



SIMON SPIEGEL (ED.)

THE FEAR OF KNOWING

SPOILERS IN FILM, TV, LITERATURE
AND GAMING CULTURE

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The Fear of Knowing
Spoilers in Film, TV, Literature and Gaming Culture

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Simon Spiegel (ed.)

The Fear of Knowing

Spoilers in Film, TV, Literature and Gaming Culture

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“The owls are not what they seem.”
(TWIN PEAKS)

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Editor's Note

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction

Filmography

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

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

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

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

SURVIVOR. Creator: Charlie Parsons. US 2000– .

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

WANDA VISION (US 2021, Creator: Jac Schaeffer)

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

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.

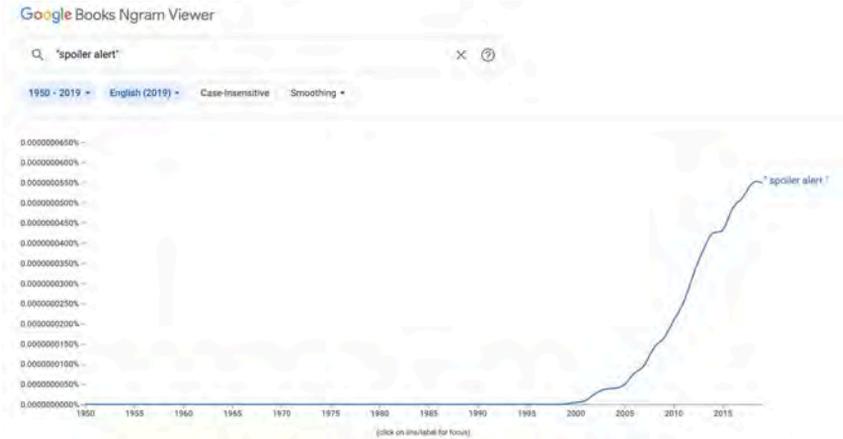


Fig. 1: The occurrence of the term “spoiler alert” in Google NGram

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 under 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

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 news-group 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.

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 Willemssen 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

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.

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

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 Brüttsch'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

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

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 other 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-

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).

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.

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 RENNTE (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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Part 1: Film and Television

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,

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=metacritic%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

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,

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=t8WLP1jbxOE.

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 Brüttsch’s chapter). The original trailer¹⁵ 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 trailer¹⁶ 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

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 trailer²¹ 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.

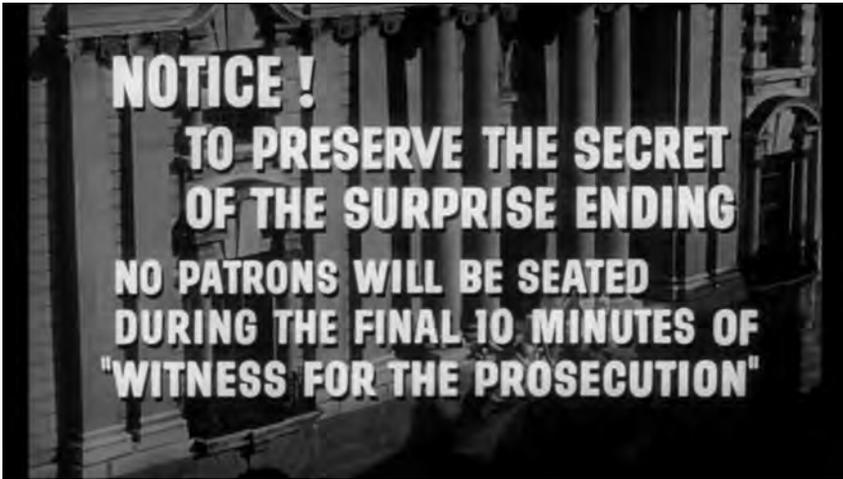


Fig. 2: The trailer for WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION

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.

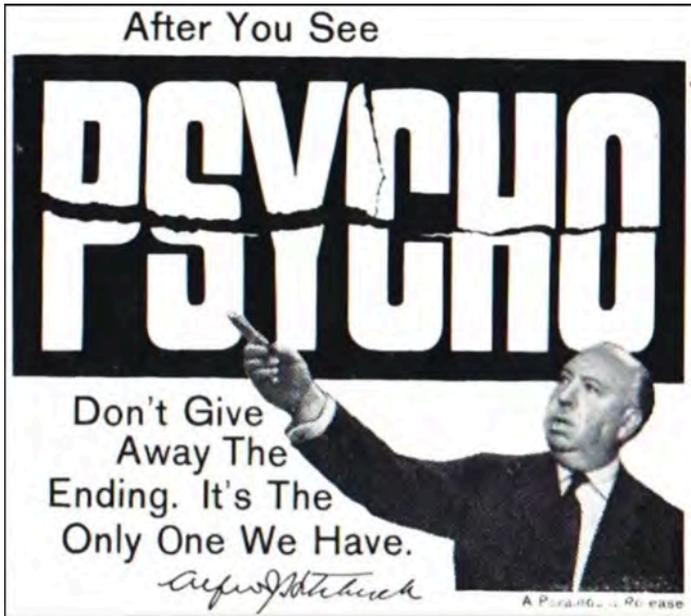


Fig. 3: An advertisement for PSYCHO

The trailer²⁵ 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=DTJQffQ40II.

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 trailer³³ 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 Brüttsch'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.

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

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 trailer⁴⁴ 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-

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

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

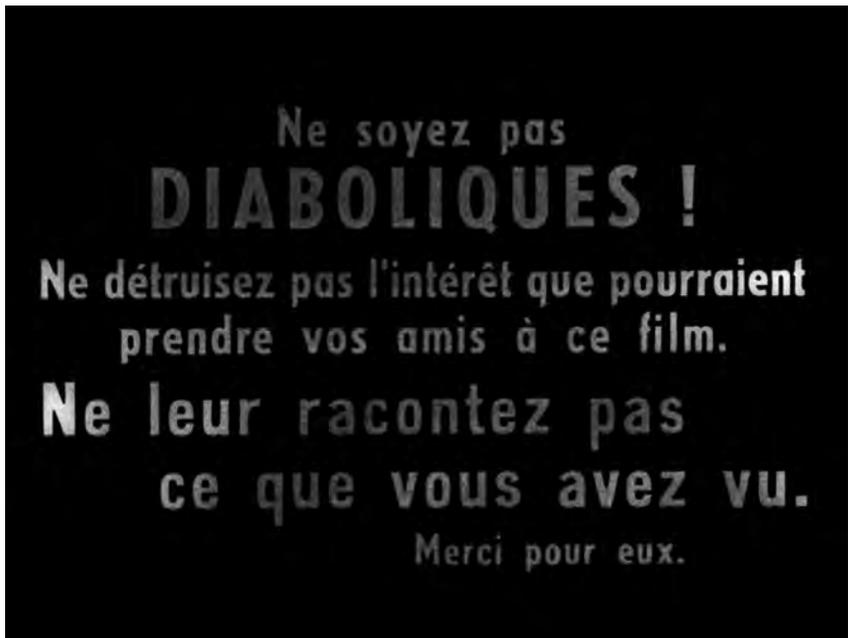


Fig. 1: The title card at the end of LES DIABOLIQUES

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

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

Definition and Prevalence

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

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

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

Plot Twists and Clues for Spoilers

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

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

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

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

THE SIXTH SENSE and Structural Deception

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Timing of the Twist

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

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

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

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

9 Eder 85 (my translation).

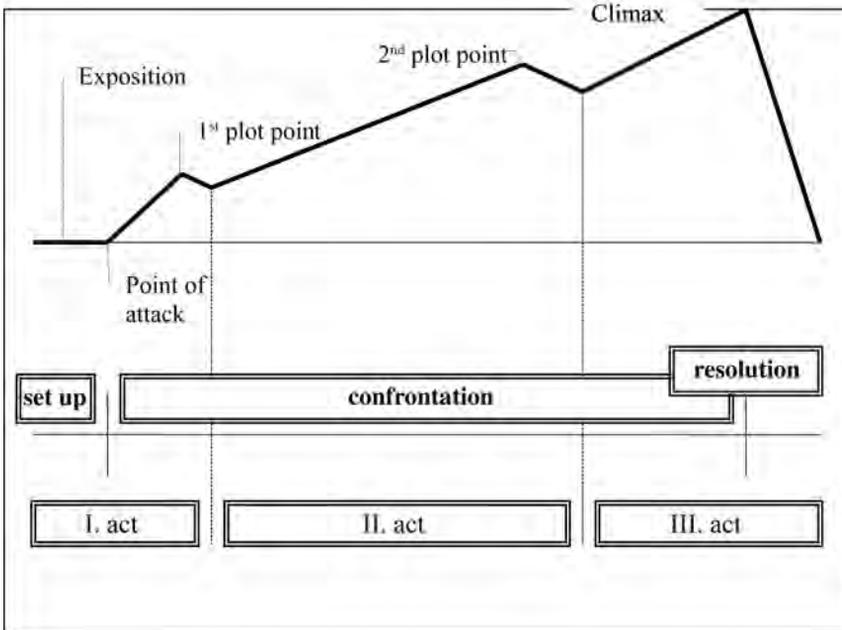


Fig. 2: The development of tension in the three-act structure according to Jens Eder

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

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

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

Plot Points, Twists and Spoilers

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

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

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

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

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

The Attractions of Unspoiled versus Spoiled or Second Viewings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The (Reduced) Effects of Spoiling Complex TV Series

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

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

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

13 Brütsch, “Puzzle Plots” 154.

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

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

Empirical Research versus Analysis Based on Introspection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Filmography

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

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

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TIFFANY HONG

Love Persevering: Televisual Homage, Americana, and Interstitial Grief in WANDAVISION

WANDAVISION (US 2021, Creator: Jac Schaeffer), a 2021 nine-episode weekly¹ television miniseries for Disney+, not only initiated Phase 4 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) but furthermore inaugurated a new kind of rhetoric for transmedia storytelling. Both diegetically and through its own press, the show enthusiastically engages fan ambiguity toward spoilers, only to retroactively dismantle its *own* marketing as a metatextual reading of exegetical strategies particular to this moment of hypertextuality, simultaneity, and participatory culture, not to mention a baroque intertextuality and narratology particular to comics.

WANDAVISION embodies, then implodes, a survey of televisual eras with their attendant filmic technologies, opening credit audiovisuals, genre tropes, and most crucially, historicized articulations of the happy American family and the possibilities of audience interaction. As such, the first and second episodes were filmed before a live studio audience and relied on old-fashioned wirework in place of now-standard CGI. Wanda's psychic control of the town of Westview is quite literally and multidimensionally mediated; her grief and abilities externalize her from the diegesis of the miniseries (initially) as simply another actor. The innovation of the show is its performativity regarding the baroque nature of expansive, hypertextual, and self-referential fan culture. Its braiding of a multiple external positionality into an archive of American sitcoms proudly presents what is ultimately a nuanced examination of linear grieving, escapism, and a fixation on macro-narratives over interiority, the domestic, and the mundane. Or, ultimately, Wanda's impossible desire: what she (and we) *have no time for* within the blockbuster filmic MCU.

Saige Walton characterizes the baroque as “an investment in the infinite through movement, deferral, and the serialized drawing out of formation, often visualized as the spatialization of time. Like the baroque, genre too, shares little interest in the narrative telos of fulfilment” (90–91). The baroque likewise concludes Thomas Schatz's evolutionary model of genres (classic—parody—contestation—critique), where “Saturation leads us into the final

1 Apart from the first week, which saw two episodes simultaneously released.

phase of a genre—its baroque stage—where conventions are parodied or subverted and ‘we no longer look through the form ... rather we look at the form itself’” (Walton 94–95). Superhero comics, the ultimate genre monstrosity, are reliant in their seriality on the infinite deferment of the teleological. However, many have argued against a developmental mapping of the superhero genre, contending that reinvention, hypertextuality, and recursion inhere within this serial, plurivocal medium where fans are invited to participate, annotate, and rewrite, rendering it difficult to isolate a so-called postmodern period for such a moving target.

Moreover, the MCU—whose success hinges on streamlining both this baroque, messy, protean seriality and the cumulative knowledge of comics fandom into a multipronged but *linear* and authoritative transmedia franchise—foregrounds what Christophe Gelly terms the “fetishism of the adaptation.” That is, “a playfulness that will lead the reader [or viewer in this case] to go back to the work and hunt down all the clues placed by the artist but whose true import had eluded us,” migrating comics’ recursive reading strategy onto what was fundamentally a far more passive, singular, teleological cinematic experience (93). We are now compelled to rewatch, pause, rewind, freeze-frame, zoom in, slow playback speed, and reference Wikipedia in order to catch clues intended to subconsciously stream past upon a first viewing.

The Vision, a 2016 limited comics series by Tom King and Gabriel Hernandez Walta on which the TV series is partially based, references this baroque quality of the Vision and the Scarlet Witch’s contradictory, rebooted, and retconned romance across series, writers, and now, media. In *The Vision: Director’s Cut*, the trade paperback re-release, writer Tom King references the “insanely baroque [...] twists in continuity and time all bent into a straight line of narrative that it kind of becomes one of the most poetic moments ever written. [...] It’s the essence of comics in a few panels” (5). Eagle-eyed or repeat comic reader-cum-viewers are treated to several Easter eggs in the animated opening credits of Episode: 2 DON’T TOUCH THAT DIAL (US 2021, Director: Matt Shakman), which pan quickly over decontextualized images of dog bones and the Grim Reaper’s helmet, the stylized two-dimensional cartoons contrasting ominously with the comic Vision’s literalized attempts at burying violent repudiations of his ‘perfect family’ layers beneath their idyllic suburban home. Wanda’s hesitation to bring (the identically named) Sparky back to life in Episode 5: ON A VERY SPECIAL EPISODE ... (US 2021, Director: Matt Shakman), would appear to inject some live-action realism, or at least a conceptual damper, on the comic Scarlett Witch’s (near-omnipotent) chaos magic. Vision’s doctoring of a deceased but fully organic dog in the

comic into a synthezoid canine pet speaks to the *The Vision's* themes of imitative and aspirational humanity. Its status as a largely stand-alone limited series, however, buffers its diegetic contents from accountability to the larger Marvel comics canon. WANDAVISION, on the other hand, weighted down by the imperative of introducing, at the very least, the filmic sequel DOCTOR STRANGE AND THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS (US 2022, Director: Sam Raimi) and Phase 4 more generally, maneuvers the original Frankensteinian concerns of the comic into a perhaps too-real interrogation of mundane, irreversible grief, a humanity for which viewers and producers have little time within the MCU proper.

It is thus interesting that WANDAVISION was (though not originally²) the first Disney+ series, an experimental expansion into a 'lesser' medium. What is more, the current retro insistence on a weekly format (rather than the industry streaming standard) reconstitutes the formerly superheroic cinematic—a finite, sensorily overwhelming *communal* experience of the multiplex—within a temporality predicated on the *partial*, the intimate, the domestic. It is a migration from the inaccessible pantheon and fanfare of the big screen to a disquieting mirroring back at us from TV screens in our living rooms—during a pandemic, no less. For a generation privileged with the default of bingeing, the weekly release schedule (minus a bonus first-and-second episode combo) was initially met with frustration, a complete disconnect from the source material's formatting. This expectation of immediacy even reverberates back to comics, where creative teams now write in typically 5-issue arcs in *anticipation* of the trade paperback releases, and readers prefer to wait on a finite collected edition rather than parcel out enjoyment and storyline over months. One thinks of reviewers hate-bombing THE BOYS (US 2019–, Creator: Eric Kripke) on Amazon Prime because of this same commitment to segmented viewing. Spoiled audiences indeed.

WANDAVISION is unique within the stable of Disney+ MCU offerings thus far in its conscious adaptation of its medium, television, not as cinema's impoverished alternative but as a *historical* mirror of the idealized American nuclear family. That is, a conscious reorientation within a temporality that metatextually critiques our (American, mostly) relationship to media, positing a TV-show-within-a-TV-show that is perhaps an inevitable but by no means conclusive reinvention of the superhero genre's (overdetermined, paradoxical, infinite, illogical, impossible) narrative malleability, which deconstructs

2 This was initially reserved for the far more traditional action/buddy comedy THE FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER (US 2021, Creator: Malcolm Spellman).

(overlapping, competing, rewound, rewritten) time-space, both imaginary and experiential.

Spoiler culture is formative to the MCU and to its particularly playful embodiment of baroque deferral and the spacialization of time: 1) As the Vision says (disingenuously) in Episode 9: THE SERIES FINALE (US 2021, Director: Matt Shakman), “I do not have one single ounce of original material”; the MCU is, after all, sustained through adaptation (however creative), with countless IPs and storylines awaiting Kevin Feige to induct them into three-dimensionality. Typically, spoiler warnings have an expiration date, but since the MCU’s success (relative to even its own past attempts at mainstreaming its content) is predicated on a two-pronged approach of a) paying tribute to long-time comics readers with Easter eggs, and b) drawing in neophytes who *need not* read the source material, the former population is cautioned against spoiling decades-old storylines even while they are rewarded for their encyclopedic knowledge. This often occurs iconographically, i.e., through visual cues that hold no meaning for a first-time encounter, like Captain Marvel’s octogram appearing on Nick Fury’s pager in the AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR (US 2018, Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo) post-credits scene. 2) This fan awareness of the canon (constantly updating and rewriting itself in real-time) is native to superhero comics and more specifically, Dick Tomasovic claims, to the “complicit writing of Stan Lee, which set Marvel apart from its competitors in the 1960s” (166).

