

Plot Points, Twists and Spoilers: On the Dramatic Impact of Withholding and Revealing Narrative Information

Allow me to begin with a confession: I hate spoilers.¹ I once nearly broke off a long-term relationship because my girlfriend revealed the ending of a novel to me, when I had just started reading it. The disclosure of this personal detail—a “backstory wound” of sorts—is called for here, since my approach is not based on empirical research but rather on my analysis of the dramatic structure of films, a method which necessarily involves introspection. For this reason, I would like my readers to know from the start that I suffer from a



Fig. 1: The title card at the end of LES DIABOLIQUES

1 Needless to say, this essay contains many spoilers, notably about the two films analyzed in detail, *THE SIXTH SENSE* (US 1999, Director: M. Night Shyamalan) and *EL MAQUINISTA* (*THE MACHINIST*, ES/UK/US/FR 2004, Director: Brad Anderson).

severe spoiler aversion. But rest assured: my primary focus is not on the moral question of whether the act of spoiling is “diabolical,” as a note appearing just before the end credits of Clouzot’s film *LES DIABOLIQUES* (*DIABOLIQUE*, FR 1955, Director: Henri-Georges Clouzot) suggested as early as 1955 (**fig. 1**), but rather on the differences in the viewing experience with or without prior extra knowledge.²

Definition and Prevalence

I propose starting with a non-judgmental definition. A spoiler may be defined as information about an element of the story (or a strategy of the narration) that is revealed in advance (i.e., before transmission by the narration) and that significantly changes the way in which the viewer processes the narration and mentally constructs the story. I would like to emphasize the last part of this stipulation, thus opting for a narrow definition. It is not very productive, in my opinion, to deem every single piece of advance information a spoiler.

What kinds of films are prone to be spoiled? Judging from my own experience, I would say plot-driven rather than character-driven films—e.g., *WITNESS* (US 1985, Director: Peter Weir) vs. *RAGING BULL* (US 1980, Director: Martin Scorsese); closed rather than open plots (e.g., *THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW* [US 1944, Director: Fritz Lang] vs. *L’AVVENTURA* [IT 1960, Director: Michelangelo Antonioni]); fairly complex rather than simple or very complex plots—*MEMENTO* (US 2000, Director: Christopher Nolan) vs. *THE STRAIGHT STORY* (US 1999, Director: David Lynch) or *LOST HIGHWAY* (FR/US 1997, Director: David Lynch); and plots with conclusive rather than ambiguous endings—e.g., *THE SIXTH SENSE* vs. *MULHOLLAND DRIVE* (US/FR 2001, Director: David Lynch). I would not know how to spoil *MULHOLLAND DRIVE*, for example, given that most people do not even agree on what really happens in the story, let alone how to interpret it. Films that can easily be spoiled often belong to the genres of the suspense thriller, the whodunit, mystery, science fiction, or horror, rather than, say, the western, the musical, or the romantic comedy.

2 On *LES DIABOLIQUES*, see also Milan Hain’s chapter.

Plot Twists and Clues for Spoilers

In the following, I will focus on films with final plot twists, which usually meet all the conditions enumerated above and for which we can assume a big difference in the viewing experience with or without the extra knowledge. Looking for clues that might spoil the surprise in films with final plot twists, I found that a wide range of types of information can have this effect. It may be information about the identity of a culprit or trickster (PSYCHO [US 1960, Director: Alfred Hitchcock]; THE USUAL SUSPECTS [US 1995, Director: Bryan Singer]); the identity of characters in constellations with split personalities, twins, or second selves (ANGEL HEART [US 1987, Director: Alan Parker]; THE PRESTIGE [UK/US 2006, Director: Christopher Nolan]; DARK [DE 2017–2020, Creator: Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friesle]); the state or condition of characters (sane vs. insane, alive vs. dead, human vs. robot: DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI [THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI, DE 1920, Director: Robert Wiene]; THE SIXTH SENSE; WESTWORLD [US 2016–2020, Creator: Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy]); the ontological status of events (reality vs. dream/VR/fiction/staging: THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW; THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR [US 1999, Director: Josef Rusnak]; SWIMMING POOL [FR/UK 2003, Director: François Ozon]; THE GAME [US 1997, Director: David Fincher]); the time of action (WESTWORLD), the duration of events (seconds vs. days/hours: JACOB'S LADDER [US 1990, Director: Adrian Lyne]; STAY [US 2005, Director: Marc Forster]); the place of action (earth vs. far-away planet: PLANET OF THE APES [US 1968, Director: Franklin J. Schaffner]); or the suppressed trauma affecting a character (EL MAQUINISTA; MEMENTO).

