

Tender Gestures

In 2016, I published an edited collection of scholarly essays on the films of director M. Night Shyamalan with the subtitle “Spoiler Warnings.” The subtitle was intended to signify two things: First, it was meant in the conventional sense of a warning to readers that plot twists in Shyamalan’s films would be addressed in the included chapters and this could potentially ruin the films for those unfamiliar with them. Second, it was meant as a larger commentary on the construction of Shyamalan’s films, especially his early ones including *THE SIXTH SENSE* (US 1999), *UNBREAKABLE* (US 2000), and *THE VILLAGE* (US 2004), which are all famous for having significant plot twists. The collection’s subtitle, as I wrote in the introduction,

bears in mind the fact that one cannot talk about Shyamalan’s films without taking into account their endings—and this means doing something all too uncommon in our contemporary moment: considering the expectations and experiences of other people.

“There is a kind of tenderness associated with the ‘spoiler warning’ designation,” I wrote there. “[O]ne that speaks to the communal power of narrative and expresses the wish to share one’s experience of surprise and delight with others” (x). I then went on to consider how Shyamalan’s films, by recasting accident and chance as fate, become reflections on the art of storytelling.

Here, I am less concerned with the auteur director’s manipulation of the audience’s experience, and instead, interested in the extension of the chain of affect from past audience members to future consumers of the same narratives via the gesture of the spoiler warning. Or rather, instead of extension of the chain of affect, I should say: preservation of potential future affect through an act of backward-oriented empathy. I will develop this observation through three propositions.

The Spoiler Warning is a Gesture of Tenderness

To begin, it must be acknowledged that spoiler warnings do not require a digital context. An early use of the term appeared in print in the April 1971 issue of the American humor magazine *National Lampoon* in which comedy

writer and *National Lampoon* co-founder Doug Kenney included an article titled “Spoilers” that revealed the endings to famous films including *PSYCHO* (US 1960, Director: Alfred Hitchcock), *THE GODFATHER* (US 1972, Director: Francis Ford Coppola), and various Agatha Christie mysteries (McCool). As Ben McCool summarizes in a 2015 *Tech Times* article, use of the terms “spoiler alert” or “spoiler warning” then proliferated across the 1970s, becoming increasingly common in book and film reviews (see McCool).¹ The term, however, is of course most fully associated today with online communication. In a *Washington Post* article from 1994, Amy E. Schwartz noted the increasing ubiquity of the spoiler warning in early Internet discourse:

Linguists who study the formation of living languages—such as creoles or pidgin languages that spring up between traders—have had trouble containing their excitement as a new one forms before their eyes. They understand it when cyberthings are copied from real ones—bulletin boards, blind carbon copies, notebooks—and they have theories to account for, say, the speed with which a community will adopt a term it needs (on movie buffs’ discussion lists, for instance, there is wide use of the term “spoiler alert,” which is a warning inserted before any comment that would give away a film’s ending.) (Schwartz)

Writing sixteen years later, Nate Freeman observed that, in online discussions of the fourth season of the television drama *MAD MEN* (US 2007–2015, Creator: Matthew Weiner) as well as the Michael Nolan film *INCEPTION* (US/UK 2010, Director: Christopher Nolan), “the ‘spoiler warning’ construction hit zeitgeist heights” (Freeman). Freeman ended his 2010 piece with a plea to the reader to continue the trend:

We’re not going to watch every show when it airs, so when we come across the recaps in a dozen blogs, we need some heads up if something’s going to be spilled. So put in those two words, even if they seem redundant. Because if you do—spoiler alert!—it might save someone’s Sunday night. (Freeman)

What is particularly notable about this desire to “save someone’s Sunday night” is that it introduces the spoiler warning as an unusual example of online discourse that seeks to preserve the enjoyment of others. It is what we may consider a *gesture of tenderness*. Online discourse, as many commentators have observed, is much more often marked by the opposite tendency: an aggressive tone facilitated by “keyboard courage” (Nichols 130). “Distance and anonymity,” notes Tom Nichols,

1 See also Simon Spiegel’s chapter.

remove patience and presumptions of good will. Rapid access to information and the ability to speak without having to listen, combined with the ‘keyboard courage’ that allows people to say things to each other electronically they would never say in person, kill conversation. (130)

