Part 1:
Film and Television

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To Tell or Not to Tell? Promoting Films with a Surprise Twist

In his book *Spoiler Alert!*, Richard Greene treats film trailers as texts that always contain spoilers because they inevitably reveal important narrative information to audiences. In his understanding, any significant narrative information becomes a potential trigger that can devalue the moviegoers' experience because, as he puts it, "we don't, generally speaking, want to know anything about what we can come to expect from a work other than very general things such as the type of work that it is (…) or who it features" (51). Yet, I would argue that instead of spoiling the experience for the audience, the function of trailers is precisely the opposite: to attract them to theaters and prime them for a specific film experience by presenting—but also strategically withholding—information pertaining to plot and characters.[1] A very distinct group, however, may consist of films involving a significant narrative twist or surprise revelation, where the unpredictable narration may be the main attraction, but at the same time, revealing this attraction beforehand as a major selling point could actually diminish the moviegoing experience by diluting the effect of the twist or surprise.

In this text, I discuss how films with a surprise plot twist have been marketed to audiences. Specifically, I am interested in whether promotional materials—and particularly the trailer, which has functioned as a privileged marketing tool for decades, at least since the days of the Hollywood studio system (Kernan 25–26)—have drawn attention to the presence of the final twist, however vaguely and indirectly. Indeed, two basic approaches seem to be available to producers and distributors: either concealing the presence of the plot twist, and thus presumably maximizing its effect when moviegoers interact with the primary text; or flaunting it in promotional materials in an attempt to differentiate the product and lure audiences into cinemas. It is the tension between these two opposing tendencies and, broadly, between the strategies of withholding and presenting information, between concealment

1 In other words, Greene's definition of a spoiler is too broad, since basically any narrative information may result in "badness" (ruining the experience) for the moviegoer. That sensitively and carefully dosing narrative information could enhance the moviegoing experience is not an option seriously explored by Greene. Nor does Greene treat trailers as specific marketing messages designed to influence the consumer behavior of potential cinemagoers.

and revelation, that will be central to my discussion of film trailers and other marketing paratexts.[2]

At the time of writing (October 2023), the *Internet Movie Database* lists over 4,500 feature films tagged with the keyword "surprise ending."[3] According to this data, most of the films are of relatively recent origin. While just over 300 films are recorded for the period between 1895 and 1970, over ten times that number, more than 3,300, have been made since 1990. If we filter the titles by decade, the results suggest that in each decade the number of these films was higher than in the previous one. Of course, the data in the database is not completely reliable, since the content of this section is mainly created by *IMDb*'s users without much fact-checking, but I would argue that it is sufficient to describe the general trend. It seems safe to assume that the narrative strategy of relying on the effect of surprise or shock by withholding key plot information and revealing it at the very end became widespread only a few decades ago.[4]

Due to the sheer number of films with a surprise twist, and because many trailers for older films are not readily available, I cannot provide an exhaustive analysis of the topic. Instead, I focus on a selection of films covering a period from the 1940s, when the first cycle of films with narrational twists appeared,

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2 Lisa Kernan, drawing on the theory of intertextuality introduced by Gérard Genette, defines paratexts as "those textual elements that emerge from and impart significance to a (literary) text but aren't considered integral to the text itself, such as all prefatory material, dust jacket blurbs, advertisements and reviews" (7). For more on trailers as paratexts, see also Gray, in particular pp. 49–52.

3 See "Sort by Popularity—Most Popular Feature Films Tagged with Keyword 'Surprise-Ending.'" *IMDb*, IMDb.com, www.imdb.com/search/keyword/?keywords=surprise-ending&ref_=kw_ref_yr&sort=moviemeter%2Casc&mode=detail&page=1&title_type=movie. Accessed 26 Oct. 2023.

4 David Bordwell claims that use of "the term 'plot twist,' apparently seldom used before the 1960s, jumped in frequency during the 1990s and soared in the new century" (*Perplexing Plots*, 376). This may be related to the growth of complex and puzzle narratives from the 1990s onwards and the advent of new technologies and post-theatrical markets (VCR, DVD, streaming) that make it easier for audiences to watch films repeatedly. A number of films with a twist—Fight Club (US 1999, Director: David Fincher), Memento (US 2000, Director: Christopher Nolan), Shutter Island (US 2010, Director: Martin Scorsese), and Arrival (US 2016, Director: Denis Villeneuve), to name a few—fit definitions of complex narratives while also benefiting from repeated viewings because they offer audiences a different type of experience, depending on whether they are familiar with the surprise revelation or not. The production trend is also analyzed by Seth Friedman in his book on "misdirection films" where he writes that "since the early 1990s, there has been a spate of Hollywood films that uncharacteristically inspire viewers to reinterpret them retrospectively" (1). For an overview of complex narratives and the causes of their rise in the mid-1990s, see Ramírez Berg; see also Simon Spiegel's chapter on this.

to the present day.[5] My intention is to describe general trends and strategies, and demonstrate how they have changed over time. Methodologically, I rely mainly on the analysis of the rhetorical strategies of trailers in Lisa Kernan's seminal publication *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers*.[6] In essence, I approach trailers as specific paratexts that reveal to us the ways in which their producers (or those who commissioned and circulated them) have thought about their target audiences. However, I also consider other promotional materials and publicity in the contemporary press, as well as reviews and other commentaries, to reveal whether and how surprise twists were discussed in trade publications and to what extent ideas about them circulated in public discourse.[7] This is essential because, as argued by Jonathan Gray, trailers, previews, ads and the like "introduce us to a text and its many proposed and supposed meanings," set up, begin, and frame many of the interactions that we have with texts and thus initiate "the process of creating textual meaning" (48).

In his book *Reinventing Hollywood*, David Bordwell has shown that the 1940s was a particularly exciting period in terms of innovative narrative schemes in US cinema. In addition to variously layered flashbacks, shifting

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5 In *Perplexing Plots* (376–77), David Bordwell distinguishes between story world twists and narrational twists: "A twist in the story world would consist of a discrete incident that violates our expectations. A pure case would be that of a sudden natural event, such as a tornado or an illness besetting a character. Many twists are one-off incidents occurring accidentally or having causes too remote or minor to be relevant (…). A more drastic twist occurs when the narration violates an informational norm and suppresses basic premises about the story world. A tornado or illness or an overheard conversation wouldn't violate any fundamental premises of the story world; such things just happen, especially in stories. In contrast, a narrational twist tends to make us reappraise the status of what we've been told earlier. The story world twist tends to be one-off, the narrational twist reveals a hidden pattern." In the following text, I am centrally concerned with what Bordwell terms narrational twists; on Bordwell's distinction see also Simon Spiegel's chapter.