Tomasovic gives the meta example of Agent Coulson collecting Captain America trading cards in THE AVENGERS (US 2012, Director: Joss Whedon): “The film multiplies disguised references and allusions to create a sense of collusion with fans, enhancing the feeling of community to the point of momentarily breaking the logic of the story” (166). Coulson as audience proxy is thus satisfying to the extent that audiences substitute (passive, objective) suspension of disbelief with the pleasure of vicarious self-insertion or recognition/mirroring. Coulson is a nerd, one of us; we even have a character named The Collector. Coulson performs fan *jouissance* or *moe*—briefly, affect or intense emotion toward a fictional character—within the storyworld itself, as a character fangirling over another character who until recently did not ‘exist’ within the same reality (read: temporality) as him. This example also fascinatingly demonstrates the baroque spatialization of time. Captain America *should not* exist within the same chronotope as Coulson, but through convoluted comic-book narrative, we have an overlapping of his truncated temporality (cryopreservation) over the real-time continuity of the film or cinematic real ‘history.’ Ever since AVENGERS: ENDGAME (US 2019, Director: Anthony Russo

and Joe Russo), which broke the viewer contract in three words with “5 Years Later,” the stakes have shifted. Through time travel reified as an occupation of *past cinematic space* (the actors walking onto the digitally recreated ‘sets’ of past MCU films), the Snap was reversed, but a certain finality reverberated through the film to our reality, into Disney+ and even other studios, like Sony Pictures’ SPIDER-MAN: FAR FROM HOME (US 2019, Director: Jon Watts). Fans needed actors Robert Downey Jr. and Chris Evans’s confirmations that their contracts were officially ended to accept that their characters were truly dead. The temporality of the MCU, already overwrought and unsustainable, must now reckon with that disconnect in Phase 4.

Spoiler culture is a response to a temporal flattening, a ubiquitous information dump, which demeans the experience of the here and now. One either seeks a leaping forward with privileged (teleological) knowledge, or the accelerated experience of viewing *in time for* a larger, inescapable cultural discussion. This is exacerbated by the MCU’s mastery of transmedia storytelling, deferring closure and telescoping narrative anticipation of media events years into the future through staggered end credit scenes and Phase-specific announcements. WANDA VISION acknowledges its inherited burden of overdetermination as (merely) a suturing product between films and Phases, and trolls its audience and fandom accordingly. For comics fans, the futurity that propels a serial medium (“Find out next issue!”) and stimulates the pleasure of adaptation (fantasy casting, speculation over potential storylines) renders content less susceptible to traditional spoiling; instead, spoiling for a plot-aware community hinges on the revelation of *fan service*, its original Japanese term defined by its *superfluity* to the plot. The plot of SPIDER-MAN: FAR FROM HOME is irrelevant—and not particularly remarkable—but its spoiler warnings center on pure fan service, such as Andrew Garfield and Tobey Maguire completing the famous Spider-Men meme in an instance of peak self-referentiality (fig. 1). I say “pure” because, through *diegetic* retconning, the multiversal collision of the film was rendered meaningless for all but us and (MCU) Peter Parker, who—after satisfying fans of all three franchises—has earned our goodwill to support him in an ingeniously avaricious *tabula rasa* franchise. What better than an *in-universe* reboot to ensure no shortage of stories to sell?

Likewise, the deflection of WANDA VISION spoilers was fixated on fan service. Weekly social media responses hyped the appearances of every tangential comics character, from Mephisto to Emma Frost to Magneto, responding, in fairness, to the deliberate placement of Easter eggs calibrated to maximize canonical fan knowledge. To contextualize the red herrings: they all spring



Fig. 1: The famous Spider-Man meme recreated with three incarnations of Spider-Man

from a refusal of compartmentalization in media that the show itself deconstructs as gradually falling out of fashion since the 1950s; fan speculation arose out of the (trained) disbelief that this could *only* be a TV show. Potential guest appearances and cameos were teased; WANDA VISION required the ‘backing’ of larger-than-life figures like Dr. Strange, Captain Marvel, and Reed Richards (not even cast at the time of broadcast) to grant legitimacy and to cement an authoritative teleology: what is the next tie-in? This is a holdover from comics culture that—how soon one forgets—while lucrative, is and was viewed suspiciously as a desperate ploy to stave off the cancellation of a less popular character. Believe it or not, postmodern poster-boy Deadpool was once in this position.

Fans even linked franchises, as Emma Caulfield’s Dottie was theorized—and she herself falsely claimed—to be a central figure, given her prominence in the Whedonverse. The extrinsic clout that an actor—often one specializing in sci-fi or genre media—brings to fans is something I term “palimpsestic iconography” elsewhere (“Transformed”). Caulfield’s inhabiting of another fan favourite—Anya from *BUFFY* (US 1997–2003, Creator: Joss Whedon)—imbues her with a pleasurable recognizability to merged fandoms. Paul Bettany even teased the casting of “an actor that I’ve always wanted to work with, and we have fireworks together.” Fans ran wild with free association: Mephisto—the Devil—*THE DEVIL’S ADVOCATE* (US 1997, Director: Taylor Hackford)—Al Pacino! But the interview was a feint to distract from the appearance of White Vision, also played by none other than Paul Bettany. WANDA VISION confronts its overdetermined nature by trolling fans seeking to place it within a larger picture. The show, after all, is about the *hermetic* (the anomaly, the contained

TV set, the American nuclear family home, the small town) and the interstices between films, between action sequences, and between the broadcast and the reception.

Another way the show—affectionately, after all—trolls its fan base is by centering an audience proxy in an unprecedented manner. Unlike Coulson, whose fridging ironically sublimated his mediocre humanity in catalyzing literal gods to act, our human proxies in WANDAVISION anticipate, embody, then deflect and debunk *real-time* fan speculation throughout the show. Coulson is a collector of memorabilia. FBI agent Jimmy Woo and astrophysicist Darcy Lewis, however, watch, annotate, and analyze the contained WandaVision (hereafter underlined to distinguish it from the Disney+ show WANDAVISION), voicing questions already emerging on social media in real time. Their interpretive template is reified in Woo’s conspiracy board. Darcy’s heterodiegetic terminology conflates our experience with her contained one as a viewer: “she’s got a speaking part now”; “Wanda is using jump cuts”; “Twins—what a twist. What? I’m invested.” She even calls a Westview resident a “character,” with Woo correcting her with “real person.”

In their initial investigation into the WandaVision broadcast, Woo identifies “a reference to our reality” when Ultron is name-dropped. Director Hayward asks, “Is this authentic? Is it happening in real-time, recorded, fabricated?” eroding our categorization of reality, Marvel anchor reality, and homodiegetic meta sitcom reality in a neat tribute to what Umberto Eco dismisses as the “oneiric climate” of the superhero story; that is, what mainstream culture demeans as ‘bad comic-book writing.’ Geoff Klock clarifies: “Superhero literature already primes its avid readers to accept these kinds of contradictions and impossible situations because they have already assented to the contradictory continuity of many given superheroes. [...] suggesting that the reader is completely compromised from the beginning” (110). The show’s excess of content—a new decade, theme song, title sequence, aesthetic, and cast with every episode—confuses our careful fan curation of multiple realities, and hyperbolizes this same suspension of disbelief or conscious gullibility. In its most egregious or ingenious feint, WANDAVISION even teases the extradiegetic migration of the parallel but distinct X-MEN franchise through the uncanny ‘recasting’ of Evan Peters as Quicksilver. The miniseries concludes with a gesture to *a* multiverse, just not one that had merged (yet) with the recently acquired 21st Century Fox.

In a further thinning of multiversal boundaries, WANDAVISION’s metatext moreover confronts and consolidates *extrinsic* criticisms regarding diegetic and performative inconsistencies within the franchise. Agatha and Pietro

mock Wanda's (or, one supposes, actress Elizabeth Olsen's) erratic Sokovian accent; the show rewrites this as Wanda's performative ethnic covering in her media-inflected idealization of American life. Fan dissatisfaction with the retconning of Wanda's powers as the simplified telepathy and telekinesis tie-in to the Mind Stone is rescripted as Wanda's latent Scarlet Witch chaos and reality-altering magic, which *predate* her encounter with an Infinity Stone. Andrew J. Friedenthal identifies this "shift from a culture of information reliant upon footnotes to one reliant upon hyperlinks [...] it points to an acceptance of the mutability of that information" (154). *Zeitgeist* aside, comic fandom and the MCU, in particular, are uniquely attuned to 'real-time rewrites' that the contained WandaVision show stages but ultimately fails to institute.

What is fandom (including Wanda's own), after all, if not love persevering? Vision says goodbye to Wanda by defining his evolution as "a voice with no body, a body but not human, and now a memory made real." Not only is this Paul Bettany's trajectory from Jarvis's voice actor to the corporeal embodiment of Vision—an evolutionary reification of Tony Stark's original AI—but moreover a tribute to fans who have loved this character for decades. He is a voice with no body who, Angela Ndaliansis asserts, "live[s] in the memory and experiences of their readers," bringing that historicity to bear on the Vision's three-dimensional, if still fictional, realization (282).

Another fascinating evolution from the comics are the weekly WANDAVISION "spoilers without context" memes, which play on multimodal media's ambiguous, open link between signifier and signified (**fig. 2a-c**). Like the two-pronged Marvel approach to its old/new fanbases, the meme format—itsself reliant on comical dissonance between the palimpsestic layering of the image's now doubled meaning—makes use of the same iconography without *singular* meaning that renders its Easter eggs significant to one fan base and simultaneously harmless to another.

WANDAVISION ultimately offers a gentle, perhaps too subtle metacritique of our own relationship to media, and to the MCU in particular. We as viewers and fans *do not allow* for the types of narratives that Wanda is seeking to escape to and through anymore. Instead, we prioritize relentless futurity, the macro- and multi-cosmic, that leave no time (story or narrative) for grief, processing, nostalgia, historicity, or the self-contained story, all attempted through Wanda's embedded show. It is significant that her WandaVision is cancelled after seven episodes, segueing us into Episode 9: THE SERIES FINALE, where we are reconstituted within the familiar futurity and contextual meaning-making of the MCU. Wanda's backwards-oriented grief (not even resolved yet!) is eclipsed by the anticipatory excitement surrounding the

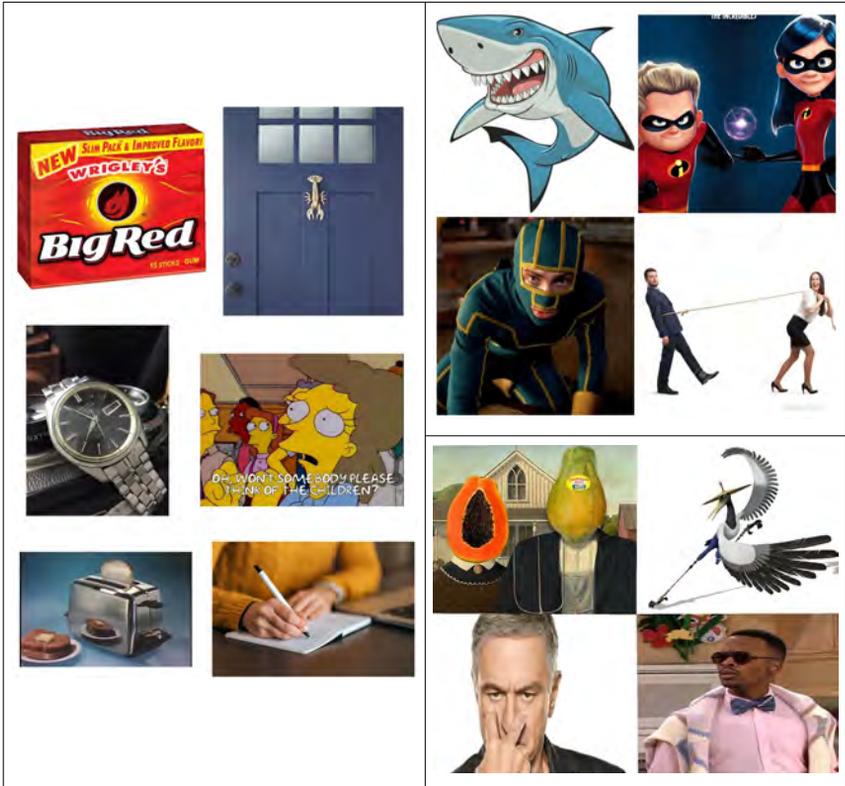


Fig. 2a-c: Three sets of WANDAVISION spoilers without context

debut of *Photon*, *THE MARVELS* (US 2023, Director: Nia DaCosta), *AGATHA ALL ALONG* (US 2025, Creator: Jac Schaeffer), and *DOCTOR STRANGE AND THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS*. Television in Wanda's world is serial, to be sure, but it is also episodic.

In another metatextual enactment, it is Wanda—and, tellingly, not the viewer—who suffers from event fatigue, and yet, she must wearily be subsumed to narrative at the close of this televisual experiment. Even the deeply personal, bodily, intimate experience of motherhood is coopted by the corporation, which has diegetically tricked Wanda into literal production of the next generation of Young Avengers. Even though *WANDAVISION* is able to demonstrate the beauty and originality in this kind of retro small-scale storytelling, the spoiler frenzy surrounding the show proves that the MCU fandom is not ready for, or has moved on from, the show Wanda herself produced, with its curated nostalgia for Americana and a particularly American

worldview that ultimately fails her as vicarious escapism. She enters Westview as a grieving, unstable, Sokovian refugee as Wanda Maximoff, but must ‘catch up to’ her prophesied incarnation (itself a retcon) as the Scarlet Witch, the living weapon. Disney and Marvel also continue to neglect to comment on the American militarism that birthed the Avengers: see the irrefutable popularity of Iron Man, whose Stark Industries features so prominently in Wanda’s traumatic past.

WANDA VISION, and all the Disney+ series to date, center on trauma: the interstices and the aftermath of the ekphrastic, glorified violence of the films. The convergent temporalities in the show—the calendrical; graduating through the decades; Tommy and Billy’s accelerated growth; Wanda and Agatha triptychally ‘walking through’ the sets of older MCU films; Monica re-manifesting post-Blip—are rendered comically insufficient when Vision reminds us in Episode 7: BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL (US 2021, Director: Matt Shakman) that for Wanda, the events of *our* past few years are “for her ... mere weeks ago.” On the one hand, the complex, postmodern formatting of WANDA VISION deflates weekly spoilers through misdirection and continual rewriting that diminishes the transformatively multiversal to the bathetic—the self-reflexive juvenility of Ralph Bohner. But more importantly, it compels the viewer to literally shift aspect ratios to the small screen, to a *historicized* MCU where grief must be processed in real time, where a refugee and heavily-accented immigrant woman curates and paces her own narrative, one which walks the audience through a metatextual examination of our own relationship to media itself.

Filmography

- AGATHA ALL ALONG. Creator: Jac Schaeffer. US 2025.
THE AVENGERS. Director: Joss Whedon. US 2012.
AVENGERS: ENDGAME. Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. US 2018.
AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR. Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. US 2018.
BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER. Creator: Joss Whedon. US 1997–2003.
THE BOYS. Creator: Eric Kripke. US 2019– .
THE DEVIL’S ADVOCATE. Director: Taylor Hackford. US 1997.
DOCTOR STRANGE AND THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS. Director: Sam Raimi. US 2022.
THE FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER. Creator: Malcolm Spellman. US 2021.
THE MARVELS. Director: Nia DaCosta. US 2023.
SPIDER-MAN: FAR FROM HOME. Director: Jon Watts. US 2019.
WANDA VISION. Creator: Jac Schaeffer. US 2021.

- WANDAVISION S01E02: DON'T TOUCH THAT DIAL. Director: Matt Shakman. US 2021.
- WANDAVISION S01E05: ON A VERY SPECIAL EPISODE Director: Matt Shakman. US 2021.
- WANDAVISION S01E07: BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL. Director: Matt Shakman. US 2021.
- WANDAVISION S01E09: THE SERIES FINALE. Director: Matt Shakman. US 2021.

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Is Performative Cinema Spoiler-Resistant?

The specter of the spoiler is haunting the social media community—especially when it comes to the long-awaited new season of a streaming series. Narrative media that rely on surprising turning points and plot developments can be spoiled if those aspects are shared on the internet. But can media narratives be spoiler-resistant? And if so, under what circumstances?

When Danish maverick director Nicolas Winding Refn shot his feature films *ONLY GOD FORGIVES* (DK/FR 2013) and *THE NEON DEMON* (FR/DK/US 2016), he insisted in interviews and workshops (especially at the Film Festival Cologne 2019) that his films were framed to look equally appealing on the big screen and on small iPhone displays. Apparently, he was thinking of the whole digital distribution process when making his films. In addition, he did not rely on established forms of plot development, turning points, and climaxes. As a result, it is hard to spoil any of his films in the usual sense, since everything we see is part of a complex web of eTvents that can hardly be explained in a *Twitter* post. The fact that the protagonist dies in the end—a reveal that would constitute a major spoiler in many other films—tells us nothing about the respective films, as they often lack a clear protagonist to begin with. Refn has, in other words, managed to create spoiler-resistant films that rely heavily on the performative power of *mise-en-scène* instead of a conventional “strong narrative.” His cinematography is the answer to the spoiler phobia of the internet community.

byNWR—the Refn Brand

When Refn claims that his cinema is created in a way that makes it equally effective on the big screen and on small smartphones, he refers to his unique cinematographic style, which he developed over a career of more than two decades. He began as an autodidact with the harshly realistic hand-held-camera gangster thriller *PUSHER* (DK 1996), which led to a full trilogy where the style changed along with the protagonists. With the minimalist psycho-thriller *FEAR X* (DK/UK 2003), Refn entered David Lynch territory, focusing on the alienated point of view of a traumatized man desperately searching for his vanished wife. In contrast to the dynamic and literally dirty naturalistic

images of the *PUSHER* films, *FEAR X* showed Refn's talent for highly stylized and at times even uncanny static tableaux. The protagonist's apathetic gaze is reflected in the symmetrical, brooding scenery and highlighted by occasional spots of light.