Despite this considerable variety, a common denominator may be identified: in most cases, it is information about *hidden states and conditions*, rather than events or changes in the course of the action, that are liable to spoil the twist. To illustrate this distinction with a well-known example: if you want to spoil the dramatic conception on which PSYCHO relies, you must disclose the conditions of Norman and his mother (the former suffering from dissociative identity disorder and the latter being dead), which the film hides till the final twist. Information about the shocking fact that Marion is stabbed early on would spoil PSYCHO to a much lesser degree, even though it would reveal a major turning point. This is why Alfred Hitchcock worried about spectators

giving away the ending (which finally reveals said conditions) rather than any prior event in the story.³

A twist, in my conception of the term, is retroactive in that it involves the reconceptualization of prior events. A turning point,⁴ by contrast, propels the course of action in a new direction and thus may be said to be proactive. Even though twists usually occur at the end of the narration and turning points prior to it, the opposite order is also possible, as demonstrated by *A BEAUTIFUL MIND* (US 2001, Director: Ron Howard), a thriller with a major twist midway through (the revelation of Nash's delusions) and a turning point later on (receiving the Nobel Prize despite his mental condition).

THE SIXTH SENSE and Structural Deception

All the films mentioned so far rely for their effect on the temporary concealment of crucial states and conditions. But only a few of them feature an extra element of *structural deception*, which I would like to analyze now by taking a closer look at *THE SIXTH SENSE*, one of the most famous plot-twist films and appearing at the top of numerous respective rankings on the internet.⁵ To my knowledge, one of the reasons why the final plot twist in *THE SIXTH SENSE* worked so well has not yet been discussed in the numerous publications on the film. Only a close analysis of the dramatic structure will bring it to the surface.

Films adhering to a classical structure often follow a conventionalized pattern.⁶ An initial equilibrium is thrown off-balance by a disturbance, which causes a problem for the main character, and thus also establishes a goal for him or her (to solve the problem) and a question for the spectators (will he or she succeed in solving the problem?). Obstacles and setbacks prevent

3 On the marketing campaign for *PSYCHO*, see also Milan Hain's chapter.

4 In dramatic theory, "turning point" is a concept used to refer to major shifts in the plot and/or in the deployment of narrative information. While the term is hardly ever precisely defined and often used indiscriminately for any kind of "milestone" in the narrative progression, I propose to distinguish it from the concept of the "twist" in the sense outlined above; on twists, see also Simon Spiegel's chapter.

5 See for instance: movieweb.com/greatest-movie-plot-twists-all-time, yourshowmanlm.hubpages.com/hub/-top-10-movies-with-twist-endings, or www.boredpanda.com/plot-twist-movies/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic.

6 The notion of a "classical dramatic structure" is used to distinguish a set of norms that came to dominate Hollywood and more generally mainstream film production from alternative modes such as (in David Bordwell's terms) "art cinema" or "historical-materialist" narration.

the protagonist from finding an easy solution, and often, a major discovery and/or change of tactics is required to finally succeed. The goal is thus ultimately achieved and the question for the spectators answered, in most cases positively.⁷ This classical dramatic structure relies on a certain number of plot and turning points as shown in **tab. 1**:

phases / crucial events on vertical timeline	consequences	plot points
beginning: equilibrium		
disturbance	→ causing problem (for character)	point of attack / catalyst
	→ establishing goal (for character)	
	→ raising question (for spectator)	
decision to act		plot point 1
obstacles		midpoint and further
progress and setbacks		further minor turning points
discovery / change of tactics		plot point 2
renewed attempt at solving problem successful		
	→ goal achieved (for character)	climax
ending: new equilibrium		

Tab. 1: The plot and turning points of the classical dramatic structure

An analysis of *THE SIXTH SENSE*, for now *without considering the twist*, shows that its narrative progression adheres closely to this pattern. Malcolm enjoys his success as an acclaimed child psychiatrist in the company of his adoring wife (equilibrium). A former patient of his, obviously not successfully cured, breaks into their house and fires a shot at Malcolm (disturbance). Half a year later, Malcolm (apparently healed) is back at work, but his obsession with helping Cole, a new and difficult patient with many similarities to the former patient, reveals that his professional skills and self-esteem are challenged

7 Proponents of the “three-act structure” tend to establish a hierarchy among the turning points, privileging as act breaks the moments when the protagonist decides to act (plot point 1) and when he or she decides on a new strategy to reach the goal (plot point 2). For simplicity’s sake, and since it works well for *THE SIXTH SENSE*, I adopt part of this concept here, even though I do not consider the notion of “acts” to be very helpful in analyzing the dramatic structure of feature films. For a critical assessment of the three-act structure, a paradigm to which classical dramaturgy is often reduced, see Brüttsch, “Three-Act Structure.”