6 Another important monograph about trailers is Keith M. Johnston's *Coming Soon: Film Trailers and the Selling of Hollywood Technology*. Like Kernan, Johnston also posits that the trailer is "a site of negotiation between the studio and the intended audience" and thus "a key text in understanding the creation and delineation of distinct sales messages and formats" (3). But his call for what he terms "unified analysis"—a close integration of analysis and film history—is less suited for my purposes than Kernan's rhetorical approach. I am interested in discerning one specific aspect of the trailer's intended message rather than performing a complex analysis of its form, which would include a discussion of how trailers "promote star images, highlight generic pleasure, position visual spectacle and display technology" (12). Johnston situates his approach against that of Kernan on pp. 4–5.

7 I used two major resources for trailers: *YouTube* and bonus materials on DVD and Blu-ray releases. For promotional materials such as posters and lobby cards, I used *IMDb,* the *Media History Digital Library* (mediahist.org), and additional content on DVD and Blu-ray discs.

viewpoints, and so on, one fresh narrative strategy was the final twist, which in several cases revealed a substantial part of the plot as the protagonist's dream. This technique is used, for example, in The Wizard of Oz (US 1939, Director: Victor Fleming), where the revelation is, however, motivated by genre (family fantasy), and where the dream and "real" worlds of the characters are clearly differentiated by color, architecture and geometry, costumes, makeup, etc. (though as Salman Rushdie notes, "Kansas (in the film) is not real, no more real than Oz," 19). A similar device appeared in a number of 1940s crime films, where the dream world and the diegetic "reality" are virtually indistinguishable, and where the effect relies precisely on the fact that a substantial part of the plot is revealed as a dream without the viewer being able to reasonably anticipate such an outcome. As Bordwell notes, in The Woman in the Window (US 1944, Director: Fritz Lang) and The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry (US 1945, Director: Robert Siodmak), the use of this technique was necessitated by Hollywood's self-censorship:

> Each film's source material (novel, play) propelled a mild-mannered protagonist into a sordid homicide. And each of the original plots comes to a grim conclusion—suicide in one, madness in the other. But neither option was permissible under the Production Code, so something else had to resolve the plot. The solution was the 'and then I woke up' device. (*Reinventing Hollywood* 301)

Regardless of the reasons, the result was a surprise twist that consequently became one of the selling points in the films' marketing campaigns.[8]

The trailer for Fritz Lang's The Woman in the Window[9] presents the film as a thrilling story of a man "who dared gamble a lifetime of honor for one exciting moment" spent with an attractive woman. Until the last moment,

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8 In my research, I have not come across an earlier film than The Woman in the Window that contained a final twist that either became a key motif in the promotional campaign or that was central to the film's reception by audiences. Ruth Vasey, in her book *The World According to Hollywood, 1918–1939*, gives the example of Paramount's Woman Trap (US 1936, Director: Harold Young), where it is revealed at the end that the Mexican villain is in fact an undercover agent. The author also quotes material from Paramount's advertising department staff who "had no doubt about how they wanted the audience to experience the movie," which led them to instruct the exhibitors "not to give the game away in their own advertising: 'Wherever the 'bad man' angle is stressed, we should suggest that the true character of this 'bad man' (the fact that he is a Mexican G-man) be kept hidden as it is in the picture. The mystery angle should be retained" (172). Unfortunately, the trailer for Woman Trap is unavailable, but some reviews in trade journals referred to the final twist ("picture has sufficient twists to satisfy any audience" and "the story [is] consolidated by a surprise climax."). See Review of Woman Trap, 223.

9 "The Woman in the Window (1944) - Trailer." *YouTube*, uploaded by Classic Movie Trailers, 14 Apr. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=apXEGjOgMdI.

audiences are given no clue that the film will offer something out of the ordinary, namely an unexpected revelation that professor Wanley's extramarital affair with the young woman, the killing of her lover in self-defense, and his own attempted suicide were merely concoctions of his dreaming mind after he had fallen asleep in his club. The trailer promises a variation on Double Indemnity (US 1944, Director: Billy Wilder), which was released to great acclaim a few months earlier. It is only in the concluding title cards that the trailer informs viewers that the film presents "a supreme adventure in suspense with the most startling surprise ending ever filmed!" We are not given a clue as to what that might be, but highlighting the final twist serves as an enticement: a way of differentiating the picture from the competition, e.g., other films in which a man's involvement with a beautiful woman has far-reaching consequences.

Other promotional materials and strategies also focused on the film's innovative plot and unpredictable ending. Exhibitors were urged to enforce a no seating policy during the last five minutes of the screening to intensify anticipation and stimulate box office sales (Review of The Woman in the Window, *Exhibitor* 15). For this tactic to be implemented, it was necessary to clearly announce the start of each screening in advance, which was not quite the standard at many movie theaters before then (Maltby 122). In fact, the assistance of exhibitors was seen as crucial to properly exploiting the film. As the reviewer for *Motion Picture Daily* noted, "if exhibitors somehow can manage the always difficult persuasion of having audience see The Woman in the Window from its beginning, greater satisfaction undoubtedly will result" (Kann 5).

The newly founded production company International Pictures and the distributor RKO also came up with a stunt where they previewed the film for

> the local press and Metropolitan Police Department. The picture was stopped five minutes before the final fade-out, and all previewers were asked to put on cards the name of the guilty party. […] Stunt received wide play in the press. (Review of The Woman in the Window, *Exhibitor* 15)

This ploy was then used on several versions of the poster, which claimed:

> EXPERTS BAFFLED! Five minutes before the close of this suspenseful picture we stopped the screening… and CHALLENGED THE LEADING MYSTERY EXPERTS to solve the story! Not one could give the answer to the Greatest Mystery Ever Filmed!" (**fig. 1**)

Other promo materials asked audience members not to "TELL ANYBODY THE SECRET OF THE AMAZING CLIMAX! It's too good, too exciting, too

unexpected to be spoiled for anybody who hasn't seen the picture. After your own great thrill you'll know what we mean."

Fig. 1: A poster for The Woman in the Window

Although the film received mostly praise from critics,[10] some commentators resented the surprise climax and the anticipation built by the campaign. One of them quipped that

> the solution was a trick—a trick of plot that was a trick before films were invented—and a solution that was impossible to solve by logical reasoning. Those theatre patrons, like myself, who went to see The Woman in the Window, expecting to be confronted with a mystery story extraordinary, discovered that they had been victims of a publicity stunt […]. ("Indignant Movie Fan" 91)

10 For examples, see Kann 5, and the review in *The Film Daily*.

The Woman in the Window—apparently without planning to do so—established an inventory of marketing strategies as well as a range of audience reactions that surfaced repeatedly in connection with many later films, as the following discussion will make clear. The film's promotional techniques form the first complex example I have found of what Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, in his book on M. Night Shyamalan, calls "anticipated surprise." Shyamalan's films such as The Sixth Sense (US 1999) and The Village (US 2004) are well known for their surprising endings, which often force viewers to reconsider the entire plot. As Weinstock argues,

