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# Watching “Insidious” – On the Social Construction of Fear

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### Abstract

As mass media are an integral part of our everyday lives, their role in constituting emotions and feeling rules receives heightened attention. However, content analyses and psychoanalytical/reaction analyses focus on a film-viewer-relation that does not consider the group character of media consumption. This article deals with the question of how fear is socially constructed and interactively negotiated by taking an ethnomethodological look at videos that teenagers have taken of themselves while watching the horror movie *Insidious*. It puts forward two inter-related forms of ambiguity: the ambiguity of what emotions are appropriate, that is, the ways in which feeling rules are treated as topics and as features of the viewing settings, and, secondly, the ambiguity of belonging that concerns the question of how several viewers can draw themselves out of a terrifying situation while simultaneously ensuring that the group is held together. Fear is regarded as a separating emotion insofar as actors withdraw, actively locate their bodies as barriers against the movie’s sensual impressions and thus simultaneously constrain interaction by blocking central channels of communication. Special attention is given to the ways in which this affects interaction. The article contributes to the understanding of visual spectatorship and the undertaking of bringing affect into media studies by bringing together audience research and emotion sociology.

### Keywords

Emotion, Horror Movie, Fear, Feeling Rules, Visual Spectatorship

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## Watching “Insidious” – On the Social Construction of Fear

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*As mass media are an integral part of our everyday lives, their role in constituting emotions and feeling rules receives heightened attention. However, content analyses and psychoanalytical/reaction analyses focus on a film-viewer-relation that does not consider the group character of media consumption. This article deals with the question of how fear is socially constructed and interactively negotiated by taking an ethnomethodological look at videos that teenagers have taken of themselves while watching the horror movie *Insidious*. It puts forward two inter-related forms of ambiguity: the ambiguity of what emotions are appropriate, that is, the ways in which feeling rules are treated as topics and as features of the viewing settings, and, secondly, the ambiguity of belonging that concerns the question of how several viewers can draw themselves out of a terrifying situation while simultaneously ensuring that the group is held together. Fear is regarded as a separating emotion insofar as actors withdraw, actively locate their bodies as barriers against the movie’s sensual impressions and thus simultaneously constrain interaction by blocking central channels of communication. Special attention is given to the ways in which this affects interaction. The article contributes to the understanding of visual spectatorship and the undertaking of bringing affect into media studies by bringing together audience research and emotion sociology. Keywords: Emotion, Horror Movie, Fear, Feeling Rules, Visual Spectatorship*

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After the horror movie *Insidious* was released in 2010, a new watching-habit went viral on the Internet: teenagers and young adults filmed themselves while watching *Insidious* at home and uploaded these videos on social media platforms like YouTube. While in the commentaries the videos are sometimes framed as an endeavour of entertaining others (e.g., “feel free to laugh at our expense”), the recordings are a valuable source of information about how fear is socially constructed and interactively negotiated. How is the expression of fear shaped “in anticipation of how it will be perceived by others” (Katz, 1999, p. 5)? How do we establish emotional norms? What “corporeal metamorphoses” occur when we are overwhelmed by fear, and how does this affect interaction?

The “affective turn” is currently gaining momentum in media studies (see Hanich, 2010; Lünenborg & Maier, 2018). As media are an integral part of our everyday lives, their role in producing emotions and constituting feeling rules receives heightened attention. “How we feel in and about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, is affected by our experiencing this world through the mass media” (Döveling et al., 2011, p. 2). However, a perspective on feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979) tends to imply a “cognitive-interpretive solution to the problem of order” (Maynard & Clayman, 1991, p. 387) wherein single actors “produce patterned courses of action because they share internalized frames of reference” (Maynard & Clayman, 1991, p. 387). Instead of focusing on film and media as creators of emotion norms, this article is taking an in-depth empirical look at audiences’ practices and procedures in self-generating an affective order and at the impact emotions have on social interactions. The analysis revolves around a special emotion: fear, that is—while emotions have clearly become an established topic of sociological work—rather seldom at the centre of

research (there are, of course, prominent exceptions, for example Stearns, 2006).

So far and in regard to mass media, the relation between socio-cultural context and fear has mostly been studied by means of content analyses or reaction analyses. Reaction analyses (e.g., Ohler & Nieding, 1996; Raney, 2005; Zillman, 1996) try to determine in an experimental setting which media narratives elicit what type of emotion by relying on the participant's self-reported feelings and associations (sometimes backed by measuring physiological reactions). Scarieness is not (only) an attribute of the film content but is said to stem from cognitive factors such as the individual's empathy with film characters or personally held moral beliefs and expectations. Content analyses focus on what cinematic elements or stories are scary *per se* in a given culture. There is some consensus that it is a play with norms and familiarities that creates horror (cf. Fraser, 1990; Pinedo, 1997; Tamborini, 1991). Taboos are broken and deviance indulged in (e.g., incest, cannibalism); incongruous elements are introduced into otherwise familiar settings. We feel fear because the socially excluded, the unthinkable, breaks way into our lives.

This way of analysis misses a crucial point: Watching movies is a social activity and sense-making is an interactive process. There is no automatic causality between cinematic techniques and fear. It was one of the main achievements of cultural studies approaches (e.g., Stuart Hall, John Fiske, Ien Ang) to show that audiences are active and, in a way, rebellious sense-makers who do not always follow the line of interpretation suggested by film directors. It may be telling that a lot of horror film analyses have a cultural studies background (e.g., Giles, 2004; Winter, 1991, 1999). However, in the Neomarxist perspective of cultural studies, media consumption is primarily thought of as a societal, not as an interaction-based, event. Encoding and decoding are *political* strategies (Fiske, 1989). For Fiske (1989) the pleasure of consumption is "a function of the self" (p. 84) that is both the expression of a social relation (the resistance of subjectivity against society and against the latter's constructive power of what a self is) and a psychological preference or source of motivation to resist. For Barthes (1975), pleasure is a kind of erotic, Freudian drive that breaks way in dealing with texts (for an analysis of the fetishist character of horror movies following this understanding of pleasure, see Giles, 2004). Both of these perspectives take pleasure to be necessary due to theoretical considerations, but they do not look at actual social practices and the empirical degree of emotion found in a "real" social situation at hand. While societal questions prevail, the challenges presented for face-to-face interactions are largely ignored.