With his biopic *BRONSON* (2008) about the ultra-violent British inmate Charlie Bronson, who turns his prison surroundings into a stage and his own body into a piece of art, Refn took his experiments with film form even further. Here, he mixes temporal levels, reality, and imagination to such a degree that it becomes hard to tell the different layers of the film apart. In all this chaos, the protagonist appears as a guide to his own performance. With extreme body art and bizarre theater concepts, Refn creates a "performative cinema" (Stiglegger, *Ritual & Verführung* 210) that never relies on the basic nature of the narration. The whole film portrays the violent thug as an artist: very much a representation of how Refn saw his own position within genre and auteur cinema (Schlösser 68–69).

It was not until his breakthrough success *DRIVE* (US 2011) that Refn managed to get his foot in the door in Hollywood. He moved to L.A. with his family and continued to work with Ryan Gosling and Elle Fanning as his male and female muses, respectively. For the mass audiences who had loved *DRIVE*, *ONLY GOD FORGIVES* and *THE NEON DEMON* were provocative, highly enigmatic, fragmented, spiritually coded nightmares, painted in primary colors and underlaid with pulsating techno sounds. They learned that Refn is in fact color-blind and that he aims for a new performative cinema that relies on form, style, and composition not so much above substance but *as* substance. After *NEON DEMON*—which is tellingly set in the fashion industry—the director created his own fashion label, *byNWR*, and started collaborating with Gucci and Prada, even casting his own wife and daughters in fashion promos (2023).¹

It became increasingly clear that Refn aims to work outside the conventions of contemporary cinema. In the case of *VALHALLA RISING* (DK 2009), he uses long shots, very slow pacing and intentionally washed-out colors and occasionally monochromatic images. The effect is that scenes set in the Middle Ages often resemble a dystopian scenario with otherworldly landscapes, alien creatures and strange rituals. The topography and the actions of the small ensemble remain mysterious until the end. The freed slave and the young boy move through the landscape like the three men in the mythical Zone of

1 Gucci: youtu.be/fxJeEwkB8yw, Prada: www.prada.com/us/en/pradasphere/special-projects/2022/touch-of-crude.html.

Andrei Tarkovsky's *STALKER* (SU 1979). But while there is plenty of dialogue in Tarkovsky's film, Refn's protagonist is mute, which forces us to focus on the body, the landscape and the sound. The director does not believe in the mimetic idea of simulating history; rather, his view of history seems to be cyclical like in mythic transformations.

Refn has a strong interest in contemporary media and new forms of expression. When he announced his first streaming series for Amazon Prime, it sounded unique and exciting. But when *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* (US 2019; Creator: Nicolas Winding Refn and Ed Brubaker) was finally released in 2019, Amazon Prime didn't promote the series, but instead hid it on its platform, as it was considered too extreme for a mass audience (Brown). Refn had used the occasion to create something like a 13-hour feature film, split into segments of 30 to 100 minutes. Many parts are in Spanish with English subtitles (especially episode 2); some individual takes last several minutes. His unique idea of a streaming series highlighted his signature style: *streaming byNWR*. But how can this style be described?

Performative Cinema, Refn Style

Feature films usually balance performative and narrative aspects (Stiglegger, *Ritual & Verführung* 210–11). Audiences are used to the narrative aspect, especially with the popularity of serial narratives. Yet it is the performative aspect of film that marks Refn's style and audiovisual artistry. Over the course of his career, Refn has increasingly focused on a performative style as the substance of his films and series. At first glance, the concepts of film and performance seem to be mutually exclusive, at least if one follows Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Ästhetik des Performativen*, which deems a theatrical performance strikingly different from that of a film or series. For example, Fischer-Lichte emphasizes the "bodily co-presence of actors and spectators," which creates a bodily intersubjectivity that can address the relationship between the performance artist and an active, possibly interacting audience (Fischer-Lichte 63–64). This results in a performative production of materiality that is corporeal, spatial, phonetic, and temporal (129–30.). What emerges from this—in all its randomness and arbitrariness—Fischer-Lichte calls the "autopoietic feedback loop" (66–67),² a term with origins in neurology. Here, an artistic performance is understood as an experimental test arrangement.

2 All translations from German by the author.

To paraphrase Fischer-Lichte's argument, everyone co-determines the experiment and at the same time allows themselves to be determined by it, without any individual having full power over it (268). In the process, "emergence" can occur, phenomena that the artist cannot plan in advance or influence in any way: For Fischer-Lichte, "emergence" designates the phenomena that occur unpredictably and without a clear motivation, even if some of them seem quite logical in retrospect (186). This aspect guarantees the non-repeatability of a given performance, as it always "produces another performance [...], [so] that in this sense each performance is unique and unrepeatable" (82). These aspects of the interactive and the unpredictable characterize the aesthetics of the performative and lead, as Fischer-Lichte puts it, to a "re-enchantment of the world" (318–19): the aesthetics of the performative, Fischer-Lichte claims, aim at crossing boundaries (356).

The medium of film differs in several respects from performance art as defined here. First of all, the film screening is not a unique act but can always be repeated. The projected film can always be watched anew, unchanged. And while the audience's reaction remains unpredictable to an extent, it has no direct influence on the film shown. Thus, it is basically impossible for an "autopoietic feedback loop" to emerge. It is also difficult to conceive of emergence in the context of film, since this would presuppose an audience's direct influence on the work or a reaction by the artist. A "re-enchantment of the world" by means of film must necessarily remain absent. However, if we take a closer look at the *dispositif* of cinematic reception—the conditions under which film is received—we notice numerous variables that nevertheless speak for the uniqueness of film screenings. In analog cinema, the celluloid can wear out or tear, and the spliced film may differ from its previous form; the audience can force the termination of the screening or create shadows on the screen; distributors or filmmakers can circulate various cuts of a film; the screening can suffer from technical deficiencies and malfunctions. In addition, audience members can influence each other's reactions, i.e., the feedback loop develops within the screening space. This may give rise to a media aesthetics of disruption, but there is another approach to the performative quality of film.

As mentioned, movement, bodies, and sensuality—which are also central to theatrical performance—are elements of performance in film. These elements are ultimately impossible to intellectualize. They address the viewer's affective memory (Stanislawski) and provoke unintentional movements (e.g. protective impulses in the case of surprising bursts of movement in the image), spontaneous emotional outbursts (tears in melodramatic moments), and

psychosomatic affects (disgust, fear). The spectator's specific reaction is highly individual and shaped by their respective socialization. Herein lies another element of unpredictability in film reception. In addition, there is the question of individual media competence, because well-trained viewers can process more stimuli and information than inexperienced ones. In any case, we must distinguish between these performative sensual attacks of the film and its narrative flow, for although the two are not mutually exclusive, the sensation can take on a life and quality of its own. A key to analyzing the performative sensation of film, then, lies in its audiovisually evoked corporeality and its appeal to the spectator's own corporeality by means of haptic images and sounds.

Since the 1970s, filmmakers have reflected on these qualities of sensation and have tried to link avant-garde strategies of modern visual art with radical borderline forms of feature film. Examples include David Lynch with *ERASER-HEAD* (US 1979), E. Elias Merhige with *BEGOTTEN* (US 1990), and Philippe Grandrieux with *SOMBRE* (FR 1998). The strategy of these filmmakers is to create haptic images that bring a performative quality to the film:

Haptic images can give the impression of seeing for the first time, gradually discovering what is in the image rather than coming to the image already knowing what it is. Several such works represent the point of view of a disoriented traveler unsure how to read the world in which he finds himself. (Marks 178)

For the performative film, the viewer must be willing to surrender to the *mise-en-scène* just like the fan at a rock concert, wedged between like-minded people, robbed of their breath by the energy of the performance and the yearning push towards the stage. Film scholar Martine Beugnet emphasizes that "to open oneself to sensory awareness and let oneself be physically affected by an art work or a spectacle is to relinquish the will to gain full mastery over it, choosing intensity and chaos over rational detachment" (3).

This intensity arises when film is no longer understood as a merely narrative medium but transcends that boundary, bursting the secure membrane of the screen and pouring over the viewer, confronting them like a performative act. Film, then, exists only in its immediacy, making us forget the original distance and the dimension of time. The performative film literally touches the viewer physically through the retina, penetrating the body through the optic nerve and activating the affective memory without reservation. The seeing eye, the vibrating eardrum become organs of "CineSexuality" (MacCormack) and re-experience the world "like a disoriented traveler" (Marks).

Robin Curtis, in her essay "How Do We Do Things With Films?" (75–77), rightly refers to Dana Polan's 1986 paper emphasizing the limits of film

theories focused solely on individual works. Accordingly, film theory can only move forward by ceasing to be a theory of film as an object to be grasped in its essence, its specificity (Polan cited in Curtis 75). Thus, film should no longer be understood as an object or a work, but as an event: “Films perform, and every performance requires the presence of a series of supporting institutions” (75). However, this “performative turn” called for in film theory did not materialize immediately, only entering the general discourse after 2000, first with Patrick Fuery and my own publications (“Rituale der Verführung” 163–65; *Ritual & Verführung* 201–03.). Later, these issues were discussed in the Collaborative Research Center Kulturen des Performativen at Humboldt University Berlin, and specifically in the work of Curtis, who emphasizes the importance of the corporeal dimension for cinema as performance: The body is the site of the manifestations produced by the cinematic event, the literal “institution” that allows this act of perception to occur (Curtis 77).

Performative cinema acts out a sometimes gruesome spectacle on the “cinematic body” (Shaviri) invoked in cinematic performance. Prefilmic reality becomes the material of a film-aesthetic performance. As in a theatrical performance, the point is no longer the art object itself but the process that brings forth the object. This process questions and transgresses the boundaries of theoretically- and aesthetically-defined genres of art as well as the artist’s role. It is no longer what is told that counts—for the narrative content is unstable and interchangeable—but how it is told in the moment. Cinematic illusion, the simple mimesis of everyday social life, is completely abandoned, as is the psychological dimension of the characters. In this respect, it is hardly surprising that Marcus S. Kleiner, for example, takes a very similar approach to the cinematic miniature form of music video, because the video clip is, by definition, a fusion of pop as performance and cinematic performance. What is important is what these films do to the viewer, and especially *how* they do it. A close reading that explores this *how* can illuminate the seductive and performative quality of a film or series. In the following section, I will return to Refn and explore these aspects in the series *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG*, showing how his directing method makes spoilers irrelevant for the reception.

Case Study: *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG*

What Refn first attempted in his feature films after *FEAR X*, he managed to take further in his big-budget L.A.-based cop series *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG*. At the Cannes Film Festival, he decided to show only two episodes (4 and 5, according to film critic Jens Balkenborg in the podcast *Projektionen*

Kinogesprache [“Kinogesprache”]) to prove that it is possible to understand his concept without knowing the first three episodes. The audience should be able to begin viewing the series at any point. Following this concept, spoilers may be possible, but they are of no consequence. Refn works with false leads and unexpected turning points, including the replacement of the supposed protagonist, who is killed off long before the season’s finale. In fact, the male protagonists are replaced one by one by female counterparts. The two male-dominated systems of the series, the police and a cartel, are gradually challenged and replaced by a matriarchy, embodied by a female serial killer (Cristina Rodlo as Yaritza) and a supernaturally gifted lawyer (Jena Malone as Diana DeYoung). In terms of style, Refn again values performance over narrative, especially in the form of duration instead of narrative efficiency. In episode 1 (VOLUME 1: THE DEVIL), cop Martin Jones’s (Miles Teller) partner is executed by Jesús Rojas (Augusto Aguilera), the son of a female gang boss (Carlotta Montanari) who had been killed by the police earlier. We will later learn that Jesús killed the wrong person: it was in fact Martin who had killed his mother and who therefore should have been the target of his revenge.

In excessively long takes, Refn works with high-contrast image compositions. He uses long lenses in close framing to create a blurred background, so that the different layers of the image are separated from each other. The combination of focused textures and foggy diffusion creates surreal impressions of hyperreal figures in a dreamworld. When the camera moves, it does so very slowly and mostly in parallel to the acting space. In static takes, we see center-focused images, which have a confrontational effect while also isolating faces in the case of close-ups. This is underlined by a primary color palette of blue, red, and yellow, filmed from unusual perspectives.

On the soundtrack, Refn employs ambient drone sounds, combined with hyperreal sound effects. The world of *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* presents itself as highly artificial; here, the inner space—the psyche of the protagonists—resemble club spaces. The electronic music by Cliff Martinez and techno tracks by Julian Winding add to this club-like impression. Even the living room of a teenage girl is illuminated with stroboscope lighting, such as in episode 6 VOLUME 6: THE HIGH PRIESTESS, where Yaritza attends a Hollywood party.

The acting in *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* is dominated by silent gazes during long takes, an ultra-slow pace, and nearly slow-motion movements. For the dialogues, Refn asked his actors to wait a few seconds before they reacted; this adds to the overall calm and otherworldly atmosphere (fig. 1). The director often works with iconic actors like Tom Hardy, Elle Fanning, Mads Mikkelsen, John Turturro, and Keanu Reeves. For his series, he aimed for similar iconic



Fig. 1: Miles Teller in Episode 1 of *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG*

figures: Miles Teller as Martin Jones is a handsome but psychopathic cop, Augusto Aguilera plays the gangster Jesús as a rap star, Cristina Rodlo as Yaritza virtually becomes Santa Muerte, the sacred goddess of death, and Jena Malone appears as the openly esoteric lawyer Diana DeYoung, who also leads a ring of vigilantes killing pedophiles. DeYoung's handyman Viggo Larsen (John Hawkes) is a one-eyed ex-cop turned vigilante who suffers from cancer and kills criminals. There is clearly a strong mythical dimension to this ensemble, as many of them are named after characters from mythology like Diana, the hunting goddess, or Jesús the Messiah, while Viggo's character hints at Odin, the one-eyed god of Germanic mythology (also referred to in Refn's *VALHALLA RISING*, with Mads Mikkelsen as One-Eye). Thus, these characters always appear both as their straightforward role and as something bigger that goes beyond their function in the story. To push this aspect even further, each episode is named after a tarot card:

1. THE DEVIL
2. THE LOVERS
3. THE HERMIT
4. THE TOWER
5. THE FOOL
6. THE HIGH PRIESTESS
7. THE MAGICIAN
8. THE HANGED MAN

9. THE EMPRESS

10. THE WORLD

These cards refer to characters in the respective episodes, such as Martin with his dark secrets in Episode 1, Viggo as the Hermit in 3, Yaritza as the High Priestess in 6, or Diana as the Empress in 9. But they also are related to the unfolding events, such as Viggo’s speech about the transformative downfall of society in episode 4, with “The Tower” signifying apocalyptic change. These references are not merely superficial, but are meant to convey the worldview behind the series. In his workshop at Film Festival Cologne in 2019, Refn revealed that he regularly visits his idol, filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, for Tarot readings before he starts shooting a new project. Refn is, in other words, well versed in the world of Tarot. This additional layer also turns each episode into a stand-alone work. The titles themselves could actually be seen as spoilers—provided the audience is aware of their meaning. This is especially true for Episode 8, which covers the martyrdom and death of Martin Jones (VOLUME 8: THE HANGED MAN) at the hands of Jesús.



Fig. 2: Miles Teller and Nell Tiger Free in their final minutes

Taking the symbolism and mythical subtext of the series seriously is not only key to understanding what is going on, but also to appreciating the somnambulist overall style, which produces its own reference system of style *as* substance. As we deal with mythical—and thus potentially cyclical—events and characters, spoilers become irrelevant. There is a meta-meaning to

everything here that simply cannot be spoiled by the information that Martin and Janey (Nell Tiger Free) will be killed in Episode 8 (**fig. 2**). It is always the performative *how*, not the narrative *why* and *when* that counts.

Despite its slow pace, each episode of *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* climaxes in a performative situation: violence, dance, sex, speeches, and rituals referring to such events. As in his previous films, Refn focuses on excessive graphic violence, shown in gory detail and slow motion. These scenes are not shown to merely shock, but rather to fulfill a promise given during the preceding slow passages. They are more about the mythical logic of violence as a sacred blood sacrifice, to be enjoyed as a brutal “payoff” much like the cum shot in a pornographic film. Refn also underlines this discourse of violence that his films feed by focusing on eyes and gazes. To be a witness is crucial in this series. Violent acts must be witnessed and endured like in ancient martyrdom (the “blood witness”). Thus, violent acts are not presented as dramatic turning points or surprises but as logical solutions to a mythical cycle within the heightened framework of the *mise-en-scène* (**fig. 3**).



Fig. 3: Mass executions closing episode 2

These existential liminal experiences (in the sense of “Grenzerfahrungen” as formulated by Karl Jaspers) are underscored by brooding drone sounds penetrating the body, sometimes with ecstatic rhythms, emphasized on the visual level by contrasts and primary colors. In this way, the duration of violence or the acting out of deviant sexuality (like the whip-handle penetration in Episode 8) produce transgressive moments. The seemingly neutral and

emotionally indifferent acting style becomes a projection screen for all the feelings we develop as we face the performative excesses of the series. We do not relate to psychologically “true” characters but to the events as such. This is how the ultimately dream-like, hermetic world of *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* works.

