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On the Origins of Spoilers

Spoilers seem to be lurking everywhere these days. Or rather, not spoilers themselves, but spoilerphobia: the fear of encountering or producing a spoiler. Whether in newspaper reviews, social media posts or coffee break conversations, over family dinners or after-work drinks, few things are as universally condemned nowadays as revealing too much about the latest Netflix series or superhero movie. Spoilers are ostracized, and no one seems surprised that film critics are routinely required to sign non-disclosure agreements in order to attend press screenings of blockbuster movies. Few people seem to be aware that things have not always been this way. And even fewer seem to think it is worth doing research on this subject, although it has significant implications for how we deal with narrative media.

One of the few scholarly monographs on spoilers—if not the only one—is Richard Greene's *Spoiler Alert!*. Greene argues that, while the concept of the spoiler is relatively new, spoilers have always existed. In other words, it has always been possible to divulge the outcome of a story in advance, even if there was no specific term for this activity. But although the act of spoiling is probably as old as storytelling itself, doing so has only become an issue in the last two or three decades. Spoiling, or rather the fear of a story being spoiled, is a fairly recent phenomenon.

In the following pages, I will summarize the history of the modern spoiler, and then go over some basic concepts relevant to understanding how spoilers work. My goal is not to provide a complete history or theory of the spoiler, but rather to lay some foundations on which the other essays in this volume will build. As I will argue, spoilers are ultimately a social phenomenon and therefore, to understand them better, we need to look at how their function has developed over time.

But first, a few words about the meaning of the term "spoiler." There is no uniform understanding, especially across different fan groups, of what should be considered a spoiler.[1] The most common usage refers to "advance information of what will happen in the plot" (Gray 20). While this definition sounds simple enough, upon closer inspection it is not very precise. What

1 On spoiler definitions, see Perks and McElrath-Hart.

exactly does the "advance information" refer to? Are we talking only about the ending—presumably a twist ending—as Benjamin K. Johnson and Judith E. Rosenbaum do, when they define spoilers as "premature and undesired information about how a narrative's arc will conclude" (1069)? While this focus on plot denouement is common, it is not shared by everyone, and for good reason. One could argue that, in many films, the ending is a given, and the really interesting, unexpected things happen on the way to that ending, which is why Dengfeng Yan and Alex S. L. Tsang distinguish between *process* and *outcome* spoilers—a distinction to which I will return later.

Others opt for an even broader understanding, deeming any information about what happens in a film (or novel) a spoiler, including extra-textual information such as genre labels. And some fans do not restrict the notion of spoilers to revealing plot elements, but also include almost any information about an upcoming movie, such as set photos, information about cameos, or even the soundtrack. There is also a lot of debate about whether advance information communicated through trailers, press releases, and interviews with the filmmakers should be considered spoilers, or whether these can be regarded as unproblematic since they are officially sanctioned as part of the film's marketing campaign.[2]

What we see here is that spoilers are a subject of heated debate, and that almost everything about them—even their very definition—is up for discussion. For the purposes of this chapter, I will mostly follow Gray's approach, which is the most widely used. Thus, my focus is primarily on important aspects of the plot, although I am well aware that there is no objective way of assessing the importance of any individual plot element. I will mostly focus on film, since there is much evidence that this medium plays a key role in the emergence of today's spoiler culture.

Spoiler History

While a proper history of the spoiler has yet to be written, we can explain with some confidence *when* and, much more importantly, *why* the fear of spoilers as we know it today originated. As explained above, although the activity of spoiling is very old, "spoiling" as a commonly understood concept related to

2 For the role of trailers in the context of the spoiler discussion, see Milan Hain's chapter.

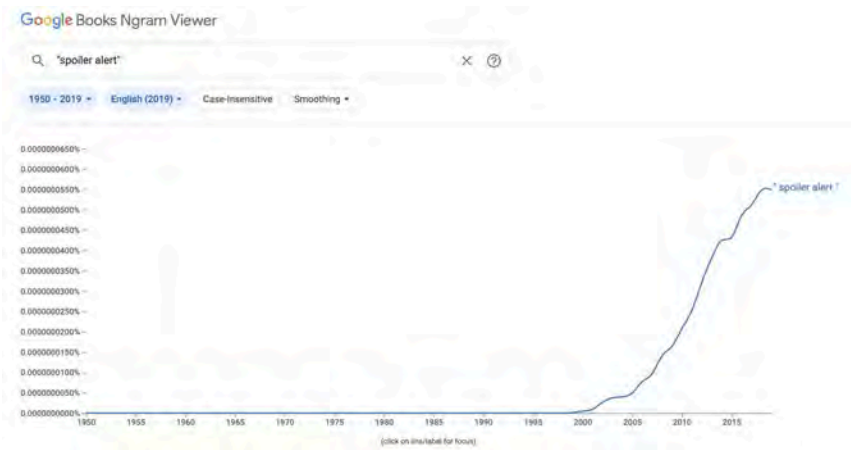

Fig. 1: The occurrence of the term "spoiler alert" in Google NGram

fiction is fairly new.[3] A useful tool to broadly trace the emergence of this new concept is Google's Ngram Viewer, which can chart the use of a phrase across a dataset of 5.2 million scanned books. Searching for the term "spoiler" is inconclusive, though, as it has many different meanings across contexts—for instance, in the fields of theology and aerodynamics, among others—that have nothing do with the reception of fiction. Searching for "spoiler alert," in contrast, gives a clear result: Until the year 2000, the line is flat, right along the bottom at 0%. With the turn of the millennium, things suddenly change, and we see a distinct spike that, with some intermittent small dips, continues steadily until 2019, the last searchable year in the dataset (**fig. 1**). While this method only offers a rough approximation, the overall trajectory of the curve leaves no doubt: before the 2000s, no one was writing about spoiler alerts—at

3 Limiting the discussion to fiction is certainly debatable, as there also are nonfictional forms prone to spoilers. We may not necessarily think of documentaries when we talk about spoilers, but for genres like True Crime and, more generally, any kind of investigative documentary, they are certainly a potential issue. At the same time, talking about "narrative content" also seems inappropriate since not everything that tells a story can be properly spoiled. Again, the case of the documentary is relevant here: most documentaries are narrative and tell a story. But we would not normally think of a documentary about WW2, an artist's portrait, or a nature documentary as something that can be spoiled. Hybrid forms such as the reality TV show Survivor (US 2000– , Creator: Charlie Parsons), which Andrew Bumstead discusses in his chapter, as well as sporting events are also susceptible to spoilers. And finally, as the chapters by Andreas Rascher and Tobias Unterhuber in this volume attest, spoilers can be equally relevant in the context of games.

least not in books—but then things change rather dramatically. Clearly, something happened around that time: but what?

Before we look more closely at what happened, more fine-grained historical research is needed in order to complement Google Ngram's broad statistical approach. The oldest known use of the term "spoiler" in its modern sense appears in the April 1971 issue of *National Lampoon*, an American humor magazine in the vein of *Mad* magazine which had its heyday in the 1970s. The satirical bent is apparent in the article in question, which is simply titled "Spoilers" (**fig. 2**). The supposed purpose of the piece by *National Lampoon* co-founder and chief editor Douglas C. Kenney, is described as follows:

> In more tranquil times, Americans loved nothing better than curling up with a blood-chilling whodunit or trooping off to the cinema to feast on spine-tingling thrillers, weird science fiction tales and hair-raising war adventure.
> Nowadays, however, with the country a seething caldron of racial, political and moral conflict, the average American has more excitement in his daily life than he can healthily handle [...]
> For this reason, on the following pages the *National Lampoon* presents, as a public service, a selection of "spoilers" guaranteed to reduce the risk of unsettling and possibly dangerous suspense. (33)

Over the next three and a half pages, Kenney presents a total of 89 spoilers, divided into various rubrics such as "Alfred Hitchcock," "Thrillers," "Agatha Christie," "Campus Standards," or "Classics."

Fig. 2: The first use of the term "spoiler" in *National Lampoon*

Kenney's article is obviously little more than a drawn-out joke. Nevertheless, two points are of interest for our purposes. The first is Kenney's alleged aim: his spoilers are explicitly meant *to reduce suspense*, to relieve tension. Even more relevant is the fact that Kenney's spoilers vary wildly in kind. They include what we might call classic examples, some of which will be covered later in this volume, for instance, Psycho (US 1960, Director: Alfred Hitchcock)—"The movie's multiple murders are committed by Anthony Perkins disguised as his long-dead mother" (33)—Les Diaboliques (Diabolique, FR 1955, Director: Henri-Georges Clouzot)—"Vera Clouzot's husband isn't really murdered. He and Simone Signoret staged it as part of a plot to drive his wife insane" (34)—Citizen Kane (US 1941, Director: Orson Welles)—"'Rosebud' was the name of Kane's childhood sled" (35)—or Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926)—"The book's narrator, Dr. Sheppard" (35).