This obliviousness is also true for reaction analysis: Although it emphasizes the idea of individuals' sense-making as well (Affective-Disposition-Theory in particular, for example Tamborini, Stiff, & Heidel, 1990; Zillman & Weaver, 1996), its psychological focus and "artificial" experimental research design again leave the actual social activity of media consumption unrecognized. We have to take into account that "for young fans, video consumption is a group event, shaped by social intercourse and liveliness" (Winter, 1999, p. 280). There is indeed some interest in the subculture of the horror fan (see for example essays in Conrich, 2010; Winter, 1991) but, again, this interest is limited to questions like what makes you a novice or a connoisseur, how you gain credit within this special group and how aesthetic choices are made—and not what role fear plays in the face-to-face situations of watching movies.

Despite a wide and interdisciplinary interest in horror movies, there remains a major gap concerning the actual negotiation of horror and fear as it occurs in situ and the way these emotions affect interactional order. I presume that emotions are "not simply [...] individual, psychological reactions but [also] intersubjective, collective experiences" (Goodwin & Pfaff, 2001, p. 283) insofar as they are both triggering of social dynamics and are themselves shaped by social dynamics (for instance, embarrassment is brought about by disappointing social/cultural expectations and may then demand that others co-engage in "repairing" face

work, see Goffman, 1956). The question of how feelings relate to social structure has accompanied me for four years, being a main aspect of my PhD thesis that I am currently in the latter stages of, and that seeks to bring together organization theory and emotion sociology. Interest in the interactional construction of fear was sparked while I worked on the role application anxiety played in recruitment interviews. As both an emotion sociologist and a film fan, I found the video material fascinating when I first came across it by the rather accidental way of YouTube's "up next" suggestions.

Inspired by Jack Katz's (1999) studies on emotions, I want to start by giving priority to the things we want to understand, "structuring methods and allowing theory to take shape to fit the contours of what we find. What will our ideas about emotions become if we start with some vivid emotional experiences that people have?" (p. 4).

### **Method, Data, and Analysis**

To tackle the question of how people negotiate fear in natural interaction, I have chosen an ethnomethodological approach (see Have, 2004; Maynard & Clayman, 1991). I analysed YouTube videos uploaded by (mostly) teenagers that show themselves while watching *Insidious*. The videos all taken together have a total running time of 104:37 minutes, individual videos varying between ten minutes and about half an hour, with the exception of one video being only 2:22 minutes long. Videos were turned into dense, rich descriptions and in a second step relevant sequences were identified and transcribed word by word. By "description" I mean a narrative report of the events unfolding in the video (e.g., noting that an actor starts panting), whereas the "classical" transcription would include a detailed matching of screenshots, on- and offset of actions and non-speech sounds and speech (e.g., transcribing the detailed pattern of breathing in and out when somebody pants, marking length and location of pauses etc.; see also Hepburn & Bolden, 2017, p. 58). Transcription conventions for conversation analysis (GAT) were followed, though slightly modified in order to capture the visual component of video analyses (e.g., screenshots were included, eye-glance movements transcribed, etc., see Heath, 2016). Talk was noted horizontally and then systematically mapped to "at least the onset and completion of the participants' visible conduct" (Heath, 2016, p. 320).

There are some limitations to such a video-based approach. It is a common objection that in situations that are filmed, the everyday activity of watching movies is altered by the camera (e.g., with people "putting on a show," trying more actively to suppress signs of fear or faking appreciation of the movie). Three aspects attenuate this objection: firstly, the situation is less artificial than it would have been if filmed by a social scientist because the actors themselves have set up the camera, integrating it into the overarching frame of having a "movie night." The movie, secondly, runs 102 minutes—enough time to forget one is being filmed (and too long a time to uphold a faked presentation of self), particularly when the movie is riveting, as seems to be the case (cf. the methodological findings in Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010; Huhn et al., 2000). Sometimes the teenagers throw a direct look into the camera, but these are rare exceptions. One has to keep in mind though that we do not get to see all of the 102 minutes the people are watching. The sequences that are posted online are parts chosen from this footage. Usually, people either pick key moments of the movie (e.g., watching the ending) or those parts in which a lot happens among the viewers (i.e., a lot of talking). However, mere scream compilations, in which respective moments had been directly cut together, have been excluded from analysis. In relation to the respective running times, screams are comparably rare occurrences in most of the videos studied, which runs counter to the impression that putting on a show for entertainment had been the primary intention.

The third point in case is that there is no live-streaming, so what has been filmed could have been safely erased afterwards. To have control over what is presented online in the end might reduce the need to pay (constant) attention to how one comes across in the video—there is only the constant need to present oneself to the other group members present.

Starting my analysis, I scanned the material for events marked by (1) screaming, (2) body posture connected to fear (e.g., facial expression, panting, turning stiff and pale...), and (3) actors' explicit talk about fear or scariness of the movie, all of which I presumed to be somehow connected to the emotion of fear (though maybe in differing ways that still needed to be clarified by analysis). I then “zoomed out” to the interactions preceding and succeeding these events, taking a look at how screaming, bodily signs of fear and “fear talk” were both embedded in the broader interactive context and treated in the specific situation when they occurred (similar to what Katz [1999, p. 5] called “situation responsiveness” and “situation transcendence”). Comparing the evolving situational analyses both within and across the cases studied, I tried to identify repetitions, similarities and singularities and thereby distil interactive patterns.

As a result of my analysis, I found two forms of ambiguity relevant for the face-to-face situations studied. The first concerns emotions as a collective sense-making process. Whereas concepts like “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1979) suggest that there are social expectations that tell us more or less clearly which emotions are legitimate and which are not in a given social context, it needs to be stressed that there is a process of sounding out what exactly the situational definition is supposed to be and how the feeling rule actually looks. Feeling rules have to be treated as “topics and as features of the very settings they are taken to organize” (Maynard & Clayman, 1991, p. 390). The central question that has to be addressed is thus: Is this scary and why? How do actors react to one another and create order in the process of direct group interaction?

The second ambiguity hints at an interactional dynamic brought forth by the feeling of fear, i.e., the “ambiguity of belonging” that concerns the question of how several viewers can draw themselves out of a terrifying situation while simultaneously ensuring that interaction and group are held together. This also has implications for the way fear rearranges the relation between body and self (for a general turn towards embodiment see Hanich, 2010; Reyes, 2016).

Viewers actively locate their bodies as barriers against the sensual impressions that could overwhelm them (e.g., by covering their eyes, see also Giles's [2004] remark on “partial vision”). Thus they are able to bear the movie and remain within the interaction, but simultaneously they constrain interaction by blocking central channels of communication.