Conclusion: A Truly Spoiler-Resistant Series

To prepare for this paper, I watched the whole series three times. Each viewing turned out to be more effective, exciting, and more entertaining than the previous one. So far, I have outlined how the series works on an aesthetic level. I will now summarize the elements that make *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* a spoiler-resistant series that goes far beyond the usual mechanisms of serial narrative streaming formats.

1. *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* features multiple characters of equal narrative importance. Protagonists change unpredictably from one episode to the next and eventually re-appear later. Thus, each episode works like a self-contained feature film with its own micro-dramaturgy. There is also a horizontal dramaturgy of episodes linked by an overarching plot, but it is vague enough that viewers might not be sure about the order of the episodes while watching.
2. Several subplots begin in certain episodes but are not followed through later, especially in cases where they lead in directions that hint at world-building beyond the core events. Yet many subplots are simply left unresolved like in David Lynch’s film *MULHOLLAND DRIVE* (US/FR 2001)—which was originally also conceived as a series.
3. The supposed main plots of *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* are interlaced with paranoid and spiritual themes, like underworld networks, extra-terrestrial influences, vigilantism. Refn paints a spiritual landscape of the United States that is marked by superstition, abuse, and openly celebrated fascism (like in the police headquarters scene, where the cops are chanting “fascism”).
4. *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG* is built on archetypal and mythical character design. As foreshadowed by their telling names, the protagonists gradually transform into the mythical characters they were always supposed to be. The psychological depth some series are praised for was never Refn’s aim. He never spends time on so-called backstory wounds or psychological motivation.

5. The heightened realism of the seemingly generic cop series aims at something bigger than life. Patriarchy is violently replaced by matriarchy in a slow apocalyptic process. This interpretation is also fueled by the intertextual connection with other films by Refn like *THE NEON DEMON*.
6. And finally, Refn's use of primary colors, high contrasts, low-focus range, and planimetric image composition grant his series (and his feature films) effective viewing on the big screen as well as on small smartphones. His performative and expressive mise-en-scène is created with a view to contemporary modes of reception.

TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG is a spoiler-resistant streaming series because it chooses performance over narrative and atmospheric immersion over rational understanding.

It is worth mentioning that Amazon Prime seems to intentionally hide the series within its freely accessible archive. It must be searched for specifically, and it will never appear as a suggestion. Apparently, the studio was not happy with the result and stopped collaborating with the director after completion of the series. There is no public statement available as to why Amazon Prime hides this expensive production and never properly promoted it after its release. However, in a 2023 interview with *Vulture*, the director stated:

Well, they took all my marketing money away because they were afraid that the show would reflect badly on Amazon. They told me that directly. They were so shocked by it. I was like, "What's so shocking?" They said, "It's going to make us look bad." And I said, "But I don't think anyone's going to look at you at all." Certain parts of Hollywood are so self-absorbed that they think they're at the center of the universe. The rule of fear is very dangerous. Amazon released the show, but they said, "We will bury you." And so they did. However, you can't bury a diamond. (Brown)

While there were in fact some promo posters and clips displayed on the US website, nothing of that sort appeared on the German Prime website (Miller). The series became available in a dubbed version on the official start date, but was not even placed in the recommended or news section.

The *byNWR* label continued the director's concept of streaming series as conceptual art on the rival platform Netflix with *COPENHAGEN COWBOY* (DK 2023, Creator: Nicolas Winding Refn), which employs stylistic strategies very similar to *TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG*. A female superhero miniseries set in Copenhagen's underworld, the show again heads for a final showdown between patriarchal and matriarchal structures. *byNWR* has become a unique stylistic and artistic trademark that has shaken up the world of commercial entertainment by tempting and seducing audiences into supposedly generic narratives that turn out to be apocalyptic and mythical mediascapes.

Filmography

- BEGOTTEN. Director: E. Elias Merhige. US 1990.
COPENHAGEN COWBOY. Creator: Nicolas Winding Refn. DK 2023.
DRIVE. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. US 2011.
ERASERHEAD. Director: David Lynch. US 1979.
FEAR X. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. DK/UK 2003.
MULHOLLAND DRIVE. Director: David Lynch. US/FR 2001.
THE NEON DEMON. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. FR/DK/US 2016.
ONLY GOD FORGIVES. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. DK/FR 2013.
PUSHER. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. DK1996.
SOMBRE. Director: Philippe Grandrieux. FR 1998.
TOO OLD TO DIE YOUNG. Creator: Nicolas Winding Refn and Ed Brubaker. US 2019.
STALKER. Director: Andrei Tarkovsky. SU 1979.
VALHALLA RISING. Director: Nicolas Winding Refn. DK 2009.

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Part 2: Literature

Some Notes on Suspense

Years ago, I attended an Easter service in a megachurch somewhere on the outskirts of Chicago. It was an impressive multimedia event with a gospel choir, movie snippets, a light show, and even artificial fog on the stage, where the altar used to be. When, at the show's climax, the pastor exclaimed "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed," the thousands of churchgoers crowded into the huge, storehouse-like building started cheering, shaking hands, congratulating and hugging each other (at the time, Corona was still a Mexican beer), and even dancing around. The air was full of joy. However, something seemed odd to me. Since Good Friday is neither a federal holiday in the United States nor a very important day in the liturgical calendar—at least not in the Pentecostal church where I found myself—there hadn't been any solemn occasion to collectively commemorate Jesus's crucifixion three days before. Yet, celebrating his resurrection would require mourning him as having suffered and died in the first place. In Catholic regions, people fast and refrain from eating meat between Ash Wednesday and Easter Friday. Pious Christians even used to ritually weep every morning during Lent, as my own mother did when I was a child. Even though the Easter service included a movie describing the crucifixion in drastic detail, this seemed to me both a bit belated and somewhat too rushed. In a way, at least according to my expectations, the churchgoers were deprived of the true joy of Easter because they were only given the second half of the ritual: the happy ending without an extended period of mourning preceding it.

This omission is no "spoiler," of course. But it does cut into the story of redemption and hope; it removes the contrasts and flattens how it is experienced. It does so not by prematurely disclosing the outcome, but by skating over the counterpoint, the contrasting middle part of the story that makes the outcome meaningful in the first place. You could say it is an inverse way of curtailing the effectiveness of a story: reducing it to its happy ending, but leaving out the preceding dramatic event. At the same time, it reminds us that the way spoilers are said to affect the reception of a story does not apply in this case. The Passion story is structured around turning points—indeed extremely spectacular ones, from life to death and back to life—yet there is nothing in it that a spoiler could spoil. Anyone who is open to the message of

the gospels knows that Christ's triumphal resurrection is at their center. But even full awareness of this does not prevent true believers from going through days of sorrow and shared suffering during Lent, year after year.

Circular and Directed Narratives¹

Spoilers are commonly understood as the undesirable disclosure of one or several decisive plot elements of a story. The disclosure deprives the story's now all-too-well informed receivers of an affect that is simultaneously tormenting and sensuous: suspense. However, in texts like the Easter Gospel, there are no moments of suspense or surprise that can be flattened by prematurely disclosing the ending. It is pointless to reveal the secret of a revealed religion: by definition, the truth is already known. But that does not impair the forcefulness of the narration; on the contrary. Holy texts may be based, as in this case, on a one-time historical event; but as canonized scripts of a ritual being repeated time and again, they have their own temporality. Although they follow a determined sequence in which every detail has its place, there is no temporal gradient, as it were. While the plot is evolving, all its parts from beginning to end are simultaneously co-present. Such stories captivate their audiences not by withholding a key piece of information, but through a sequential recollection and re-presentation (in the sense of the German term *Vergegenwärtigung*) of what is eternally there.

Rituals generally have a circular structure, and their cultural efficacy is based on their repeated re-enactment. Thus, we can establish a first conceptual distinction: between *circular* plots and those that are *directed* or *linear*; only linear plots can produce effects of suspense and are therefore prone to being spoiled. It should be noted, however, that this distinction is by no means clear-cut: even the consumption of directed narratives such as novels or feature films can take on a circular character by being repeated often, as will be discussed below.

Ritualistic narratives (or narrated rituals) are not the only story subgenre that is immune to "spoiler attacks." There are many other examples. Take fairytales: you would not seriously "spoil" them by letting their audience know beforehand that the hero will kill the dragon and marry the king's daughter.

1 The following remarks stem from my ongoing work on a general theory of narrative. They do not focus on specific literary or cinematic works, but rather attempt to provide a differentiated set of categories for their analysis from a literary historian's perspective.

ter. The same applies to other conventionalized plot structures. However, predictability is not the only reason why the concept of suspense, including its psychological implications, does not apply to these kinds of stories. A deeper reason lies in their being structured by a different kind of motivation and causality.

Some explanatory remarks are in order here.² First, we should note that there are three basic linkages or “knots” between narrative elements, expressed in the conjunctions “and,” “then,” and “because.” A text that consists merely of an additive sequence of elements will have difficulty passing as a narrative. Inventories, lists, timetables—and to some extent, chronicles—mark a lower limit of narrative organization. Even if they form the very base of narration, sequences in the “then” mode appear to lack something, as if they were underdetermined. Temporal sequence pushes past itself toward causal connection. At least in modern times, we rarely describe a sequence of events without attributing to it an implied causality that is, to use an expression by Fritz Breithaupt, “on the go” (137). Thus, juxtaposition tends to transform itself into causality, *post hoc* into *propter hoc*, although this causality might be unspecific and ambiguous. In general, “because” linkages in narrative make do with weak motivation. The elixir of narration consists precisely of this interference, in the not-fully-determined zone between the linkage’s modalities. For just like the pure “and” and “then” sequences, strict causal junctures are ultimately not of a narrative nature; an unfolding mathematical proof hardly lends itself to presentation as a narrative. The spinning of a tale thrives on the *possibility of an alternative linkage*, that is, of another possible sequence, and hence of weakened motives and causalities that have been unsettled by countervailing forces. And it is precisely the availability of alternatives, the possibility that things could turn out otherwise, that makes a story potentially suspenseful. This applies likewise to the outcome (the “what”) and the way in which events will unfold (the “how”) (Pütz 15).³

It should be added that causality is a historically protean category: more an umbrella concept than one possessing stable validating criteria. Specifically, we need to distinguish between two temporal directions of causal relationships: between *causa efficiens* and *causa finalis*, that is, between an explanation on preceding grounds and one based on a goal to be realized. This is relevant to narrative theory in that stories can be motivated by a beginning

2 In the following, I draw on more detailed elaborations in chapter 2 of my study *Fact and Fiction*.

3 See also Simon Spiegel’s chapter on this.

or by an end. What is causal in the narrower sense here is an embedding of the plot in a context of cause and effect. This contrasts with “finality” in the sense of motivation by a governing principle taking in the frame of action: a “numinous authority.” Invoking German literary scholar Clemens Lugowski’s 1930s theory of medieval prose fiction, narratologists have shown how with increasing representational realism the old plot motivation “from behind” is converted into motivation for a roaming space of action and protagonists’ interpretive horizon. According to Armin Schulz and Harald Haferland, pre-modern narrative is characterized by an extensive process of “a-causal apposition,” a process explained by the fact that “narration oriented towards the relation between partial aspect and totality either suppresses or at least neglects causal motivations.” “Since older narration,” Schulz and Haferland argue,

is tied much more clearly and specifically to existing material, plot schemas, and motifs than modern narration, the plot is usually much more strongly motivated by final goals, thus by the ending. [...] Correspondingly, in pre-modern narratives we find far fewer reasons given for something happening; rather, most events are only connected through simple succession. “Then” or “afterwards” would be the most appropriate conjunctions here, but not “therefore.” (41–42)⁴

Again, there’s a limit to the production of suspense here. Plot motivation “from behind” is not exactly what we would expect from a thrilling movie or book. Outcome-oriented suspense emerges from a different mode of motivation. To hook the audience by means of suspense, a story needs to unfold within an open horizon: against the backdrop of other paths the plot might take, as previously stated. In short, suspense depends on uncertainty and thus on risk—yet only to a certain degree. The uncertainty has to be channeled, as it were, by a limited choice of alternative endings. The most important limiting factor, at least in the modern era, is realism. If every turn of the story is possible at every moment without any narrative “costs,”—without any threats to the risk-taking protagonist with whom we identify—suspense equally evaporates. There would not even be any surprise because surprise is conditioned on reliable expectations. Surprise thwarts expectations, which must exist in the first place.

In this connection it is worth briefly mentioning a literary genre that emerged at the dawn of modernity and that contains an overdose of uncertainty. I am talking about the picaresque novel. Its protagonist, the picaro—

4 Translations from German are my own.

typically a figure from the lower stratum of society—is thrown into a world that undermines any endeavor to lead a predictable life. Consequently, the picaro’s life story as told in the novel is ripe with sudden changes and unforeseen turns. The rules guiding their lives are dictated from outside, and even if they attempt to control these mightier forces—and they do so with the tools of the powerless: opportunism, deceit, frequently switching sides—they only succeed temporarily. One could say that there is a disconnect between the (external) causalities of the plot and the hero’s inner motivation. This, again, is a limiting condition for suspense. The experience of a permanently changing fate limits the creation of suspense. As we see from this example, suspense is furthermore tied to *intention*, to pursuing goals which might fail but at least have a chance of being accomplished.

Temporal Structure and Suspense

To summarize: suspenseful stories need a directional structure, and their elements (or “knots” as previously described) must be connected in a tentatively causal way, as opposed to a mere addition or temporal sequence, while being open to alternative outcomes—and provided that the range of alternatives is limited by the gravitational forces that genre and storyline activate and imply. Furthermore, such stories need a central character whose subjectivity is accessible to the narrator, who behaves intentionally and pursues goals that they may or may not achieve. In witnessing a protagonist’s struggle, we are drawn into their existential condition and usually cannot avoid reacting with empathy. This makes us feel situationally vulnerable, which in turn triggers an uneasiness that is more physical, based in the body, than cognitive (“somatic empathy” as Simon Spiegel calls it in his chapter). And uneasiness, as an emotional state on the verge of fear, is the enabling condition for suspense.

All stories centered around a set of protagonists share an archaic principle: that the most relatable character—almost always the good actor in the story—will ultimately prevail. So the basic question such stories have to answer is whether the good will prevail. In their simpler versions, such stories give a positive answer from the outset, and this structure is never questioned. In their more nuanced realizations, the result is hidden, the process of receiving an answer is extended, and the protagonist faces hurdles and setbacks on their quest. The fact that we participate not only in the hero’s quest and risk-taking but also in the uncertainty of the outcome makes these realizations suspenseful. They address a metaphysical question that has been broken down to its fundamentals: is the world good? Yet instead of a generalizing philosophical

answer, these stories offer a narrative one. That is, the answer depends on the fate of a particular character in a particular situation, whose perspective and horizon—and that means, whose uncertainty—we temporarily share.

That leads us to a phenomenon I call the dual temporal structure of narration. One of narratology's simple but consequential basic tenets is the nearly always retrospective nature of the narrative process. As a total composition, a narrative is determined by its end (which is different from the "motivation from behind" in medieval storytelling mentioned before), even when that end is initially hidden from the recipient—and often from its narrative voice. Both narrating and reading are thus located within a double temporal order: "Those who read narrative texts," observe Matias Martínez and Michael Scheffel,

are doing something seemingly paradoxical: they take in the represented story as something simultaneously open and present and closed and past. The events appear to be past to the extent that, from the start, they are conceived as a closed whole and narrated in the preterit—as a chronological form in which the beginning is already coherently related to the end. (119)

It is only at the end of the reading, however, that the narrative's character as a "closed whole" reveals itself. While the reading process is ongoing, the reader experiences the narrated action as open and indeterminate—the precondition for understanding and empathy. As Martínez and Scheffel continue: "Because narrative texts are depictions of human action, as readers we have to reconstruct the protagonists' open horizon of possibilities in order to be able to understand their actions as actions in the first place" (121).

The rules of narrative attention-guidance demand that readers—and this even applies to repeated readings—block out their potential knowledge of the action's progression and ending and synchronize their consciousness with that of the hero. For readers to successfully identify with a fictional hero's existential situation and temporal horizon, they need to at least temporarily lose awareness of the composition's closure: of the coherent interrelatedness of its temporal elements, its inner stasis. The action's progress as a series of unspecified open moments steadily intersects with contexts that face backwards and forwards; the progress is ultimately cancelled out through its embedding in a completed textual form. But this reality cannot dominate the receiver's consciousness. Käte Hamburger observes that "epic fiction [is] the only place in cognitive theory" where the "subjectivity of a third person can be represented as a third" (115). This anthropological accomplishment of narration depends, on the receiver's side, on a capacity to operate on two constantly changing temporal planes. The receiver must be able to leap forwards and

backwards between the limited temporal world of the narrative agents and the free temporal organization of the narrative itself. Martínez und Scheffel describe this as the “doubled epistemic structure of narrative texts between the agent’s and narrator’s perspective”: “Narrated texts unite [...] two different epistemic perspectives, the protagonist’s practical level of experienced life and the analytic-retrospective level of the narrator. For the reader, understanding a narrative text means being aware of both perspectives” (122).