Then there are examples that basically consist of short quips, like the "Science Fiction Monsters" section, which simply lists the means by which the respective monster is ultimately destroyed; for example, "Flamethrowers" (Them! [US 1954, Director: Gordon Douglas]), "Freezing cold" (The Blob [US 1958, Director: Irvin Yeaworth]), or "3,000 volts" (The Thing from Another World [US 1951, Director: Christian Nyby]). One could debate whether knowing that the giant ants in Them! are killed with flamethrowers really constitutes a spoiler. Definitely not a spoiler is the line given for Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866)*:* "Raskolnikov did it" (36). It is not a revelation that the protagonist of Dostoevsky's novel kills the old woman and her half-sister, since this happens at the very beginning and is what sets the story in motion.

The *National Lampoon* article is generally considered the first use of the term in its current sense,[4] although it is not clear whether this early coinage had any lasting impact. We only know of a few scattered instances of "spoiler" being used in the same way in subsequent years. While they may have been influenced by Kenney's article, there is not enough evidence to construct a convincing lineage.

Things only begin to pick up in the late 1970s, and here, two areas are of particular interest: the use of both the terms "spoiler" and "spoiler warning" or "spoiler alert" is well documented in both science fiction magazines and

4 It is also the earliest example listed in the *OED*, which added this specific meaning of spoiler in 2007. As Richter notes, technically, the first occurrence of "spoiler" is the March 1971 issue of *National Lampoon*, which contains a preview of the spoiler article to appear the following month (542).

online discussions. Again, it is not clear whether these instances are related to the term's first appearance in *National Lampoon,* but all evidence suggests that the term was more widely used in science fiction magazines at first and later spread to the digital world.

According to a *Tech Times* article by Ben McCool, spoiler warnings were quite common in reviews in science fiction magazines in the late 1970s. McCool specifically mentions *Destinies,* an anthology series published by science fiction writer Jim Baen between 1978 and 1981. While I was not able to examine all *Destinies* issues, I can verify that the term "spoiler" does appear in review columns by Spider Robinson as early as the first issue of *Destinies*, published in November/December 1978. The article features a very prominent insertion: "WARNING! I AM ABOUT TO COMMIT A SPOILER! IF YOU DON'T *WANT* TO KNOW HOW THE BOOK ENDS, SKIP THE REST OF THIS PARAGRAPH!" (Robinson 145). What stands out is that Robinson (or Baen as the editor) does not deem it necessary to explain what a spoiler is: a strong indication that the term was already in use by that point.

Before he started writing for *Destinies*, Robinson was responsible for the Reviews section of *Galaxy* magazine, also under the editorship of Baen. In these reviews—starting with the August 1978 issue—Robinson uses the verb "to spoil" in its modern form several times, but not yet the nouns "spoiler" or "spoiler alert." I am not suggesting that Robinson single-handedly popularized these terms; additional research in other magazines and especially fanzines would surely turn up more early examples.[5] But Robinson's writing clearly indicates when spoiler terminology became common in science fiction fandom.[6]

Soon afterwards, spoiler warnings arrived in the digital world. In one of the earliest electronic mailing lists, the SF-LOVERS mailing list established around 1975, the phrase "spoiler warning" came into frequent use around 1980. Two years later, it spread to Usenet, which was publicly established in 1980. A message from June 8, 1982 in the newsgroup net.movies

5 Researching fanzines, which were often short-lived and published in small print runs, is notoriously difficult. A search of the *Fanfiction Fanzine Collection* at the *Internet Archive* (archive.org/details/fanzines-collection) yielded a review of Robert A. Heinlein's *The Number of the Beast* (1980) in the February 1980 issue of the *Science Fiction Review* as the earliest occurrence of "spoiler" in this specific corpus (Pinto 11). According to a note in the review, it is a reprint of an article that was originally published in another fanzine called *Feetnotes,* about which I found no information. Its author, Peter Pinto, was apparently an Englishman living in England, which is relevant insofar as it suggests that the term "spoiler" had already crossed the Atlantic by that time.

6 On the relationship between science fiction fandoms and spoilers, see also the interview with Adam Roberts.

discussing Spock's death in Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan (US 1982, Director: Nicholas Meyer) prominently features the all capital phrase "[SPOILER ALERT]."[7]

It is probably no coincidence that these early examples occurred in a mailing list dedicated to science fiction and in a Usenet post about a science fiction film, since fans of the genre were much more likely to already be familiar with the term by then. The fact that "spoiler alert" is used without explanation again suggests that the poster expected the audience to understand the meaning of the phrase.

In the following years, spoiler terminology proliferated across all of Usenet. It became so popular that, by the mid-1990s, most newsreader programs would interpret the so-called form feed character (^L or Ctrl+L), an ASCII control character for page breaks, as a "spoiler character," which would cause the reader to automatically hide the following text; a function to insert a "spoiler character" became a standard feature. Today Usenet is a niche network, and funnily enough, this function, which was considered essential in the late 1990s, is absent from current Usenet readers.[8]

Although spoiler warnings were fairly common in Usenet newsgroups in the mid-1990s, they were not yet a widespread phenomenon. Mainstream media did not yet seem to know about the perils of spoilers. We must not forget that private internet access was far from common at that time, and only a small minority of users, most probably at technical universities, was active in Usenet. And once net access became ubiquitous, most people did not engage in Usenet discussions but rather surfed the web.

Most of the research on spoilers, outside of empirical research, has been conducted in the context of fan studies, and at least up until the early 2010s, research in this field conceptualized spoilers as an issue that almost exclusively concerns (digital) fandoms.[9] As late as 2012, Matt Hills speaks of spoilers

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7 Several authors claim that this was the first Usenet message mentioning spoilers, but as Tobias Unterhuber notes in his chapter, there are even earlier examples in games-related newsgroups.

8 Another method of marking spoilers that was well-established in the mid-1990s is the so-called "spoiler space" of multiple blank lines added before the potential spoiler. Some newsgroup FAQs contained detailed rules on how many lines a spoiler space must contain (for the reference to this practice, my thanks go to my student Jean-Luc Rossé). Yet another way of hiding spoilers used already in the early 1980s is ROT13 encoding, a simple letter substitution cipher that replaces a letter with the 13th letter after it in the Latin alphabet. Again, encoding and decoding ROT13 was eventually considered a basic feature of a newsreader; see also Unterhuber's chapter on this.

9 See, among others, Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 25–58; Gray; Booth 103–25; Hills. Today, spoiling is generally considered a bad thing, but this negative connotation was not always

as "a kind of fan cultural production" (111). This focus is understandable insofar as fandoms were indeed instrumental in establishing the idea of the spoiler, though when Hill was writing this, the concept had already begun to spread more widely. An instructive example is a *New York Times* article titled "The End of the Surprise Ending" by Emily Nussbaum, published May 9, 2004. In it, Nussbaum discusses what she sees as a new trend: the fact that entertainment websites such as *Ain't It Cool News* or *E! Online* are publishing spoilers of popular television shows; much to the dismay of Joss Whedon, J. J. Abrams, and other prominent showrunners. Here, "spoiler" is in quotation marks the first time it is mentioned; clearly, the average reader was not yet expected to know the specific meaning of the term. This changed quickly: less than a year later, other *New York Times* articles mention spoilers without quotes.

In summary, "spoiler" in its contemporary meaning was coined in the 1970s, proliferated in online communities over the two following decades, and finally went mainstream in the mid-2000s. The interesting question, of course, is *why?* What happened between 1980 and 2005 that ultimately changed the way we talk about fictional content?

Complex Narratives

The rise of spoilerphobia coincides with significant changes in both the kind of content produced by the film industry and how that content is distributed and viewed. For decades, the film industry followed the same model: films were shown in theaters, and then, years later, on television. Or people would watch TV shows at a specific time. This arrangement controlled what, when, and how a film or a show could be seen, and it led to a situation where everyone would essentially watch in lockstep. You saw a film either when it was in the theater or when it was on television.

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firmly established. For example, in *Convergence Culture*, published in 2006, Henry Jenkins discusses fans of the TV show Survivor who engage in spoiling. This is one of the earliest academic discussions of spoiling, and it is interesting to note that for Jenkins, the term "spoiler" refers primarily to the fans trying to gather information about the show's winner and less to the piece of information they reveal. For Jenkins, spoiling is also not about diminishing someone's experience, but rather a game played with the creators of the show, "an adversarial process—a contest between the fans and the producers, one group trying to get their hands on the knowledge the other is trying to protect" (43). Jenkins describes this (shared) activity mainly in positive terms, as "fun" and a "compelling practice" that is "empowering" (29); see also Andrew Bumstead's chapter on Survivor.