Expressing a particularly dim view of online discourse, political commentator Andrew Sullivan observes,

Online debates become personal, emotional, and irresolvable almost as soon as they begin. Godwin’s Law—it’s only a matter of time before a comments section brings up Hitler—is a reflection of the collapse of the reasoned deliberation the Founders saw as indispensable to a functioning republic. (Sullivan)

While this may seem somewhat hyperbolic or overly alarmist, it is true that, if there is a better angel to the human character, it is seldom in evidence in the comments section of any online news article or forum, where trolling is more common.

This is why spoiler warnings are so noteworthy, particularly in online discourse. Rather than reflecting the “uncivil discourse” (Rainie) or the “intellectual narcissism of the random computer commenter” (Nichols 130) that the internet tends to foster, they instead are symbolic gestures of tenderness. In *Gestures*, Vilém Flusser analyzes physical gestures, describing them as intentional movements expressing and articulating an affective state (4). Gestures are forms of communication that allow us to read a state of mind. Spoiler warnings can also be considered as a kind of gesture. Although not physical ones like smoking a pipe, writing, or the other forms considered by Flusser, spoiler warnings nevertheless are a symbolic articulation of an affective state of mind. Importantly, the spoiler warning expresses good intentions by indicating a concern for the enjoyment of others. As such, spoiler warnings are certainly the most common gestures of tenderness found in online discourse and perhaps even in daily life as a whole. Where else do we routinely encounter gestures of good will and the wish on the part of others to preserve our enjoyment?

The Spoiler Warning is a Form of Imagined Identification

The spoiler warning is thus a kind of social compact, an agreement among individuals presumed to be like-minded in their desire to retain the possibility of surprise, and it operates in the future conditional as it speculates about what might may transpire. On the part of the author, it is a projected empathic wish and form of imagined identification. “If you are like me,” it says, “you

prefer to be surprised by plot developments and unexpected twists rather than to be forearmed with knowledge of what is to come. The information I am about to reveal therefore could compromise your enjoyment by undercutting the tantalizing suspense generated by narrative uncertainty or the pleasure taken in unexpected plot twists.” Like a “here be monsters” designation on a medieval map, the spoiler warning thereby cautions readers to venture no further lest their pleasure be compromised. Interestingly, some evidence suggests that spoilers actually do not in fact compromise the pleasure consumers derive from at least some types of narrative.² Nevertheless, the pervasive assumption is that readers and viewers prefer to experience narrative unfolding in real time without foreknowledge of plot developments—or, at least, that readers and viewers should be able to choose whether or not to have plot developments disclosed to them outside and in advance of their consumption of the narrative itself.

This assumption carries with it an implicit theorization of the consumption of narrative (regardless of form) as *linear* and *participatory*, with pleasure associated with epistemological uncertainty and, even more so, with subsequent revelation. Not surprisingly—and in keeping with familiar Western discussions of narrative as having “stages” of development (introduction, rising action, climax, falling action or *denouement*, conclusion)—the assumption undergirding the spoiler warning is that the reader or viewer (or auditor or gamer, for that matter) progresses linearly from uncertainty to certainty as narrative complications raise questions about outcomes, thereby creating affective tension for the consumer of narrative who waits to see what will happen and may choose to speculate about future developments. Suspense generated by narrative is, in itself, conceived of as an important component of the experience of consuming it. The consumer of narrative media does not simply follow along, but engages with the story through the development of affect. Revelation then offers a pleasurable release of tension, potentially rewarding the narrative consumer able to correctly predict the outcome or impressing the consumer with something unforeseen. In this sense, the spoiler warning assumes that all narratives to which they are attached are, in a sense, mysteries, engaging the consumer’s curiosity by raising questions, creating affective tension about potential outcomes, and then delivering a pleasurable release of tension when the outcome is revealed. Given the assumption that narrative pleasure is generated by this tension / release process associated with

2 On empirical research on spoilers, see Judith Rosenbaum’s chapter.

the movement from uncertainty to certainty, it then follows that to disclose information about the outcome prematurely is to undercut narrative pleasure by diminishing the tension elicited by uncertainty.