(problem). This raises the question for spectators of whether Malcolm will be able to cure Cole. A character's goal may be differentiated by what theories of dramatic structure label his or her "want" as opposed to his or her "need." The former pertains to a character's more immediate, conscious, and concrete objective, the latter to his or her deeper, sometimes unconscious, urge or desire. Malcolm seeks to help Cole (his "want") and in doing so tries to redeem his shortcomings in treating the former patient and to re-establish his self-image as a successful psychiatrist (his "need").

In accordance with classical dramatic structure, Malcolm must overcome several obstacles and setbacks before achieving a breakthrough. At first, Cole is evasive, and although he confides in Malcolm, his condition still deteriorates, and he accuses the psychiatrist of disbelieving him. Only when Malcolm detects secret voices on tapes recorded during interviews with the former patient, does he realize that Cole's perceptions of dead people are real (discovery).⁸ This leads him to encourage Cole to listen to what the ghosts want from him rather than backing off from them (change of tactics). Cole can thus overcome his fear of the dead and can help one of them to expose the tormentor who caused her death (climax part 1). With his self-confidence regained, Cole is now able to triumph over his rival at the school theater (climax part 2) and to reconcile with his mother by convincing her of his supernatural perceptive faculties (climax part 3). At this point in the narration, Malcolm has successfully achieved what he wants (to help Cole) and what he needs (to redeem his past errors and rehabilitate himself professionally), and the main dramatic question has thus been answered positively. In addition, there has been a shift from an everyday world with eerie touches but realistic assumptions, to a supernatural universe in which the existence of ghosts is acknowledged.

Even though the focus is clearly on the main plotline, classical structure allows for a secondary plotline—if it remains subordinate to the main dramatic question. The secondary plotline often involves (heterosexual) romance and may be resolved only after the climax. This is the case in *THE SIXTH SENSE* with regards to Malcolm's relationship with his wife, to which the narration

8 I disagree with Friedman, who takes the moment of Cole's confession (the now famous "I see dead people," located at the midpoint) as the crucial breakthrough in Malcolm's endeavor (20). The fact that Malcolm at this point still considers Cole's perceptions delusional and feels at a loss with his pathological state indicates that this scene directly leads to the "darkest moment," a stage protagonists in the classical paradigm first have to overcome before finding the key to the solution.

dedicates short scenes here and there, outlining a steady deterioration (which on an unspoiled first viewing we take to be caused by Malcolm's neglect of his wife due to his obsession with curing Cole). The only question left unanswered after the triple climax outlined above is thus whether Malcolm will achieve reconciliation with his wife. This is when the plot twist occurs, revealing that Malcolm actually died when he was shot and thus has been appearing to Cole as a ghost all along.

The Timing of the Twist

Where in the reception process are we just before this twist? I would say that we are near the end of a tale featuring all the dramatic components expected from a well-made film with classical structure: a series of unsettling incidents, developments, and discoveries; an eventful quest with ups and downs but a happy ending; an interesting dramatic question answered (positively) in a triple climax. There is not much left to expect, and this is why, I would argue, the twist is so unsettling. It manages to turn everything upside down after we already experienced a satisfactory resolution.

The dramatic structure of films is sometimes visualized with suspense curves charting the level of tension in a two-dimensional diagram. Here is an example of how the degree of tension is supposed to develop in a classical three-act structure (**fig. 2**).⁹

A suspense curve for *THE SIXTH SENSE* without the twist and the secondary storyline (which is often neglected in charts like these) could roughly take this form. The twist, however, occurring when the curve is near its low point, flagrantly upsets the familiar progression by boosting tension for one last time when nobody was expecting it.

We must compare *THE SIXTH SENSE* with other examples to see how exceptional its timing of the twist is. Typically, the twist coincides with the climax, as in *THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW*, a film in which the rising tension and the protagonist's mounting trouble are solved in the final minutes, when it turns out that his entanglements were just a bad dream. **Tab. 2** shows that the coincidence of twist and climax, as in the first eleven examples listed, is the norm. The examples extend from the silent era (*THE AVENGING CONSCIENCE* [US 1914, Director: David Wark Griffith]; *DANS LA NUIT* [FR 1929, Director: Charles Vanel]), film noir (*THE STRANGE AFFAIR OF UNCLE*