This began to change in the mid-1990s. With the advent of DVD, pay-per-view channels, time-shifting technologies such as digital video recorders, and eventually streaming services, viewers gained increasing control over when to watch the film or series of their choice. "The traditional passive role of viewers-as-spectators, which asked audiences to submit themselves to the time-bound conditions and conventions of the cinematic screening, has been upgraded with more (inter-)active potential" (Kiss and Willemsen 13). Suddenly, it was not only possible to watch a movie multiple times, but also to rewind a scene or even freeze it and scrutinize individual frames. At the same time, the emerging world of the internet offered entirely new ways of finding kindred spirits with whom one could discuss the latest movie or episode of a series in great detail.

The mode of reception changed drastically, and filmmakers reacted to the fact that they could now count on what Jason Mittell calls "forensic fandom," that is, an active audience that would "embrace a detective mentality, seeking out clues, charting patterns and assembling evidence into narrative hypotheses and theories" ("Lost" 128–29; see also Mittell, *Complex TV*). This altered mode of perception is why the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a surge of movies that deviated from the straightforward classical plot such as The Usual Suspects (US 1995, Director: Bryan Singer), Lola rennt (Run Lola Run, DE 1998, Director: Tom Tykwer), The Sixth Sense (US 1999, Director: M. Night Shyamalan), Fight Club (US 1999, Director: David Fincher), Memento (US 2000, Director: Christopher Nolan), Mulholland Drive (US/FR 2001, Director: David Lynch), Donnie Darko (US 2001, Director: Richard Kelly), Vanilla Sky (US 2001, Director: Cameron Crowe), or A Beautiful Mind (US 2001, Director: Ron Howard).[10]

As this small selection of films shows, it was not one specific feature that changed. While The Sixth Sense and Fight Club have comparable surprise endings, they are very different from Lola rennt, Mulholland Drive, or Donnie Darko. What unites all these examples is that they diverge from the

10 Mittell coined the term "forensic fandom" in the context of the TV show Lost (US 2004–2010, Creator: Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof); series are another area where we can trace the rise of complex narratives. One important forerunner in this development is Twin Peaks (US 1990–1991, Creator: Mark Frost and David Lynch). Not only does Twin Peaks contain several elements that are considered typical of complex narratives, but it is also an early example of a show that attracted an active online community. The Usenet group *alt.tv.twinpeaks* "became one of the most active and prolific on the Usenet system, averaging one hundred or more entries per day during the peak months of the series' initial American broadcast" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 79).

narrative patterns that dominated Hollywood for decades. The films play with basic structural elements and, above all, they are increasingly designed for an audience that would actively engage with them.

There has been extensive research on this development in film studies, and scholars have come up with a plethora of terms to describe these new forms, including *mind-game films*, *puzzle films, twist films, mind-tricking narratives, misdirection film, brainfuck films, mindfuck films*, *modular narrative,* and *complex narratives.*[11] These terms—and several others—are not entirely interchangeable; these scholars are not all drawing on the same corpus of films, instead often emphasizing specific aspects. But what they all have in common is that they signal a departure from established forms.[12]

For our purposes, it is not necessary to look at the various approaches in detail. What is important here is that many of these *complex narratives,* as I will call them, feature some unexpected variation on the classical model. It may be that the main character is—unbeknownst to them as well as the audience—either dead or imaginary, that everything happens in a kind of time loop or is repeated several times, or that the movie tells its story in a non-chronological way. The films are, in the words of Thomas Elsaesser, "playing games [...] with the audience's (and the characters') perception of reality" (14). There is always some deviation from well-established narrative forms, some kind of twist or trick—there is, in other words, always *something that can be spoiled.*[13]

This change is crucial. When we look at classical Hollywood movies, there is not usually much to spoil, at least not in terms of the outcome. It is not really a surprise that a Western ends with John Wayne shooting the bad guy, that the lovers will eventually be united in a romantic comedy, and that, at

11 See, among others, Elsaesser; Buckland; Cameron; Kiss and Willemsen; Mittell, *Complex TV*; Klecker; Friedman.

12 There is a long, but ultimately not very productive discussion of whether complex narratives represent a radical departure from the established norms of classical Hollywood or rather, as David Bordwell prominently argues, merely "legible variants on well-entrenched strategies for presenting time, space, goal achievement, causal connection, and the like" (*The Way,* 75).

13 While this change in narrative patterns has doubtlessly taken place, there is a danger of overgeneralizing this development. Steven Johnson, for example, argues in *Everything Bad is Good for You* that mass culture in general has become more complex and more cognitively demanding over the past three or four decades. Whether this is a general trend that can be observed beyond a comparatively small group of works is at least debatable. Once you look beyond prestige productions, for example at Hallmark Channel movies or daytime TV series, there are still a lot of unimaginative run-of-the-mill productions without any narrative complexity.

least until very recently, James Bond will not die. With the complex narratives that emerged in the late 1990s, we can no longer count on any of these former certainties.

But there were not just many more films prone to being spoiled, there was also a substantial change in the way people talked about movies. As early as 2001, several years before the first social media platforms appeared, researchers described what they called "incidental news exposure" caused by online news portals. In a traditional understanding of media, news consumption is the result of a conscious choice. I read a newspaper article or watch a TV show because I want to. This has changed with the rise of online media. "The Web may be unique in its ability to provide a typical user with an array of information choices that extend far beyond what he or she intentionally seeks" (Tewksbury et al. 534). This development has, of course, intensified massively since the early days of the Web. Social networks such as *Facebook, X*, or *TikTok* encourage their users to post short, snappy content. Scrolling through *Facebook* or *X*, we are constantly exposed to "incidental news." Brevity is the name of the game: Because a tweet is so short, we can absorb it at a glance. It is virtually impossible to not read a tweet.[14]

These developments reinforce each other when it comes to spoilers. Not only is there more content that can potentially be spoiled; because everyone watches at a different pace, I can also never be sure if the person I am talking to has already seen the latest season of the hit show I just binge-watched yesterday. In pre-digital days, talking about last night's TV show during a coffee break was not yet a risky proposition. You could be pretty sure that anyone interested in the show had seen it as well. And if someone did not want to hear what you had to say, they could just walk away. None of that is possible anymore. There is no synchronized schedule, so everyone has a different level of knowledge. And with social media, it is not only possible to reach a worldwide audience instantly, it has also become almost impossible to avoid incidental exposure.

For about a quarter of a century, various fan communities developed a spoiler discourse, but this discourse remained a niche phenomenon. There was simply no need for it in a world where most films were predictable anyway, and where everyone was on the same schedule. A fundamental change in the media system had to happen for this discourse to become more widespread. The developments of the 1990s affected all levels of media

14 Of course, there are also long *X* threads and extensive *Facebook* posts, but they're not the norm.

production and consumption. It was a change in the kind of media that is produced, in the way it is distributed and received, and also in how, when and where we talk about it. Once this shift occurred, the mainstream was quick to adopt the nomenclature and protocols that had already been established in online communities.

It is no coincidence, then, that the fear of spoilers spread at the exact moment it did. It was caused by very specific developments that affected almost every aspect of media production, distribution, and reception. Looking back in history, though, this is not the first time such a change has occurred. As James Green shows in his chapter, a similar shift took place in the mid-19th century. Although the term "spoiler" was not in use back then, the publication of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* in book form in 1860 marked a comparable change in content, distribution, and reception, and was accompanied by discussions very similar to those of today.

Genres

As mentioned at the beginning, Richard Greene argues that for as long as there have been movies, novels, or plays, it has also been possible to give away the ending in advance:

> We can easily imagine, for example, some citizen of Athens in 429 B.C.E. leaving the Theater of Dionysus on the opening night of Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* shouting "OMG, Oedipus slept with his own mother!" (or something along those lines). This can't be verified, but it would be shocking if things like this didn't happen (there have been jerks for considerably longer than there have been things to spoil). (Greene 4–5)

Greene gives this example half-jokingly, but it is worth looking at it more closely, because he has it completely wrong. While our knowledge of the actual practice of Attic theater is sketchy, we can state with some certainty that audiences watching Sophocles's play for the first time would *not* have been surprised by what Greene deems a spoiler. After all, *Oedipus Rex* was not an original story invented by Sophocles but rather his adaptation of a much older myth. And if we look at how the play tells Oedipus's backstory, i.e., how he ends up killing his father and marrying his mother, it is clear that this is in no way meant to surprise the audience; the only one who is not aware of these events is Oedipus himself (cp. Storm 5–6).

In the play, Oedipus sets out to avenge a murder that, according to an oracle, is the cause of a plague ravaging the city of Thebes. He vows to find the murderer, whatever the consequences, completely unaware that he himself is

the culprit. Even to an audience member who may not know anything about Oedipus's early life, the play makes it clear that this promise is a bad idea, and that it will have terrible consequences for Oedipus himself. *Oedipus Rex* is, after all, a tragedy. What's more, in his *Poetics,* Aristotle declares it the paradigmatic example of a tragedy: an assessment that would influence the way the genre would be conceived for millennia to come.

