent movies are part of the entertainment industry and made widely available to the consumer: violent movies aren't free, consumers have to pay for their entertainment as they would with other comparable leisure activities. Those
viewers I spoke to thought all the target films could be classed as entertaining, but there are different aspects of entertainment, and some movies are thought more entertaining than others depending on individual preferences, and the stylistic presentation of violence.

10 Violent movies are seen as safe

It is precisely because violent movies are fictional that viewers can feel safe to experience a range of complex and sophisticated responses to violence. They would not be able to do this in any comparable way in real life. Hence, they go to the movies. Violence is something all viewers I spoke to feared and abhorred, but this did not mean they eschewed all aspects of violence: it is real violence which is to be avoided, not fictional violence. For these participants, watching media violence is a safe activity. The reason it is perceived to be safe is due to a number of presuppositions on behalf of consumers of media violence. Participants in this study pre-suppose that other viewers, including themselves, follow certain codes of behaviour; these viewers gauge their response according to others; these viewers know the difference between reality and fantasy; these viewers can self-regulate the ‘risks’ of media violence. These are perceived to be legitimate ways of dealing with violence. Consequently, violent movies act as a safe way of exploring the issue of violence and provide a forum for complexities of response.

The Theory of Portfolios of Response
A significant factor to emerge from the qualitative research is that participants possess what I have termed ‘portfolios of response’ when viewing violence. The expression ‘portfolios of response’ signifies the way participants understand and interpret violent movies. It is a theory which best describes the accumulation of responses that are part of the viewing process.

Portfolios signify a body of work, a record of experiences. The theory ‘portfolios of response’ best sums up the processes of viewing violence because moviegoers possess experiences which are multiform. They possess dynamic and fluid methods of response. Some of these methods of response are shared by many others. For example, anticipation is a method of response many participants utilize in order to prepare for watching or not watching violence. Other methods of response are shared by few. For example, personal thresholds are unique to each individual, and are utilized in order to re-affirm personal experiences within the context of viewing violence.

However, all of these methods of response are part of a portfolio of experiences that are identifiable as belonging to a particular type of entertainment activity. In this instance, watching films such as Reservoir Dogs, or Pulp Fiction involves an awareness of a series of ‘acceptable’ physical and emotional responses. Participants draw upon their portfolio of experiences in order to associate themselves with a particular type of viewer. These films are categorized by consumers of media violence as intelligent and sophisticated films which invite intelligent and sophisticated responses. It follows that viewers of such films will wish to respond in the appropriate manner. As we have seen from the results of the focus group interviews, such responses include anticipation of acts of violence in order to prepare for the ‘right’ response; self-censorship of representations of violence that are perceived to be disturbing by the individual; and, an understanding that fictional violence can be entertaining and real violence and mediated
images of real violence are abhorrent and not entertaining. This means that 'acceptable' responses to films such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) may be categorized as an anticipation that acts of violence in this film will be treated in a humorous way; an awareness that this film is deliberately testing certain thresholds, for example male rape, but in such a playful way that it is not necessary to self-censor, although some people may feel the need to do so; and, an understanding that this film is self-consciously stylized and unrealistic in its representations of violence. However, if we take another film, *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1990), it is possible to see that participants respond to this film in quite different ways. This film is categorized by participants as being realistic and disturbing in its treatment of violence. Therefore, what is considered to be 'acceptable' responses to this film can be categorized as an anticipation that the violence in this film will be treated in a realistic way; an awareness that this film will deliberately test thresholds, for example female rape, and that it will do so in such a disturbing way that many viewers will find it necessary to self-censor; and, an understanding that this film undertakes to examine and critique violence in a serious manner.