It will be shown that fear paralyzes both personal impression management and interactional dynamics in a variety of ways. I start by developing and discussing a model of group processes that are prompted by fear and the need to negotiate its appropriateness, then I turn to the ways in which these processes are linked to group cohesion, commitment and the “ambiguity of belonging.”

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study analyses publicly available video content without the researcher being involved in or intervening with the groups filmed and was as such exempt from ethical review by the Ethical Committee at Bielefeld University. However, the research was conducted in close adherence to the ethical guidelines for social media research by the International Visual Sociology Association (Papademas & IVSA, 2009), making sure that (1) data are immediately anonymized (names were modified as a measure of privacy protection), and (2) no sensitive and potentially harmful personal data (e.g., on sexual orientation, illegal

or morally deviant behaviour, religious attitude or political opinion, etc.) were surveyed. Because it is reasonable “to assume that the data were knowingly made public” (Kosinski et al., 2015, p. 552)—users did not make use of YouTube’s privacy settings that limit access—and YouTube is a media context in which it is reasonable for users to expect their videos are observed by strangers (Townsend & Wallace, 2018), informed consent could be waived (see Kosinski et al., 2015; Papademas & IVSA, 2009).

### **Dealing with Ambiguity: Strategies of Negotiating Fear**

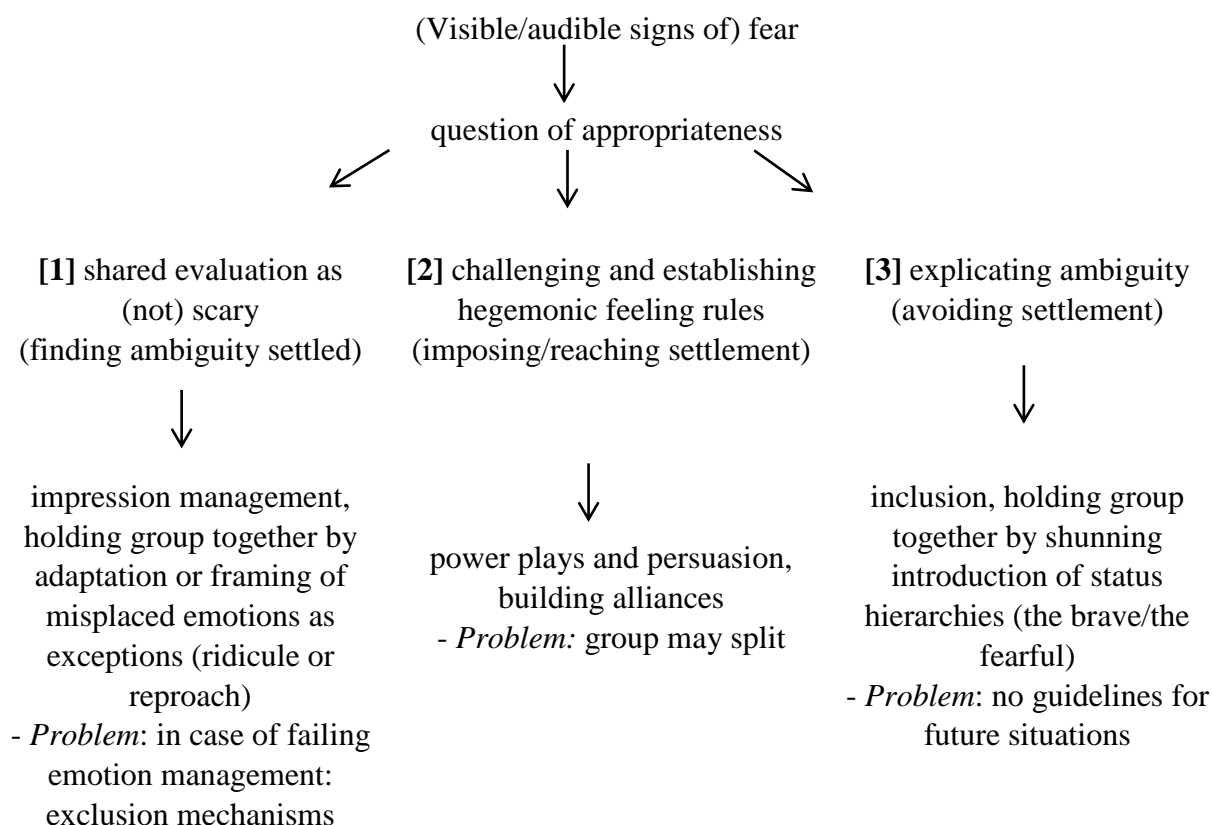
Horror is a multifaceted feeling. It is about anxiety, disgust, fear and shock (see Walsh, 2008). That repulsion has a strong biological component (e.g., that mutilated bodies cause natural revulsion) is intuitively persuading. Above all, being startled can be regarded as a natural reflex. If we hear loud, sudden noises, we flinch. Since horror movies make frequent use of sudden, startling appearances and sounds (though, of course, there are other and more subtle cinematic techniques to create tension), one could argue that our screams and fear are in fact a “simple” automatic reaction. Some people might be more thick-skinned than others, but in the end the signal-response-mechanism stays the same: It’s just a matter of how much gore you add.

However, as Ronald Simons (1996) has shown, things are not that simple: There is cultural variation in regard to what qualifies as a startling signal and how startling tendencies are culturally exploited. Startling is not solely neurophysiological. It always happens within a specific social frame.

So how is this frame set? How do we determine whether something is creepy or entertaining? I found that, when watching a horror movie, there is a latent ambiguity concerning what is scary and what is not that has to be addressed. Viewers in the sample studied tried to reassure themselves that their definition of the situation and feelings were socially appropriate by checking against others’ displayed emotions. One can see, for example, that usually somebody who has startled takes a quick look around. Typically, they then adjust their expression and body posture to others or try to catch the eye of those who showed the same startling reaction as they did.

This said, it would all be about matching one’s own behaviour to others’. But this presupposes that there is a shared, *coherently* expressed situational reaction among the group one can adapt to. Sometimes this is the case, and it raises the question of how the emotionally “deviant” (in the group situation) deals with her diverging feelings in the group context. I will come back to this question later on. Firstly, however, it is important to note that the question of *whose* feelings are deviant and whose are appropriate is not as settled as one might think. Checking against others’ reactions can bring about the feeling that it is *they* who do not live up to the appropriate expectations, especially when there is more than one person whose emotional expressions differ.