Greene is a philosopher by training and not a scholar of literature, which might explain why he seems oblivious to the fact that genres are defined, among other things, by the expectations they raise. In the case of the tragedy, it is, in the words of Aristotle, about "a man [...] who falls into adversity not through vice or depravity but because he errs in some way" (32). Telling someone that things will not turn out well for the protagonist of *Oedipus Rex* is about as much of a spoiler as giving away that a Western will feature men on horses wearing Stetson hats.[15]

We know that there is no happy ending for the protagonist of a tragedy; for centuries, writers did not think it was a problem to say so early on. A striking example is the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet.* It takes Shakespeare merely six lines to firmly establish that this story will not end well, and that we will witness "a pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life." Baz Luhrman, in his 1996 adaptation Romeo + Juliet (US/MX/AU/CA 1996, Director: Baz Luhrman), drives this point home forcefully: the line is first read by a news anchor, then repeated by a voice-over that, as we later learn, belongs to the priest, and at the same time displayed on the screen in huge letters (**fig. 3a–b**).

We can speculate as to why we enjoy *Romeo and Juliet*, a play that is so much a part of Western culture that even people who have never seen or read it know that "there never was a story of more woe," as the film's (and the play's) final line has it. Perhaps it is our irrational wish that, at least this one time, against all likelihood, the lovers will miraculously make it. Whatever the reason, the fact that our prior knowledge in no way diminishes our enjoyment indicates that not all genres are equally spoilable.[16]

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15 Dana Steglich also discusses the example of *Oedipus Rex* in her chapter, but has a rather different take on it.

16 Although I've discussed two plays, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Oedipus Rex,* as examples, it is interesting to note that the realm of theater seems to be largely unaffected by spoiler discourse. There is the famous example of Agatha Christie's murder mystery *The Mousetrap* (1952), where the audience is asked not to reveal the twist ending, but plays such as Christie's in many ways represent a bygone era of theater. In contemporary productions, spoiler warnings are virtually unheard of. The main reason for this is probably that modern

Fig. 3a–b: Baz Luhrman's Romeo + Juliet

What is true for the classic tragedy holds equally for a much younger and more cheerful genre, the romantic comedy. Whether Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in His Girl Friday (US 1940, Director: Howard Hawks), Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn in Roman Holiday (US 1954, Director: William Wyler), or Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan in When Harry Met Sally (US 1989, Director: Rob Reiner), one thing we know about all these films—and many, many more—is that the two leads will end up together. There are exceptions to this rule, like My Best Friend's Wedding (US 1997, Director: P. J. Hogan), where Julia Roberts's character has to content herself with dancing with her gay best friend—who is at least played by a dashing Rupert Everett—but these rare cases are just that: rarities.

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theater is much more concerned with the experience of presence than with telling a story; see also the interview with Joshua Astrachan.

As in tragedy, the outcome of a romantic comedy is never seriously in doubt. Ultimately, this is true for most of popular cinema. Be it the classic Western, a typical whodunit, or basically all action movies: no matter how big the obstacles, the hero will ultimately prevail. We can even go further: a classic genre like the Western is so highly conventionalized that we can correctly predict its plot to an astonishing degree.

A little test I do with my students is to show them the beginning of Shane (US 1953, Director: George Stevens), where the eponymous protagonist enters the frame from the horizon and meets the inhabitants of a farm (**fig. 4a–d**). I then ask them who this character is, where he comes from, and what will happen to him. I specifically use the example of Shane for this exercise, because it is a condensation of all Western tropes—which is why Will Wright, in his influential study *Sixguns and Society*, calls it "the classic of the classic Westerns" (34). Still, it is always amazing to see that my students, very few of whom have ever seen a Western made before the 1970s, never fail to predict the movie's plot with remarkable accuracy. They know exactly what to expect from a classic Western, even though most of them have never seen one.

Fig. 4a–d: The opening of Shane

The constant reuse of established tropes, and the fact that we know in advance much of what is going to happen: these elements are constitutive of genre cinema and of popular cinema in general. In fact, one might argue that even plot twists have by now become an expected element of popular films and—especially—series.

Plot twists are an important element of complex narratives, but what is rarely discussed in this context is that there are very different kinds of twists. In *Twist Endings,* Willem Strank develops a detailed typology of endings; for our purposes, only his distinction between *plot twists* and *twist endings* is relevant. Plot twists can occur at any given point in the plot; when they happen at the end, Strank calls them *final plot twists.* But not every final plot twist is a twist ending. For Strank, the latter represents a very specific kind of twist that retroactively changes the premises of the fictional universe, the paradigmatic examples being the endings of The Sixth Sense and Fight Club—where we realize, respectively, that the Bruce Willis character was dead all along and that Tyler Durden is merely an emanation of the main character's split personality (30–51).

Strank emphasizes that twist endings fundamentally change our understanding of a film, that they force us to reassess everything we have seen. For Cornelia Klecker, this is also an essential quality of what she calls "*mind-tricking narratives*." They "hold back some vital information until the very end of the film. The instant this piece of information is finally revealed, the audience will experience the ultimate epiphany" (12). Seth Friedman looks at a similar corpus of—in his terminology–*misdirection films,* which "provoke spectators to understand narrative information initially in one manner and subsequently comprehend it in drastically new ways" (1–2). Thus, all three authors are interested in films in which a twist ending leads to the subsequent realization that the world of the film follows different rules than we initially thought.

Much of the discussion about complex narratives focuses on twist endings, even though this type only makes up a fraction of complex narratives. Regular plot twists are much more common, such as the unexpected deaths of major characters in Game of Thrones (US 2011–2019, Creator: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss), or the moment when the supposedly senile old man in the first season of Squid Game (SK 2021– , Creator: Hwang Dong-hyuk) turns out to be the inventor of the titular deadly contest. A thriller series like Damages (US 2007–2012, Creator: Todd A. Kessler, Glenn Kessler and Daniel Zelman) or Big Little Lies (US 2017–2019, Creator: David E. Kelley), on the other hand, does offer a final plot twist at the end of each season, but not a twist ending. In these cases, the final twist only resolves the mystery of the central

murder, but does not alter the rules of the world and therefore does not force us to re-evaluate everything that has happened before.[17]

Although Klecker's study is titled *Spoiler Alert!,* she only touches briefly on spoilers when discussing audience expectations regarding twists. According to her, "the mere knowledge that there will be a twist—without actually knowing what exactly it is—greatly tampers with the enjoyment of a film since it completely changes the viewer's expectations" (132). I agree with Klecker that the very expectation of a twist can alter the viewing experience, and that the twist ending of a film like The Sixth Sense works best for an unsuspecting viewer.[18] But I would argue that in today's media landscape, this expectation is essentially a given.

According to Friedman, misdirection films peaked in 2010 and have since fizzled out (231). It is indeed true that recent series as diverse as Game of Thrones, Big Little Lies, or Severance (US 2022– , Creator: Dan Erickson), while undoubtedly twist-heavy, rarely attempt to provide an "ultimate epiphany" in the sense of Klecker. The fact that they employ major plot twists does not come as a surprise, but can rather be seen as a convention in its own right. It may well be that the era of misdirection or mind-tricking films is essentially over, because today's audiences are simply too much aware of potential twists.[19]

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17 Bordwell proposes a distinction between "story world twists and narrational ones" (*Perplexing Plots* 376). Whereas the former type involves "a discrete incident that violates our expectations" (376), the latter "violates an informational norm and suppresses basic premises about the story world" (377). I find this nomenclature rather counterintuitive, since story world twists, despite their name, are not about the setup of the story world. Nor do I agree with Bordwell's assessment that Psycho, which he cites as an example, has two narrational twists, the death of Marion Crane and the revelation of the killer's true identity. I would argue that these are rather different kinds of twists. The former is a surprise, but it does not retroactively change what has happened before. The realization that Norman Bates is the murderer, on the other hand, makes us see the events of the film in a different light. Strank does not consider the ending of Psycho to be a twist ending though, since it only affects one aspect of the plot about which we have been misled, but does not fundamentally change our understanding of the fictional world as does the ending of Fight Club (50–51). Despite this difference, he nonetheless holds that Psycho's two big twists are very different in nature.

18 See Matthias Brütsch's chapter for a detailed analysis of The Sixth Sense.

19 Strank, whose study was published three years before Friedman's, and whose most recent examples are from 2012, sees no decline in twist endings. Whichever assessment is correct, it is certainly true that twist endings, which are often considered central to complex narratives, are much less common in series. There is at least one obvious reason for this: when a series runs over several seasons, a twist ending that turns everything that has happened before upside down is almost impossible (if only because most series do not have all seasons planned out in advance).