Thus, it can be seen that when a consumer of media violence comes to the viewing experience they bring with them an understanding of what are 'acceptable' responses to different types of media violence. To laugh at the rape scene in *Pulp Fiction* is an acceptable form of response, but to laugh in a similar fashion to the rape scene in *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* is not acceptable for the reasons outlined above. Consumers of media violence are very much aware that everyone has their own way of interpreting and responding to media violence, but nevertheless there are certain pre-conditions and presuppositions about what are socially acceptable forms of response both before, during and after the viewing event. As the practice of watching
media violence is a social activity, viewers place some importance on these pre-
conditions, and monitor their own responses in relation to how other people also
respond to representations of violence.

Viewers possess portfolios of response so that they can manage their risk-taking
behaviour in relation to others, and in relation to different types of media violence.
However, it follows that if there are a variety of responses to media violence, and that
viewers of media violence possess experiences which are multiform, then there will be
types of consumers of media violence that exhibit what are perceived to be
'unacceptable' responses. Participants in this study were quick to cite examples of
'unacceptable' forms of response to types of media violence. These include laughing at
inappropriate moments, and being unaware of the serious content of a film. A few
participants also expressed a concern that there may be some types of viewers who
could imitate acts of violence which they saw on film. This reflects a common concern
by viewers and can be seen to be evident in other audience research discussed in this
study. However, it is important to point out that I found no evidence in the focus group
discussions to support the concept that watching media violence can lead to an increase
in violent behaviour. Participants may express concern about such a viewer, but this
concern reveals more about dominant discourses and media violence than about
participants' own viewing practices.

These particular types of 'problem' viewers of media violence are located at the
far end of the scale of what are perceived to be 'unacceptable' forms of response by
participants in this study. They do not possess an awareness of cinema going as a social
activity; they do not draw upon portfolios of response but instead draw upon a limited
and distorted understanding of media violence and real violence. These types of viewers
of media violence are also types of people that are perceived to be psychotic and
socially inadequate; it is not that participants believe these people to be drawn to media violence, but rather that these types of people exist in every local community. These people transgress social rules and threaten the stability and safety of the community. It does not matter what type of activity these people are involved in, whether it be robbing banks or selling life insurance, such people will exhibit asocial behaviour. This is an important point. The theory of portfolios of response does not exclude the possibility of a ‘problem person’ who never self-censors and who does not know the difference between reality and fantasy. However, this ‘problem person’ is not made this way by watching media violence, but rather is a person who brings with them the experience of psychosis, or child abuse, or schizophrenia, who brings with them a history of aggression, and unhappiness and mental illness that make then unable to balance their behaviour in relation to others.

The same logic can be applied to theories of risk-takers. There are many similarities between John Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis and the theory of portfolios of response. Before I go on to outline the ways in which the risk thermostat hypothesis can help us to understand the positive aspects of watching media violence it is as well to point out now that, if, according to Adams, everyone has a propensity to take risks, and everyone sets their risk thermostat according to their perception of the dangers and rewards of types of risk-taking behaviour, then this hypothesis must also include the concept of a ‘problem’ risk-taker. This type of risk-taker is someone who cannot balance their behaviour in relation to others, who has no understanding of socially acceptable responses to risk-taking activities, and who does not care for safety precautions. Someone who is a member of a gun club and enjoys shooting for sport is not the same as a mass murderer who kills innocent children, and yet both are risk-takers. The difference is that the second example is a person who brings with them a
distorted and unbalanced experience of human life. These people exist in every community, and there are ways of reducing the risks of such people committing real violence, but these safety measures should not be confused with safety measures for all other types of risk-taking activities.

As I have shown, media violence is a good example of the way in which a risk-taking activity has become confused with real violence in our society. There is a place for the regulation of media violence, and yet this regulation should not be confused with steps to reduce levels of real violence: this is an entirely separate issue. What the research findings of the focus groups interviews reveal is that viewers of media violence are already engaged in a complex balancing act, whereby responses to media violence are balanced with perceptions of real violence. Participants are aware that they live in a violent world. And they also suggest that they find it difficult to understand and comprehend this violent world. One of the ways in which to comprehend real violence is to choose to watch certain types of fictional violence. Participants suggest that in certain instances they wish to use media violence not to desensitize themselves to real violence but to achieve further understanding of the acceptability and unacceptability of violence in society. Here, the ‘risks’ of media violence are transformed into developmental opportunities. One of the reasons participants choose to watch media violence is to achieve a balanced view, not just towards media violence, but towards the reality of violence in our society.