9 Eder 85 (my translation).

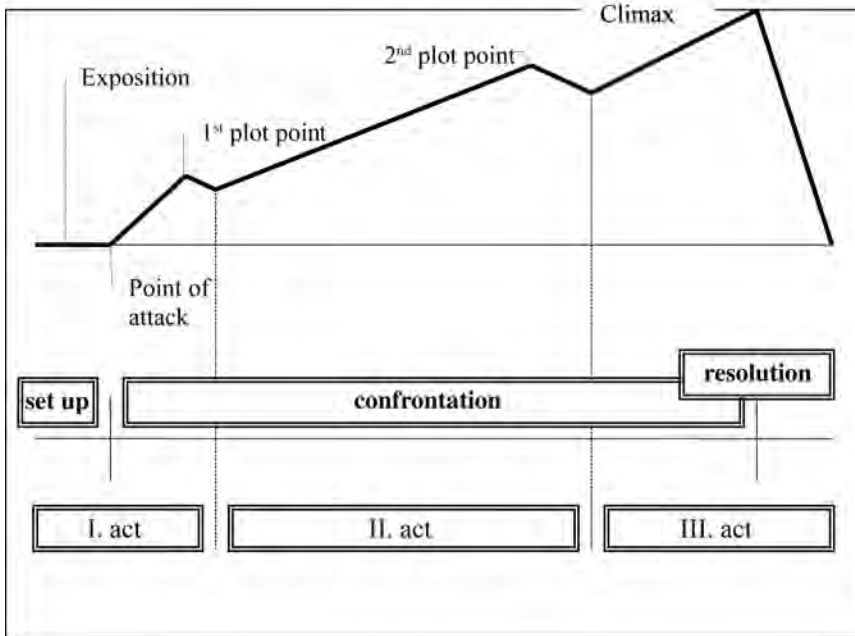


Fig. 2: The development of tension in the three-act structure according to Jens Eder

HARRY [US 1945, Director: Robert Siodmak]; STRANGE IMPERSONATION [US 1946, Director: Anthony Mann]), horror thriller classics (LES DIABOLIQUES; PSYCHO), and short film (LA RIVIÈRE DU HIBOU [AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE, FR 1962, Director: Robert Enrico]) to more recent complex narrations (ANGEL HEART; EL MAQUINISTA).

Sometimes the twist occurs at an earlier stage. In THE MATRIX (US 1999, Director: Lilly Wachowski and Lana Wachowski), for example, the revelation that all humankind has been enslaved by robots marks the end the first act (and of Neo's innocence), launching the fight against the machines that takes up two thirds of the screen time. Other examples of twists before the final climax are ABRE LOS OJOS (OPEN YOUR EYES, ES/FR/IT 1997, Director: Alejandro Amenábar), FIGHT CLUB (US 1999, Director: David Fincher), THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR, A BEAUTIFUL MIND, and THE NUMBER 23 (US 2007, Director: Joel Schumacher), as shown in the second section of **tab. 2**.

If there are multiple twists, a second, third, or fourth twist might be positioned after the climax. A good example for this constellation is THE GAME: As a birthday present, the wealthy investment banker van Orton receives a voucher for an adventure game from his brother. At midpoint, it turns out

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timing of the plot twist:	inciting incident	plot point 1	mid-point	plot point 2	between pp2 + climax	climax	after climax
THE AVENGING CON-SCIENCE (1914)						twist	
DANS LA NUIT (1929)						twist	
THE STR. AFFAIR OF UNCLE HARRY (1945)						twist	
STRANGE IMPERSON-ATION (1946)						twist	
LES DIABOLIQUES (1954)						twist	
PSYCHO (1960)						twist	
LA RIVIÈRE DU HIBOU (1962)						twist	
ANGEL HEART (1987)						twist	
THE USUAL SUSPECTS (1995)						twist	
EL MAQUINISTA (2004)						twist	
STAY (2005)						twist	
ABRE LOS OJOS (1997)					twist		
THE NUMBER 23 (2007)					twist		
FIGHT CLUB (1999)					twist		
THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR (1999)				twist			
A BEAUTIFUL MIND (2001)			twist				
THE MATRIX (1999)		twist					
THE OTHERS (2001)					twist 1	twist 2	
TOTAL RECALL (1990)		twist 1	twist 2				
MEMENTO (2000)						twist 1	twist 2
EXISTENZ (1999)					twist 1	twist 2	twist 3 + 4
IDENTITY (2003)				twist 1			twist 2
THE GAME (1997)			twist 1			twist 2	twist 3
DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI (1919)							twist
PLANET OF THE APES (1968)							twist
THE SIXTH SENSE (1999)							twist

Tab. 2: The timing of the twist in relation to the major turning points of the classical dramatic structure

that the brother has been deceived and the people behind the game are after van Orton's life and money. At the climax (and what we take to be a tragic denouement), van Orton accidentally shoots his brother just before finding out that the whole series of nightmarish events was a game for his birthday after all. In shock, van Orton jumps from the building, but a final twist reveals that the shooting has been staged as well and that everybody is assisting with the safe landing of the birthday boy on a big air cushion. Further examples of multiple twists are *THE OTHERS* (ES/US/FR 2001, Director: Alejandro Amenábar), *TOTAL RECALL* (US 1999, Director: Paul Verhoeven), *MEMENTO*, *IDENTITY* (US 2003, Director: James Mangold), and *EXISTENZ* (CU/UK 1999, Director: David Cronenberg). The third section of **tab. 2** shows which of these examples position one of their twists after the climax.