> because one can't speak about Shyamalan's films without discussing their endings and one can't talk about the endings without discussing the de rigueur plot twists, viewers now ironically have been conditioned to anticipate precisely such an ironic reversal in any Shyamalan film, which to a certain extent delimits the effectiveness of the plot twist—if one oxymoronically is prepared to be surprised, then the surprise arguably is a lesser-order epistemological one (what will the surprise be?) rather than an ontological one (I was not expecting any surprise at all). (x–xi)

It seems that the creators of the advertising campaign for The Woman in the Window decided that this lesser-order type of surprise described by Weinstock was an acceptable price to pay for the opportunity to take advantage of the final twist in the promotional materials. Further examples show that they were not alone in adopting this strategy. When Universal's The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry was released less than a year after Lang's picture, exhibitors were prepared to use the same exploitation angles, such as "no person seated during the last five minutes" and "don't tell your friends the ending," which, according to *Showmen's Trade Review*, should have translated into "above-average business" (Review of The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry 11).[11]

Other films in which a substantial part of the plot turns out to be a dream followed in due course. As David Bordwell noted, the distributors of two 1946 film noirs, Strange Impersonation (US 1946, Director: Anthony Mann) and The Chase (US 1946, Director: Arthur Ripley) from Republic Pictures

11 For some, the endings of both films, where the murder turns out to have taken place only in a dream, posed serious moral questions. J. P. Mayer in his treatise *Sociology of Film* mused about the potentially negative social impact of such films: "Have you ever dreamt of murdering somebody? If not, go and see these films, they will give you—pleasant dreams. Our social life is—without such films—full of problems of the most serious and urgent nature, social and personal; why is it necessary that we create artificially nightmares and cruel psychological refinements? Where does this constant drugging lead us? It must naturally make us unfit to master our lives as they are" (279).

and United Artists, respectively, encouraged exhibitors to incorporate dream motifs in their marketing, while the critics of the time "were likewise unafraid of spoilers." For instance, the *New York Times* review for The Chase explicitly stated: "All the foregoing horrors (…) are only a nightmare of Cummings' ailing brain." Based on this, Bordwell concludes that "perhaps some audiences, primed by reviews, were actually waiting for the twist" ("In Pursuit").

The Chase was based on the 1944 novel *The Black Path of Fear* by Cornell Woolrich, whose plots, according to James Naremore, often "border on the fantastic or have an is-this-happening-or-am-I-crazy quality" (87–88), which lent itself particularly well to surprise twists.[12] The trailer for Black Angel (US 1946, Director: Roy William Nell),[13] based on Woolrich's 1943 novel of the same name, in which a flashback reveals that the protagonist Marty committed a murder he cannot remember, focuses almost solely on the tough-guy persona of Dan Duryea and makes no mention of the final twist. However, the surprise was featured prominently in the press. *Swing* magazine stated that "as usual, there's an 'O. Henry' twist at the end" ("Swingin' with the Stars" 66), referring to the famous short story writer whose style relied heavily on unexpected endings.[14] Fan magazine *Modern Screen* informed its readers that "visitors were kept off the set during certain sequences as the film has one of those surprise endings which are entirely hush-hush" (Wilson 22). This time the texts did not reveal the essence of the twist, but again the audiences were primed to expect something surprising.

By the mid-1950s, it seems that it was fairly common to refer to a twist ending in promotion. If anything, the strategy was intensified. In Les Diaboliques (Diabolique, FR 1955), a chilling thriller by French director Henri-Georges Clouzot, a character thought to be dead turns out to be alive after all. This discovery leads to the shocked heroine's death. The film itself included a final title card urging the audiences not to "be diabolical. Don't destroy your friends' interest in the film. Don't tell them what you saw. Thank you on

12 For more on Woolrich, see Bordwell, *Perplexing Plots*, pp. 272–81.

13 "Black Angel Official Trailer #1 - Peter Lorre Movie (1946) HD." *YouTube*, uploaded by Rotten Tomatoes Classic Trailers, 10 Jan. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8WLpIjbxOE.

14 Seth Friedman reminds us that the name of O. Henry "is now synonymous with the ironic, twist ending" as his short stories often contain "late revelations that encourage drastic retrospective reinterpretations of narrative information" (10). Friedman also references Shouhua Qi's PhD dissertation *The Shift of Emphasis and the Reception of Surprise Ending Stories (1900–1941)* which reveals that prior to cinema, "misdirection narrative appeared with its most prominence in print in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (10).

their behalf" (see the screenshot in Matthias Brütsch's chapter). The original trailer[15] elaborated on this technique. In a remarkable montage of the film's footage, the actors' faces are completely absent, and instead the mysterious and tense atmosphere is accentuated. A warning appears at the end stating that "latecomers will not be admitted," making it clear to moviegoers that only by arriving on time and consuming the story continuously can they enjoy its full effect. Clouzot's "shocker whodunit," as it was dubbed by some commentators, became one of the highest-grossing films in France of the 1950s, did respectable business in the US, and became an influence for several Hollywood filmmakers associated with the suspense film ("French Producers' Sharp Eye" 15).

In Hollywood, a renaissance of films with a twist emerged around the same period. This time screenwriters no longer relied exclusively on the dream motif, but came up with alternative shocking revelations and resolutions. In Beyond a Reasonable Doubt (US 1956), the last US film directed by Fritz Lang, novelist Tom Garrett participates in an elaborate hoax designed to expose the inadequacy of circumstantial evidence. With the help of a newspaper publisher, he gets himself convicted of murder, intending to have it revealed at the last minute that he did not commit the crime. One plot twist is that the publisher is killed in a car accident before Tom's name can be cleared. The second, even more shocking revelation, is that Tom is in fact guilty of the act for which he had been incarcerated. The trailer[16] preserves the mystery and presents the plot as the story of an innocent man facing the death penalty for a crime he did not commit. However, the trailer's closing prepares the audiences for something startling by urging them to "see it from the start for the full impact of one of the most surprising climaxes ever filmed." The newspaper ads also used the "super-surprise ending" as one of the selling points that will "have the whole town talking."[17]

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15 "Les Diaboliques (1955)—trailer." *YouTube*, uploaded by BFITrailers, 28 Sept. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6nYruzj__8.

16 "Beyond a Reasonable Doubt (1956) ORIGINAL TRAILER [HD 1080p]." *YouTube*, uploaded by HD Retro Trailers, 27 Aug. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6cb4sB2Nk4&ab_channel=HDRetroTrailers.

17 See the advertisement in *Motion Picture Exhibitor*. Most critics found the ending contrived and unrealistic. For example, the review in *Photoplay* blamed the filmmakers for "trying hard for a new plot twist. […] It's an ingenious idea, but as the plot clicks along its mechanical course, all semblance of reality is crushed out of the story's people." (Review of Beyond a Reasonable Doubt 39).