At this point, we could say that no matter whether we are talking about classical Hollywood or contemporary productions, we are always dealing with highly conventionalized forms of storytelling that ultimately proceed along expected lines. But if that is true, it obviously begs the question of how or to what extent a piece of Hollywood entertainment can be spoiled effectively. The common assumption behind the fear of spoilers—which is already the basis of Kenney's *National Lampoon* article, albeit for ostensibly opposite purposes—is that too much advance knowledge is detrimental to the enjoyment of a movie because it destroys suspense. To better understand what is at stake when we talk about spoilers, we must now delve into the theory of suspense.

Suspense

The academic discussion of suspense is wide-ranging. In fact, what is commonly called suspense encompasses a range of phenomena on multiple levels, and various theoretical traditions deal with it differently. In what follows, I make no attempt to cover this field exhaustively. Rather, my goal is to look at certain aspects of suspense that are particularly pertinent with regard to spoilers.[20]

One possible distinction—which is similar to the one between outcome and process spoilers—is between *what* and *how* (or *why)* suspense (Pütz 15). In other words: whether the suspense concerns the outcome of a sequence of events—*what will happen*—or whether the focus is on *how* the events will unfold. In the case of the romantic comedy, the emphasis is almost entirely on the *how.* That the lovers will end up together is never in jeopardy; what interests us is how they will get there. Or to be more precise, the true attraction of a romantic comedy lies in the obstacles that serve to delay the happy union.

Tragedy works differently in this respect. As in a romantic comedy, we know how things will turn out, but the effect this knowledge has on our experience is starkly different. Central to the mood of a tragedy is what is commonly known as *dramatic irony*, a narrative setup in which the audience knows something vital to the character's endeavor of which that character is unaware.[21]

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20 For overviews, see Lehmann 45–100; Vorderer et al.; see also the chapter by Albrecht Koschorke.

21 William Storm describes dramatic irony as the "dissonance between what the audience may see and the limitations of the character's own self-awareness" (5–6). It is no coincidence

A specific form of dramatic irony that has been much discussed in film studies is Hitchcockian suspense. In the oft-cited example of the bomb under the table that Alfred Hitchcock invokes in his conversation with François Truffaut, we have an advantage over the characters: we have seen the terrorist plant it, while the characters are completely oblivious to the imminent danger. This advantage—knowing about the threat that the protagonists are blissfully unaware of—is what makes the scene suspenseful (Truffaut 73).

Since this kind of suspense depends on the audience's additional knowledge, Hitchcock recommends "that whenever possible the public must be informed" (73). This seems to contradict the notion that too much information destroys suspense. Contrary to the common conception, it is not uncertainty but rather our knowledge advantage that creates suspense in this setup. Indeed, one could even argue that Hitchcockian suspense cannot be spoiled at all, since our knowledge of something the characters are unaware is precisely what creates suspense.

A possible objection to this argument could be that, although we know about the bomb, we do not know whether it will go off. As long as this uncertainty persists and the fate of the characters is in doubt, we still experience suspense. As compelling as this argument may sound, I still think it is wrong. In fact, I would argue that most forms of suspense do not at all depend on an overall story arc, at least not in the sense that knowing the end of that arc would greatly affect our experience of suspense. Here I will discuss two very different examples to illustrate my point.

The Belgian-French film A PERDRE LA RAISON (OUR CHILDREN, BE/FR 2012, Director: Joachim Lafosse) tells the story of Murielle, a woman who suffers from depression because she feels increasingly trapped in her oppressive marriage. Finally, in an act of desperation and helplessness, she kills her four children and then tries to commit suicide. The film covers the whole of Murielle's marriage; we first see her and her boyfriend Mounir, how she happily agrees to marry him, and then how she becomes more and more entrapped by her husband and his fatherly friend André. Director Joachim Lafosse tells this story, which is loosely based on a real-life incident, in chronological order, except for a prologue that anticipates the tragic ending. The film opens with Murielle in the hospital, pale and at the end of her tether, begging someone who is only visible as a dark outline in the foreground that "they" should be buried in Morocco and that "their father" should be

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that he specifically refers to *Oedipus Rex*, since he also considers Sophocles's play a prime example of this mode.

informed (**fig. 5a**). This is followed by a scene in which a visibly shaken Mounir embraces André. The prologue ends with a shot of an airplane at an airport; four small coffins are being loaded into the cargo hold on a conveyor belt (**fig. 5b**).

Fig. 5a–b: The prologue of A PERDRE LA RAISON

This opening firmly establishes that all of Murielle's children will die while she will survive. Thus, we know right from the beginning that the film will end terribly, and the only question is how we will get to that terrible ending. This is the classic tragic setup, and as in a tragedy, knowing the ending is not a problem but, on the contrary, intensifies the emotional effect.[22]

Much of the film's impact stems from our awareness of the looming catastrophe. Just before the end, we see Murielle in a shopping mall. Compared to earlier scenes, she seems quite composed. She carries two boxes of cake, picks

22 Lafosse himself has likened his film to "a Greek tragedy" (in Dawson 59).

up a DVD, and then turns to another shelf where she chooses a large kitchen knife. Here, her behavior seems odd: she spends too much time selecting the knife, looks around several times for no apparent reason, and then hides the knife in her purse. We then see her at the checkout counter paying for everything but the knife.

Clearly, Murielle has now collected everything she needs to murder her children, but in and of itself, the scene is not very remarkable. It is even somewhat implausible. First, Murielle would probably already own a large knife. Second, people buy large knives every day, so there would be no reason for her to steal it. In a way, the scene is very artificial and only exists to underscore that something important is going on. Its function is foreshadowing for the next scene, the event to which the whole film has been heading. But few viewers will raise this or similar objections. At this point, we have a clear idea of what is to come and are fully engaged. Our knowledge of what is going to happen charges the scene with meaning and turns it into a very intense moment.

The next scene marks the emotional climax of the film. Murielle picks up her youngest child while his sisters are watching TV—presumably the new DVD—and eating cake. She leaves the room with the baby in her arms and goes upstairs. In the next shot, we see the three remaining sisters in front of the TV. Off-screen, Murielle calls the second-youngest child, who leaves the room and also climbs up the stairs (**fig. 6a–b**). This procedure is repeated twice. One by one, the girls are called by their mother and leave the room.

Again, watched in isolation, this would be an unremarkable scene since nothing much happens. We do not see the murders; the drama unfolds entirely off-screen. But even though we do not see or hear anything out of the ordinary, this is a moment of almost unbearable intensity. We know exactly what awaits these sweet girls as they unsuspectingly follow their mother's call. We know, to return to Hitchcock's example, of the bomb under the table, and we even know that it will go off. This does not diminish the scene's emotional impact; on the contrary, the scene derives its power from the fact that we already know the outcome.

My other example is Touching the Void (UK 2003, Director: Kevin Macdonald), which tells the true story of Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, two mountaineers who nearly died attempting to ascend a previously unclimbed mountain face in the Peruvian Andes. The climb proves much harder than expected, and during the descent in a storm, Joe falls and breaks his leg. Simon tries to lower his companion with ropes, but eventually finds himself in a desperate situation where he either has to cut the rope holding Joe or

Fig. 6a–b: The almost unbearable climax of A PERDRE LA RAISON

plummet with him. He cuts the rope, and after suffering through a night of sub-freezing temperatures, searches in vain for his partner. Concluding that Joe must be dead, Simon makes his way back to the base camp. Joe, however, has survived. With a broken leg and no food or water, he manages to climb out of the crevasse into which he fell, and spends the next three days crawling back to camp in terrible pain. He arrives just in time: Simon and Richard Hawking, a non-climber who had remained in camp, are just about to return to civilization.

The story of TOUCHING THE VOID is as full of high kinetic drama as any action movie. However, it is not a work of fiction inspired by true events, like A PERDRE LA RAISON, but a hybrid in which long sequences of dramatized action are framed by interviews with the real-life protagonists. So we see two versions of each character: the real Simon, Joe, and Richard, recalling their stories, and actors re-enacting the events. These two strands of the film are staged and shot for maximum contrast. On the one hand, we have a series of

talking heads in a very reduced studio setting, where the trio tell their stories with typical English understatement. The re-enactments, on the other hand, are elaborately staged scenes employing all the stylistic devices we know from adventure-laden feature films.