How the actors in the sample negotiate and construct feeling rules, and how this is embedded in larger group processes can be summarized in the following model:



I start by discussing in greater detail the two strategies that deal with a situation in which group members find expectations to be uncertain and a shared evaluation has not yet been reached (2 & 3 in the model). Strategy number two establishes a certain “feeling frame” (cf. Goffman, 1986) by gathering allies and persuading others. Thus a hegemonic frame is set that creates a distinction between correct and incorrect emotional displays. The third strategy does not fix a feeling norm. Instead, every emotional reaction is both valued in its own right and relativized.

The following two transcription segments each provide an example of one of these strategies. The first one, a segment of twelve seconds, shows how interactants seek reassurance of their feeling frames and confront others in order to persuade them that their feelings are correct. (The nomenclature used in transcriptions is listed and explained at the end of the paper).

Five girls, aged presumably between thirteen and sixteen, are watching the new *Insidious*-trailer in a room that seems to be a school’s computer room. One of them, called “Carrie”<sup>1</sup> below, is especially terrified and screams loudly several times. As the trailer ends and the screen is blackening, Carrie turns to the girls sitting behind her.





- 1 laughs, looks at B A looks at screen, makes a theatrical 'Ta-da'-gesture by flinging open her arms. Broad smile..
- 2 Amy:
- 3 Brenda: he hehheh= he he [HEHEHEHHheh] heh
- 4 B looks at A, leans to the side looks at A, one hand over mouth, sits upright again B looks at Carrie quickly
- 5 Carrie: <<whiningly> =I don't [like thi-is.] (.) <<snappy> WHY is she LAUghing?> (.)
- 6 C looks at screen turns around to the girls sitting behind her C looks at Brenda
- 7 Dora:
- 8 D looks at screen, frightened; one hand on her chest D looks at Carrie D leans forward
- 9 Eliza:
- 10 E raises one hand E smiles, looks at B E looks at Carrie



11	Amy:	A looks at screen, smiling		A turns around, looks at Dora
12	Brenda:		B looks at Eliza, still laughing	B stops laughing, looks at Dora
13	Carrie:			[IT'S scary.]
14		C looks at Dora		
15	Dora:		You don't=you don't understand how scary this [is. You] WON'T sleep. It's so: scary.	
16		D looks at Carrie		claps her hands with each word D looks at Brenda, then at E
17	Eliza:			
18		E looks at Brenda		E looks at Dora

Though Brenda is already laughing at the beginning of this transcription<sup>2</sup> segment (there had been an extra accentuated sound effect when the movie's release date appeared on screen), her laughter is intensified (1.3) when she sees Amy's gesture. Without words they joke about how sensationalist the trailer is. Carrie falsely believes that Brenda's laughter is a reaction to her confessing that she 'doesn't like' the movie (1.5), i.e., is scared. She makes a rather harsh demand on the girls to tell her the reason for Brenda's laughter. In addition to inquiring why she is being ridiculed, Carrie raises another implicit question: Why should hilarity be a proper emotion in reaction to horror movies—whereas fear is not? Dora obviously leaves Carrie's explicit question unanswered—she does not resolve the misunderstanding. Instead, she takes up the implicit question as she reacts by saying that Brenda and the others just “do not understand how scary this is” (1.15). Something is wrong with the way they experience the movie. Whereas Carrie and Dora have got it, the others have missed the crucial point. Interestingly, while Dora is clearly addressing Brenda verbally (“You just *don't understand*,” 1.15), her gaze is locked on to Carrie (1.16). This incongruence between direction of gaze and addressee of verbal communication may show a need to assure oneself principally that one's emotional experience is correct. It's not only about defending or explaining one's position, it's about making sure one is allowed to feel this way. Carrie and Dora unite in their interpretation of a frightening experience. It's locking gazes and locking feelings. When Carrie confirms this also verbally (“It's scary,” 1.13), Dora's gaze eventually shifts to Brenda and Eliza (1.16). Backed by Carrie she opens up her field of view and confronts the group with her interpretation.

While in the segment above persuasion succeeded in the end, this strategy may also be prone to conflict (as a later transcript segment shows, see p. 23) and could split the group if two views on appropriateness of fear (or inappropriateness /cowardice) collide.

I will turn now to a second, complementary scene of misplaced laughter which resembles a more inclusive negotiation strategy (third in the model). Three girls and one boy (ca. 13 to 15 years old) are watching *Insidious* in a living room with a matched set of sofa and armchairs. In the movie somebody is whistling the melody of the 1920s song “Tiptoe through the Tulips.”

- 1 **Amanda:** ((looks at Claire)) **WHY are you laughing?** ((laughs shortly))
- 2 **Brian:** ((ears covered with his hands, slightly laughing)) **The whistling?**
- 3 **Claire:** ((nods, smiling, puts one hand over her mouth as she starts to laugh silently))
- 4 **Brian:** [(they hit on) the recorder]
- 5 **Amanda:** [This is not funny=it's scAry.] ((looks at Brian))
- 6 **Brian:** **and they're like, (.) you think DANCERS and there's more like dub**
- 7 **dudumm** ((snaps his fingers, waving his right forearm rapidly from left to right))
- 8 **Claire:** ((makes tapping movement with her hand)) **shh shhh. Let everyone watch.**

Although bringing it forward in a very determined way, Amanda takes some of the fierceness out of her question by adding a short laugh at the end (l.1). She shows that *per se* she doesn't condemn Claire's differing emotional response. Brian then offers an explanation for the laughter (l.2): the pairing of haunted houses with a cheery 1920s sing-along song is indeed something to smile about. He goes on about how the movie plays on viewers' expectations (cf. l.4 & l.6), alluding to the record player theme in *Insidious*. While the song had been associated with dancing scenes before, this time, there's a fundamental break: The dancing music (itself already kind of distorted by being stripped of vocals and instrumental accompaniment) is separated from actual dancing at all: in fact, one sees a totally motionless family sitting on a sofa. Brian lays open a clashing of expectations and frames of meaning regarding the content of the movie. There is horror *and* feel-good music, the dancing theme *and* a scene of lifelessness. Claire interprets this disconnection of frames as funny. For Amanda, however, it is exactly this disconnection that becomes a source of horror. This interpretive ambiguity is not settled in the interaction: The segment starts with both Claire and Amanda making their interpretive point (cf. l.3 & l.5). When Amanda turns to Brian as he expands on his explanation (l.5), talk and attention turn away from the question of evaluation. Instead of trying to convince oneself and others what the correct reaction to the ambiguity is supposed to be, interactants are left with the explication of the latter. Other than in the complementary segment above, it is not a question of getting (and, respectively, not getting) what the movie really is about. It is the demonstration that sometimes there is no either/or.