In The Bad Seed (US 1956, Director: Mervyn LeRoy), an adaptation of Maxwell Anderson's eponymous play, which in turn was based on a novel by William March, it turns out that an eight-year-old girl named Rhoda is a cold-blooded murderess. The Production Code necessitated a change in the story, with the girl receiving divine punishment for her sins in the form of a lightning strike at the end (Casper 143). Due to its controversial nature, the film was recommended for adults only, which arguably only increased its audience appeal.[18] The ingenious advertising campaign prepared by Warner Bros.[19] was centered around the trailer that included, among other things, the following information: 1) there will be a brief "catch your breath" intermission at each showing; 2) there will be no seating during the last fifteen minutes; 3) and audiences, given the sensational nature of the material, can talk all they want "about the man and woman" but they shouldn't "tell about the girl."[20] Overall, the trailer for The Bad Seed effectively marketed the film as a chilling and suspenseful thriller, leaving audiences intrigued and eager to uncover the truth behind Rhoda's character.

Billy Wilder's Witness for the Prosecution (US 1957) was also based on a double source: Agatha Christie's 1953 play of the same name, which was derived from her 1925 short story "Traitor's Hands." The play was extremely successful in London and on Broadway, where it ran for 645 performances. The film adaptation ends with a surprise twist, followed by a voice-over urging moviegoers to remain silent: "The management of this theatre suggests that for the greater entertainment of your friends who have not yet seen the picture, you will not divulge to anyone the secret of the ending of Witness for the Prosecution." The same discretion was expected from reviewers. Richard Gertner in *Motion Picture Daily* praised the succession of surprise twists, which "come trigger-fast, one right after the other, and have a terrific 'shock' effect. (…) Any reviewer who gives them away should be permanently expelled from the job" (Gertner 5).

The marketing campaign was built heavily on the fact that the film contained a shocking resolution. For example, the poster used the tagline "It's

18 See the data cited by Garth Jowett according to which audiences were more likely to see films with "censorship difficulties" (415).

19 Exhibitors were urged to "check the Warner fieldmen for the *exact* sequence of the advertising, and the exciting promotion technique." This shows that in cases like this, proper exploitation was seen as more important than usual. The film eventually grossed more than four times its budget of $1 million and made it into the top 20 highest grossing films of the year. See the advertisement in *Motion Picture Herald* and "109 Top Money Films of 1956."

20 See the advertisement in the *Motion Picture Herald*.

climaxed by the 10 breath-stopping minutes you ever lived! Don't reveal the ending—please!" The trailer[21] privileges the star and story discourse, while flagrantly accentuating the enigma surrounding Marlene Dietrich's character, who is described as "the woman of mystery, a fascinating question mark." This provides a clue as to where to look for the source of the film's duplicity. At the same time, the trailer contains several misleading pieces of information. For example, it presents Leonard, played by Tyrone Power, as a loving husband, and questions Christine's love for him, when the reality is just the opposite.

In fact, an important motif is that of pretense and deceit: Charles Laughton (as the barrister) turns to Christine in one of the trailer's scenes and asks "Were you lying then or are you lying now? Or are you in fact a chronic and habitual liar?" (In a way, this captures the essence of most trailers.) At first, the question of whether the jury finds defendant Leonard guilty seems to be presented as the major narrative puzzle. But in the last third of the trailer, Laughton turns directly to the camera and addresses the audience: "Guilty or not guilty? We answer that question at the end of most mystery stories. But in Witness for the Prosecution, it is only at the beginning of a series of climaxes that I defy you to guess." The main selling point, then, was the twist-laden plot, which, however, was so complex that it was hard to predict—or so the promotional materials claimed. The producers were encouraging positive word-of-mouth, but they also appealed to the discretion of cinema patrons: "You'll talk about this picture alright, but you'll never tell the ending to your friends because you won't want to spoil their excitement and their fun." The trailer ends with a notice: "To preserve the secret of the surprise ending no patrons will be seated during the final 10 minutes of Witness for the Prosecution." (**fig. 2**). As already shown, this strategy goes at least as far back as The Woman in the Window.

The campaign for Wilder's picture significantly, even excessively, foregrounded the suspenseful narrative with surprising twists that, along with the star-studded cast, was presented as the main attraction. But the trailer also distributed information in a clever way so that viewers had little chance to guess the twists and turns of the plot.

The publicity campaign for Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho (US 1960) is often presented as groundbreaking and highly innovative,[22] but it was in fact modelled on techniques already tried and tested in the past, including in Clouzot's

21 "Witness for the Prosecution (1957) ORIGINAL TRAILER [HD 1080p]." *YouTube*, uploaded by HD Retro Trailers, 2 Oct. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMlJfiA2u7Y.

22 For an example, see Cusano.

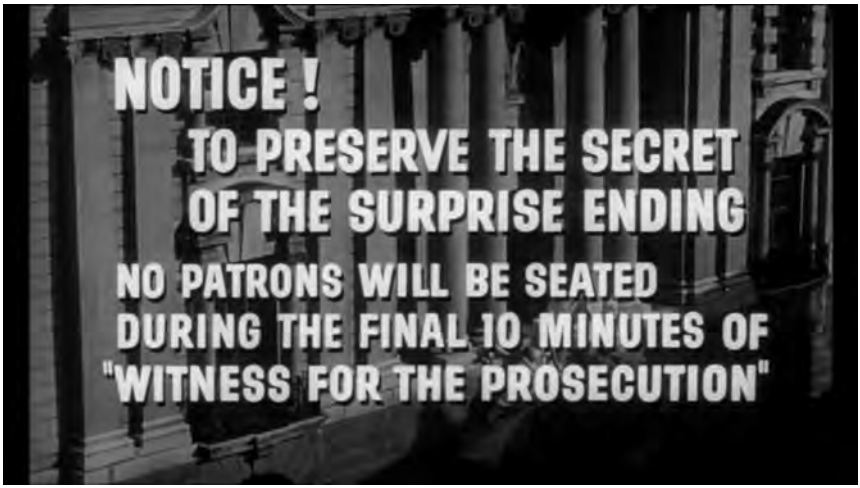

Fig. 2: The trailer for Witness for the Prosecution

Les Diaboliques, which is probably its most immediate predecessor.[23] For instance, Hitchcock and Paramount Pictures as the distributor adopted the practice of not seating audience members who came late, but they also significantly amplified the rhetoric accompanying this policy. Psycho's publicity materials proclaimed in an excessively threatening tone that "No one... BUT NO ONE... will be admitted to the theatre after the start of each performance of PSYCHO." This is partly due to the fact that Marion Crane's shocking murder comes not at the end, but about a third of the way through. At the same time, there was no attempt to hide that this was a clever marketing ploy: "a creation of Paramount Pictures' showmanship," as the pressbook put it.[24]

Other materials accentuated the unpredictable narrative, again translating it into clever marketing tools. Lobby cards contained pleas such as "If you can't keep a secret, please stay away from people after you see Psycho," and "After you see Psycho, don't give away the ending. It's the only one we have." (**fig. 3**). Overall, this made for a very consistent and cleverly designed campaign, relying on the cooperation of the exhibitors, who were provided with a sophisticated manual for the film's presentation.