While the re-enacted scenes do not look like a typical documentary, they do not feel like a regular feature film either. There is an artificial quality to them, especially when the focus is not on the mechanics of climbing. This impression is reinforced by the lack of dialogue. Except for screams, grunts, and other primal sounds, the characters are silent; the only spoken words we hear are the voice-over explanations from the interviews commenting on what is happening in the scene. This way, we are constantly reminded that what we are seeing is not what actually happened, but a mere illustration;

> thereby never allowing these sections to develop narrative or temporal independence but always keeping them as action spaces which were partly memory spaces, from which the spoken narratives of testimony recollection departed and returned. (Corner 93)

This leads to interesting effects with regard to potential spoiling. Since Joe is the narrator of his part of the story, we are aware that he must have survived his ordeal. Whether he falls nearly 150 feet or is convinced that he will die on the last night of his journey back, the audience never doubts that he will survive. But that constant reminder that he must have made it out of that hell alive in no way diminishes the drama. If anything, the interviews serve as a means of "iterative authentication" (Austin 76), underscoring that what we are witnessing is not just a piece of entertainment but a faithful reconstruction of a real event.[23]

As Dirk Eitzen argues, although we often think of documentaries as an intellectual and detached genre—Bill Nichols speaks of a "discourse of sobriety" (36)—they are in some ways more emotional than works of fiction, since they affect us directly on a physical level. Because what happens on the screen is read as real, there is a strong sense that one should intervene. We want to do something, we want to right the wrong, but we are helpless because we are just watching past events that cannot be changed.

Eitzen describes this awareness as a very physical experience that touches us deeply on an affective-emotional level. This is certainly true of Touching

23 An empirical study by Thomas Austin confirms this: "Viewer investments in its re-enacted narrative appear to have been strengthened by the verifying function of the accompanying interview material" (79).

THE VOID. Knowing that Joe is not going to die does not lessen the tension we experience as we see him fight his way out of the crevasse under great pain. On the contrary, the combination of interviews and re-enacted scenes adds a sense of authenticity. Knowing that this really happened, that someone actually lived through this ordeal heightens the suspense and the overall emotional impact.

TOUCHING THE VOID and A PERDRE LA RAISON are two very different films, in terms of genre and narrative structure, as well as tonally and in the emotional-affective experience they seek to provide. In both cases, the end is revealed early on, but it affects our experience differently in each case. TOUCHING THE VOID offers very suspenseful moments *despite* our knowing the outcome; A PERDRE LA RAISON, by contrast, is emotionally intense *because* we know what will happen.

Obviously, these two examples do not cover the entire spectrum of cinematic suspense; there are various others forms, which work differently. But taken together, they clearly show that knowing the outcome of a story does not necessarily lessen our experience as viewers. The moment when Simon cuts the rope and lets his friend fall into what we would normally presume is certain death is very intense; our knowledge of the outcome of the endeavor does not change that.

What we are dealing with here is related to a phenomenon known as the "paradox of suspense." As noted above, many theories of suspense—including those that fuel the fear of spoilers—are based on the assumption that suspense depends on uncertainty. We supposedly experience suspense when a scene has multiple possible outcomes, one of which corresponds to what the narrative frames as desirable. Or as Noël Carroll puts it, "one of the alternative outcomes is morally correct but improbable" (261).

There are several problems with this idea. For one thing, there are countless examples where we experience suspense even though what is at stake is by no means "morally correct"; we can also experience suspense when the villain is in jeopardy (more on this later). But the issue that has caused the most discussion is the problem of repeated viewings. As we all know from our own experience, truly suspenseful films remain suspenseful across multiple viewings, which should not happen if suspense really depended on the uncertainty of the outcome.[24]

24 On the question of re-reading, see also the chapter by Dana Steglich.

Various explanations have been suggested for this paradox. As Richard J. Gerrig argues the fact that we can repeatedly experience suspense "reflects a systematic failure of memory processes to produce relevant knowledge as a narrative unfolds" (172). In other words, although we know about the outcome, we are not able to access this information while we watch a film (or read a novel). Carroll proceeds along slightly different lines, arguing that, although we know how a film will end, we are still able to imagine a different outcome. "The audience may not believe that the relevant outcome is uncertain or improbable but, nevertheless, the audience may entertain the thought that the relevant outcome is uncertain or improbable" (267). According to Carroll, deeming an outcome improbable is sufficient for reintroducing the uncertainty necessary for suspense.

Frankly, I find these explanations rather baffling. I already find it hard to accept that I should be unable to remember the outcome of a movie on its second viewing, but to suggest that I somehow forget that the protagonists of Touching the Void are still alive while I watch the film seems patently absurd to me. Gerrig and Carroll go to great lengths to maintain the central role of uncertainty in creating suspense, while examples like Touching the Void or A perdre la raison clearly suggest otherwise. But instead of accepting that uncertainty is not a necessary condition for suspense and consequently thinking about what this could mean for a theory of suspense, they cling to the notion of uncertainty and try to save it with ever more intricate theoretical constructions.

Aaron Smuts resolutely rejects the notion that suspense requires uncertainty, instead proposing what he calls the "desire-frustration theory of suspense." At the heart of this concept is the idea that we, as the audience, often strongly wish for a particular outcome, but since we are watching a movie, we are unable to intervene. This futile desire is what creates suspense, according to Smuts (he also cites the example of Touching the Void). "Suspenseful situations are those where we want to affect an outcome—that is, where we strongly desire to have a causal impact—but our desire is frustrated" (284).[25]

I find this model much more compelling, since it does not depend on our ignorance of the outcome and thus explains why suspense can occur in a film like Touching the Void. It is also consistent with how tragedy works. As indicated earlier, we do indeed want Romeo and Juliet to survive and are

25 This line of argument is quite similar to Eitzen's when he talks about the emotional impact of documentaries. Eitzen basically confirms that Smuts's desire-frustration theory is particularly apt for explaining moments of suspense in nonfiction films.

frustrated to see their plan fail; and we equally want to scream at Murielle not to go through with her horrible plan.

One problem with Smuts's approach, however, is that it only accounts for situations in which we wish for a good outcome. While he does not go as far as Carroll, who claims that suspense is always about the "morally correct" ending,[26] he states that "one must have a strong desire to make it turn out the way one wants" (284), which definitely implies that our (frustrated) desire is aligned with the hero's goals.

Hitchcock strongly disagrees with this notion and, returning to the example of the bomb under the table, argues that "the apprehension of the bomb is more powerful than the feelings of sympathy or dislike for the characters involved" (Truffaut 73). Since I have now invoked him several times as a theorist of suspense, it seems appropriate to look at two of Hitchcock's films to illustrate his point.

Strangers on a Train (US 1951) and Frenzy (UK 1971) feature similar scenes in which the villain is at risk of losing an important piece of evidence that would prove the falsely suspected hero's innocence. In Strangers on a Train, the sinister Bruno wants to plant a cigarette lighter belonging to the protagonist as false evidence, but accidentally drops it in a storm drain. In Frenzy, Rusk needs to get hold of a tiepin that threatens to identify him as the murderer; unfortunately, it is stuck in the tightly-clenched fist of his latest victim. In both examples, our sympathies are very clear: we do not want either Bruno or Rusk to succeed. But even though our overall allegiance is not with the villains, we are very much involved with them in both scenes.

In Strangers on a Train, Bruno reaches down through the grid and tries to grab the lighter. A close-up shows his outstretched hand approaching it, finally grabbing it, but then, because his grip is not tight enough, dropping it. This procedure is repeated with the lighter sliding even further down the drain. Again, we see Bruno's hand, now in an even tighter close-up, getting close to the lighter, touching it with his fingertips and then somehow getting a grip on it. Both attempts are intercut with close-ups of Bruno's increasingly tense face (**fig. 7a–d**).

The scene in Frenzy plays out similarly, though over an extended period of time. Rusk is already exhausted from having to get the body, which is stiff from rigor mortis, out of a potato sack. He can clearly see the pointed end

26 Carroll acknowledges that a character's morality depends largely on the value system established by the film and may not correspond to a real-life ethics. Nevertheless, he sticks to the basic idea that suspense depends on (positive) moral evaluation.

Fig. 7a–d: Bruno tries to get hold of the lighter

of the pin sticking out of the dead woman's fist. Simply pulling it out of her hand does not work though, nor does opening the fist; the stiff fingers will not budge. After another failed attempt, which leads to Rusk breaking off the blade of his pocketknife, he finally ends up breaking every single finger of the dead woman's hand until he finally reaches the pin (**fig. 8a–f**).

Both scenes, which are typical of Hitchcock (though not an example of what he considers suspense), are very intense and affect us directly on a physical level. Seeing the two men's faces strained with effort, witnessing Bruno desperately stretching his arm but being unable to reach the lighter, and observing Rusk's sweaty hand slipping from the needle evokes an almost bodily response. We suffer with them and seem to feel what they feel. We all know the sensation Rusk experiences when he fumbles with his pocketknife, and when he repeatedly fails to open the blade, we want to step in and help him.