This has the advantage of being socially inclusive but may bring about the disadvantage of not absorbing uncertainty. No feeling guidelines are provided that the interactant could stick to as the movie goes on, as was indicated by the fact that groups in the sample who made frequent use of this inclusive strategy showed relatively more information seeking behaviour (e.g., asking how others understood what had been happening or what they thought was significant) than groups who did not.<sup>3</sup>

### The Case of Shared Evaluations: How to Deal with Diverging Emotional Reactions

While the strategies of establishing hegemonic feeling rules and/or stressing ambiguity have been discussed above, the possibility of adapting to a shared, fixed group norm has only been touched on so far. If there is a shared definition of the situation (or, put differently: a coherent expression of feelings within the group from which the individual notices to diverge), this raises the problem of how to deal with diverging emotional reactions. A likely solution is impression management (cf. Goffman, 1956). The person adapts her

behaviour to the perceived norm. This process of adaption is influenced by the sensual character of emotional cues.

We can tell from a range of different signs that somebody is afraid. The most fundamental vary from non-acoustic bodily reactions (flinching, withdrawing) to holding one's breath, panting, squeaking and, finally, screaming. Of these reactions body language is the easiest to be "worked over" if it reveals too much fear judged by others' reactions. It is of great semiotic openness and the most plastic way of conveying meaning, as it is a form of indirect communication. Communication is indirect if one can convincingly deny to have intended to communicate at all (cf. Kieserling, 1999). "Talk removes one ambiguity: we don't talk by accident. Tongues may slip, but not in the sense that you mean to spit and a word came out" (Sabini & Silver, 1982, p. 120). But bodily reactions "are blurred compared to a word explicitly spoken. A student can raise her hand in a manner that leaves open whether she wants to tell her opinion [or if she simply needs to stretch]" (Kieserling, 1999, p.149, my translation). This indirectness, openness or ambiguity allows that non-acoustic signs of fear may be "worked over." For example, when her arm shot up in fright, one girl managed to turn this upward movement of her hand into a gesture of stroking her hair back. This works with some audible sounds as well but giving them a different meaning is more delicate expression management, as this example of turning panting into laughter shows. Here, one viewer tackles the difficulty of changing respiration patterns smoothly:

**Girl1:** AAah°hh h° °HH h° °H h° °h h° h° °H he (.) °hHH AH°H ha HA HA  
 ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑  
 leans backwards, mouth agape (on the inhale) looks aside & smiles (on the exhale) coughs

In this short transcription segment, the girl shrinks back with a sharp inhale and starts panting. As she continues panting, she over-emphasizes the breathing-out-sounds, thus gradually but quickly turning the exhales into laughing sounds. A "ha"-syllable evolves, almost explicitly spoken as if "ha" were a word in its own right. By sudden coughing she finally manages to get out of this forced laughter and bring the intermezzo to an end.

While for the individual, expression management of fear gets easier the more indirect the corporeal signals are, the range of movements that can be read as signs of tension is widened due to the same semiotic openness that also allows for adjustment and new contextualization. Sipping water, for example, made one group member a "nervous drinker" in the eyes of others. What is read into the body by others can be rejected but never totally dismissed (that attribution theory is a "back side" of indirect communication is mentioned by Kieserling, 1999). The emotions truly felt are known only to the individual who feels them, but their expressions are in collective hands.

What is acoustically expressed within an interaction always has a public character (see Simmel, 1907). In this context it is especially revealing if someone notices she is the only one who has screamed. A scream is unmistakably a scream—there's no denying it. And it draws attention. There is a self-referential aspect to this, since what makes people startle may not be what happens in the movie but what happens next to them. It becomes the audible peak of tension, the nexus of interactive strands, and an event that begs interactive responses. While the privacy of audible sounds has to be actively established (e.g., by whispering into somebody's ear; Simmel, 1907), in case of visibility it is the public character that needs active creation. Especially body movements depend on being seen, i.e. require a shared focus of attention. This shared focus has to be actively established. In other words: reactions like flinching might go unnoticed. In order to generate an interactional dynamic attention has to be drawn to them. They balance on the brink between being public and private: Someone *could* have noticed but does not have to have noticed. Thus, to draw somebody's frightful

reaction into the limelight is usually an act of teasing. Something that otherwise would have passed (almost) unnoticed is now the centre of attention and made entirely public, as in the following segment.

Alan points to the screen and shouts: “Whoa!” Betty flinches and turns away from TV. Chris chuckles, turns to her and points at her with his index finger: “I saw that.” All the others look at Betty (the older girl on the couch makes the start; she laughs shortly). Betty, who had been looking at Chris, now looks away and shrugs her shoulders, scratching her underarm. She says quietly: “okay.” The little girl on the couch looks at Betty and growls: “rooaah.” There’s some laughter in response to this.

In regard to visible signs of fear it thus seems crucial who takes initiative in framing and, therefore, impression management (see also what Tholander & Aronsson [2002] call “proactive work”). Adapting to a shared, group-related feeling norm re-emphasizes its legitimacy as much as ridiculing people who failed to adapt (interestingly, in the sample there are also cases of slight self-reproach for failing to show signs of fear while others do, e.g.: “I can’t scream. What’s wrong with this? I can’t scream.”).

Like the first two strategies of dealing with ambiguity discussed at the beginning, the strategy of emphasizing group norms through adaption and ridicule may run into subsequent problems: In order to hold the group together and the feeling norm in place, a person who experiences fear can be turned into a fearful person, so the fears she reveals leave traces lingering *beyond the interaction itself*. Quite similar to scapegoating, “making” somebody a “wimp” can be an exclusion mechanism increasing group commitment at the expense of some of its members. However, it is a mechanism that has some prerequisites. Most of the time, startle-teasing was interactively organized as a symmetrical relation in the groups. The dominance order that is established by ridiculing some persons and not others gets mixed up when another movie scene scares the mockers (or the mocked person actively startles her mockers in return, thus directly replacing a status of inferiority with a status of control and superiority). This symmetrical element underlines the playful character—(almost) everyone will be in the role of the mocker and the mocked at least once. However, in some groups in the sample it could be observed that although (audible or visible) display of fear was more or less equally distributed among viewers, it was unequally addressed in the group. Perception of fear and ridicule of the fearful were decoupled. *Why* some groups had egalitarian teasing habits and some did not, I can only speculate about, for I have no information on the groups’ shared history. Here lies a central limitation of my analysis. It could very well be that the role of the wimp was allocated for reasons lying in prior relationship development. But even if prior group norms determined who was predisposed for being teased, groups had to manage the fact that the movie could startle any other member more than the person predisposed and that this was clearly visible to all viewers present. So the situational dynamics of watching the movie cannot be ignored entirely. In order to break the symmetry and attribute fear to a person as a fixed character trait, some fearful reactions have to be *repeatedly* highlighted against all others.