That we are able to lose sight of the “closed whole” of a story while synchronizing our perspective with that of the protagonist, through whom the narration is focalized, explains why we can experience suspense even if we already know the story by heart. Which means that this experience can hardly be “spoiled.” Apparently, withholding relevant information is only one aspect of making a story suspenseful, and often not the most important one. This corroborates the claim noted above: that there is not only a cognitive, but also an affective dimension to suspense. The more the narration invites us to identify with our hero’s sorrows or triumphs, the more we invest emotional “work,” the more a text keeps its secret even when we know the outcome, thus making the re-reading more pleasurable. To solve the riddle of why—and based on which factors—a repeated reading or viewing can still be suspenseful (see the respective discussion in Spiegel’s chapter), it might be useful here to establish a distinction between re-readable and “one-shot” stories, where only the latter are prone to consequential spoilers.⁵

A dynamic interaction unfolds between the overall frame of a story and the process that its protagonists undergo. There are many possible arrangements. In some, as discussed, the preponderance of the framing significantly weakens, even freezes the narrative progression. In those cases, the plot structure might still contain moments of suspense and surprise, but they are put into brackets by the conventions guiding the overall narrative. The story’s “loose elements,” so to speak, might guard their secret until the final resolution and thereby cause impatience and a feeling of insecurity in the receiver, but they are counterbalanced by a fixed and stabilizing scheme bringing the story to a predictable end. The fact that Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple will eventually help to convict the perpetrator is guaranteed by convention: that is how detective stories end. The only open question is how they reach their conclusions. This brings us to one more conceptual distinction: between

5 On re-reading, see also Dana Steglich’s chapter.

“flexible” and “firm” elements of a narrative. The former put the audience in a state of unrest, while the latter allow them to still feel reassured.

Redundancy and Variance

We have now turned from a typology of narratives—some suspenseful, others not—to opposing forces within the act of storytelling as such. To elaborate, we can call the two driving forces redundancy and variance. Redundancy consists in fulfilling a given genre and narrative schema: for instance, of fairytales or detective stories. It satisfies a need for confidence in the way events will unwind. But of course, pure redundancy would be boring, making the reassuring predictability that comes with it meaningless and dry. A narrative schema only comes alive in being tangibly realized. It thus needs variance—deviation from the schema—to draw attention to the specific story being told. The appropriate Latin expression here is *variatio delectat*, “variation gives delight.” Stories grip their audiences through the promise held by each specific case, which is to say by concealing their redundant side. They thus spark a pleasure that has a double origin and that comes from a conflicted feeling related to what psychoanalysis terms “Angstlust” (Balint): a pleasure derived, on the one hand, from the distance between an intradiegetic world and an extradiegetic situation untouched by it; and on the other hand from the combination of surprise and satisfied expectation. Consequently, the tension felt by those hearing or reading a story is not only grounded in wanting to know what comes next. As mentioned before, stories with a totally open horizon of possibilities, where everything can happen at any time, are not exciting. Rather, excitement results from whether awakened expectations are fulfilled in line with the logic of a particular plot, and if so, how.

An emphasis on the dimension of redundancy seems to contradict the view that the purpose of narrating lies chiefly in imparting news, that is, singular events. The pleasure of storytelling gravitates towards what is unexpected, not what is expected: deviation from the familiar, stepping outside a cultural or group-specific norm. Conformity with expectations fails to catalyze conscious exertion; accordingly, it merits no special mention. But a sequence of reactions contradicting a typical behavioral pattern stimulates the inventive narrative spirit, causing it to either “normalize” the deviation through choice of another mental schema or render it plausible through a narrative bridge. “Stories fill the breach when typification fails,” (180) narratologist David Herman observes. It is not possible to discuss here in detail with what kind of

means this occurs. But we should take note of one particular tendency of narrative schemas that seems especially important: the dissolution of anomalies. In the interplay of scheme and variation, we can understand redundancy as the moment of inertia within stories, which, in order to nevertheless attract attention, consistently require and generate new material.⁶

What is the function of narrative redundancy? We can refer here to the value of recognizability of narrative patterns as a psychological factor; this leads in turn to the reliable fulfillment of expectations, a factor with strong emotional resonance. The charm of uniform narrative constructions is evident in simple literary genres that use a limited number of formulas into which a theoretically infinite number of possible combinations can be inscribed. Take again the fairy tale as a prime example. Regardless of what takes place in a fairy tale and how horrific individual episodes may be, our trust in the stability of the formulaic system is never disappointed. The genre's pop-culture variants make use of the same effect. Something similar is common in extra-literary contexts as well: satisfied expectations of order offer so much protection that denying portions of reality is preferable to abandoning one's bond with a narrative that has been adopted by the receiver.

Depending on the receiver's perspective, then, a story modelled upon a recurring and recognizable pattern is either a variation of the same, or something singular and different from every other version. The first can make you feel safe, while the second can make you feel thrilled. The first tells you that the fictional world you are immersing yourself in accords with your world view and cognitive orientations; the second challenges you in a way that is mostly sensuous, yet oftentimes also disturbing. Usually, it comes down to a mixture of both, on two different levels: one level is attached to the plot and a "naïve" absorption into what is going on; the other level invites the learned readership or movie audience to a kind of meta-consideration of the narrative techniques, psychological plausibility, causal links, and affordances of the respective plot schema or genre.

Displacement of Frames

Having described the conditions for suspense in a general way, I'd like to conclude with a look at more recent developments. If we consider the media environment of today's storytellers, we might assume that it shifts the equa-

6 For further elaboration, see my study *Fact and Fiction*, chapter II.3.

tion towards redundancy. Every possible storyline, every generic convention seems to have been exploited, if not exhausted in manifold ways. Looking at the industrialized mass production of fiction around the globe every day and reducing it to its basic patterns, we find iteration again and again. Authors, playwrights, and filmmakers will have trouble lending their oft-repeated stories an unheard-of twist.

This, however, has driven them to expand the range of variations. They are encouraged by a postmodern condition of storytelling that opens up a combinable set of narrative realizations. Furthermore, postmodernism has conditioned producers of fiction and their audience to deploy irony and thus deliberately play with conventional expectations. As Spiegel outlines in his chapter, the change of media environment plays a decisive role here: in the digital era, “forensic fandom” (Mittell 128) and active participation of the audience open up space for negotiations and “departure from established forms.”

Or, seen from a different perspective, those established forms have lost their pertinence. We can observe a dissolution of guiding narrative patterns at work across the board. Once again, we should call to mind the archaic principle of narration mentioned above: namely, that the character closest to us—almost always the good actor in the story—will ultimately prevail. As Noel Carrolls argues, the value system established by the respective work and the audience’s respective moral evaluation play an important role. However, that presupposes that we know the difference between good and evil, where the protagonists stand, and which side we are on. And most fundamentally, that the distinction can be upheld in the first place. In many popular narratives, this is no longer the case; popular heroes who fight for the good cause are increasingly ambiguous. Take the case of James Bond, who, in his most recent iterations, has become a traumatized perpetrator of violence. Or look at the other side of the spectrum, at an anti-hero like Arthur Fleck in *JOKER* (US 2019, Director: Todd Phillips), who nevertheless demands empathy, even compassion.

The secret that the narrating instance withholds from listeners in order to capture their attention no longer pertains only to the stories’ outcome within a predetermined frame. It concerns the frame as well. If the protagonists’ career constantly blurs the line between the good side and the bad side, the metaphysical riddle that stories are supposed to solve becomes unanswerable. Thus, in this type of story there is more at stake than whether the good heroes will prevail in their quest. And since there might be no solution to the question of good and evil, asking it—enduring it, constantly bearing it in

mind—becomes more important than superficially answering it. Hence, we are dealing with a kind of “two-storied” suspense, which concerns the plot on one level and the frame encompassing the story on another. This, in turn, has an impact on the consequences of potential spoilers. They not only uncover how things in a particular case will turn out, but also cut into the tension (in the double sense of the German word *Spannung*) between story and frame.

We should add, of course, that the perpetual displacement of the frame has become a predominant generic feature in today’s commercial storytelling insofar as filmic narratives, especially, are spread across several sequels. As a rule, every sequel shifts the frame of reference in a different direction. Thus, what I have described as a metaphysical loss of security in popular storytelling is reflected in its formal arrangements, too: the need to keep viewers, who are no longer synchronized by a fixed broadcast schedule, in a state of suspense in order to make them long for the series’ continuation. A spoiler here is simply a threat to the business model of film production firms and, to a lesser extent, the book industry.

Translated from German by Joel Golb and Michael Thomas Taylor

Filmography

JOKER. Director: Todd Phillips. US 2019.

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Spoil the Classics: Considering the Differences between Reading and Rereading Literature

Even though the term “spoiler” is not used at all—most likely because it had not permeated mainstream popular culture in 1997—a brilliant illustration of the perils of literary spoilers is at the center of an episode of the TV Show FRIENDS (US 1994–2004, Creator: David Crane and Marta Kauffman). In the episode, Rachel and Joey have recommended their favorite novels to each other. As a result, Rachel is now reading Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1977) and Joey is reading Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868). When Joey accidentally talks about the ending of *The Shining* in front of Rachel, she retaliates by telling him the outcome of the main love story in *Little Women*. For a moment, the two go back and forth, revealing spoilers to each other, but Rachel deals the knockout blow when she tells Joey that Beth (one of the sisters in *Little Women*) will eventually die. Joey’s reaction says it all: disbelief, shock, and pain race over his features as he jumps off the couch and points an accusatory finger at Rachel. Joey is so distraught that he only calms down when two of the other friends convince Rachel to pretend that she was lying, that she made up Beth’s death in order to hurt him. The implication is clear: by telling Joey of Beth’s death, Rachel just “ruined the first book he ever loved that didn’t star Jack Nicholson” (THE ONE WHERE MONICA AND RICHARD ARE JUST FRIENDS [US 1997, Director: Robby Benson]).

Although the dramatic dimensions are played up for comedic purposes, I would argue that many spoiler-defining elements are on display in this interaction. First, we see that spoilers are, at their core, pieces of information. Even more specifically, we see that Rachel and Joey both reveal narrative elements, specific plot points, dependent, one could argue, on the genre of their respective novel as well as their personal priorities when reading the text. While Joey reveals horror elements as well as the ending of *The Shining*—who lives, who dies—Rachel focuses on the relationships central to *Little Women*, the love story between Jo and Laurie (which she describes in vocabulary reminiscent of the soap operas she loves and Joey starred in) and the death of Jo’s beloved sister Beth. Rachel does not mention that Jo goes on to write a novel or who she ends up marrying, which suggests that not all information is equally crucial when it comes to spoilers.

Still, in both cases, knowledge of the information comes with a certain power or control, insofar as the information regulates the spoiled person's reading experience. Because what the FRIENDS scene highlights, first and foremost, is the fact that spoilers pose a threat to enjoyment. This simple fact underlies all spoiler discourse: from philosophical pondering about the morality of spoiling, to controversial newspaper headlines like "Man stabs colleague in Antarctica because of book spoilers." Just as in the FRIENDS scene, spoilers affect emotions.

And finally, both Rachel and Joey are able to spoil each other's reading experience because the information they each receive from the other is about a part of the story they themselves have not yet experienced, which makes time—or timing—the final element of any spoiler.

Listing these elements—the nature of spoilers as (specific, genre- and audience-dependent) information; the power wielded through spoilers; the emotions at play (most evidently the enjoyment of a reading experience); and the timing of a spoiler—highlights various aspects of spoiler discourse we could be focusing on. And there are, of course, more to add, such as fan culture and community aspects.¹ But in comparing these findings to existing definitions of spoilers, one could make a case for *time* being, in fact, the key element. Henry Jenkins argues that, historically, the term and concept of spoiling "emerged from the mismatch between the temporalities and geographies of old and new media" (30). Benjamin Johnson and Judith Rosenbaum define spoilers as "premature and undesired information about how a narrative's arc will conclude" (1069). And Jonathan Gray emphasizes the same aspect of temporality when he says that "[s]poilers include any information about what will happen in an ongoing narrative that is provided before the narrative itself gets there" (147).

The emphasis on the temporal aspect of spoilers is unsurprising, but it does lead me to my central hypothesis: namely, that a spoiler affects what is generally classified as the 'first' reading experience. Having knowledge of a literary spoiler—Rachel knowing who survives *The Shining* or Joey knowing that Beth will die—creates a new reading experience, one that is different from the reading experience that did not happen and which is perceived as a loss by the victim of the spoiling. The contrast between the spoiled reading

1 The community aspect of spoilers, which Henry Jenkins's research emphasizes, or the context of fan culture, which Matt Hills focuses on, is also on display in the FRIENDS episode, since both Joey and Rachel are introduced as fans of their respective novels, and Joey's fan-like excitement for *The Shining* is the reason why he cannot help but spoil the story for Rachel.

experience and this alternative first reading experience, the “what if the spoiler hadn’t happened” timeline, is the focus of this article.

Spoiling Literature

To this day, both the concept of spoilers and the review culture surrounding them are much more apparent in film and television than in literature. On a practical level, the reason why books as a medium are less likely to be spoiled is simply because the time needed to read a book differs greatly from reader to reader and thus, simultaneity on the scale of international cinema or streaming releases is rarely achieved, except for singular literary events like the releases of the later *Harry Potter* novels. The fact that spoiling does not affect the literary medium in the same way it does film and television also has consequences for the amount of research conducted on spoilers in the field of literature. In Richard Greene’s study on the philosophy of spoilers, for example, an overwhelming number of the examples used to illustrate his observations are taken from movies and TV series, while barely any are from literature.

When talking about literature, Greene argues that it is “not considered timely in the way that movies and television programs are. By design, a novel, if good, will be as enjoyable now as it was in the past and will be in the future” (135). This seems to suggest that spoilers do not affect literature at all. But in his contemplation of literary spoilers, Greene creates an interesting paradox. On the one hand, he tries to limit the time frame in which a book is ‘spoilable’ to “one year or the point at which it drops off the best-seller list, whichever is later” (135). But on the other hand, he bemoans that many novels that are way past this spoiler expiration date have been spoiled simply because their contents have long since become common knowledge. The texts he identifies as belonging to this category of “simply too ‘out there’” (40n9) have all attained the status of classics.

In recent years, the concept of spoilers and the etiquette surrounding them has spread out from visual media and is no longer limited to film and television. Proof that spoiler culture has reached literary discourse is most visibly found in the current blogosphere and BookTube communities where spoiler-free book reviews are frequently advocated for, no doubt inspired by trends in film and TV criticism. At the same time, jokes about spoiler warnings are often closely connected to the idea of spoiling classic literary

works.² While it is considered possible to spoil *STAR WARS: EPISODE IV – A NEW HOPE* (US 1997, Director: George Lucas) or—to name a more highbrow example—*THE GODFATHER* (US 1972, Director: Francis Ford Coppola), the idea that you could spoil *Hamlet* (1599/1601) or *Moby-Dick* (1851) is usually treated as a joke. This discrepancy, I would argue, is not simply tied to the different time frames the two types of media exist in but also to a difference in status. Books are still, to this day, considered a more intellectual medium. Less of an experience, less limited to one-time consumption.

So even though new audiences for classic texts are born with every generation, the reasons why the idea of spoiling something like *Hamlet* is generally considered laughable are threefold. First, because it was published over 400 years ago; second, because as a classic piece of literature, the plot of *Hamlet* has been deemed common knowledge; and third, because of the assumption that even if you had not known the ending of *Hamlet* before someone told you, the spoiler would not matter because there is so much more to *Hamlet* than its ending. We will dig further into what exactly the “so much more” assumes about classic literature later on. But first, let us consider the argument as a whole. Does this view of classic texts mean that the negative connotation of the term spoiler simply does not apply to literary spoilers? Can you, quite simply, not spoil books in the same way you can spoil movies?

What Do Spoilers Spoil?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the etymology of the word ‘to spoil’ relates to the forceful act of taking something valuable, be it goods, property, or territory, from a defeated or dead enemy. To spoil someone or something means to strip a person of something or to damage an object to such an extent as to render it useless. The ‘spoiler’ by the same logic is the one who pillages or plunders, the one who destroys.³ So what, if anything, is destroyed by a literary spoiler? Answering this question was the main motivation behind one of the earliest studies on the effects of spoilers.

2 See, for instance, the popular cartoons by John Atkinson (wronghands1.com/).

3 In June 2007, the colloquial use of the word signifying the “description of a significant plot point or other aspect of a movie, book, etc., which if previously known may spoil a person’s first experience of the work” is added, and in 2018, the term “spoiler alert” was included in the *OED* as well, defined as “an intervention used to warn a reader that an important detail of the story is about to be divulged or alluded to” (“Spoil, *V.* (1)”, “Spoiler, *N.*”).

In 2011, Jonathan Leavitt and Nicholas Christenfeld let participants read spoiled as well as unspoiled short stories and compared the readers' reported enjoyment. The surprising results of this study showed that subjects preferred spoiled over unspoiled stories. Leavitt and Christenfeld interpreted these results in the context of text comprehension and concluded that in "all these types of stories, spoilers may allow readers to organize developments, anticipate the implications of events, and resolve ambiguities that occur in the course of reading" (1153).⁴

On the surface, the results of this study seem to agree with the aforementioned assumption that the negative connotation of the term spoiler simply does not apply to literary spoilers. But, as Leavitt and Christenfeld concluded themselves, the students' "enjoyment" was not measured as excitement or joy when engaging with the stories. Instead, their enjoyment appeared to be measured solely on the level of text comprehension.⁵

The discrepancy between the judgement of spoilers from the perspective of comprehension theories versus the perspective of excitation transfer theory motivated Johnson and Rosenbaum to recreate Leavitt's and Christenfeld's study in 2015. With different parameters to specify "enjoyment," their study revealed the opposite result; namely: that unspoiled stories were deemed significantly more enjoyable than spoiled stories (Johnson and Rosenbaum 1082). In their follow-up study from 2016, Rosenbaum and Johnson offered an explanation for this contrast. Their second study showed that "depending on an individual's personality traits, a spoiler can have differential effects on enjoyment of, or even one's desire to read, a narrative" (Rosenbaum and Johnson 30), and specifically, that only "those low on need for cognition"

4 For an overview of empirical research on spoilers, see Judith Rosenbaum's chapter.

5 In 2013, Leavitt and Christenfeld expanded on this in a second study, in which they argued for three possible explanations for their previous findings: firstly, "that spoilers improve the experience of reading by making stories more fluent, with fluency defined as subjective ease of processing"; secondly, "that readers of spoiled stories draw greater enjoyment from aesthetic elements because they are less focused on guessing the outcome"; or, thirdly, "that readers take pleasure in stories concluding in the manner they expected, and this adds to the otherwise undiminished joy of reading a story" (Leavitt and Christenfeld 94). Thus, in their second study, Leavitt and Christenfeld specified the rather vague notion of "enjoyment" to be gained either from fluency in understanding (text comprehension), aesthetic elements of a text, or reader expectations being met. In the end, their study affirmed only the first as a possible explanation. The results of the experiment proved what had been only a hypothesis in the conclusion of their first study, namely, that increased fluency gained through spoilers improves reading experiences.