But only very rarely does a first and completely unannounced twist hit the spectators when they are already shuffling in their seats, ready to get up and leave the movie theater. Besides *THE SIXTH SENSE*, only *DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI* and *PLANET OF THE APES* come to mind.

However, the twist in *THE SIXTH SENSE*, occurring after what we—on a first unspoiled viewing—take to be the climax, does not invalidate the established dramatic structure. Rather, it enriches the pattern with additional elements for each section. The unfinished business of a second patient in need of help remains in force, but now it motivates Malcolm's return from the dead. And while his "want" remains unchanged (to help Cole), his "need" additionally includes becoming aware of his own condition, without which he will not be able to leave the living behind and rest in peace. In the subplot, it turns out that Malcolm had to become aware of his misapprehensions so that he can bid farewell to his wife. With these new facets brought into play, the twist turns Malcolm's journey into a quest of self-discovery and reconciliation. The additional elements also entail a shift in the balance between the main characters, since it turns out that Cole was helping Malcolm as much as the other way round. And in the relationship between Malcolm and his wife, we now realize that dissociation was inevitable, even if a new bond on a more spiritual level appears possible, resulting in a bittersweet instead of a happy ending.

The Attractions of Unspoiled versus Spoiled or Second Viewings

What are the attractions of an unspoiled first viewing of *THE SIXTH SENSE*? Without prior knowledge, character engagement is enhanced owing to the predominant alignment with Malcolm's perspective and understanding. This

facilitates immersion in the fictional universe. The twist at the end may then be experienced as a pleasurable shock of recognition. And the ensuing rush to reconstruct the story according to new terms may be appreciated as a gratifying cognitive challenge. In a way, we get two films for the price of one, since each of the two versions—with Malcolm as a living and a dead person—work smoothly and independently. But most importantly, without prior knowledge of Malcolm’s ghostly condition, spectators have a first-hand physical experience of some of the film’s core philosophical topics, centered around notions such as “seeing is believing,” “appearances may be deceiving,” and “could there be more to our world than meets the eye?” Last but not least, we can watch the film a second time from a knowing stance to fully appreciate the cleverly-crafted dual structure or to check on details of the audience deception.

Which brings me to the attractions of a second or “spoiled” viewing. Let me emphasize first, though, that spoiled versus unspoiled viewing is a lopsided comparison, since an unspoiled viewing can be followed by a second one, whereas after being confronted with spoilers, there is no return to an ignorant form of reception. One of the pleasures of an informed viewing is the challenge of a simultaneous double reading. The viewing experience is more distant, self-conscious, and “safe,” which may better suit spectators who do not like to be overly aroused. Attention may be focused on how it is done rather than what happens next. In Ed Tan’s conception, “artefact” rather than “fiction emotions” take center stage (64–66). Spectators may also experience gratification from their superior knowledge vis-à-vis the main character and other, unspoiled spectators, especially in films keeping the latter parties aligned and in a state of ignorance, as is the case in *THE SIXTH SENSE*. And in cases of a spoiler without precise details, suspense may still arise from the question of how a character finds out about and reacts to the hidden state of affairs.

A Different Kind of Priming for the Twist in *EL MAQUINISTA*

THE SIXTH SENSE is a particularly elaborate example of a false lead feigning a coherence that is only revealed to be deceptive in the twist. A clear majority of the examples mentioned so far belong to this type of plot twist film, for which Seth Friedman has proposed the term “misdirection film.” However, there is a different kind of priming for the twist, employed by the following examples: *ANGEL HEART*, *ABRE LOS OJOS* (and its remake *VANILLA SKY*) [US

2001, Director: Cameron Crowe)], *THE MATRIX*, *IDENTITY*, *EL MAQUINISTA*, and *STAY*. I would like to elucidate the way these films lead the spectators to the twist through an analysis of *EL MAQUINISTA*.¹⁰