In the following short segment, a group of seven teenagers (three girls, four boys) start counting the screams of one of them, called “Chris” below. While there are others who startle as often as Chris does, only his screams are counted.

- 1 **Alan:** ((waves four outstretched fingers in Chris's direction))  
 2 **Chris:** ((looks at Alan quickly, smiling)) **Who cares?** ((waves hand dismissively))  
 3       (.) It's just a movie. ((waves hand dismissively))  
 4 **Alan:** **That's four for you, Chris.**  
 5 **Chris:** ((smiles slightly, stares at TV, than looks into the camera, laughs and points  
 6       with both index fingers into the camera)) **That's number four.**

Counting as a way of both openly keeping track of his screams and highlighting them against all others' fearful reactions poses a threat to Chris's presentation of self. His reaction to Alan shows that he tries to play down the importance of this threat by a) challenging the idea that his screams are relevant signals that mean anything of interest ("who cares?", 1.2), and b) restricting the scope of meaning that can be derived from his outbursts of fear ("just a movie," 1.2). The word "just" implies that movies and the behaviour shown while watching them are not to be taken too seriously. The movie does not express anything about real life, and so is Chris's reaction not conveying anything about the person he is in every-day life.

This scene is an act of teasing, but it is implicitly on the brink of losing its playful character—at least in regard to Chris's ability to control the image of the person he is. Teasing implies that what is said is not really meant the way it seems and playful attacks on impression management will not have the usual consequences (cf. Glenn, 2003). Chris has to actively emphasize the teasing character of the whole scenario by joining into the counting game in an obviously joking way. This reveals the ambiguity of the situation: It is not at all clear (above all: not to the Internet audience) that this is still teasing and not an active deconstruction of self, especially since "real" men are required to show they can master their fears (see Zillman & Weaver, 1996). Defending the feeling norm can thus turn out to have rather negative consequences for the personal presentation of self (see Sinkeviciute, 2017 for the combination of group binding potential and personal face-threat in teasing).

### The Strategies Shortly Compared

Adapting to fixed group norms, explicating the ambiguity of appropriateness of feelings and seeking alliances to establish emotion norms are three ways in which groups in the sample dealt with the question of what is scary and what is not. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, i.e. interactants make use of more than one of them throughout the recordings. However, it seemed that strategies avoiding settlement of ambiguity and settlement-imposing ones were difficult to combine and groups used either the former or the latter in particular. This could be because the former is, not unlike adaption and ridiculing, a group-focused behaviour that stresses inclusion of every member, whereas establishing hegemonic rules by forming alliances risks open conflict and splitting of the group. One could speculate that groups sensitive to member drop outs (e.g., because of low general commitment or very small size) could thus tend to avoid use of conflict-laden behaviour patterns and prefer to leave ambiguity unresolved.

In other words, the strategies differ in the way they are related to the second type of ambiguity I want to discuss, the "ambiguity of belonging." By this I mean the implicit question whether the interaction is about to end, because scared group members start to withdraw, or whether interactants still commit. Paradoxically, it is by asking about the function of laughter in this specific setting that we can best get to the interactional challenge that lies at the heart of the "ambiguity of belonging."



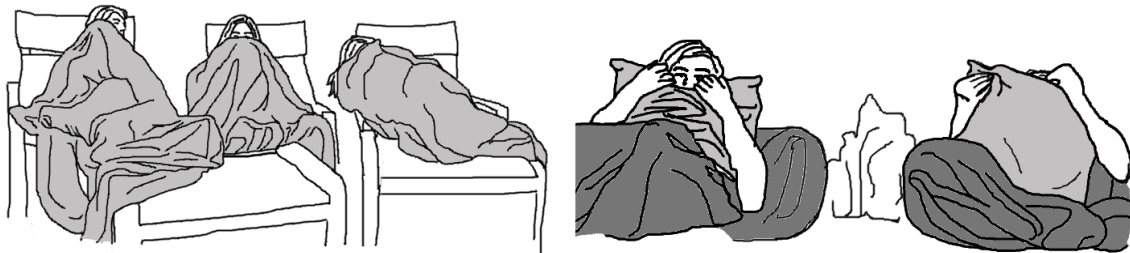
## The Function of Laughter and the “Ambiguity of Belonging”

It is striking that people watching *Insidious* together seem to be laughing a lot of the time. The crucial aspect is that, unlike watching comedy movies, laughter in these cases has often been immediately preceded by screams. So why do people who have just been startled laugh directly afterwards?

Since the time of Sigmund Freud it has been suggested (e.g., Tamborini, 1991; White & Winzelberg, 1992) that laughing is a psychological way of stress relief. This might or might not be the case. Whatever way, there is more to it: laughter is the answer to a specific *interactional* challenge. Fear can be a separating emotion insofar as people start to withdraw from the interaction. This shows already in the subtle ways fright impairs respiration. Panting and holding one’s breath make respiration (or its discontinuance) witnessable, that normally goes unnoticed in everyday communication. By eliminating or massively shortening the exhaling phase that is ordinarily used to produce spoken words or other communicative utterances our bodies pull us out of wilful communication. The body pushes to the fore, but simultaneously cuts us short of expression. The self is enclosed, withdrawn behind a corporeal display of expressive impairment.

There is some range of how far this impairment goes. Holding one’s breath at least leaves a vagueness, the idea that something *could* follow, that in the end there *is* an exhale and a comment given. This expression of tension thus carries the implication that it is only momentary, that it will pass or be released and let the individual be free again. Panting on the other hand is respiration “on the loose.” Bodily processes have acquired a degree of visible autonomy that is no longer controlled by a now paralyzed self (taken farther this notion is also conveyed in rather vulgar expressions like “scared shitless”).

In extreme cases even the body itself is drawn out of interaction. An obvious example would be to leave the room. Most of the time, however, people have ways of reducing their presence while staying in place: pushing their chairs back and away from TV, closing their eyes and covering their ears, pulling large cushions, jackets or blankets in front of their face or over their head. At this point fear creates communicative blank spaces. Where once there was an actor, there now is a huge, piling up piece of cloth.