(273), which was defined as “the tendency for an individual to engage in and enjoy thinking” (275), “held a selective preference for spoiled stories” (273).

These studies show, first and foremost, how hard it is to quantify and thus correctly measure something as subjective as the enjoyment of a literary text. Additionally, the discrepancies between the studies also highlight the different functions and effects a spoiler can have. Spoilers can function as a processing aid, helping some readers to understand a complicated text during their first interaction with it, and thus heightening their enjoyment. At the same time, to a different reader, the same spoiler can function as a destructive element, for instance by giving away a twist before the reader has had a chance to speculate, and thus lessening their enjoyment.

These studies, together with research on why people seek out spoilers,⁶ show that along with the complicated topic of “enjoyment,” the perception of and reaction to spoilers is also highly dependent on who the reader is and why they are reading in the first place. The different ways of and reasons for reading a text are key factors in determining the concrete effect a spoiler has for the individual. But regardless of whether the spoiler is seen as helpful or highly destructive, its existence changes the interaction between reader and text. It exists somewhere between the text and its recipient, and it affects their relationship. This is why I like to think of spoilers—all spoilers, not just literary ones—as possessing a power similar to paratextual elements.

The Paratextual Power of Spoilers

Coming from a TV-centric background, Gray is the first one to call spoilers “viewer-created paratexts” (143). His reason for doing so seems obvious, since

6 Research in film and television studies has additionally paid attention to how spoilers are used as an instrument of control: not, however, as we have seen in the *FRIENDS* episode, as an instrument of control over somebody else’s reading experience, but as a way to enhance one’s own viewing (or reading) experience. As Matt Hills argues, “spoilers centrally pose emotional questions of anxiety, trust, and control” (111). Especially for fans, “[t]hreats to diegetic narrative can [...] be felt as threats to these fans’ self-narratives” (114). Thus, for fans, spoilers are not about “spoiling their relationship to the text, but rather conserving and protecting their emotional attachments—guarding against disappointments, avoiding unpleasant shocks or surprises, and working-through possible threats to textual authenticity (and hence self-narrative)” (115). In agreement with Hills are the observations by Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell, who see spoilers as a way for fans to immunize themselves against potential future disappointments: “Spoiler fans aim to take control of their emotional responses and pleasures of anticipation, creating suspense on viewers’ own terms rather than the creators” (17).

paratextual elements can sometimes be spoilers themselves. Think of book covers, blurbs, the marketing surrounding the release of a new novel or—a paratextual element we will return to later—the dreaded introduction to a text. But this is not why Gray seeks to classify spoilers in general as paratexts. There are several parallels between spoilers and paratexts. Like any paratextual element, as Gérard Genette defines it, a spoiler stands on the threshold between text and non-text; it exists in the discourse surrounding a text. Secondly, just like paratexts, spoilers have considerable power to amplify, reduce, erase, or add meaning to a text, and thus change the readers’ perception of a text or the way they read it. And thirdly, as for most paratextual elements, temporality plays a significant role for spoilers, since most spoilers lose their power if they occur after the reader has read the text in question.⁷

The only real difference between spoilers and paratextual elements lies in the fact that a spoiler is not officially author- or editor-intended material. This is why Gray calls spoilers specifically “viewer-created” paratexts. In his study on fandom, Hills discusses the difference between official and unofficial spoilers. In film and television, previews or sneak peeks that function as advertising for a movie are official spoilers, i.e.: spoilers given authority by the producers. Unofficial spoilers, on the other hand, are leaks: unauthorized set photographs, insider information, leaked scripts (Hills 108). Using this differentiation between official and unofficial spoilers, I would argue that, while official spoilers do fit into Genette’s category of paratexts, unofficial spoilers do not. Which is why, rather than defining spoilers as paratexts, I prefer to focus on the paratextual power that lies in framing the way a text is read by an individual and claim the same—or at least a similar—power for spoilers. Thus, in addition to all the spoiler-defining elements listed in the introduction, I am defining spoilers as a subset of all the material that generates reading expectations.

7 An additional explanation Genette gives about the short lives of some paratextual elements applies to spoilers as well: “If, then, a paratextual element may appear at any time, it may also disappear, definitively or not, by authorial decision or outside intervention or by virtue of the eroding effect of time” (Genette 6). Spoilers are certainly able to “erode” over time, since they may lose their function and thus disappear from the discourse surrounding a text after a time. This is why Matt Hills considers spoilers “a form of currency in both the temporal and the axiological sense of that term: they represent information acquired as soon as is humanly possible [...] and they have a fan-culture value, representing breaking news in the 24/7 rolling news informational economy of digital fandom” (110), thus deeming spoilers both information of intense value and information whose value decays rapidly when it becomes widely known.

“To read is to make guesses,” Matei Calinescu writes, “based on expectations and assumptions and to modify them as the reading proceeds” (xiv). If we consider spoilers as a subset of all the material that generates reading expectations, just like book covers or blurbs or other forms of paratexts, spoilers are pieces of outside information—as in ‘outside of the text’—given to the reader before the act of reading occurs or is concluded that affect the reader’s expectations and thus their reading of the text. To be even more specific, I’d like to argue that the change brought about by the existence of a spoiler is best understood as the difference between a first reading and a subsequent rereading of the same text.

Hills himself argues that “spoilers might be akin to a sort of re-reading” (112). Emily Nussbaum makes a similar point in her article “The End of the Surprise Ending,” in which she argues that people who enjoy watching shows whose endings have already been spoiled pay the price of never really getting to watch a show for the first time.

This change, from first reading to rereading, is what happens, at least in part, when we encounter a literary spoiler. Pre-empting an uninformed first reading, or combining it with a more analytical rereading, spoils some potential that the text held—be it suspense, or ambiguity, or surprise—for the reader. “Spoil” in this case does not mean that the experience is completely ruined, void of all enjoyment. On the contrary, I would argue that the reader will enjoy certain aspects of a text upon rereading that would have been harder to enjoy the first time. But while this subsequent reading can occur whether or not the text was spoiled, the first reading only exists for the unspoiled reader. Greene makes the same argument when he considers what he calls “The Multiple Engagement Paradox,” observing that people might have several reasons to return to a text: “The Multiple Engagement Paradox rests on a mistaken assumption, namely, the assumption that spoiling something entails ruining it completely or beyond enjoyment [...]. This is not the case: spoiling something just ruins a part of our experience of the work” (161). The “part of our experience” that is ruined by spoilers is our first interaction with the text, the first-time reading experience with all that it entails. Thus, in order to understand what change a spoiler causes, we need to understand the difference between reading and rereading.

Reading vs Rereading

There are, as Calinescu argues in *Rereading*, “three basic ways of rereading stories. [...] partial rereading (or back-tracking) [...] simple (unreflective)

rereading or the repeating of a game of make-believe for the sheer pleasure of repeating it [...]; and reflective rereading, a meditative or critically inquisitive revisiting of a text one has already read.” (277) Most, if not all, studies of rereading focus on reflective rereading. The main characteristics attributed to this mode are non-linearity, reflection, and interpretation. Thus, rereading stands in contrast to a linear, “curious, end-oriented” (3) first reading.

The idea of a virginal first reading, one that is “naive”—a pure experience without reflection and without other experiences or intertextual contexts framing the reader’s interaction with the text—is, of course, a purely theoretical construct. As if, using the same irony as Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (16), there were a beginning of reading, as if everything had not already been read. Still, certain elements of this hypothetical first reading cannot be attributed to a subsequent rereading. In addition to linearity, a way of reading that could be repeated in subsequent readings, Calinescu defines the first reading as “continuous, fresh, curious, and sensitive to surprising turns or unpredictable developments (which include unpredictable intertextual associations)” (7).

When talking about reading, curiosity and surprise or unpredictability are all linked to the plot. Any rereading will focus less on plot than on structural elements. Studies about rereading place further emphasis on this difference. As Verlyn Klinkenborg writes in *The Observer*, “[p]art of the fun of re-reading is that you are no longer bothered by the business of finding out what happens.” Patricia Meyer Spacks comments in her autobiographical study that “the energy of plot and characters” (12) may overwhelm a reader the first time around, and that rereading books changed her view on them: “I admired it more than I had originally, principally, I think, because I didn’t need to rush to find how things turn out, and I had time to savor the author’s narrative skill” (134). And in *The Triumph of the Novel*, Albert Guerard associates “suspense, [...] exciting plot, [...] dizzying ambiguity, [...] the pleasures of incessant surprise” with a hypothetical first reading, while claiming “unity and a satisfying relation of the parts to the whole, [...] subtle reflexive reference, [...] foreshadowings” for subsequent rereadings (20). Thus, the most obvious difference between the first and any future readings of a text is foreknowledge about the plot, which is also what most spoilers focus on and most definitions of spoilers are tied to. Calinescu himself warns that “the sharpened attention [...] [rereading] demands may *spoil* the more naïve pleasures associated with a first, linear, curious, engrossing reading” (19). Gray and Mittell agree with Hills in seeing spoilers as “a short cut to the second reading, getting the plot out of the way so as to concentrate on other issues and pleasures” (18). And Meyer Spacks sums up many comparisons between

plot-focused first readings and the accretion process of rereading, concluding that “knowledge of what is to come changes speculation about outcomes to speculation about meanings—a deeper form of excitement” (137).

This idea of a “deeper” form of excitement, of suspense,⁸ or even a deeper form of enjoyment is associated with subsequent readings in all aforementioned studies on rereading. And much like Meyer Spacks, Leavitt and Christenfeld speculate about the possibility that “spoilers enhance enjoyment by actually increasing tension. Knowing the ending of *Oedipus Rex* may heighten the pleasurable tension caused by the disparity in knowledge between the omniscient reader and the character marching to his doom” (Leavitt and Christenfeld 1153). Here, once again, a literary classic is used as an example to illustrate how little damage a literary spoiler supposedly does, or can do. Spoiling the ending of *Oedipus Rex* to a first-time reader, Leavitt and Christenfeld argue, is going to enhance that person’s enjoyment of the play.⁹ Once again, the idea that this first-time reader might value not knowing the ending beforehand is disregarded. And once again, the simple fact that they could have the heightened enjoyment of a spoiled ending the next time they read the play is ignored.

This is where the notion of “unspoilable” classics comes in. This is where the idea of a naive first reading turns into condescension.

Literary Criticism

One aspect that all the articles and books on rereading have in common is a tendency to rank the second reading, the one in which the plot is already known, higher than the idea of an uninformed first reading. Rereading, they all seem to say, is more pleasurable than reading. Additionally, rereading is linked to something even more important or valuable than pleasure: if

8 Additionally, the second key aspect associated with first-time reading, the experience of suspense, is tied closely to the reader being uninformed about the plot as well. In talking about suspense this way, I am, of course, focusing on what Eric Rabkin calls “plot-suspense,” not “subliminal suspense,” which would be associated with rereadings as well (see Rabkin 69). Roland Barthes attributes the illusion that a naive first reading is even possible largely to operators of suspense (16). And Thomas Anz links literary techniques for creating suspense to the uninformedness of characters as well as readers (157). As Patricia Meyer Spacks argues: “What suspense the plot offers of course vanishes in a second reading: I know from the outset how everything will turn out” (132). On suspense, see also the chapters by Simon Spiegel and Albrecht Koschorke.

9 On *Oedipus Rex*, see also Simon Spiegel’s chapter.

we believe Calinescu's reflection on the origins of the dichotomy between intensive (repeated or highly focused reading) and extensive reading (reading various texts), the true quality of rereading has historically always been linked to "condemnations of reading for pleasure or entertainment" (88–89). While reading is purely pleasure-focused, rereading "represents [...] dedication, sustained attention, and sophisticated absorption" (90). In the context of this distinction, Calinescu identifies the differing practices of reading and rereading with the dichotomy between two types of literature: popular literature is thus classified as "'purely readable' literature," while high literature is deemed "'rereadable' literature" (77–78). Throughout, Calinescu maintains this divide, even when he argues for the rereadability of popular literature, which "is in no way precluded from developing its own forms of rereadability and, on occasion, from reaching the status of full classic rereadability outlined above" (77–78). Thus, even when considering the rereadability of popular literature, Calinescu assigns a specific quality to 'high' literature, which distinguishes it from mass or popular literature, namely its innate rereadability.¹⁰

In this, Calinescu is far from alone. Meyer Spacks starts her analysis with the results of a British survey on rereading. Her comments largely illustrate her own surprise at the high number of children's books and fantasy novels that hold the top spots over classics like *Pride and Prejudice* or *Great Expectations* (5–6). And as a prominent writer of both children's and fantasy fiction, C. S. Lewis himself suggests using rereadability as a criterion for judging the quality of literature, since rereading a text will reveal whether the enjoyment (or tension) was produced merely by the unpredictability of the plot (90–105).¹¹

10 Calinescu focuses his discussion of suspense largely on the genre of mystery or detective fiction, which he calls a "genre of literature that prizes pure readability" (208). The readability, not rereadability, of the mystery genre lies precisely in the importance of revelations and endings as structural features that organize the reader's experience: "Detective fiction privileges the first-reading perspective as a generic requirement. A mystery story is always primarily constructed, and all its main effects calculated, with the first-time reader in mind; that is, the implied reader it constructs in the process of constructing itself gets acquainted with the unfamiliar text progressively and in a strict sequential manner culminating in the ending" (210). In this context, Calinescu also voices how "revealing the ending of a detective story to someone who plans to read it ranks among the least forgivable offenses in the informal deontology of detective fiction fans" (207).

11 "The nearest we can come to a test is by asking whether he often *re-reads* the same story. [...] For excitement, [...] [defined as the alternate tension and appeasement of imagined anxiety], is just what must disappear from a second reading.[...] The re-reader is looking not for actual surprises (which can come only once) but for a certain ideal surprisingness. [...] It is

Often disregarded in this context is the fact that rereading might not be motivated by the implied quality of a certain text, or that it might not even be motivated by the text at all. The autobiographical experiment in Meyer Spacks's book is based entirely on the premise that, while the text does not change, its reader does: the idea being that rereading can become "a way to evoke memories (not only of the text but of one's life and of past selves)" (2). The change in a reader's subjectivity might only be located on a wider temporal scale than the one that marks the difference between a first and a subsequent reading, but it can still serve as an argument as to why a rereader could continue to find new meanings in a text, regardless of whether that text is considered high or popular literature. In fact, the reading tastes of her younger self are precisely what Meyer Spacks analyses: "I sound more like a moralizer than a literary critic. Rereading seems to bring out that side of me when it causes me to see myself as I was in the distant past: a vision that stimulates self-judgment as well as judgment of the characters with whom I once imaginatively identified" (98). By disregarding this self-reflective motivation for rereading, most of the studies on the subject place the literary quality of the text at the forefront of their inquiry.

The idea of rereading as superior to reading and, consequently, rereadability as a marker of literary quality, is also at the heart of the few articles and studies that focus specifically on literary spoilers. Jonathan Russell Clark argues in an article on *LitHub* that "the best stories, the great ones, are spoiler-proof." The same claim lies at the heart of Leavitt and Christenfeld's as well as Gray's comments on *Oedipus Rex* (Gray 149). In a similar vein, Gray and Mittell conclude their study on spoiler culture surrounding the TV show *Lost* (US 2004–2010, Creator: Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof) by referring to Laura Carroll's thoughts on "literature professors [who] have long 'spoiled' texts in their classes without concern for actually ruining the text, precisely because a text is about more than just surprises and plot-twists" (Gray and Mittell 16–17).

This connection between spoilers and merely entertaining literature is drawn most often and most contemptuously in the features sections of our newspapers. Here, the differentiation between two kinds of readers and two kinds of literature concludes almost every discussion of spoiler warnings. In this context, one of the four aforementioned studies on the enjoyment of spoilers has received special attention: it is, of course, the first study by

the *quality* of unexpectedness, not the *fact* that delights us. It is even better the second time" (Lewis 90–105).

