

Introduction

It seems a universally accepted truth that there are few social missteps more serious than spoiling a TV show, movie, or recently-published book. Casually mentioning at a dinner, during a coffee break, or over an after-work beer that Dumbledore is killed, Bruce Willis's character is dead for most of *THE SIXTH SENSE* (US 1999, Director: M. Night Shyamalan), or that James Bond dies at the end of *NO TIME TO DIE* (UK/US 2021, Director: Cary Joji Fukunaga), is generally considered a rude, even hostile, act that must be treated with the utmost severity.

The fear of spoilers is so pervasive nowadays, it seems almost inconceivable that, not so long ago, people cared much less about them. Of course, it has always been possible to give away the ending of a story in advance, but for a long time, this was not considered an offence of the most extreme kind. It is only in the last quarter of a century that spoilers have become the bone of contention they are today.

Although it is a relatively recent development, the fear of spoilers has become ubiquitous and is by no means limited to blockbuster movies or novels. It has long since made its way into high literary criticism as well as into the classroom. Even at academic conferences, it is not uncommon to hear someone in the audience complain that the speaker is revealing too much about the novel or film being discussed—something that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.

As ubiquitous as the fear of spoilers is, there has been surprisingly little research into it. The only exceptions are empirical psychology and fan studies. For more than a decade, psychologists have been investigating whether spoilers do, in fact, spoil the experience of reading a book or watching a movie—with contradictory, sometimes even counterintuitive results. In the traditional humanities and the broader field of cultural studies, by contrast, there is almost no research on spoilers, with the sole exception of fan studies, which has mainly looked at how various fandoms deal with spoilers.

This lack of research into a phenomenon that affects almost everybody dealing with fictional or narrative content was the starting point for *#spoiltheconference*, a conference organized jointly by the Department of Film

Studies and the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies at the University of Zurich, which took place in March 2022.

Spoilers touch on many areas, including what kind of content can be spoiled, under what circumstances spoiling occurs, and how different audiences react to it. The conference was therefore conceived from the outset as a truly interdisciplinary event, with contributions from film and literary studies, as well as from game and fan studies, and empirical psychology. As is often the case when scholars come together for the first time to discuss a hitherto neglected subject, it proved to be an extremely productive and stimulating event. Early on, we planned to use the conference as the basis for a collective volume. The result is *The Fear of Knowing*, which includes most of the papers presented at the conference as well as additional material.

This collection of essays has three main goals. First, to cover an under-researched subject for the first time; second, to do so from as many angles as possible; and third, to thereby start a conversation between fields that have seen little or no exchange so far.

We begin with an introductory chapter by Simon Spiegel, in which he traces the origins of today's fear of spoilers and lays some theoretical groundwork for how spoilers work, or rather, how they are supposed to work. After outlining the genesis of the term "spoiler" in its modern sense, Spiegel argues that movies are generally much less susceptible to spoilers than is commonly believed, since most forms of suspense do not rely on the audience not knowing the outcome.

The book is then divided into four sections that explore different areas. Three sections focus on specific media: film and television, literature, and games. The fourth section looks at reception and how different audiences deal with spoilers.

Milan Hain opens the "Film and Television" section with an essay about films that rely on a major plot twist and the way Hollywood marketers have dealt with this challenge. Is a central plot twist something that is highlighted in the advertising campaign, or do studios tend to downplay it? By comparing movie trailers over seven decades, Hain shows that Hollywood has, during different historical periods, used different strategies to deal with the issue. There are famous examples, such as Alfred Hitchcock's *PSYCHO* (US 1960), which put the big surprise at the center of its marketing campaign, but there have also been times when trailers did not mention twists at all.

Twist films are also the subject of Matthias Brüttsch's chapter, which focuses on the dramatic function of plot twists and their position in the overall plot construction. In particular, he looks at one—if not *the*—paradigmatic example

of a twist film, *THE SIXTH SENSE*, which, as he argues, is so effective because its big twist does not coincide with the film's climax, as is usually the case, but comes afterwards.

In the next chapter, Tiffany Hong turns to television and the Marvel series *WANDA VISION* (US 2021, Creator: Jac Schaeffer). As Hong shows, *WANDA VISION* exhibits a particularly high degree of self-referentiality in that the series constantly comments on itself. One consequence of this meta-textual approach is that the series also very self-consciously plays with spoilers and the fans' engagement with them.