Laughing on the other hand is reinforcing. We commit ourselves to the situation, the interaction, the group (see also the “engulfing” function of laughter mentioned by Glenn, 2003, p. 30). Departing from the idea that shared laughing contributes to expression and maintenance of group solidarity (Glenn, 2003, p. 30), one could assume that laughing together fulfils another important function in addition to possible psychological stress relief: an implicit assurance that people won’t withdraw from interaction completely. Usually, in the groups studied, laughter is accompanied by making eye contact with others and by adjusting body posture in a way that conveys belonging (slightly bending the torso towards others).

Instead of laughter, there can also be a chatting episode that is introduced by explicit comments on the scariness of the movie (i.e., not exclamations like “Oh my god!” but

evaluations like “Did you see that? That is creepy as hell”). These comments may serve a similar purpose. When people talk explicitly about how scary a certain feature was or is, it most probably is no longer terrifying (see Katz, 1999 for a similar argument in regard to funniness; also Petrarch’s famous line in sonnet 137: “He who can describe how his heart is ablaze is burning on a small pyre”). To be able to verbally reflect on fear shows the self is back in command, is not affected by feelings to a degree that becomes impairing as outlined above. Thus, both laughter and explicit comments are ways of healing interactive impairment and mechanisms by which interaction reinforces itself.

### **Guiding Others through the Movie**

Sometimes these interactive “healing strategies” of laughter and commenting may not suffice. In some of the groups there developed a situational role that is closely related to the ambiguity of belonging outlined above. One of the viewers takes over the task of appeasing fears, warns the others of especially terrifying scenes and encourages them to watch on. She may then play an important part in the task of holding the group together and prevent loss of emotional control, as in the case of one group where a girl declared she would leave if the scene to come was even more disturbing and had to be convinced this would not be the case.

The social constellation this role depends on is that there is someone who knows the movie better than the others, e.g., has seen extended trailers or the whole movie before. This puts him or her into a position of power. They can shape and direct the others’ expectations and the others turn to them for guidance and information. As a consequence, their definition of what is scary and not scary turns into the leading interpretation within the group. It may turn out however, that in the end the guide’s interpretation does not fit the others’ emotional experiences. As her leadership position is grounded on the social expectation that she is an adviser this raises a problem.

The following two segments reveal two ways of dealing with the exposed position of the previously informed that differ in regard to their sensitivity to group cohesion. They show how the delicate balance between playing to others’ emotional expectations and talking them out of timid behaviour by one’s own emotional standards can succeed—or fail.

In the first segment two girls, about twelve-years-old, watch the movie together. One of them, called “Beth” below, already knows (at least) parts of the movie. The second segment is a transcribed interaction between three teenage girls and one boy (aged 14 or 15 presumably). “Claire” is the one who has seen *Insidious* before, and as it has turned out she is much more thick-skinned than the others.



I.

1 **Ann:** ((rapidly but without emotionality)) **Shall I look, shall I look, shall I look?** (.)

2 **Beth:** **This part is not creepy but it's kind of (realistic.)**

4 **Ann:** ((very rapidly)) **What is it? What is it? What is it?**

5 **Beth:** **NOthing.** ((quietly)) **This part isn't creepy. It's just like Open Door.**

6 (.)

7 **Ann:** ((quietly)) **It looks so realistic, I don't like it.**

8 **Beth:** **It IS realistic. But no real PEOple.** ((Ann peers over her cushion and lets it sink to her nose))

9 **Ann:** ((muffled)) **I know.**

II.

1 **Brian:** **Is thAt the end?**

2 **Claire:** **No.**

3 **Dana:** ((without enthusiasm)) **Great.**

4 **Claire:** **It gets better.**

5 **Amanda:** **By better do you mean scarier?**

6 (.)

7 **Claire:** ((quietly)) **(better.)**

8 **Dana:** **Soooo YEAH.**

9 **Claire:** ((laughing)) **It's not really like (.) uber uber scary. [but it's-**

10 **Dana:** [OKAY; you] know what? **YOU**

11 said [(in) the part that (we did the)]=

12 **Amanda:** [WE're (gonna scream [anyway].]

13 **Claire:** [hE he he]

14 **Dana:**=screaming, **creepy little doll [things ((twists fingers)) was] KIND of scAry.[( )]**

15 **Amanda:** [wAs scary,]

16 **Claire:** [he he.

17 **Brian:** ((looking at Dana)) **I KNOW.**

18 **Claire:** **Hehe he.**

19 **Amanda:** **I really DO have the peever. I'm °hh ((shakes her head))**

20 **Claire:** ((laughing)) **YOUR hehe your reaction to the the climbing on the wall,**

21 ((mimics)) **WOAhh AAhh ahrgh** ((curling with laughter))

At first, what these two scenes have in common is that both Beth and Claire label what is about to happen in the movie as “not creepy”/“not really scary,” whereas the others express feelings of uneasiness. Beth, however, is steering Ann through the movie, while Claire starts to play a status game. When asked for guidance (“Shall I look?”<sup>4</sup>, segment 1, l. 1) Beth offers two labels for the movie scene, “not creepy” and “realistic” (l.3). Realism is something she treats as a possible restriction on an otherwise un-frightening atmosphere (explicitly linking it to *The Open Door*, another horror movie). Thus, she provides Ann with a point of reference to express her feelings should they diverge from Beth’s interpretation and Ann readily makes use of it (l.7). She embarks on a semantic course that Beth has set. If we take a closer look at the two labels Beth introduces, we can see a central difference. “Scary” or “creepy” things stir emotions one can hardly talk a person out of. If someone says she finds something terrifying, nobody can deny this because the real emotions are known only to the actor herself (see on this point, Luhmann, 2004). It’s no use trying to convince someone that what they are afraid of has no scary qualities at all. The image of realism, however, can be communicatively challenged on an *intersubjective* basis. While it is nonsensical to say: “It may look creepy, but remember it isn’t!” it is perfectly acceptable to point out that “It may look realistic, but remember that it doesn’t happen for real!” Thus, realism is a semantic category that can be used to appease fears (see l.8). It is not the only one. Just like realism that makes the horror of films intrude into real life as a possible scenario, empathy has a similar twofold structure: When one imagines taking the film characters’ place this can create fears (e.g., a girl commented: “I would fucking be dead would that happen to me”). Viewers start warning the characters and get involved emotionally—this has been a central finding by Dolf Zillman (1996). What affective disposition theory does not see is that empathy, just like realism, can be communicatively broken by outlining that even if one were in the character’s place, this does not mean one would behave the same way (“Consider you would go through that door.” – “No. [That’s] Stupid”).