The film opens with an enigmatic scene: Trevor wraps what appears to be a corpse into a carpet, drives it to the coast, and struggles to dump it into the sea, when someone approaches with a torch. We do not get to see this person, and the scene ends abruptly with Trevor's face staring in the direction of the approaching light. Unlike the *THE SIXTH SENSE*, *EL MAQUINISTA* thus begins *in medias res*, with an action raising many questions. Who is the victim? Did Trevor kill this person? Who interrupts him when he tries to get rid of the body? The next scene shows Trevor back in his apartment washing his hands with bleach. This appears reasonable after handling a corpse, but we still wonder how he got away after the intervention of a third party. In the following scenes, the incident is not an issue anymore, which prompts the question of whether we might have witnessed a dream. While the narration in *THE SIXTH SENSE* initially appears overly communicative and explanatory (an impression which turns out to be deceptive), *EL MAQUINISTA* makes it clear from the start that withholding information is one of the key features of the narration. In contrast to Malcolm in *THE SIXTH SENSE*, Trevor, pale, skinny, and suffering from insomnia, appears off-balance from the start. Soon enough, we not only wonder about his condition and his actions, but also about what happens around him. In response to his question "do I look okay?" a waitress and a prostitute in two separate scenes answer with the exact same words: "If you were any thinner, you wouldn't exist." When the waitress invites Trevor to her apartment, it becomes apparent that the clocks in her living room and kitchen have stopped at the exact same time as the one we saw in the cafe. A new colleague at work called Ivan, who distracts Trevor and causes him to mishandle a machine, turns out to be unfamiliar to the foreman and his co-workers. Yet Trevor gets hold of a photograph showing Ivan with one of the colleagues who denied knowing him. Moreover, mysterious sticky notes pop up on Trevor's fridge, causing him to wonder who got access to his apartment. As spectators, we constantly try to make sense of these unusual coincidences and inconsistencies. Could it be that Trevor is being framed by some of his colleagues, or by Ivan (as he himself comes to believe)? Is he delusional due to his insomnia? Or does he doze off occasionally without realizing it (as several scenes suggest), and some of the events we witness originate from his dreams?

10 For an analysis of *ABRE LOS OJOS* and *IDENTITY* with a similar focus on the way spectators are primed for the twist, see Brütsch, "Complex Narration" 137–42.

In the end it turns out that Trevor is responsible for a hit-and-run that killed a young boy. Guilt about the crime made him suppress any memory of it and imagine an alter ego (Ivan) and the waitress (in the form of the dead boy's mother), who interfere with his real surroundings and eventually help him unearth the hidden truth. In *THE SIXTH SENSE*, we had no clue that we were missing an important piece of information. In *EL MAQUINISTA*, by contrast, we are constantly made aware that something is wrong and that we do not have all the relevant information to understand what is going on. Accordingly, the major attraction of an unspoiled first viewing here is the cognitive challenge of forming hypotheses to explain the contradictions and inconsistencies. The phase during which we are only given fragmentary hints but are mainly left in the dark is quite long, and the final plot twist resolving the puzzle does not come as a surprise, even though the explanation it offers is unexpected.¹¹

For Kiss and Willemsen, a film may only be regarded as complex if the way its narrative information is deployed impedes, or at least challenges, the viewer's meaning-making process: "[W]e will understand 'complexity' as a reception effect that follows from a viewer's (temporary or ongoing) inability to coherently integrate the narrative information into a causal, chronologic and determinate structure of events and other explicit and referential meaning" (38). In this view, a spoiler is liable to strip a puzzle- or mind-game film like *EL MAQUINISTA* of one of its most valuable assets: its complexity. Granted, in everyday life we do not like being uninformed and confused, and when it comes to consuming works of fiction, "processing fluency," that is, the ease of understanding a novel or film, usually correlates positively with its enjoyment.¹²

For the niche genre of puzzle films, including examples such as *ANGEL HEART*, *ABRE LOS OJOS*, *IDENTITY*, *EL MAQUINISTA*, or *STAY*, I would nevertheless maintain that much of their appeal lies in the prolonged phase of cognitive dissonance, which serves as brain candy for spectators willing to engage in a game of conjecture with an uncertain outcome. Otherwise, I would not know how to explain the success, at least with certain groups, of films that disturb and confuse without offering a reassuring solution in the end, and which thus cannot be spoiled at all, at least not in the proper sense of the word.

11 The term "puzzle film" is often used indiscriminately for films based on false leads as well as those based on an extended phase of disorientation (e.g. Buckland). I agree with Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen (51–56) that the term is better reserved for the latter case.

12 Cf. Leavitt and Christenfeld, "Fluency of Spoilers" 94. See also Judith Rosenbaum's chapter.

Such puzzle films without explanatory revelations (“impossible puzzle films” in the terminology of Kiss and Willemsen, 140–82) include examples that have established veritable cult followings: *LOST HIGHWAY*, *DONNIE DARKO* (US 2001, Director: Richard Kelly), *MULHOLLAND DRIVE*, *PRIMER* (US 2004, Director: Shane Carruth), *TRIANGLE* (UK/AU 2009, Director: Christopher Smith), *COHERENCE* (US/UK 2013, Director: James Ward Byrkit), or *ENEMY* (CA/ES 2013, Director: Denis Villeneuve).