23 See, for example, Barr 84 and Hawkins.

24 For an overview of Psycho's marketing strategies, see the video "PSYCHO—Newsreel Footage: The Release of Psycho." *YouTube*, uploaded by Sanchez del Campo, 28 Dec. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=C528RZBye4I.

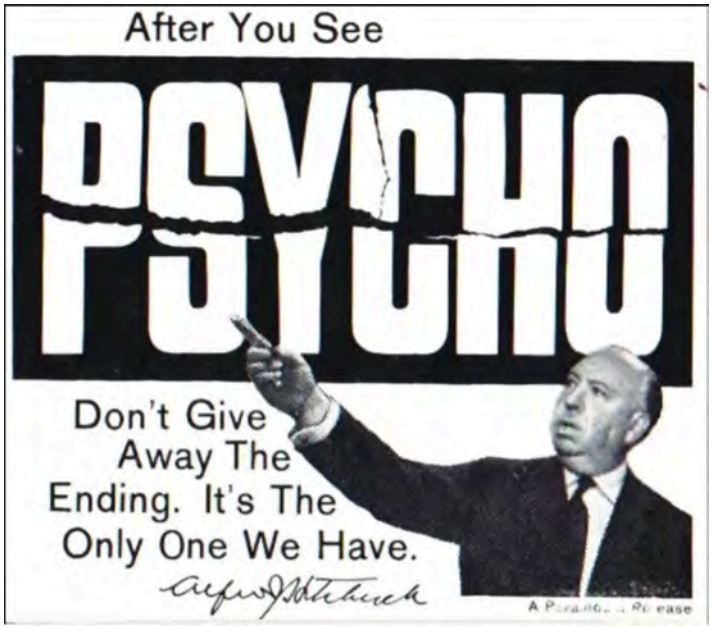

Fig. 3: An advertisement for Psycho

The trailer[25] became an important ingredient of the campaign. As was typical for a Hitchcock picture at the time, it was built around the celebrity persona of the director, famous for his films and his appearances in Alfred Hitchcock Presents (US 1955–1962, Creator: Alfred Hitchcock). The trailer uses the same cynical humor, and Hitchcock styles himself as a guide to Norman Bates's motel and neighboring house, teasing the prospective audience with deliberately vague and misleading remarks such as "in this house the most dire, horrible events took place," "it was at the top of these stairs that the second murder took place," and "of course the victim, or shall I say victims, hadn't any conception as to the type of people they will be confronted with in this house—especially the woman." The trailer ends with the shower curtain being pulled down and a shot of a woman screaming. Thanks in part to this campaign, Psycho became Hitchcock's most commercially successful film, with worldwide gross receipts reported at around $32 million—an achieve-

25 "Psycho (1960) Theatrical Trailer—Alfred Hitchcock Movie." *YouTube*, uploaded by Rotten Tomatoes Classic Trailers, 13 Nov. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTJQfFQ40lI.

ment that is even more impressive given the modest budget of under a million dollars.[26]

In the wake of Psycho, which, in turn, was heavily influenced by the campaigns for Witness for the Prosecution and Les Diaboliques, came other thrillers and horror films exploiting similar strategies. One of the original posters for Michael Powell's controversial Peeping Tom (UK 1960) asked moviegoers to "see it from the beginning" and not to disclose the ending to anyone: "you'll be blamed for nightmares!"[27] "The master of gimmicks" (Leeder 772), producer and director William Castle, who was renowned for innovative and highly exploitative promotional strategies, was apparently eager to jump on the bandwagon with Homicidal (US 1961, Director: William Castle), where it is revealed at the end that the murderous woman was actually born as a boy. Castle specifically prevented ticketholders from being seated in the theater fifteen minutes before the twist ending and offered a forty-five-second "fright break," a chance for too-terrified audience members to leave for the lobby and have their admission refunded at the "Coward's Corner." It is not clear from the contemporary press whether anyone took advantage of this opportunity, but Castle's ideas were always more about their publicity value than strict implementation. For one of the trailers,[28] Castle interviewed audience members who planned to see Homicidal, making sure they would not disclose the surprise ending to anyone. He then addressed the trailer's audience directly, saying that if they revealed the movie's ending, their friends would kill them. Then he smiled, pointing directly at the camera, and saying "…and if they don't, I will." Strait-Jacket (US 1964, Director: William Castle), referred to by its star Joan Crawford as Castle's first film without a gimmick,[29] nevertheless also employed the "see it from the beginning" policy ("in order to brace yourself for the surprise ending"). The trailer further exploited the shock value by including the following warning: "In fairness to our patrons the management wishes to warn you Strait-Jacket depicts axe murders."[30]

Films with a narrative twist implementing a variation of the "no seating policy" after the start of the show completed the process of what Joan

26 For figures, see "Psycho."
27 The poster can be viewed here: filmartgallery.com/products/peeping-tom-5988.
28 "Homicidal (1961) Trailer." *YouTube*, uploaded by alifeatthemovies, 9 Oct. 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWWi0vuv05s.
29 See "Joan Crawford."
30 "Strait-Jacket (1964) - Official Trailer." *YouTube*, uploaded by ScreamFactoryTV, 30 Jul. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9n8BnNL03GY&ab_channel=NOWSCARING.

Hawkins terms "the gradual disciplining of film audiences" (13). Psycho et al. urged moviegoers to come on time (in line with a pre-arranged and clearly announced schedule) and enjoy the full effect as it was designed by the filmmakers (in the case of Hitchcock, Clouzot and Castle, often promoted in highly auteurist terms). Hawkins claims that the "change in American spectators's viewing habits (…) took place gradually over about a twelve year period" between 1955 and 1967 (21), but as we have seen, it was in fact already initiated in the mid-1940s with films such as The Woman in the Window.

Variations on some of the techniques introduced in the Fritz Lang film and others released in its wake were still circulating twenty-five years later. The trailer for Planet of the Apes (US 1968, Director: Franklin J. Schaffner)[31] initially focuses on the fictional world where humans are evolutionarily inferior to apes who have enslaved them. That alone could have been enough of an original plot to entice audiences into the cinema. However, the trailer promises even more. Charlton Heston steps out of his role as astronaut George Taylor and, reminiscent of Charles Laughton in the trailer for Witness for the Prosecution, says directly to the audience: "It did not end here. It ended in an episode so unpredictable, so shocking, that it made the horror which preceded it seem calm and gentle as a summer's night." In this way, the trailer again activated the mode of anticipated surprise, priming audiences to expect the unexpected. Some of the posters and ads also promised a story where the "astronaut will wing through the centuries and find the answer he may find the most terrifying one of all."