The author of the spoiler warning speaks from a position of knowledge, having themselves presumably transitioned from uncertainty to certainty through consumption of the narrative. The spoiler warning can thus be conceived of as an act of beneficence, a gift to those who lag behind. It is an act of solidarity across time from the author of the spoiler warning to an imagined future reader who, the author assumes, experiences and enjoys narrative in a similar way. It thereby creates an imaginary bond between the author and the imagined reader, who will one day, after consuming the text in question, be able to appreciate the magnanimity of the author whose warning preserved the “pure” narrative experience for the reader and themselves extend the same courtesy to other, future consumers. The spoiler warning in this way breeds future spoiler warnings.

The serial propagation of spoiler warnings, however, reveals that this gesture of tenderness is not purely magnanimous. In the first place, it shields the author from opprobrium: the scorn heaped upon those who spoil the narrative experience for others by disclosing information prematurely and without warning that undercuts the tension of not knowing, and presumably diminishes the pleasure of revelation. If affixing a spoiler warning is an act of tenderness toward others, neglecting to append it is an act of selfishness and a lapse of online decorum, punishable by invective, ostracism, and expulsion from particular groups. Beyond this, however, the spoiler warning is also self-serving in its insistence that it function reciprocally. The author of the spoiler warning “does unto others” as they would have visited upon themselves. This may well be the Golden Rule of twenty-first-century online discourse: those who would have their narratives unspoiled must therefore not spoil the narratives of others. For the recipient of the spoiler warning, it should be added, it functions as both blessing and curse. It warns one from proceeding lest one’s meal be spoiled, but tantalizes nevertheless!

The Spoiler Warning Highlights the Centrality of Narrative in the Twenty-First Century

Beyond highlighting shared assumptions about the nature of narrative, the contemporary zeitgeist of spoiler warning reflects the centrality of commercial narrative to twenty-first-century existence. The age of the spoiler warning

highlights the ubiquity and importance of storytelling and consumption, as well as the pervasive role of social media, in our lives.

The lives of citizens in industrialized countries in the twenty-first century are arguably suffused and shaped by consumption of narratives in forms ranging from books, film, and television shows to podcasts, games, and other forms of new media. A *U.S. News and World Report* article from 2021 reported that Americans averaged 186 minutes per day watching television in 2020 (Hubbard). Results for European countries were even higher, with an average of 235 minutes per day (Stoll). According to *Variety*, global cinema box office revenues for 2022 came in \$26 billion dollars: an improvement over 2021, but still well short of 2019's pre-pandemic record of 42.3 billion ("Global Box Office"). Meanwhile, fictional narratives in book form brought in over 10 billion dollars in trade revenue in 2021 in the U.S. alone (Curcic). When we consider the popularity of television, cinema, and printed narrative (novels, graphic novels, comics, short stories, and so on), together with other contemporary forms of narrative such as gaming (a 180 billion world-wide market in 2022 [Wijman]), podcasts, theater, and videos, it is clear that the twenty-first century is the age of commercial narrative and our intense affection for and attachment to these narratives is expressed in ways ranging from fandoms and conventions of different types to social media groups to acafan collections of scholarly essays focusing on various media properties.

The ubiquity of the spoiler warning in online and offline discussion marks the centrality of media consumption in twenty-first-century life. If the twenty-first century is the age of narrative media consumption, "Spoiler Warning" could serve as its subtitle. What the zeitgeist of the spoiler warning shows us is that we love our stories and that we prefer (or think we prefer) to experience them as they unfold without foreknowledge of later events. To protect this enjoyment, we have established a new type of social compact. The spoiler warning is thus, in the end, first and foremost an expression of love for the stories we consume and that are so central to life in the twenty-first century.

Filmography

THE GODFATHER. Director: Francis Ford Coppola. US 1972.

INCEPTION. Director: Christopher Nolan. US/UK 2010.

MAD MEN. Creator: Matthew Weiner. US 2007–2015.

PSYCHO. Director: Alfred Hitchcock. US 1960.

THE SIXTH SENSE. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 1999.

UNBREAKABLE. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 2000.

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