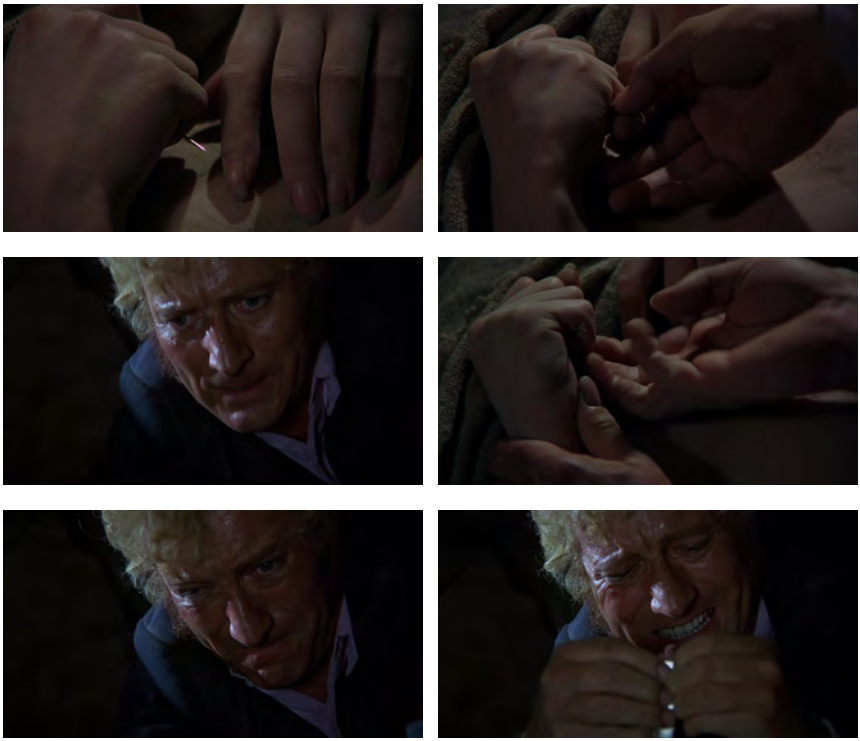

Fig. 8a-f: Rusk tries to get hold of the tiepin

In both examples, we experience frustrated desire, but the desire is completely at odds with our overall sympathies.[27] Although we do not want the villains to succeed, we are still firmly on their side for the duration of the scene.[28]

What these examples show is that suspense is not necessarily a narrative phenomenon, at least not in the sense that it relies on an overall plot. Obvi-

27 There is a long-standing and complex discussion in film studies and beyond about the spectator's sympathetic and empathetic engagement with fictional characters, which I will not enter into, since my point is that the forms of suspense I examine do not require any kind of overall engagement with a character.

28 Margrethe Bruun Vaage agrees "that the spectator can sometimes feel with characters independently of her moral evaluation of them, or independently of whether she has also first sympathized with them" (66). Vaage is interested in why we root for deeply flawed characters like Breaking Bad's (US 2008–2013, Creator: Vince Gilligan) Walter White. She argues that Carroll and Gerrig have it backwards when it comes to the relationship between suspense and our attitude toward a character; it is not so much "the spectator's sympathetic allegiance

ously, we need to understand the situation the respective character is in and what he is trying to accomplish. But both scenes also work when watched in isolation: their suspense is fundamentally independent of the bigger plot. In these cases it is a "local" and, above all, an affective-corporeal phenomenon that has much more to do with rhythm, editing, sound, and how we engage with a character than with an all-encompassing story arc. For the suspense of these two scenes, but also for the kind of "cliffhanger" suspense we experience in Touching the Void, *somatic empathy* with the respective character, that is engagement on a basic bodily level, is key. Watching someone do or experience something strenuous or painful puts us in a state of tension and excitement, regardless of their goal and the overall outcome. Hitchcock deliberately uses a lot of close-ups and, in the case of Frenzy, lets us hear Rusk's heavy breathing and other sounds of exertion: all elements that create suspense in a very primal way.[29]

As I said earlier, what we commonly call "suspense" covers a wide range of phenomena, and one problem with discussing both suspense and spoilers is that we often lump together things that, on closer inspection, work quite differently.[30] Thus, I am not suggesting that somatic empathy is the key to all forms of suspense. Rather, my point is that somatic empathy, frustrated de-

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with the antihero making suspense for him possible, as suspenseful situations being used in order to encourage, and maintain, sympathy for the antihero" (Vaage, *The Antihero* 65).

29 Unfortunately, Christine N. Brinckmann's excellent article on somatic empathy, which analyzes the scene in Frenzy in detail, is only available in German. Vaage uses a similar term, "*bodily empathy*", to describe a state that "give[s] the spectator the bodily and affective feeling of the character" ("Fiction Film", 163) and adds that "watching someone do something has a remarkable tendency to make us engage empathically in that action," (72) which is very much in line with Brinckmann's argument. Richard Allen discusses the two films in *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony* as examples of "shared suspense" (55–58), a term he borrows from Susan Smith, who uses it for situations "where the viewer shares the suspense with a character" (20).

30 Therefore, Robert J. Yanal concludes that what viewers call suspense is usually something else. He is convinced that it is impossible to experience suspense on repeated viewings and consequently solves the paradox of suspense by claiming that what repeaters call suspense is a different emotion. While it is problematic to deny people's ability to correctly identify their feelings, Yanal may be right in that "suspense" is a very broad category that encompasses a variety of emotions. That is why Delatorre et al. suggest that it would be more accurate to speak of curiosity and anticipation instead of suspense (10). Julian Hanich, in turn, develops a phenomenological model of horror, distinguishing between two varieties of suspense: dread and terror. "Dread's paradigm case is the alone-in-the-dark scenario—terror is best exemplified by chase- and-escape scenes. In dread the exact nature of the threat to the characters is still uncertain for me—in terror I know the nature of the threat, because I can perceive its approach" (161).

sire, Hitchcockian suspense, and dramatic irony in general are some possible forms of suspense, and that none of them require uncertainty.[31]

Obviously, there is also suspense that does depend on uncertainty. For example, the whodunit or murder mystery revolves around the (unknown) identity of the murderer, and the kind of twist films discussed earlier depend heavily on our not anticipating the twist. This kind of suspense is very different from Hitchcockian suspense or the affective-corporeal excitement just discussed. Hitchcock famously disparages the whodunit, which he likens to "a jigsaw or a crossword puzzle" (74). For him, the whodunit is "a sort of intellectual puzzle" that creates "a kind of curiosity that is void of emotion" (73). We do not have to agree with the Master of Suspense's disapproval of the whodunit to accept that his distinction between a more cerebral and a more emotional-affective type of suspense is essentially correct.[32]

So while there is suspense based on uncertainty, it is not the only variety. And for many—I would argue most—other forms of suspense, the overall plot is of minor significance. I also basically agree with Hitchcock that the "pure" whodunit, in which all that matters is the identity of the murderer, is not very exciting and, I might add, not as common as we might think, at least in the case of cinema.[33] There are many suspenseful films in which the outcome is of

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31 As indicated earlier, somatic empathy as in Frenzy and Strangers on a Train as well as Hitchcockian suspense can both be understood as varieties of frustrated desire. We want something to happen but are unable to interfere. The main difference to Smuts's approach is that he links suspense to an overall desired outcome. According to Vaage, there is also a general "narrative desire." "The spectator wants the story to be engaging. She desires actions that bring the narrative forward" (*The Antihero* 75). This desire is independent of uncertainty or moral evaluation; we just want something suspenseful to happen.

32 Carroll, on the other hand, argues that mystery and suspense are distinct genres since their uncertainty concerns different temporalities: "For in mysteries in the classical detection mode, we are characteristically uncertain about what has happened in the past, whereas with suspense fictions we are uncertain about what will happen" (257). There is a variation of the *whodunit* that Hitchcock does not mention but which is much closer to his sensibilities, the *howcatchem*. Also called "inverted detective story," this variety begins with the audience witnessing the murder and the detective coming in later and trying to solve it (Reilly, Berzsenyi 4–5); the TV series Columbo (US 1968–2003, Creator: Richard Levinson and William Link) is probably the best-known example of this. Although there is a knowledge advantage right from the start, this setup does not necessarily create suspense in the Hitchcockian sense. Still, it is certainly an example of dramatic irony.