Leavitt and Christenfeld, which concluded that readers prefer spoiled texts. *The Guardian* discussed this study in an article about paratexts and authors spoiling their own stories (Armitstead). Literary theorist Stanley Fish used it to defend himself after spoiling the end of *The Hunger Games* in a newspaper review, stating that “[i]f suspense is taken away by certainty, certainty offers other compensations, and those compensations, rather than being undermined by a spoiler, require one” (Fish). In the same *New York Times* article outlining his defense, Fish again provoked readers’ ire by claiming that “works which deliver to the reader or viewer suspense and only suspense [lose their pull] when the cat has been let out of the bag and there may not be much point to re-experiencing them.” Alison Flood of *The Guardian*, in turn, commented on this and doubled down on Fish’s criticism: “I tend to agree with him, and anyway I can’t feel too sorry for all his *Hunger Games* spooilees. Over here, people: Harry Potter lives, Bella chooses Edward, Susan doesn’t get to go to heaven. Now go and find some grown-up books to read, and stop whining” (Flood). As a final example, a senior features editor for the German newspaper *Die Welt* offers a similar argument in an article on prolepsis, moving even faster from passive-aggressive to simply aggressive: “There must have been a considerable loss of level in the reception of artistic creations if today even educated people permanently sound the ‘spoiler alarm’. [...] Great literature has always spoiled. Because with good writers, it’s not so much the material (the what) that matters, but the form (the how). [...] However, this presupposes the advanced reader who does not feed intellectually only on television series” (Krause).¹²

It is clear that we have reached the well-known battlegrounds of literary assessment, where high literature and popular fiction fight endlessly, where readers are divided into highbrow rereaders and naive first-timers, where suspense is, as Thomas Anz quips, “a second-rate phenomenon in first-rate literature, and only in second-rate literature is it considered a first-rate phenomenon” (152).

Articles like the ones mentioned above are quick to point to the tradition of “the great novelists of the 19th and 20th centuries, [...] the narrators of medieval epics” (Krause), or “the history of heroic fiction” (Ambrose) dating back to ancient Greece. They see spoilers as “a declaration of authorial mastery” (Ambrose) and again and again argue that “[i]t is not *what* is said that matters, but *how* it is said, and ultimately, by whom” (Clark): because

12 Translations from German by the author.

a good author, a good piece of literature transcends plot (Ambrose). Since 'good' literature is rereadable, it is not affected by spoilers: this is the argument nearly all articles on (literary) spoilers boil down to.

But even though Calinescu's arguments steer in a similar direction, "rereadability" for him does not simply mean that a text has something to offer to the returning reader. It also means that a text of high quality cannot simply be read, it *must be reread*—even the first time around (280). Italo Calvino tests the same argument in his first, and possibly most intuitive, attempt at defining what the classics are in his introduction to *Why Read the Classics*: "The classics are those books about which you usually hear people say: 'I'm rereading ...', never 'I'm reading ...'" (3). Later in his introduction, Calvino explains that when it comes to classics, reading and rereading become interchangeable: "A classic is a book which with each rereading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading. [...] A classic is a book which even when we read it for the first time gives the sense of rereading something we have read before" (5). Calinescu also comments on this paradoxical status of the classics:

there is a sense in which great novelistic classics like *War and Peace* seem to urge us to reverse Nabokov's paradox ("One cannot read a book; one can only reread it") and to say: One cannot reread *War and Peace*; one can only read it for the first time. With great literature, we may justifiably say, each time is the first time. (43)

Thus, engaging with a classic means, according to both Calvino and Calinescu, simultaneous reading and rereading. Classics are texts that make every reading feels like the first, while they are at the same time texts that have accumulated so much cultural connectivity¹³ that they can only be reread, even the first time around.

Engaging with (Spoiled) Classics

In my introduction, I argued that on a practical level, books as a medium are less likely to be spoiled because the time needed to read a book differs greatly from reader to reader. On another level, as we have seen, a common argument on spoilers in literature is that only 'bad' or lowbrow texts can be ruined by what is commonly understood as a spoiler, whereas 'good' literature—which includes any canonized text—cannot be spoiled, because it is not defined by

13 "The classics are those books which come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations, and trailing behind them the traces they have left in the culture or cultures (or just in the languages and customs) through which they have passed" (Calvino 5).

plot but rather by its structure, style, or language. This disregard, not only of plot, but of the virtues only a first reading holds, has consequences for the way readers supposedly or actually engage with the classics. The flaw in making rereading the default manner of engaging with canonical texts, as Thomas Anz explains, lies in the fact that it “excludes the temporal sequence of reading, the process in which the reader extracts partial information from the text, constantly checks and modifies his or her assumptions about the course and meaning of the text” (161).

The consequences of disregarding the temporal sequence of reading are especially visible in academic editions of canonized literature. While literary scholars who regularly engage with these editions will likely be aware of the spoiling practices surrounding them, new students often have their first interactions not only with the text in question but with academic editions of classic works in general. As such, they will likely not be aware of the spoiler minefield that is the introduction to a classic text.

“The main disadvantage of a preface,” as Genette writes,

is that it constitutes an unbalanced and even shaky situation of communication: its author is offering the reader an advance commentary on a text the reader has not yet become familiar with. Consequently many readers apparently prefer to read the preface after the text, when they will know “what it’s all about.” (237)

Genette explains the fact that prefaces are still more common than afterwords by pointing to the pragmatic function of any preface to:

Hold [...] the reader’s interest and guid[e] him [sic] by explaining why and how he should read the text. If the first function is not fulfilled, the reader will perhaps never have an opportunity to reach a possible postface; if the second function is not fulfilled, it will perhaps be too late for the author to rectify in extremis a bad reading that has already been completed. (238–39)

Here, Genette considers both the fact that most introductions might be better placed after the text, so as not to spoil the first reading, and the idea that an introduction is placed before the text precisely because it wants to guide the reader toward the “correct” reading.

If we look at how some of the best-known editions of classic texts navigate the minefield of the introduction, we can categorize publishers’ approaches into two main groups. On the one hand, we have critical editions of, for example, *Oxford’s World Classics* or *Penguin Modern Classics*, which both start

with an introduction that might contain spoilers on different levels.¹⁴ On the other hand, some *Penguin Classics* editions include a publisher's note directly under the Introduction header, which warns new readers "that this Introduction makes details of the plot explicit" (Knowles xiii). The most consistent publisher when it comes to spoiler warnings is *Wordsworth Classics*. In 1999, editor Keith Carabine joined the *Wordsworth* staff and began to include a general introduction to the books he was assigned.¹⁵ These are printed above the specific introductions and read:

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction. (Jansson vii)

When Calinescu warns that "the sharpened attention [...] [rereading] demands may *spoil* the more naïve pleasures associated with a first, linear, curious, engrossing reading," he additionally remarks that such pleasures are kept "in store [by certain fictional texts] for the happy 'ordinary' reader," meaning those who do not reread but simply read (19). Looking at the practices of engagement with and the assessment of literary classics through the lens of spoiler discourse has shown how undervalued the idea of an uninformed first reading is. The fact that most editions of classic literature contain introductions that give away major plot points, or rather, take the knowledge of those plot points for granted, illustrates how even on a paratextual level, the practices of engagement are different for canonized texts. Contrary to the voices heard in literary criticism, though, there seems to be an awareness in publishing that just because something is considered a classic, that does not mean it cannot be read by a first-time reader. And for these readers, the proverbial Joey or Rachel, the experience of reading can still be spoiled. The

14 For example, the introduction to the *Oxford World's Classics* edition of Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* starts by quoting a review that called it "the most hopelessly evil story" (Lustig vii) and goes on to discuss the role ghosts play in the story, and the *Oxford World's Classics* introduction of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* opens with a detailed description of an important scene and literally starts by saying: "One of the memorable moments of *Hard Times* occurs ..." (Schlicke vii).

15 An unofficial inquiry into this practice was answered by one of the editors at *Wordsworth* who responded: "I have always thought that the word 'Introduction' was misleading as it does imply it should be read first, so Keith's warning is a prudent one. Despite this, I do still receive the occasional complaint about 'spoilers'."

presence of spoiler warnings in classic editions proves that attitudes towards spoilers largely depend on who the imagined readership of the edition is. *Wordsworth* sees itself addressing a different readership than *Oxford*, but neither seems to agree entirely with the notion that classics are per se unspoilable. So, no, do not spoil the classics.

Filmography

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

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Spoil the Classics

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“Telling the Story Second-Hand”: Victorian Sensation Fiction and the Pre-History of the Spoiler

2019 arguably represents the high-water mark of the spoiler. That year saw the culmination of both HBO’s fantasy series *GAME OF THRONES* (US 2011–2019, Creator: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss) and Marvel’s superhero “Infinity Saga” in *AVENGERS: ENDGAME* (US 2019, Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo): two globally popular franchises that had dominated television and film for nearly and over a decade, respectively. The long, well-publicized buildups to their releases saw feverish discussion about all facets of the spoiler, that is, “premature and undesired information about how a narrative’s arc will conclude” (Johnson and Rosenbaum 1069), which is assumed to negatively impact audiences’ enjoyment. Online guides advised on how to live “spoiler free” or else satirically denied the possibility, while offline, the situation was even more fraught. Most notorious was the case of the moviegoer physically assaulted for announcing the conclusion to *ENDGAME* outside a cinema in Hong Kong (Ivie). If the perpetrators had evidently broken the law, those sympathetic to their actions could cite as extenuating circumstances the victim’s breach of a *moral* imperative. Had Disney not implored fans #DontSpoilTheEndGame (Radulovic)? The spoiler had well and truly arrived as a ubiquitous and fraught fixture of the global media consciousness.

Although it received somewhat less fanfare, admittedly, 2019 was also the year in which I submitted my PhD thesis on Victorian sensation fiction, and in the course of re-reading novels that had once captured the attention of the British reading public in the 1860s and beyond, I could not help but think that these conversations about the spoiler—its origins, what it said about contemporary society, and so on—were suffering from a distinct lack of historical consciousness. Nearly exclusively, they perpetuated a sense that the spoiler was a uniquely twenty-first-century phenomenon, arising from the instantaneous transmissibility and accessibility of plot information via the internet; the creation of extended, serialized franchises released to global audiences almost simultaneously; and the infantile, hyper-capitalist habits of consumers who, once told of plot details in advance, saw either less or no value in that piece of media. Perhaps it was not the films themselves but their audiences that were *spoiled* (Robbins; St. James). In scholarship, at least,

Richard Greene was directing focus as far back as Agatha Christie's West End play *The Mousetrap*, which since its opening in 1952 has famously implored audiences not to reveal its twist ending. Yet, while I could see the obvious precedent here for the "modern conception of the spoiler" (Greene), I was at the same time reading an appeal by the English novelist Wilkie Collins, in which he asked critics to refrain from revealing the plot details of his latest, best-selling novel *The Woman in White* (1860). The request was, naturally, framed in different language and received under very different cultural assumptions than those operating in the 1950s, let alone today. That being said, *here*, I thought, in the 1860s' response to the sensation novel, were the first meditations on spoiler culture as we would recognize it today.

This chapter delves further into that moment, as well as others before and after the release of *The Woman in White*, in order to offer a pre-history of the spoiler, and to excavate the origins of what has become arguably the most ubiquitous and controversial figure in popular media discourse. Recovering such moments helps uncover a great deal about the conditions necessary for the spoiler to achieve such prominence, the practices of media consumption and reviewing both then and now, and the reasons why the spoiler can foster such polarizing responses.

The Chain and the Veil: Collins Challenges the Critics

Precursors to the Victorian sensation novel had entertained British readers during the 1850s and even before. But Collins's *The Woman in White* was the example—alongside Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)—that crystallized the "new school in fiction" in the minds of readers and critics alike, leading to the label of "sensation fiction" afterward becoming more widely understood and used (Beller 7). Like others of its kind, *The Woman in White* is a tightly-plotted novel hinging upon a central mystery that is only gradually revealed. The identities of the eponymous "woman" and of the antagonist Sir Percival Glyde, as well as the nature of the scheme meditated by Glyde and his villainous co-conspirator Count Fosco, are interlinked secrets not fully disclosed until the novel's later parts. Integral to the fostering of suspense was its original serialization in Charles Dickens's literary magazine *All the Year Round*, which meant practically that from November 1859 to August 1860 readers were forced to wait at least a week at a time to read the latest installment. The temporal character of the original reading experience was hence more akin to that of the television or radio serial than to that of novel-reading nowadays, when nothing prevents

a novel’s consumption in a single sitting. To help ensure the retention of its considerable readership, Collins made frequent and pioneering use of what we would now term “cliffhangers” for many of the instalments’ endings: the protagonists are left in a dangerous or dramatic situation whose outcome is highly uncertain. Jointly, these characteristics produced a reading experience that was intensely social, and which ran at a fever pitch, where breathless speculation by readers occupied the interval between each new release (Allen 34–35).

But the novel’s reception was complicated by what was to become customary for serial fiction thereafter: its republication in the dominant novel format of the day, the so-called “three-volume edition” (Allen 42). This brought the opportunity to attract new readers, not least because it occasioned the critics to belatedly review the novel in its entirety. But it also presented a potential dilemma for Collins: what was to be the experience of this “new class of readers” (Collins, “Preface” vii) who were about to have key parts of the all-important plot spoiled by critics? (It was standard practice in this era for reviewers to use their permissive word counts to provide a comprehensive synopsis.) His concern prompted him to conclude his Preface to the three-volume edition with a highly unusual appeal. In the event of its “being reviewed,” Collins writes (with faux modesty):

I venture to ask whether it is possible to praise the writer, or to blame him, without opening the proceedings by telling his story at second-hand? [...] No small portion of this space [the novel] is occupied by hundreds of little ‘connecting links,’ [...] of the utmost importance. If the critic tells the story *with* these, can he do it in his allotted page, or column, as the case may be? If he tells it *without* these, is he doing a fellow-labourer in another form of Art, the justice which writers owe to one another? [...] lastly, if he tells it at all, [...] is he doing a service to the reader, by destroying, beforehand, two main elements in the attraction of all stories—the interest of curiosity, and the excitement of surprise? (“Preface” viii; original emphasis)

Despite being written for a very specific purpose, the Preface illuminates Collins’s ideas about the purpose of his fiction more generally, as well as the landscape of mid-century criticism. That he couches the request in such cautious and flattering language (he elsewhere writes that his “questions” are of the “most harmless and innocent kind” [“Preface” viii]) suggests that the writer was only too aware of the novelty of his request. The use of metaphor substantiates the same point. Collins attempts to familiarize the strange by likening the novelist’s work to that of the expert craftsman: the critic cannot hope to reproduce the same effect without using the same materials in the same way; and even if they managed to somehow do so, it would only be

to rob the story of what makes it compelling. Intriguingly, Collins appeals to both tradition and novelty as he talks around the concept of spoiling. The qualities present in *The Woman in White* are, to his mind, timeless aspects of “all stories”; it is only the fact that he has worked them up to such an unprecedented degree that make this intervention necessary. Preventing the premature disclosure of plot is therefore crucial, because his novel relies to an unusual extent upon the plot being revealed in pre-planned ways that arouse feelings of curiosity, surprise, and excitement.

In fact, though Collins’s request was extraordinary, it was motivated by the critics’ previous treatment of his writing as far back as nearly ten years prior. In 1852, Collins published his second novel *Basil: A Story of Modern Life*, one of the prototypes for sensation fiction. Unlike *The Woman in White*, the novel is not structured by a central mystery. The antagonist’s identity is revealed relatively early, shifting the focus to *how* he plans to revenge himself upon the protagonist. That said, the sequence of events—the plot—remains a chief attraction, and the cultivation of suspense becomes especially pronounced as the novel nears its climax. The critics recognized such a quality when they reviewed *Basil* at the start of 1853. The popular periodical the *Dublin University Magazine* summarized many of the events depicted in the novel, but it stopped short of those that form the conclusion; “over this part of the story,” their reviewer writes, “we must drop a veil” (78). The use of the veil metaphor, like that of the chain, signals an attempt to familiarize readers with an original concept. Readers readily understood the veil’s ability to conceal the face and yet also to heighten the anticipation of it being revealed, and so it was with this partial description of plot. Frustratingly for our purposes, the reviewer declines to specify the reasons for their partial synopsis, but a sense of it can be gained by looking at a review of another of Collins’s novels, *Hide and Seek* (1854). This novel, much like those before and after it, is structured by the suspenseful unfolding of plot. In this case, Geraldine Jewsbury, writing for the literary magazine *The Athenaeum*, offers only scant details on the events depicted in the novel and concludes her piece with the tantalizing remark that “we will not spoil the reader’s interest in the book by developing the story.” To that end, she refuses to “extract” passages from it (that is, to provide excerpts), suggesting instead that readers get their hands upon the work directly (775). By using the term “develop,” Jewsbury implies that there is an acceptable degree of detail to which critics can discuss plot, enabling them to recognize a book’s virtues while not risking its enjoyment by its would-be readers.

It was not these experiences that conditioned Collins’s appeal for the critics’ silence, however, but those of the opposite nature; the tendency to avoid summarizing the plot in its entirety was far from universal. The example of Collins’s later novel *The Dead Secret* (1857) illustrates the point perfectly. This was, again, reviewed in the *Athenaeum*, but by someone else. Unlike Jewsbury, Horace St John’s review roams across all the major plot points. Moreover, in case readers ascribed this to a casual oversight on his part—perhaps with an eye to the precedent set by his colleague—he goes out of his way to explicitly dismiss that idea. St John prefaces his piece with the claim that “no injustice will be done to Mr. Collins if we trace the outline of his story [*The Dead Secret*] before estimating its qualities as a work of art” (788). By the use of the words “trace” and “outline,” we see once more, just as in Jewsbury’s review, the navigation of an issue that continues to dog reviewing culture to this day: *to what extent* can plot details be explicated before they constitute a spoiler? For this reviewer, it is the *quality* rather than quantity of his disclosures that makes them acceptable. Readers may learn about all the events of the novel, including those contained in the conclusion, but the lack of specificity and detail means that readers’ enjoyment will not suffer for it. It is therefore clear that St. John’s review is marked by more than a touch of self-consciousness around this question of what to cover and to omit; though he does “spoil” the novel, according to a modern understanding, he is also aware of the ruinous effects that such premature disclosure might have on the reading experience and, therefore, on its creator. It is only by believing that there will be no “injustice” committed that St John gives himself the license to proceed as he does.