The (Reduced) Effects of Spoiling Complex TV Series

I would like to add a few remarks on spoiling TV series. The two films I have analyzed can easily be spoiled with one or two sentences, since they both culminate in one major plot twist. With a complex TV Series like *DARK*, however, circumstances are different. The series features not just one protagonist and two or three secondary characters, but more than half a dozen important characters belonging to four different families, and even more secondary characters. As the action expands to include more and more eras, no less than four generations are involved, forming an intricate web of connections and intrigues, which are complicated even more when it turns out in the finale of season 2 that several universes exist in parallel. But most importantly, the number of dramatic questions raised is much higher than any feature-length film could accommodate. In the first season alone, they concern a variety of issues (as I have pointed out elsewhere):¹³

the missing children (Where are they? Who kidnapped them?); unknown characters showing up (Who are they? Where do they come from? What are their plans?); the strange behavior of established characters (What do they know?); the secret activities of the nuclear power plant executives (What are they hiding?); abnormal occurrences (Why are whole flocks of animals dying simultaneously?); and unusual places and objects (Where does the tunnel lead? What are the nursery and the clockwork for?). (Brütsch, “Puzzle Plots” 154)

Most of these questions relate to unresolved issues pertaining to the present situation or past developments leading up to it; thus again, we are dealing with states and conditions withheld from us (and most characters) by a restraining narration. Compared to the feature films analyzed above, the enigmas are not just higher in number, but also dispersed over the season, and

13 Brütsch, “Puzzle Plots” 154.

partial resolutions start as early as the end of episode 1 and continue to occur in each ensuing episode.

It should be clear by now that it is more difficult, and would take more time and elaboration, to spoil a complex series like *DARK* than films like *THE SIXTH SENSE* or *EL MAQUINISTA*. Spoiler activities and associated discussions about ongoing series with multiple enigmas interfere with the reception process in a different way than spoilers targeting feature films that are based on the concealment of one major premise and thus geared towards one major plot twist. In their research into spoiling practices amongst fans of the TV series *LOST* (US 2004–2010, Creator: Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof), Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell concluded that “typical spoilers may point to little pieces of the show’s major enigmas, but rarely provide information that would reveal the larger mystery of the island (which still appears to be ‘unspoiled’ in the fanosphere),” or, as one of the fans pointedly states: “You find out one thing, but there are 10 new things that pop up from it.” (28)¹⁴

Empirical Research versus Analysis Based on Introspection

As I have emphasized at the outset, my findings are not based on empirical research and experiments but on an analysis of the dramatic structure of the films and series in question. To my knowledge, there are to date no empirical studies on the difference between watching *THE SIXTH SENSE* or *EL MAQUINISTA* with versus without prior knowledge of the twist. To conclude, I would nevertheless like to tentatively link my findings to results gained from empirical research.¹⁵ The first scholars to challenge conventional assumptions about spoilers were Jonathan D. Leavitt and Nicholas J. S. Christenfeld, who in 2011 found that subjects who were given spoilers before reading short stories gave significantly higher scores for enjoyment than those who were not, even for three out of the four stories with an ironic twist ending (“Story Spoilers”). The result that “story spoilers don’t spoil stories” (the title of their report) was so counterintuitive and surprising that it led to various efforts to replicate and refine the findings as well as to include audiovisual narrations as stimuli.

14 On the role of spoilers among *STAR WARS* fans, see also Völcker.

15 For an overview of empirical research on spoilers, see Judith Rosenbaum’s chapter.

Some of the replications confirmed the earlier results,¹⁶ some contradicted them entirely or in part,¹⁷ so that the question is still under debate.

An important step towards better understanding the effects of spoilers was to introduce the variables of personality traits and experiences, most importantly “need for cognition,” “need for affect,” and “fiction reading frequency.” An empirical study conducted by Benjamin Johnson and Judith E. Rosenbaum (“Who’s Afraid”) again used short stories as stimuli and produced the following set of results. Subjects with a high need for cognition (that is, who enjoy thinking and cognitive challenges) showed a selective preference for unspoiled stories, but they did not enjoy them more, nor did they feel more immersed in them than subjects with a low need for cognition.¹⁸ Subjects with a high need for affect (that is, who like to be emotionally aroused) enjoyed reading the unspoiled short stories more than subjects with a low need for affect, but they did not show any selective preference for them and did not feel more immersed in them. A third result was that subjects who frequently read fiction enjoyed unspoiled stories more than spoiled ones. This empirical study by Johnson and Rosenbaum is but one of many that attempted to measure the effects of spoilers on different kinds of readers and spectators.