Another unusual series is *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* (US 2019, Creator: Nicolas Winding Refn and Ed Brubaker), which the Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn created for Amazon. Marcus Stiglegger argues that, unlike many other series, *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* is essentially spoiler-resistant because the series is much more performative than narrative, i.e., it is less interested in developing a coherent plot than in providing a particular affective-corporeal experience that cannot be spoiled.

The second section, "Literature," begins with Albrecht Koschorke's reflections on suspense, in which he considers at a fundamental level what kinds of narratives can actually be spoiled. As Koschorke shows, there are many kinds of stories for which spoilers are simply not an issue; in some ways, the whole idea of suspense, which is central to spoilers, is a modern phenomenon. Many older forms of narrative are not about creating suspense as we know it, but rather about ritually repeating what is already known.

Dana Steglich examines the introductions to standard editions of literary classics, which often unashamedly assume that the plot of the respective novel is—or should be—already known, and thus do not take care to avoid potential spoilers. Steglich argues that the main reason for this is an elitist understanding of literature, one that values rereading more than first-time reading.

One such classic, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), is the subject of James Aaron Green's chapter. Collins's novel is the first known instance of a book that was the subject of a proper spoiler debate, as the author specifically asked reviewers not to give away the plot. Green makes the case that it was no coincidence that *The Woman in White* sparked this discussion, since the novel is emblematic of a new media configuration.

Video games are probably not what most people immediately think of in connection with spoilers. Nevertheless, spoiling is an issue that is intensively discussed among gamers as well as game scholars, and is the subject of the third section, "Games."

After looking into the role of spoilers in video game culture as well as in game studies, Tobias Unterhuber returns to Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, one of the foundational texts of game studies, to discuss on a basic level how games—and what kind of games—can be spoiled.

While Unterhuber's focus is mainly on video games, Andreas Rauscher looks at narrative board and role-playing games. His main interest is in the interaction between ludic and narrative elements, and how different game designs lead to very different effects in terms of potential spoiling.

After three sections dealing with spoilers in various media, the fourth part, titled "Reception," shifts the perspective. Here, the emphasis is not on the works themselves, but on how spoilers affect audiences, and how different groups deal with them.

Judith Rosenbaum provides a sweeping overview of more than a decade of empirical research on the effects of spoilers. She traces how experimental design has become increasingly sophisticated in order to properly account for how audiences react to spoilers, but also how different approaches lead to divergent, sometimes outright contradictory results. Finally, she also discusses the inherent limitations of empirical research in this area.

While Rosenbaum's research is firmly grounded in the methods of empirical science, Kristina Busse comes from a fan studies background. In her chapter, she describes a decisive change in the relationship between author and audience. Traditionally, the author has been considered the authority who decides how a text should be read. In recent years, however, there has been a shift towards an understanding of media consumption in which the recipients decide how they want to experience a particular work—which naturally also includes the question of spoilers. Busse looks specifically at various systems of tagging and content notes developed by different fan communities, which she sees as emblematic of this trend.

A specific fan community is at the center of Andrew Bumstead's chapter. He looks at the so-called Edgic community, fans of the TV show *SURVIVOR* (US 2000–, Creator: Charlie Parsons) who try to—often successfully—predict the winner of a season through an intricate system of analyzing the narrative patterns of the ongoing show. Since Edgic fans do not actually know how a season will end, Edgic is not spoiling in its proper sense. The fact that it is nonetheless a contested activity within the larger *SURVIVOR* fandom highlights the delicate relationship between different knowledge communities.

The fourth section concludes with an essayistic piece by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, who has published extensively on M. Night Shyamalan—who, along with Alfred Hitchcock, is probably the most frequently mentioned

director in this volume. Weinstock looks at spoiler warnings, which he sees as a kind of social compact among like-minded individuals.

One aspect that was central to the conference, and that we also wanted to emphasize in this collection, was the goal of going beyond a purely academic discussion to look at how the fear of spoilers affects the way movies, novels, games, and so on are created, distributed, and consumed. To do this, Simon Spiegel conducted interviews with three practitioners from different creative fields. These three conversations form the conclusion of the volume.