Claire on the other hand uses different shades of scariness as labelling options (“kind of scary,” “uber scary,” segment 2, l.9 & l.13). Claire’s way of opening up an emotional intensity scale results in a clash of subjective emotional experiences. It’s “kind of scary” against “the peever” (l.13 & l.18). In this conflict, she has the upper hand and manoeuvres the others into a position of cowardice. Although united in their emotional interpretation, they are forced to argue for a position of less self-composure and braveness. Claire misuses the trust and power given to her and is reproached by Dana and Amanda (l.10): As it is her duty to warn others, Claire is required to (at least partially) accept and feel into her mates’ emotionality, which she does not. Later on, Brian will call her unreliable.

Claire for her part laughs about it (l.12-l.20). Her laughs are a wordless comment that accompanies the others’ arguments. It’s both showing that she is attentively following the line of argument and that she is distancing herself from any blame that is put on her. (Usual ways of demonstrating attentive listening, like nodding, could be misinterpreted as a signal of understanding—they would not allow her to combine *both* display of attention *and* objection at once.) She creates a status game for her own amusement.

As has been shown for the sample, the guide has the power to set emotional standards and expectations, but she can misuse her power (i.e., become unreliable in the eyes of her group members) or instead feel into her co-viewers to warn them and to appease their fears by turning *their own* definitions against them. The guide can either set her definition of scariness as the ultimate standard or she can give the others a semantic hook to express their

feelings should they diverge from the guide's—thereby stressing the underlying ambiguity of the situation that allows for more than one correct reaction.

### **Conclusion**

Watching horror movies can be entertaining or frightening or both. Whether the former or latter feeling is appropriate depends on interactive negotiation. In the groups studied I found that a central ambiguity was created regarding what is scary and what is not, and, respectively, what emotions can be appropriately displayed and which are misplaced. To negotiate emotion, interactants made use of two general strategies: either they try to persuade others and gather allies for a certain situational definition that is then established as accurate or they choose a more inclusive strategy that puts emphasis on ambiguity as such and lets all the interpretations seem justified in their own way. These two strategies also become apparent in moments when one person already knows what is going to happen in the movie and is asked to warn the other viewers. The guide can either set her definition of scariness as the ultimate standard or she can give the others a semantic hook to express their feelings should they diverge from the guide's. In the first case, she has an absolutistic way of using her power of definition and may ridicule everyone who does not live up to her view. In the latter case, the guide interprets her task as steering others through the dark waters of horror, warning them, appeasing their fears and encouraging them to watch on. Insofar as she plays an important part in the task of holding the group together, the guide can be seen as a situational role implicitly created to tackle the ambiguity of belonging that has been discussed: since fear can be a separating emotion insofar as people start to withdraw from the interaction, there have to be interactional mechanisms that bring the group back together and stress commitment (i.e., laughter and explicit comment on the scariness of the movie).

This article only dealt with fear in the context of horror movies, and findings apply primarily to the sample studied. Fear in other social situations (e.g., walking dark streets at night in a dubious neighbourhood) has to be described in different ways. The threat of zombies or vampires is not real (though it might allude to very real threats) and can therefore be linked with teasing, playfulness and entertainment. Fear can be tested out in a safe environment.

Nonetheless, there might be similarities between fearful situations in general: whether something is frightening or not frightening has to be negotiated either way, just as the question if somebody's behaviour is emotionally correct or if they are overreacting. For example, in a society that stresses gender-equality, is it acceptable for a woman to feel too afraid to walk home alone (cf. Sandberg & Rönnblom, 2013)? Is she being prudent or overanxious when she asks her boyfriend to pick her up at night?

Also, the question of how to appease fears that are subjectively undeniable and strong feelings has its parallels when it comes to politics and social movements. To try and talk people out of their fears by use of rational arguments seldom works, however absurd these emotions might seem to be (e.g., that Syrian refugees will steal work opportunities). Somehow communication of fear is self-assuring (Luhmann, 2004)—we readily pick up contributions that fuel our emotions while rational objections are more and more easily ignored. As Arlie Hochschild (2016) has recently argued for the Tea Party Movement, it simply creates the impression that they are not taken seriously if people are told their feelings are inappropriate and irrational. But granting them a right to feel these fears openly and giving them a semantic hook they can relate to can win you the election (see Hochschild, 2016). As with the guide who steers their co-viewers through the movie, there might be a need for empathy first, in order to change the way people feel the world.

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## Appendix

### Notes

1. No names used in the transcripts resemble the names of the persons depicted in the videos. All names have been thought up and given in alphabetical order (instead of numbering the interactants) to ensure better readability of transcript and analysis.

2. Transcription symbols used:

((action or description of expressive qualities))

(assumed wording)

°h / h° → breathing in / out

( ) → incomprehensible utterance

[overlap with other speakers' utterances]

= = → quick continuation of sentences or quick turn taking

<<actions accompanying an utterance>> >

EMphasis

(.) , (..) → micro pause, differing lengths

↑ → onset of action (action specified beneath the arrow)

3. I checked this impression by counting the frequency of strategies and running a bivariate correlation analysis with SPSS. I found that  $r=0,952^{**}$  and  $p=0,001$  for ambiguity and information seeking behaviour (whereas  $r$  was  $-0,063$ , and  $p=0,893$  for information seeking behaviour and adaption/ridicule—a strategy that presupposed rather clear rules and expectations regarding emotions). Since seven groups make a rather small sample size for quantitative research measures, one has to treat this finding with caution. The high correlation/ pattern found in the data could be a mere coincidence. It is a first indicator, yet it fits the hypotheses that can be derived from the theoretical context and qualitative analysis.

Group	Ambiguity (frequency)	Ridicule/adaption (frequency)	Seeking information (frequency)
1	1	8	2
2	2	1	5
3	5	2	10
4	0	1	2
5	0	2	1
6	1	1	1

7	0	0	2
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4. The threefold repetition is something “characteristic” of “Ann.” The first time she uses it is pretty much at the beginning of the video clip when she is under tension (“Ohh why are they black? Why are they black? Why are they black?”). While there she says it frantically, panting in the end, with her body tensed up, in the example above she is rather nonchalant, playing on her own previous expressions of fright.

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