33 It is interesting that the classic murder mystery has been absent from the big screen for many decades (if it ever existed). And supposed exceptions like the Knives Out movies or Kenneth Branagh's Hercule Poirot adventures are largely "meta murder mysteries", that is, tongue-in-cheek exercises that lovingly poke fun at the genre's established tropes. I would argue that the actual appeal of these movies is less in not knowing the identity of the murderer than in the Byzantine twists and turns the plot takes to finally reveal it. Again, it

little importance, but there are few, if any, examples that are driven solely by uncertainty. Put another way, I do not think it is just the big reveal at the end that makes films like The Sixth Sense or The Usual Suspects suspenseful.[34]

If suspense does not necessarily depend on uncertainty, the basic assumption behind the fear of spoilers is also called into question. While this conclusion may seem surprising, it is at least partially supported by empirical research. As Judith Rosenbaum explains in her chapter, various experiments have reached different conclusions about whether and to what extent spoilers can actually spoil a story. But two findings seem to be fairly well established. First, actual spoiling—i.e., having our experience significantly degraded by additional information—happens much less frequently than we commonly believe; in some instances, spoilers can even increase enjoyment. Second, people are pretty bad at "affective forecasting": that is, anticipating how much an alleged spoiler will actually diminish their enjoyment. In general, the negative effect of spoilers is massively overestimated.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion of my reflections on suspense is that the fear about spoilers destroying suspense is largely unfounded. This conclusion is supported, at least to some extent, by empirical evidence. But if this is true, why is the fear of spoilers so pervasive? I cannot give a definitive answer, but my guess—based very much on the contributions in this volume—is that it has less to do with the actual films (or novels, or games …) than with *how we talk about them.*

One of the strange contradictions of the spoiler discussion is that the very movies usually considered formulaic potboilers are nonetheless supposed to be especially prone to spoilers. For example, there was immense pressure on journalists not to give away too many details when reviewing Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens (US 2015, Director: J. J. Abrams), which

is much more a question of *how* than of *what.* For reasons that deserve further investigation, the classic murder mystery has been almost completely relegated to television. See also the interview with Joshua Astrachan, in which he comments on Gosford Park (IT/UK/US 2001, Director: Robert Altman).

34 A recent example of a film that solely relies on uncertainty is Anatomie d'une chute (Anatomy of a Fall, FR 2023, Director: Justine Triet), which revolves around the question whether the protagonist killed her husband. The film largely plays out as a courtroom drama and does not contain any suspenseful scenes in the sense described above. Interestingly, Anatomie d'une chute cannot really be spoiled, since the central mystery is never resolved.

is rather absurd, since even self-proclaimed fans of the franchise agree that The Force Awakens is basically a skillful reworking of all the major elements of the original Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope movie (US 1977, Director: George Lucas). In fact, many fans explicitly welcomed the degree to which the movie was essentially a throwback to the beginning of the franchise; they were not looking for new ideas or some sort of novel reinterpretation of the existing material. Rather, they were "interested in recapturing a certain feeling they experienced once upon a time when watching another film" (Roberts).

"The fan experience is all about repetition," as Kristina Busse states in her chapter. According to this premise, one would think that potential spoilers should not be a problem for an audience whose primary interest is in being given exactly what they already know (and love). If you have a very specific idea of the kind of experience you are looking for, what is there to spoil? But strangely enough, the opposite seems true. Precisely in cases like Star Wars or Marvel movies—in other words, in the most commodified of franchises—the discussion about spoilers is most heated (which does not mean that all fans are equally spoiler-averse). We do not see anything remotely comparable when a new film by Jim Jarmusch, Claire Denis, or Kelly Reichardt comes out, even though the plot of a typical arthouse movie is supposed to be much less predictable.[35]

Of course, this has a lot to do with the audience for a Denis or Reichardt film being much smaller and probably also less vocal on social media and the like. But it also suggests that the fear of spoilers relates less to the film in question than to habits of reception. While I have argued that the emergence of the current understanding of spoilers is related to the rise of complex narratives, nowadays the fear of spoilers is by no means limited to films with twists. Indeed, it need not even be related to the plot at all, but can concern almost any aspect of an audiovisual production. Ultimately, what counts as a spoiler, what we are allowed to say about a piece of fiction, and how we are supposed say it depends largely on the context, on our peer group, on discourse.

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35 Another interesting example of a disproportionate fear of spoilers is Oppenheimer (US/UK 2023, Director: Christopher Nolan). Director Christopher Nolan has long cultivated an aura of secrecy around his movies, and in the case of Oppenheimer, it took on truly bizarre proportions. As a film that tells the life story of a well-known historical figure, there should not be much to spoil in terms of plot. However, when its lead actor Cillian Murphy was interviewed by *The Guardian,* he was not only forbidden from discussing the film's content, the interviewer was not even allowed to see it (Edwardes).

It is neither a coincidence that the concept of the spoiler originated in science fiction magazines, nor that fan studies is the only field in the humanities and cultural studies that has produced noteworthy research on spoilers. Spoilers concern the very heart of fan activity. Not because all fans are by their very nature spoiler-averse; on the contrary, different groups of fans handle spoilers in completely opposite ways. While some try to avoid spoilers at all costs, others actively seek them out. There are Star Wars fans, for example, who try to amass as much information as possible in advance about upcoming installments of the franchise, in order to be "prepared for the associated emotional strain" (Völcker 156) of significant narrative developments, such as the death of a beloved character.[36] For all their differences, how a particular fan community deals with spoilers is always the result of complex negotiations that lead to permitting certain reading strategies while prohibiting others.

In *Textual Poachers,* the founding text of fan studies, Henry Jenkins concludes that fandom "involves a particular mode of reception" and "involves a particular set of critical and interpretive practices" (284). The importance of spoilers in fan discourse, and the central role fans played in establishing the concept of the spoiler, confirm this observation. Whether a spoiler is framed as an inexcusable violation of etiquette or completely irrelevant, whether it is seen as essential or negligible to how a work is experienced, indeed depends on the mode of reception and is the result of a particular interpretive practice.

Fandom is a social practice, and so are spoilers. Watching a film, reading a novel, or playing a game never happens in a vacuum. There is always a context that shapes our understanding. This is especially true when it comes to spoilers. The idea of a spoiler implicitly assumes someone in addition to the work and the recipient, a third party that can potentially spoil the experience. Spoilers are, in other words, first and foremost *a social phenomenon*.

Filmography

A perdre la raison (Our Children). Director: Joachim Lafosse. BE/FR 2012.
Anatomie d'une chute (Anatomy of a Fall). Director: Justine Triet. FR 2023.
A Beautiful Mind. Director: Ron Howard. US 2001.
Big Little Lies. Creator: David E. Kelley. US 2017–2019.
The Blob. Director: Irvin Yeaworth. US 1958.

36 See also Kristina Busse's chapter on how fans deal with spoilers, as well as Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell on fans of Lost, and Castellano et al. on Brazilian fans of Game of Thrones.

Breaking Bad. Creator: Vince Gilligan. US 2008–2013.
Citizen Kane. Director: Orson Welles. US 1941.
Columbo. Creator: Richard Levinson and William Link. US 1968–2003.
Damages. Creator: Todd A. Kessler, Glenn Kessler and Daniel Zelman. US 2007–2012.
Les Diaboliques (Diabolique). Director: Henri-Georges Clouzot. FR 1955.
Donnie Darko. Director: Richard Kelly. US 2001.
Fight Club. Director: David Fincher. US 1999.
Frenzy. Director: Alfred Hitchcock. UK 1971.
Game of Thrones. Creator: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. US 2011–2019.
Gosford Park. Director: Robert Altman. IT/UK/US 2001.
His Girl Friday. Director: Howard Hawks. US 1940.
Lola rennt (Run Lola Run). Director: Tom Tykwer. DE 1998.
Lost. Creator: Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof. US 2004–2010.
Memento. Director: Christopher Nolan. US 2000.
Mulholland Drive. Director: David Lynch. US/FR 2001.
My Best Friend's Wedding. Director: P. J. Hogan. US 1997.
Oppenheimer. Director: Christopher Nolan. US/UK 2023.
Psycho. Director: Alfred Hitchcock. US 1960.
Roman Holiday. Director: William Wyler. US 1954.
Romeo + Juliet. Director: Baz Luhrman. US/MX/AU/CA 1996.
Severance. Creator: Dan Erickson. US 2022– .
Shane. Director: George Stevens. US 1953.
Squid Game. Creator: Hwang Dong-hyuk. SK 2021– .
Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan. Director: Nicholas Meyer. US 1982.
Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope. Director: George Lucas. US 1977.
Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens. Director: J. J. Abrams. US 2015.
Strangers on a Train. Director: Alfred Hitchcock. US 1951.
Survivor. Creator: Charlie Parsons. US 2000– .
The Sixth Sense. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 1999.
Them! Director: Gordon Douglas. US 1954.
The Thing from Another World. Director: Christian Nyby. US 1951.
Touching the Void. Director: Kevin Macdonald. UK 2003.
The Usual Suspects. Director: Bryan Singer. US 1995.
Twin Peaks. Creator: Mark Frost and David Lynch. US 1990–1991.
Vanilla Sky. Director: Cameron Crowe. US 2001.
When Harry Met Sally. Director: Rob Reiner. US 1989.

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