Joshua Astrachan has worked in the film industry for over thirty years. He produced Robert Altman's last three films and is currently a producer for Jim Jarmusch. In addition to these two quintessential independent directors, Astrachan has also worked on proper genre films such as the horror movie *IT FOLLOWS* (US 2014, Director: David Robert Mitchell). He has, in other words, vast experience with very different kinds of movies and is therefore ideally positioned to talk about how the fear of spoilers affects filmmaking. One observation that he shares in his interview is how difficult it is nowadays to shield a film from the public eye, allowing the filmmakers their privacy and not presenting their work until they decide it is ready.

The second interview is with film industry executive Noemi Ferrer Schwenk, who has worked in almost every part of the European film production value chain over the last 25 years; including the German film distributor Prokino Filmverleih, the European funding institution Eurimages, and Zentropa, the production company founded by Danish director Lars von Trier. One of the reasons that Ferrer Schwenk sees for the heightened sensitivity to spoilers is that audiences nowadays think of themselves more as consumers whose purchase of movie ticket or a subscription service entitles them to remain spoiler-free.

The final chapter is a conversation with British author Adam Roberts. Roberts is not only a prolific writer of science fiction and fantasy, but also a renowned science fiction scholar. In addition, he regularly reviews films and novels for major newspapers. Aside from his views on spoilers in connection with his own books, Roberts also talks about the critics' dilemma caused by the fact that some books cannot be properly reviewed without giving away key elements of the story. At the end of this wide-ranging conversation, Roberts develops a new and highly original psychoanalytic theory of spoilers.

Editor's Note

Many people have been involved in making this book a reality. First of all, I would like to thank Christine Lötscher and Natalie Borsy who organized the *#spoiltheconference* conference with me and were also deeply involved in the early conception of this volume. Diliara Fruehauf and Andrea-Luca Bossard supported us during the conference and helped make it the success it was.

The main reason why the conference was so productive and enjoyable was, of course, its participants. In addition to the contributors to this volume, my thanks go to Julia Gronhoff, Thomas Kristjansen, Michael Sennhauser, Anna Smith, Sebastian Smoliński, Wendy Wagner, and Eberhard Wolff, all of whom contributed to the conference in different ways. As a side event to the conference itself, we organized *Memento*, a festival of retelling films: an event where spoiling was for once compulsory. Monika Schärer hosted the event with aplomb, and Martin Weiss took care of the technical challenges. A special mention goes to Nurit Blatman, whose deft retelling of *ONCE UPON A TIME* (US 2011–2018, Creator: Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz) won her the first prize.

Many people supported the genesis of this book in various ways. I am especially indebted to Robert Blanchet for his skillful editing, and to Marcy Goldberg and Susie Trenka for their diligent proofreading. Thanks also to Jason Isaacs for wittering support, and to Denise Bucher, John Clute, Kim Dang, Josephine Diecke, Tereza Fischer, Sean Guynes, Adrian Martin, Regina Martin, Margrit Tröhler, Linda Waack, and, as always, Nadine Adler Spiegel.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the Privatdozenten-Stiftung of the University of Zurich and to the Swiss National Science Foundation for their generous financial support, without which this volume would not have been possible.

Making a book is often an unpredictable endeavor that, like a suspenseful movie, can surprise—or annoy—with unforeseen twists. The most unexpected, but ultimately very gratifying, turn that *The Fear of Knowing* took was becoming part of the publication series *Pop: Kultur | Medien | Ästhetik* edited by Daniel Illger and Christine Lötscher; without the latter the whole enterprise would never have gotten off the ground. Special thanks also to Marion Müller from Rombach Wissenschaft for shepherding me through all stages of the publication process.

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Filmography

IT FOLLOWS. Director: David Robert Mitchell. US 2014.

NO TIME TO DIE. Director: Cary Joji Fukunaga. UK/US 2021.

ONCE UPON A TIME. Creator: Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz. US 2011–2018.

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

SURVIVOR. Creator: Charlie Parsons. US 2000– .

TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG. Creator: Nicolas Winding Refn and Ed Brubaker. US 2019.

WANDAVISION (US 2021, Creator: Jac Schaeffer)

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Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Beacon Press, 2016.