In the following years, however, this forceful emphasis on the surprise twist in marketing materials, including trailers, waned. The direct approach visible in the preview for the thriller The Crying Game (UK/JP 1992, Director: Neil Jordan),[32] which uses title cards to announce that "nothing is what it seems to be" and tells exhibitors at the end to "play it at your own risk," is rather an exception. Instead, most trailers contain only implicit hints about the twist, or they completely mask it. The trailers for films as diverse as Don't Look Now (UK/IT 1973, Director: Nicolas Roeg), Soylent Green (US 1973, Director: Richard Fleischer), Chinatown (US 1974, Director: Roman Polanski), Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back (US 1980, Director: Irvin

31 "Planet of The Apes 1968 Trailer | Charlton Heston." *YouTube*, uploaded by Trailer Chan, 2 June 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdqjNkHA9IA.

32 "The Crying Game (1992) Official Trailer - Forest Whitaker Thriller Movie HD." *YouTube*, uploaded by Rotten Tomatoes Classic Trailers, 14 May 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6N426QCQ-Y&ab_channel=RottenTomatoesClassicTrailers.

Kershner), Friday the 13th (US 1980, Director: Sean S. Cunningham), Angel Heart (US 1987, Director: Alan Parker), The Usual Suspects (US 1995, Director: Bryan Singer), Arlington Road (US 1999, Director: Mark Pellington), and A Beautiful Mind (US 2001, Director: Ron Howard) usually emphasize the rhetoric of the genre (horror film for Friday the 13th, sci-fi for Star Wars, bio-pic for A Beautiful Mind, crime for Chinatown and so on) and the rhetoric of the story, often suggesting a narrative enigma (what is the secret in Soylent Green?, who is Keyser Soze? in The Usual Suspects), but de-emphasizing a central plot twist that might shock viewers and make them reconsider the whole story. Thus, from the 1970s onwards, it seems that the surprise twist was no longer used as an attraction in itself or as a primary means of product differentiation in promotion and publicity.

A good example is the promo campaign for The Shawshank Redemption (US 1994, Director: Frank Darabont), based on the novella by Stephen King. The film's famous "wow moment" occurs when we learn that Andy Dufresne, sentenced to two consecutive life sentences, has been patiently digging a tunnel to freedom for years. The trailer[33] gives viewers quite a few clues suggesting that Andy will indeed manage to escape from the high-security prison. For one thing, there is the underlying motif of hope, "something inside they can't touch," as Andy proclaims. Secondly, we see not only scenes from the prison, but also a shot of the sea, Andy's friend Red in a meadow, a shot of Andy with a rock trying to break through a sewer, and finally his triumphant gesture with arms outstretched against the pouring rain. Also significant is the inclusion of a shot showing a prison guard and his surprised reaction ("Oh my holy God") to some shocking revelation, which the trailer glosses over. A similar strategy was used in the posters depicting Andy with his arms outstretched and his shirt torn as raindrops fall on him, accompanied by the slogan "Fear can hold you prisoner, hope can set you free." But nowhere is the twist accentuated as a central component of the viewing experience.

Given the many clues—and the fact that prison breaks are a standard element of prison films—the strong reaction to the film's climax might have come as a surprise.[34] But perhaps the effect was due not to Andy's escape

33 "The Shawshank Redemption (1994) Official Trailer #1 - Morgan Freeman Movie HD." *YouTube*, uploaded by Rotten Tomatoes Classic Trailers, 16 Mar. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmzuHjWmXOc&t=7s.

34 The film features prominently in various rankings and polls on the best movie ending ever (it recently topped a chart compiled by *Movieweb.com*), and the ending is often mentioned in moviegoers' reviews and comments. See Altman; "Vykoupení."

despite bad prospects, but rather to how he accomplishes it. Presumably, audiences hope all along that he will manage to break out of his oppressive environment, but because of the restricted and uncommunicative narration, they have no idea as to how he will do it.

At the turn of the millennium, twist endings became a trademark of director M. Night Shyamalan's authorial brand.[35] The Sixth Sense was widely discussed in this context and became a model for numerous films in its wake, including The Others (ES/US/FR 2001, Director: Alejandro Amenábar) and Identity (US 2003, Director: James Mangold).[36] However, the trailer for The Sixth Sense[37] contains no hint of a twist. Rather, it is dominated by genre rhetoric, presenting the film as a ghost tale about a boy who, famously, sees "dead people." In the trailer, the character of Malcolm played by Bruce Willis —revealed at the end of the film as one of these ghosts—seems to be merely the boy's mentor and advisor. Along with other marketing tools, the trailer packaged the film as an atmospheric genre piece, whereas the shock came solely from the movie itself.[38]

The ending was, however, widely discussed by critics in the press and audiences on the internet, which was still in its infancy at the time. Roger Ebert, for example, wrote:

> I have to admit I was blind-sided by the ending. The solution to many of the film's puzzlements is right there in plain view, and the movie hasn't cheated, but the very boldness of the storytelling carried me right past the crucial hints and right through to the end of the film, where everything takes on an intriguing new dimension. (Ebert)

With the rise of the internet—and the proliferation of online film criticism as well as discussion forums and chat rooms—a new phenomenon sprung up in connection with films containing a twist ending: spoiler panic or spoiler anxiety. Whereas previously, information was carefully doled out and monitored by the studios, and spoiler warnings were part of marketing strategies and audience manipulation, information has spread in a less controlled and mediated way since the late 1990s. At the same time, however, the aura of protectiveness and conspicuous efforts to prevent spoilers from leaking may have

35 For more on Shyamalan's directorial brand, see Friedman, pp. 159–81.

36 See also the detailed analysis of The Sixth Sense in Matthias Brütsch's chapter.

37 "The Sixth Sense (1999) Trailer #1 | Movieclips Classic Trailers." *YouTube*, uploaded by Rotten Tomatoes Classic Trailers, 9 Aug. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-ZP95NF_Wk.

38 However, as discussed by Friedman (33), several taglines used in promotion (such as "Discover the secret of The Sixth Sense" and "Can you keep a secret?") foregrounded "its memorable changeover."

their own marketing potential. In a way, then, filmmakers can—or rather must—reckon with an unrestricted dissemination of plot information, and leaks about twists (whether unintended or carefully orchestrated) have replaced the earlier more explicit advertising campaigns.

Shyamalan became almost synonymous with surprise twists, with each successive film expected to feature a variation on the technique. The trailer for Unbreakable (US 2000)[39] is more explicitly conceived as a puzzle, as audiences may wonder what is behind Bruce Willis miraculously surviving a tragic train accident. Based on the trailer, we can assume that the explanation will not be easily predictable. Similarly, the trailer for The Village[40] flagrantly points out an enigma: what lies beyond the tight-knit community inhabiting the village? In the last shot, Joaquin Phoenix's character steps into the forest and the unknown. To see the rest of the story, audiences had to buy a ticket.[41] Because twist endings have become part of the director's brand, trailers for his films have often been constructed around a mystery or narrative puzzle that is expected to have an unanticipated resolution.[42] Even so, their practices are a far cry from the directness and explicitness of the trailers from the 1950s and 1960s discussed above.