Figure 3 is an adaptation of Adams’ risk thermostat hypothesis in relation to media violence and the theory of portfolios of response.
Figure 3: Portfolios of response
What we can see from this model is that viewers of media violence balance their behaviour. Factors which influence individual behaviour and make up the portfolio of response include:

- Perceptions of media violence as positive and negative
- Personal experience of violence, to oneself and to others
- Identification of social and personal thresholds to fictional and mediated representations of violence
- The use of different methods of self-censorship as a means of managing and controlling responses to media violence
- Testing boundaries is a reactive mechanism to media violence and symbolizes the risks and rewards of this type of entertainment
- Trust and distrust are significant to the way in which viewers respond to media violence; viewers trust their own responses to media violence because they are in control of this experience; viewers distrust other people, but place confidence in the portfolios of response which people bring to the viewing experience.

This model of the theory of portfolios of response is based upon a simplified version of the empirical research conducted in this thesis. It is both a conceptual model, and an operational one. However, in this form the model of the theory of portfolios of response is specific to a type of consumer of media violence, a consumer that associates themselves with films such as *Pulp Fiction*, a consumer that wishes to categorize themselves as intelligent and sensitive viewers of these types of media violence texts. It is therefore a model that must be adapted to suit different types of consumers of media violence and different types of activities. Many of the factors that I have related to the viewing experience will be shared by other viewers of media violence, but there will most certainly be other factors, not included here, which need to be addressed. This is not a weakness in the theory of portfolios of response, but rather an acknowledgement that in every ‘portfolio’ there are many different ways to respond to media violence. A consumer of Hollywood action movies, or a horror fan, will not respond in exactly the
same way as a consumer of crime movies. It is as well to bear this in mind when researchers attempt to understand viewing practices in relation to media violence. As the research findings in this study indicate, viewers themselves are quick to categorize different types of films and different types of viewers within the framework of media violence; this subtlety of distinction between the range and variety of what can be classified as ‘violent’ is something researchers themselves would be wise to pay attention to.

**Participation and Communication**

The research findings of the qualitative research conducted for this thesis provide an example of the way in which people themselves are far more intelligent and media literate about the function of media violence than politicians or self-appointed moral watchdogs. If more attention can be paid to public response to the issue of media violence then it would be possible to move away from the type of one-sided debate that currently dominates this emotive issue.

At present, the general public can be seen to be confused and distrustful of the competing claims about the role of scientific research in the media violence debate. Time and again newspapers report that ‘experts’ have discovered a causal link between watching media violence and negative ‘effects’, such as aggressive behaviour. This type of research is unreliable and invalid because it is based on the flawed assumption that the effects of watching television can be scientifically measured, and because it ignores powerful extraneous variables such as employment, age, or existing mental
health. Other types of research which aim to show that responses to media violence are complex and diverse and cannot simply be labeled as positive or negative are routinely ignored by politicians, campaign groups and the media. However, even without a balanced perspective of research into media violence, the general public are far more likely to possess a more rational and non-judgemental perspective of media violence than politicians, the media and anti-violence campaign groups. Recent research suggests that although the public are anxious about the alleged negative ‘effects’ of media violence, and believe that there is a great deal of violence on television which should not be available to children, they still do not suggest that all media violence should be banned (see Kieran et al., 1997). Indeed, the general public can be seen to present far more practical measures to dealing with the issue of media violence, for example pay per view, than politicians and policy makers.