By way of a conclusion I would like to add one more consideration, by pointing out that some of the films I have mentioned are not targeted at a mainstream but rather a niche audience. This is particularly true for puzzle plots that do not reward spectators with a final revelation, but in part also for plots which have spectators go through a prolonged phase of disorientation (such as *EL MAQUINISTA*, analyzed above) before redeeming them in the end. It would be interesting to investigate the personality traits and reactions to spoilers of these niche audiences, to better understand what effect the withholding of information has on them. After all, the scriptwriters and directors go to considerable lengths to construct a narration that misleads or confuses spectators for the better part of the film’s duration. If their target audience did not enjoy this temporary state of relative cluelessness and instead preferred to be informed in advance, they could have saved a lot of time and effort. If we presume that aficionados of such narrative constructs (many of which belong to the thriller genre) predominantly have a high need for cognition and affect as well as being above-average film consumers, the results of the studies by

16 E.g. Leavitt and Christenfeld, “Fluency of Spoilers”; Yan and Tsang.

17 E.g. Johnson and Rosenbaum, “Spoiler Alert”; Levine et al.; Daniel and Katz.

18 Levine et al. (525), by contrast, reported a positive effect of the absence of spoilers on the enjoyment of stories.

Johnson and Rosenbaum (“Spoiler Alert”) and Levine et al. suggest that the filmmaker’s labor was not in vain. That said, film scholars, the subclass of spectators to which I belong, are probably even more particular in their personality traits, and thus I would not dare to generalize my own experiences. My aim was to analyze a selection of films whose narrative design depends on the (temporary) withholding of crucial information, a dramatic configuration I personally find particularly intriguing, but which other spectators may want to avoid.

Filmography

- ABRE LOS OJOS (OPEN YOUR EYES). Director: Alejandro Amenábar. ES/FR/IT 1997.
ANGEL HEART. Director: Alan Parker. US 1986.
THE AVENGING CONSCIENCE. Director: D. W. Griffith. US 1914.
L’AVVENTURA. Director: Michelangelo Antonioni. IT 1960.
A BEAUTIFUL MIND. Director: Ron Howard. US 2001.
DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI (THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI). Director: Robert Wiene. DE 1920.
COHERENCE. Director: James Ward Byrkit. US/UK 2013.
DANS LA NUIT (IN THE NIGHT). Director: Charles Vanel. FR 1929.
DARK. Creator: Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friese. DE 2017–2020.
EXISTENZ. Director: David Cronenberg. CU/UK 1999.
LES DIABOLIQUES (DIABOLIQUE). Director: Henri-Georges Clouzot. FR 1995.
ENEMY. Director: Denis Villeneuve. CA/ES 2013.
FIGHT CLUB. Director: David Fincher. US 1999.
THE GAME. Director: David Fincher. US 1997.
IDENTITY. Director: James Mangold. US 2003.
JACOB’S LADDER. Director: Adrian Lyne. US 1990.
LOST. Creator: Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof. US 2004–2010.
LOST HIGHWAY. Director: David Lynch. FR/US 1997.
EL MAQUINISTA (THE MACHINIST). Director: Brad Anderson. ES/UK/US/FR 2004.
THE MATRIX. Director: Lilly Wachowski and Lana Wachowski. US 1999.
MEMENTO. Director: Christopher Nolan. US 2000.
MULHOLLAND DRIVE. Director: David Lynch. US/FR 2001.
THE NUMBER 23. Director: Joel Schumacher. US 2007.
THE OTHERS. Director: Alejandro Amenábar. ES/US/FR 2001.
PLANET OF THE APES. Director: Franklin J. Schaffner. US 1968.
THE PRESTIGE. Director: Christopher Nolan. US/UK 2006.
PRIMER. Director: Shane Carruth. US 2004.

- PSYCHO. Director: Alfred Hitchcock. US 1960.
- RAGING BULL. Director: Martin Scorsese. US 1980
- LA RIVIÈRE DU HIBOU (AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE). Director: Robert Enrico. FR 1962.
- THE SIXTH SENSE. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 1999.
- STAY. Director: Marc Forster. US 2005.
- THE STRAIGHT STORY. Director: David Lynch. US 1999.
- THE STRANGE AFFAIR OF UNCLE HARRY. Director: Robert Siodmak. US 1945.
- STRANGE IMPERSONATION. Director: Anthony Mann. US 1946.
- SWIMMING POOL. Director: François Ozon. FR/UK 2003.
- THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR. Director: Josef Rusnak. US/DE 1999.
- TOTAL RECALL. Director: Paul Verhoeven. US 1999.
- TRIANGLE. Director: Christopher Smith. UK/AU 2009.
- THE USUAL SUSPECTS. Director: Bryn Singer. US 1995.
- WESTWORLD. Creator: Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy. US 2016–2020.
- WITNESS. Director: Peter Weir. US 1985.
- THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW. Director: Fritz Lang. US 1944.

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