Rather than pointing out the presence of the twist directly, trailers in recent decades have opted for a strategy of teasing audiences with subtle hints and oblique allusions. In perhaps one of the most original trailers ever,[43] the entire plot (including end titles) of Brian De Palma's thriller Femme Fatale (FR/DE/US 2002) is condensed into two minutes using fast-forward, dwelling slightly longer on the most dramatic and sexy scenes. The makers did not need to worry about ruining the audiences' experience of the actual film because at this speed, moviegoers were not expected to grasp major plot turns, not even the extended twist ending, which—in an echo of The Woman in the Window—reveals that much of the plot was a dream. The trailer ends

39 "Unbreakable (2000) Trailer #1 | Movieclips Classic Trailers." *YouTube*, uploaded by Rotten Tomatoes Classic Trailers, 7 Jan. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNeCB2ALNoA.

40 "The Village (2004) Trailer #1 | Movieclips Classic Trailers." *YouTube*, uploaded by Rotten Tomatoes Classic Trailers, 2 Oct. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTGyhwvdY6k&ab_channel=RottenTomatoesClassicTrailers.

41 The trailer for The Village is also discussed in Gray, pp. 70–71.

42 As pointed out by Seth Friedman (179–81), after the commercial and critical failures of Lady in the Water (US 2006) and The Happening (US 2008), Shyamalan's directorial brand was significantly transformed to embrace blockbuster-style productions that do not depend on twist endings. His reputation has not fully recovered since.

43 "Femme Fatale - Trailer (2002)." *YouTube*, uploaded by WorleyClarence, 13 Apr. 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGttEqkwGBo.

with the words "You've just watched BRIAN DE PALMA'S new film. / You didn't get it? / Try again..." (**fig. 4a–c**). In a way then, the trailer has shown all but revealed nothing.

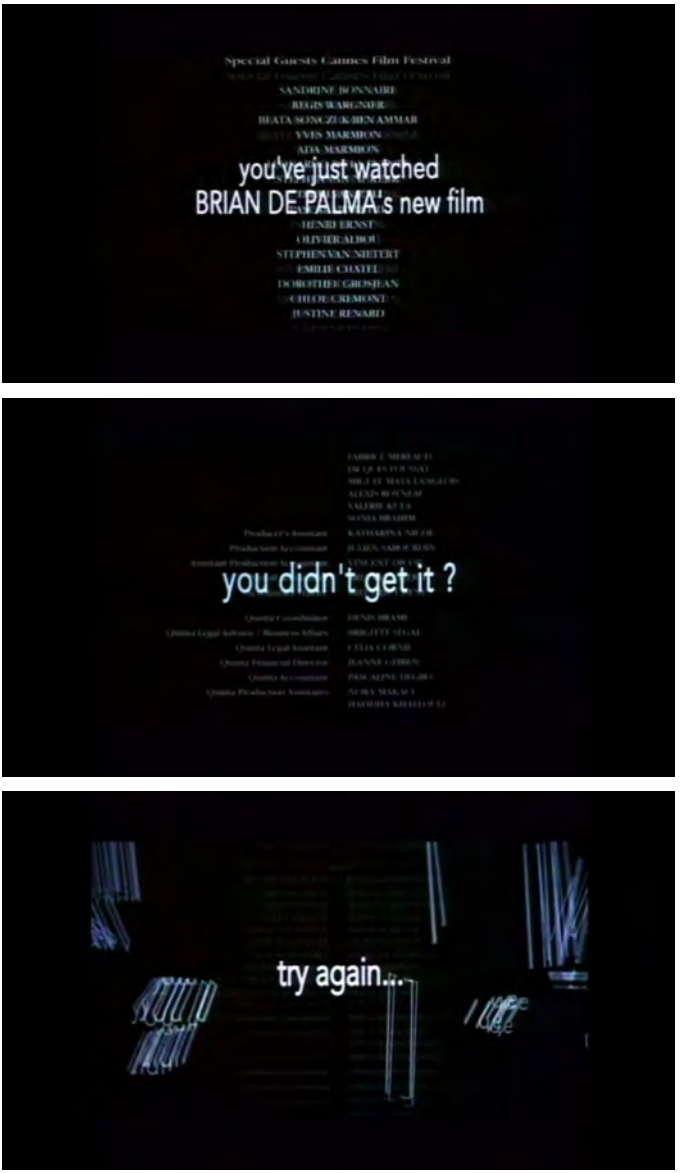

Fig. 4a–c: The trailer for Femme Fatale

Another instance of audience teasing is the campaign for Christopher Nolan's The Prestige (UK/US 2006). As in Witness for the Prosecution, the twist here is based on the identity of the characters. In Wilder's film, two characters turn out to be one; here it is the other way around. The magician, played by Christian Bale, hides his twin brother (or rather, each lives only half a life) to conceal the essence of his much-admired trick. The trailer[44] accentuates the motif of magic and thus the promise of a surprise that is part of every effective magic performance. Cutter (played by Michael Caine) introduces the three phases of a magic trick in the film, and portions of this monologue (carefully edited) are used in the trailer:

> Every great magic trick consists of three acts. The first act is called "The Pledge." The magician shows you something ordinary: But of course… it probably isn't. The second act is called "The Turn." The magician makes this ordinary something do something extraordinary. Now you're looking for the secret… but you won't find it. That's why there's a third act called "The Prestige." This is the part with twists and turns, with lives hanging in the balance. And you see something shocking you've never seen before.

The montage culminates during the last words with increasingly dramatic scenes.

The trailer suggests a similarity between magic and cinema: "a real magician tries to invent something new that other magicians are gonna scratch their heads over." Likewise, the illusiveness of films—and trailers, one might add—lies in the medium's power to deceive, to mislead. Alongside the words "magic" and "trick," the word "secret" appears repeatedly. The trailer—along with posters featuring the tagline "Are you watching closely?"—thus primes viewers for the likelihood of a plot twist, while remaining rather vague about what exactly it might be.[45]

While the trailers for Femme Fatale and The Prestige are moderately self-conscious about the films' plot construction, preparing audiences for the possibility of a surprise twist—but also remaining appropriately vague about it—other trailers instead opt for hiding the twist completely. The trailer for Once Upon a Time in Hollywood (US 2019, Director: Quentin Taranti-

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44 "The Prestige (2006) Trailer #1 | Movieclips Classic Trailers." *YouTube*, uploaded by Rotten Tomatoes Classic Trailers, 11 Oct. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLtaA9fFNXU&t=14s.