Such a suggestion is not made in ignorance of the current situation with regard to media violence. I have spent a large proportion of this thesis considering the overwhelmingly negative and inaccurate portrayal of media violence by anti-violence campaign groups. The problem with this construction of media violence as an environmental hazard is that it plays upon public confusion of this issue – do ‘video nasties’ kill? – and amplifies the potential ‘risks’ of media violence, so that people are encouraged to think that if ‘experts’ cannot agree on the ‘risks’ of media violence, it is better to be safe than sorry. Anti-violence campaign groups moralize the issue of media violence. ‘Moralization is a mechanism that allows spectators to form attitudes or opinions about an issue even if the beliefs about the factual outcomes indicate uncertainty and ambiguity’ (Renn, 1992, p.192). By moralizing the issue of media violence, campaign groups polarize positions on media violence policies. One side of the argument proposes that all media violence is unjustified as long as it is capable of
killing a single individual, and the other side argues that media violence is an inevitable reflection of societal/cultural anxieties. This moralization and polarization of the issue of media violence offers no compromise. And as the more popular opinion is that it is better to be safe than sorry, politicians, the media and campaign groups seize upon this position and propose policies which will set out to reduce levels of media violence in the community as a whole.

However, it is as well to bear in mind that unlike environmental hazards such as global warming, the general public do have immediate experience of watching media violence. The social amplification of media violence and the politicization of this issue have ensured that there is little open dialogue with the public and policy makers. Regulatory bodies such as the BBFC, the ITC and the BSC have undertaken regular surveys, and public opinion polls over the last decade, and have also conducted regional discussion groups into public concern about the issue of media violence (BBFC, 1996). Whilst this is certainly to be applauded, opinion polls and surveys are an example of one way communication programmes, whereby ‘experts’ learn about the ‘lay perspective’. Even when such ‘experts’ engage in public discussion groups, this is still not an example of reciprocal risk communication, because the general public have little trust in such organisations (see Marris et al., 1997). Trust is an important factor in successful risk communication. European and American studies have shown that public distrust in authorities can affect perceptions of risk and lead to deadlock over suggested risk conflict resolutions (Kasperson et al., 1992; Slovic et al., 1991). It is important to advocate more reciprocal communication programmes, whereby ‘experts’ consider ways of increasing trust levels through encouraging more open dialogue. Given the one sided nature of the media violence debate at present, a proposal to encourage more open and objective lines of communication would seem a better alternative than leaving the
media violence debate in the polarized state that it is in at the moment. Although such a strategy would not avoid anti-violence campaign groups, politicians and the media from using media violence controversies for political gain, it should help to reduce the problems associated with the social amplification of the risks of media violence by increasing public understanding of this issue, and encourage the public to take more control in decision making processes.4

Thus, I would argue that although risk communication studies (see Otway, 1992; Winterfelt, 1992; McDaniels, 1997) suggest that it is no easy task to include public discussion within decision making processes, research into how and why children and adults respond to media violence would suggest that it is film and television audiences who have a greater understanding of this issue than self-appointed moral guardians, politicians or policy makers. Researchers in audience communication studies can learn from the experience of risk communication studies which have shown that risk communication is not about simple surveys, or advertising, or providing credible information which the public will passively accept as ‘true’, but, rather, risk communication is about entering into a social relationship with the public, who can expect to play a more significant role in conflict resolution and in the sharing of power and responsibility of risk issues (see Otway, 1992). One way to begin to promote reciprocal communication between the public and policy makers is to undertake more sophisticated audience research, research which focuses on the contextual and individual factors which make up the viewing experience (see Buckingham, 1996; Gauntlett, 1997; Barker and Brooks, 1997). In the final section of this chapter I would like to argue for a more integrative approach to understanding and dealing with the issue of media violence, both in terms of empirical research and in terms of social theories of risk and the mass media.
Towards an Integrative Approach

Throughout the course of this thesis I have argued that a relationship exists between the construction of the media violence debate and the 'masterframe of environmental discourse' (Eder, 1996). I have deliberately focused on the areas of risk analysis and media violence because it is my intention to show that the media violence debate can be better understood in relation to environmentalism and the political, social and cultural construction of media violence as an environmental hazard. However, this does not mean that I would wish to exclude other approaches to the issue of media violence, or indeed other methods of research into the area of mass communication studies. Different theoretical and empirical approaches to the mass media certainly have an important role to play in future studies of the mass media. For example, feminist analysis provides the researcher with tools to investigate power relations within texts, and to challenge representations of women. Postmodernism provides the researcher with the tools to investigate intertextuality and to foreground shifting identities. However, the function of feminist or postmodernist approaches to the mass media is to present a specific reading, and this is both a virtue and a shortcoming. We may learn about patriarchal power relations or the use of irony, but on their own, such methodologies abstract the researcher from other cultural and contextual factors which are also significant to an understanding of the mass media.

This is why a more integrative approach to the study of the mass media has proved fruitful to this investigation of the issue of media violence. Figure 4 is a conceptual model of this integrative approach.
Figure 4: risk and media violence: an integrative approach
Here we can see that the issue of media violence can be understood from three different perspectives. The first represents a micro-level of analysis, and is concerned with individual behaviour and social interaction. Audience research and media content analyses are two examples of this, and in this study I have argued for a more critical ethnographic approach to audience research, and a close attention to the way in which the media construct controversies. The second perspective represents a meso-level of analysis, and is concerned with the 'segmentation of society into different...systems that interact with each other but still preserve their autonomy' (Renn, 1992, p.181). The risk thermostat hypothesis and the social amplification of risk are two methods of analysis which help to understand anti-violence campaign groups, and types of consumers of media violence, and in this study I have argued that both methods of approach are extremely useful in revealing the dynamic and social experience of risk in relation to media violence. The third perspective represents a macro-level of analysis and is concerned with societal behaviour as a whole. Social theories of risk, communications research and social theories of the mass media are all examples of this way of understanding large-scale social systems, and in this study I have argued that the political, social and cultural construction of media violence as an environmental hazard has far reaching implications about the production and dissemination of knowledge and the role of popular culture in everyday lives.

This integrative approach to the issue of media violence allows for cross-fertilization and provides a framework for comparative analysis. The research conducted in this study has shown that social theories of risk and the mass media combined with communications research have proved a fruitful means to investigate this area. An integrative approach to the issue of media violence can help to identify the contextual and individual factors which make up the experience of watching media
violence; it can help to explain social, political and public concern over this 'risky' subject; and, it can provide a framework with which to design new ways of evaluating and dealing with media violence, an issue that will be the subject of hot debate for some time to come.

Notes

1 See the Newson report (Newson, 1994) and the PAPFCPG report (PAPFCPG, 1997), both of which are examples of the way in which anti-violence campaign groups use media violence as a symbol for other issues. See also Barker and Petley (1997) for recent criticism of the way in which such groups target 'undesirable' aspects of society, i.e. adolescent boys from single parent families.

2 Lord David Alton, the Liberal Democrat peer and Julian Brazier, a Tory MP, are campaigning for the BBFC to be made more accountable, and for members of the board of the BBFC to be approved by the government (see Sylvester, 1997).

3 There have been many examples of this type of media campaign. Probably the most famous is the reportage of the Newson Report in 1994, where experts were considered to have made a 'U-turn' about the effects of media violence (see Newson, 1994; Buckingham, 1996; Barker, 1997a). However, a recent example can be seen in The Sunday Times, see Hellen and Rufford (1997, p.1) and a new report by Dr Kevin Browne and Amanda Pennell, titled 'The Effect of Video Violence on Young Offenders' which claims to have proved a connection between young offenders and a taste for media violence.

4 I am grateful to Ragnar Lofstedt for his helpful comments about risk and public discussion, and many of the points in this section are adapted from an article titled 'Risk Communication', published in Energy Policy, Vol.24, No.8, pp.689-696, 1996.
Appendix 1: Guiding Questions for Focus Groups

I INTRODUCTION
There are name cards around the table and I'd like to ask you to introduce yourself and tell us the most recent film you saw on the list in front of you.