45 Similar to the trailer, the film itself is full of this kind of "metanarrative commentary" that "signal[s] its status as a misdirection film and announce[s] an intellectual competition with the audience." Friedman, pp. 186–187.

no),[46] for instance, introduces Quentin Tarantino's ninth film by emphasizing the stars and the world inhabited by fictional actor Rick Dalton, his stunt double Cliff, real-life actress and director Roman Polanski's wife, Sharon Tate, and the Charles Manson gang, while remaining unclear about how these elements will connect in the story. Initially, it presents the film as a buddy comedy, but by revealing Robbie's character as Sharon Tate and introducing Charles Manson, the trailer takes on a more sinister flavor. The latter never quite dominates though, due to upbeat music and nostalgic evocation of late 1960s Hollywood, promising plenty of intertextual references as implied by Tarantino's directorial brand. The trailer evokes the historical period, mixing historical characters with fictional ones, but there is no suggestion of a bold rewriting of history, which forms the last part of the film. Tarantino's counterfactual approach to history, unheralded by marketing materials, is the main cause why audiences had little reason to expect a surprise twist.

Based on my research, a few preliminary conclusions can be drawn. Starting in the mid-1940s, a major question about films containing a narrative twist became part of marketing and publicity decisions: should producers and distributors reveal the existence of the plot twist, thereby using it as a powerful marketing tool, but perhaps also reducing its effect? Or should they hide it and thus risk less commercial pull—while the twist might still be leaked by critics?

Films from the 1940s to the 1960s usually not only acknowledged the presence of the twist, but flagrantly used it in promotion, often employing what Kernan terms the "circus mode" (18) whereby the rhetoric of hyperbole is used to make exceedingly bold claims ("the most startling surprise ending ever filmed" and numerous variations). Lang's The Woman in the Window introduced an inventory of techniques—the practice of not seating theater patrons during the climax, the announcement of the twist in the trailer and on posters, a request for secrecy on behalf of those who had not yet seen the film—that subsequently became industry standards. Examples such as Les Diaboliques, Witness for the Prosecution, and Psycho show that, if anything, their use increased and intensified in the following years. Exhibitors were encouraged to cooperate and translate these elaborate campaigns into practice. Moreover, there were frequent mentions of twists in the trade press. Audiences were thus frequently, even excessively, primed to anticipate surprise. This corroborates Elizabeth Cowie's claim that major Hollywood

46 "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood—Official Trailer (HD)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Sony Pictures Entertainment, 21 May 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELeMaP8EPAA.

studios sought to obtain "multiple guarantees [...] through other elements of the package, notably stars and high production values, but also sensational and spectacular elements" (182).

However, in the following years, the strategies changed. Kernan (120–123) argues that trailers were subject to frequent experimentation from the 1960s onwards, due to both a loosening of institutional control—resulting from the breakdown of the Hollywood studio system—and uncertainty about how to address an increasingly diverse and selective audience. Trailers and other promotional paratexts produced in the post-studio era usually contained only vague promises of something surprising. The level of explicitness and directness in addressing the audience decreased significantly. While some trailers contained at least hints of a narrative surprise, others emphasized genre aspects and tended to detract from shocking resolutions. For instance, in his analysis of Fight Club, Friedman shows that the film's "theatrical marketing campaign told spectators little about the film itself," the taglines were "intentionally ambiguous" and the twist was cloaked entirely (40).[47] All in all, the days of the twist as the focus of a controlled promotional campaign were long gone.

However, this shift has been offset since the 1990s by the rise of the internet, which provides a much less controlled (and controllable) environment. This has led to the phenomenon of spoiler panic. Whereas previously, distributors carefully dosed the amount and exact nature of information that was in their interest to disseminate, this is practically impossible in the virtual environment of the internet and social networks. Even though non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and detailed review guidelines have become standard practice for big-budget film and television productions, producers still have to reckon with the potential of information about twists leaking into public discourse: if not from reviews, then through discussion forums, social networks, chat applications and so on. This at least partly explains why trailers opt for obliquely teasing audiences without being overly specific about the twists and turns of the plot, as this information tends to flow through less formal channels.

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47 It was not until the film was released on a DVD that the promotional materials alluded to the duplicitous narrative (Friedman 40).

Filmography

Alfred Hitchcock Presents. Creator: Alfred Hitchcock. US 1955–1962.
Angel Heart. Director: Alan Parker. US 1987.
Arlington Road. Director: Mark Pellington. US 1999.
Arrival. Director: Denis Villeneuve. US 2016.
The Bad Seed. Director: Mervyn LeRoy. US 1956.
A Beautiful Mind. Director: Ron Howard. US 2001.
Beyond a Reasonable Doubt. Director: Fritz Lang. US 1956.
Black Angel. Director: Roy William Nell. US 1946.
The Chase. Director: Arthur Ripley. US 1946.
Chinatown. Director: Roman Polanski. US 1974.
The Crying Game. Director: Neil Jordan. UK/JP 1992.
Les Diaboliques (Diabolique). Director: Henri-Georges Clouzot. FR 1955.
Don't Look Now. Director: Nicolas Roeg. UK/IT 1973.
Double Indemnity. Director: Billy Wilder. US 1944.
Femme Fatale. Director: Brian De Palma. FR/DE/US 2002.
Fight Club. Director: David Fincher. US 1999.
Friday the 13th. Director: Sean S. Cunningham. US 1980.
The Happening. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 2008.
Homicidal. Director: William Castle. US 1961.
Identity. Director: James Mangold. US 2003.
Lady in the Water. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 2006.
Memento. Director: Christopher Nolan. US 2000.
Once Upon a Time in Hollywood. Director: Quentin Tarantino. US 2019.
The Others. Director: Alejandro Amenábar. ES/US/FR 2001.
Peeping Tom. Director: Michael Powell. UK 1960.
Planet of the Apes. Director: Franklin J. Schaffner. US 1968.
The Prestige. Director: Christopher Nolan. UK/US 2006.
Psycho. Director: Alfred Hitchcock. US 1960.
The Sixth Sense. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 1999.
The Shawshank Redemption. Director: Frank Darabont. US 1994.
Shutter Island. Director: Martin Scorsese. US 2010.
Soylent Green. Director: Richard Fleischer. US 1973.
Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back. Director: Irvin Kershner. US 1980.
Strait-Jacket. Director: William Castle. US 1964.
The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry. Director: Robert Siodmak. US 1945.
Strange Impersonation. Director: Anthony Mann. US 1946.
Unbreakable. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 2000.
The Usual Suspects. Director: Bryan Singer. US 1995.

The Village. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 2004.

Witness for the Prosecution. Director: Billy Wilder. US 1957.

The Wizard of Oz. Director: Victor Fleming. US 1939.

The Woman in the Window. Director: Fritz Lang. US 1944.

Woman Trap. Director: Harold Young. US 1936.

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