II OPENING QUESTION
1. How do you choose to see these movies?
   A) How do they compare to other films like the Die Hard series, or Terminator 2?

III TRANSITION QUESTION
2. Going to the cinema is a social activity; do you notice how other people respond to violent scenes in a film?

3. What physical emotions do you feel when you see a violent scene in a film?
   A) Can you anticipate the violence in a film?

IV KEY QUESTIONS

Characterization
CUE: Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer - eye-stabbing scene
4. Do you identify with any one character in this scene?

5. Is it necessary to know something about the characters before you are able to identify with one of them?

Thresholds and Self-censorship
6. What do you think to the visual effects of violence in these films?

CUE: Reservoir Dogs - ear-amputation scene
7. What is your personal response to this scene?
   A) Would you, or anyone you know not watch this scene?
   B) What would be the reason?

8. Would you not watch a scene in a film you found disturbing?
   A) What would be the reason?

ENTERTAINMENT
9. How does these movies compare to watching real violence on the news, or in real life?

10. Are these films entertaining?

CUE: List of target films.

V SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION
12. Summary of key questions.

13. Invite comments.
Appendix 2: List of Target Films Used in Focus Groups

LIST OF TARGET FILMS

Reservoir Dogs
Pulp Fiction
True Romance
Natural Born Killers
Man Bites Dog
Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer
Bad Lieutenant
Killing Zoe

Appendix 3: Registration Form - Focus Groups

NAME_________________________________
AGE_________________________________
MALE/FEMALE_________________________
ETHNIC ORIGIN_________________________
EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS_________________________________

PLEASE TICK WHICH FILMS YOU HAVE SEEN

Reservoir Dogs
Pulp Fiction
True Romance
Natural Born Killers
Man Bites Dog
Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer
Bad Lieutenant
Killing Zoe

PLEASE INDICATE WHICH FILMS YOU HAVE SEEN AT THE CINEMA, ON VIDEO, OR BOTH. USE C FOR CINEMA OR V FOR VIDEO, AND WRITE THE CORRESPONDING LETTER NEXT TO EACH FILM

WHICH CINEMAS DO YOU REGULARLY GO TO?_________________

WHAT PAPERS/MAGAZINES DO YOU REGULARLY READ?______________


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Filmography

*Accused, The*, 1988, Jonathan Kaplan

*Bad Lieutenant*, 1992, Abel Ferrara

*Braveheart*, 1995, Mel Gibson

*Child's Play 3*, 1992, Jack Bender

*Clockwork Orange, A*, 1971, Stanley Kubrick

*Crash*, 1996, David Cronenberg

*Die Hard*, 1988, John McTiernan

*Die Hard 2*, 1990, John McTiernan

*Die Hard with a Vengeance*, 1995, John McTiernan

*Exorcist, The*, 1973, William Friedkin

*Friday the 13th*, 1980, Sean S. Cunningham.


*Killing Zoe*, 1994, Roger Avary

*Last House on the Left*, 1972, Wes Craven

*Man Bites Dog*, 1992, Belvaux, Bonzel, Poelvoorde

*Misery*, 1990, Rob Reiner

*Nightmare on Elm Street, A*, 1984, Wes Craven
Natural Born Killers, 1994, Oliver Stone
Outbreak, 1995, Wolfgang Petersen
Pretty Woman, 1990, Gary Marshall
Pulp Fiction, 1994, Quentin Tarantino
Reservoir Dogs, 1992, Quentin Tarantino
Schindler's List, 1993, Steven Spielberg
Shining, The, 1980, Stanley Kubrick
Straw Dogs, 1971, Sam Peckinpah
Terminator, The, 1984, James Cameron
Texas Chain Saw Massacre, The, 1974, Tobe Hooper
Thelma and Louise, 1991, Ridley Scott
True Romance, 1993, Tony Scott
Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me, 1992, David Lynch
Visions of Ecstacy, 1996, Nigel Wingrove