The treatment of *The Dead Secret* by another contemporary reviewer is revealing for distinct reasons that I will revisit later. *The Saturday Review*’s piece on the novel also discloses the plot, but it justifies the decision on alternate grounds: “as the secret is plainly discernible in the very opening of the book, the interest of the story hangs not upon the nature of the secret, but upon the mode in which it is discovered” (“Review of *The Dead Secret*,” 188). For this reviewer, it is not the premature disclosure of plot details per se that risks readers’ interest, but the revelation of those not easily guessed at: those that create suspense when they are withheld from readers and whose later reveal elicits surprise. This instance tallies with what Vera Tobin describes as the “well-made surprise.” She outlines its characteristics as follows:

The tradition of the well-made surprise asks, has this revelation been built on an expertly crafted foundation? It places highest value on the satisfactions that come

from the sense that the plot is a finely-constructed mechanism, a well-oiled trap, [...] the surprise should be not merely unexpected but also revelatory. (Tobin 2)

The well-made surprise is, to my mind, an underappreciated precondition for the spoiler. That is to say, for a plot development to qualify as a spoiler, it must be deliberately and carefully built towards during the narrative, so that any knowledge of it before the fact creates a new perspective as regards the content that comes before it—and one not intended by the work's creator (implicitly, then, a *lesser* experience). Tobin expands upon this point, with reference to people's aversion to spoilers, by noting that "they want to avoid a premature and underwhelming transformative experience, so that they can experience the best possible version of the transformative experience a given work has to offer" (282). Not every plot development is capable of producing such an effect, and this is the argument of the *Saturday Review's* piece on Collins's *The Dead Secret*. The secret is not of a revelatory sort, and the novel is not structured by guiding readers to its eventual reveal; hence, the premature disclosure of it has no potential to negatively impact the reading experience. Like St John's contribution to the *Athenaeum*, this review does not refrain from divulging all plot details, and it shares with that piece an awareness for how the critics' work may jeopardize the enjoyment of a novel heavily reliant on plot.

Those are some of the contexts that motivated Collins to request that reviewers refrain from disclosing key aspects of *The Woman in White*. But what was the reaction of the critics? The first thing to remark upon is how many of the reviews explicitly mention the request, in a further indication of how unusual it was. Perhaps surprising, therefore, is the extent to which Collins's appeal was obliged. *The Morning Advertiser* deemed it reasonable and accordingly refrained from discussing plot details in its review (3). *The Critic* likewise acknowledged that there "is certainly much reason in his request." They explained through an extended (and fairly macabre) metaphor that to do otherwise than honor it would be akin to rearing a child for many months, only to strip it of all interest and exhibit its skeleton (233). Significantly, the same review also goes on to recognize the great difficulty readers will face in trying to predict the end for a certain character in the novel (233). Implicitly, the magazine thereby corroborates the thinking behind the earlier *Saturday Review* piece on *The Dead Secret*. The novel is seen to contain, to use Tobin's terminology, a "well-made surprise"—one that is revelatory and carefully built towards during the novel, and one that therefore *deserves* to be kept from readers until the designated moment of disclosure, lest the suspense and surprise of *The Woman in White* be ruined. That

same publication, the *Saturday Review*, also complied with Collins’s request, despite their contrasting treatment of the earlier novel. They explained their reasoning as follows: “on the present occasion it would be unnecessary, and perhaps unfair to the story, considering its nature, to analyze it in detail” (“Review of *The Woman in White*,” *Saturday Review* 250). The statement is clearly of a kind with those reviews of the author’s earlier works (with their concern for “spoil[ing]” the effect and the “injustice” of disclosure), and it is intriguing for its recognition that there is something unprecedented about *The Woman in White* that justifies deviation from standard reviewing procedure.

Collins’s conversion of the critics was far from total, however. For instance, even as the *Critic* accepted and understood the request, they settled upon a compromise that would enable them to carry on with the task at hand. With wry acknowledgment of the potential upset to readers, they venture that an “occasional hint” and “dark allusion” to the plot of *The Woman in White* would be permissible (“Review of *The Woman in White*,” *Critic* 233). Once more, therefore, we see the navigation of that fine line between a review offering so much substance as to risk the reader’s enjoyment of its subject, and so little as to obstruct the purpose of the critic. *The Guardian* was among the other publications to accept Collins’s request, and they justified it on the same grounds of the reading experience: “to betray the plot to those who are yet ignorant of it would be to take the edge from their enjoyment” (“Review of *The Woman in White*,” *Guardian* 780). Like their fellow publication the *Saturday Review*, they observe that there is something particular about the development of plot in Collins’s new novel that necessitates a change: “such a story, in which the gradual involving and unrolling of events constitutes the chief interest, would be obviously spoiled by the knowledge of a meagre outline” (780). In stark contrast to St John’s *Athenaeum* review of *The Dead Secret*, therefore, the *Guardian* contends that offering even just an “outline” of the plot—perhaps especially just an outline—would be unjust. Affirming Collins’s own analogy of the storyteller and the master craftsman, the critic can only hope to create a poor imitation of the work under review. In lieu of a synopsis, the paper’s critiques center instead on isolated incidents within the novel and generalized observations, including the consistency of motivations and characterization (780). The typical format of the mid-century review is thereby reworked in response to the demands of the plot-heavy, suspenseful narrative. More intriguing still, however, is the *Guardian*’s subtle change of subject; whereas Jewsbury wrote of the “reader’s interest” being spoiled, here it is the novel itself that is threatened with the same. This is not quite the explication of “the spoiler” itself as an independent entity within media

discourse, but it is not far from it. Even admitting this, if we consider these reviews of *The Woman in White* and Collins's earlier novels *Basil*, *Hide and Seek*, and *The Dead Secret*, we find a careful consideration by critics of the same issues tackled in the reviewing culture of today. Critics must be attentive to their audience and the nature of the work being considered, including the particular plot developments it contains (are they revelatory or are they easily guessed at?), and adjust their practices accordingly.

The "How" or the "What"? Braddon and the Later Legacy

If not a full-scale trend, Collins's request did at least prompt further imitations, and seems to have left a minor legacy in the reviewing culture of the 1860s. His fellow writer and founder of sensation fiction, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, subsequently achieved huge success with her second novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, in which, as the title suggests, much depends on the suspenseful unfolding of hidden plot developments. But it was her next novel, *Henry Dunbar: The Story of an Outcast* (1864), that prompted Braddon to re-iterate the stance taken by her contemporary. Even more than her earlier work, *Henry Dunbar* is structured around readers' ignorance of a case of false identity that is perpetrated within the early part of the novel, but which is not revealed until the conclusion. In the Preface to the three-volume edition, Braddon therefore makes the following request:

The author [...] has to make the same appeal to the critics which has been made by an eminent novelist on a previous occasion: [...] not to describe the plot. The story [...] pretends to be nothing more than a story, the revelation of which is calculated to weaken the interest of the general reader, for whose amusement the tale is written. ("Preface" v)

The "eminent novelist" being none other than Collins, Braddon tries to leverage his precedent of four years prior to give extra weight to her own demands; there is a fledgling tradition in the making. Her case relies on quite a different rhetorical strategy than its predecessor, however. Whereas the dominant view of fiction's purpose at this time emphasized its didactic role—its capacity to benefit readers morally and intellectually—Braddon situates her own work within an alternate tradition of pure storytelling, one that she deprecates as unpretentious. By using self-effacement and citing an alternative literary barometer by which to judge the work, Braddon tries to propose that customary reviewing practices ought to again be suspended as they had been for *The Woman in White*.

In contrast to the generally warm reception of Collins’s appeal, however, Braddon’s seems to have been received more skeptically. The literary magazine *The Examiner* acknowledged her request, for instance, but refused to adhere to it. Their reasons relate less to the nature of the ask, though, than to what they perceive as *Henry Dunbar*’s failure to provide the “well-made” surprise that would justify the break from tradition. With echoes of the *Saturday Review*’s 1857 piece on *The Dead Secret*, they judge that the central mystery is actually “manifest from the beginning”; hence, there is no merit in keeping it hidden from readers at the cost of being able to properly evaluate the novel’s merits. Their criticism goes beyond the particular case, however, and into a more far-reaching commentary on the spoiler-free review (to use an anachronism). How, they ask, is a novel’s plot to be “at the same time concealed and criticised” (“Review of *Henry Dunbar*,” *Examiner* 404). Whereas prior reviewers of *The Woman in White*—including in their own publication, it should be recalled—opted to adapt their writing to meet the unprecedented character of that novel, here the *Saturday Review* stridently defends standard practice. In their eyes, generous synopsis and discussions of plot are necessary to the critics’ work and must be retained above all other considerations.

The *Sixpenny Magazine*, in which Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* had debuted two years prior, viewed the point differently. Its reviewer observes firstly the consistency with which the writer treats the “paramount incident” found in each of her novels: “the great secret is constantly before the reader, and yet he is constantly self-deluded” (“Review of *Henry Dunbar*,” *Sixpenny Magazine* 84). In other words, the solution teases predictability, only to repeatedly prove otherwise. In terms that closely echo Collins’s chain metaphor, the critic notes that each sentence in her fiction is purposefully crafted to advance the narrative and to link one part to the other until the conclusion (84). For this reviewer, such careful planning—the effect of which is to create a riveting narrative—means that the simplicity of *Henry Dunbar* in terms of its plot and the central mystery is not the decisive point. Such a character requires that the critic take extra care in how they discuss the novel, since “almost one word would unravel it” (84). The *Sixpenny Magazine*’s reviewer declines to be the one to do so and encourages their counterparts likewise:

It is not for us to utter that word, and we should think that the appeal which Miss Braddon on this point makes in her brief preface will be generally respected by those into whose hands these volumes may fall for critical review. (84)

The job of the critic is not to risk readers' enjoyment by unpicking the links carefully crafted by the writer. Taking this case alongside those aforementioned, we see that even as spoiler-free reviewing practices start to become more conspicuous by the mid-1860s, it remains at the discretion of individual critics as to whether or not this nascent custom is followed. The inconsistencies between the *Saturday Review* cases demonstrate, in addition, that editorial oversight did not create any kind of unanimity on the question either. Rather, to provide a "spoiler" as it would be understood today was to pass judgment on the quality of a suspenseful novel: if a critic revealed a novel's secrets, it was an indication that those secrets were not "well-made" and therefore revealing them did not risk ruining the reading experience.

The Times, in its review of *Henry Dunbar*, justified their own refusal to adhere to Braddon's request on two counts. First, the secret is not "well-made." Second, the intention of the request is misplaced. The pleasures of novel-reading, so they argue, do not depend on "ignorance" of a story's conclusion. Readers are more intrigued by the *how* of the mystery than the *what*: "Miss Braddon labours under an extraordinary delusion if she imagines either that the fact upon which the story hinges is unknown to her readers, or that if known it must tar the interest of the novel" ("Review of *Henry Dunbar*," *Times* 4). Such a perspective challenges the very concept of the spoiler, since it disputes whether the premature disclosure of plot details can negatively impact the reading experience. For this reviewer, there are other, *worthier*, pleasures than a suspenseful wait for a surprising discovery.

Such a question of whether it is better to experience media with or without foreknowledge remains contentious in the present day, in circles both popular and academic. The *Times* review anticipates the direction of, for instance, psychological studies that have proposed that knowing plot details in advance may increase pleasurable tension and be akin to perceptual fluency (Leavitt and Christenfeld 1152).¹ By removing the mental burden of trying to anticipate surprises, the reader (and nowadays also the viewer, listener, and player) is free to focus on the formal qualities of the work. And by knowing what is going to happen, they experience exciting anticipation over how the event will be handled by characters; this would seem related to the effects of dramatic irony. Based on the example of the *Times* review and others, we see that Braddon's appeal and the discussion that ensued around the spoiling of *Henry Dunbar* prompted a deeper consideration over issues such as where the enjoy-

1 For an overview of empirical research on spoilers, see Judith Rosenbaum's chapter.

ment of reading novels originated and the role of the critic—topics of ongoing relevance and contention in the present.

Unsurprisingly, given how unsettled they remain today, the issues raised by Collins’s and Braddon’s appeals provoked diverse responses in the decades that followed. In its review of Herman Ludolph Prior’s suggestively titled sensation novel *Behind the Veil* (1871), for example, the *Saturday Review* confesses to finding suspense unpleasant and preferring to know plot developments in advance. But they admit that they are not in the “majority of novel-readers” who, in their words, “value a story the more highly the more they are hurried through it by their anxiety to discover the end” (Review of “*Behind the Veil*” 316). The reviewer revisits the previous point about the relative merits of reading spoiled or unspoiled by observing that this headlong rush toward discovery inhibits readers from attending to either the “development of character” or the “minor details” of plot (317). Working like a tidal wave through the novel, all else besides the primary incidents is swept aside in the reader’s haste. This diatribe against the reading practices of those who consume sensation novels forms the precursor to this reviewer’s total spoiling of the novel: “enter[ing] rather more minutely into the plot” of *Behind the Veil* (317), they disclose among other things the dramatic death of the antagonist as well as the ending; little of consequence is spared from their synopsising tendencies. *The Saturday Review* critic hence recognizes audience antipathy to spoilers, but they neither sympathize with it nor respect it. The premature disclosure of plot becomes, in their hands, almost a means of punishing reading practices they regard as infantile. The role of the reviewer, at least in this case, is reimagined as an act of resistance: spoiling is a cudgel by which they can in some way rectify the fallen state of novel-reading. Needless to say, this was far from the only perspective on the subject.

Fifteen years later, the reaction to George Manville Fenn’s sensation novel *Double Cunning: The Tale of a Transparent Mystery* was completely different. *The Graphic* recognized that the nature of the work demanded they avoid the disclosure of plot to the utmost degree: “We shall avoid spoiling the effect by giving the least hint of its plot, the interest of which depends altogether upon the reader’s coming to it with complete freshness and openness of mind” (“New Novels”). For this reviewer, reiterating earlier statements that include Collins’s own appeal in 1860, even a faint indication of plot is enough to fatally jeopardize the reading experience and to constitute an injustice to the novel. A comparison between the opposite approaches taken by these later reviewers indicates how much critics’ responses to the issues implicated by the spoiler were still highly idiosyncratic. There was nothing to indicate to the

periodical's reader—and would-be reader of the novel under review—whether they would find plot details disclosed entirely or, alternatively, a polite veil drawn over them.

Taken together, the examples discussed in this chapter reveal the conditions necessary for the idea of “spoiling” to crystallize in the popular consciousness, as well as the results of this formation. A particular confluence of narrative style and form, method of distribution, and publishing landscape was key: sensation fiction's elevation of suspenseful plotting to the chief attraction, combined with serialization and the re-issuing of the novel in a volume format, occurring in a reviewing culture that typically elaborated aspects of plot. The debate that followed Collins's appeal—and Braddon's invocation of that appeal four years later—shows how “the spoiler” inflected such crucial questions as the source of pleasure when reading fiction, the purpose and practice of criticism, and what readers, reviewers, and writers owed to one another. Nothing like a consensus is apparent on any of these issues; the days of an editorial policy on something like a “spoiler alert” were still in the distant future. But we do gain glimpses of common feeling shared among the critics, as well as between them and the novelists.

Bearing these contexts in mind, the novelty of the feverish debates over the spoiler that took place in 2019 becomes clearer. In certain respects, the appeal made by the co-directors of *AVENGERS: ENDGAME* to avoid spoilers is a resolutely twenty-first-century phenomenon: disseminated instantly to global audiences across the internet; responded to and shared by those same audiences via social media; and supported by a multi-billion-dollar media conglomerate in the form of Disney. None of this applies to the responses that came before and after Wilkie Collins's appeal in 1860. In the interim, concern about the spoiling of a novel or readers' enjoyment has morphed into the present-day concern for spoilers as independent entities that are both paratext and *part of the text* (Mecklenberg 55); to see this change unfold requires us to consider the twentieth century. But in sentiment, and in several other ways, the Russo Brothers' appeal is directly continuous with those issued by Collins and Braddon. Separated by 150 years, their requests are united by an appreciation for how the enjoyment of media can rely upon the pleasures of a suspenseful narrative and a “well-made surprise”: pleasures that are all too easily risked by the disclosure of plot details in a public forum.

Recovering this pre-history enables us to disentangle the spoiler and spoiler culture from the twenty-first-century media landscape, and see it as emergent whenever plot is made the major attraction of a work; whenever seriality and multi-format releases stretch or partition the experience of a

work; and whenever a “collective audience” (Mecklenberg 63) is built around the consumption of a work, often on the basis of sharing a fleeting moment in time. It is worth emphasizing that Collins, Braddon, and the Russo Brothers made their respective pitches to protect audiences in their particular historical moment. They were not speaking to future readers or viewers, but to those either experiencing or imminently due to experience their works at the time of writing. Given this, I would venture that the spoiler says less about the peculiarities and pathologies of present-day audiences than it does about a deeper (more profound and more longstanding) desire for connection and community: something increasingly realized through the consumption of media and the fandoms that emerge from it. If that is so, then we come closer to understanding, though not condoning, why people should feel so provoked—even to the point of physical violence—by the airing of spoilers.

Filmography

AVENGERS: ENDGAME. Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. US 2019.

GAME OF THRONES. Creator: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. US 2011–2019.

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Part 3: Games

Spoil the Game, Shatter the World: Spoilers in Games and Play

In *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), your companion Aeris dies midway through the story. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), your unfriendly companion Solas is actually an old elven god and possibly responsible for the apocalypse. In *Metroid* (1986), the tough bounty hunter Samus is a woman. In *Heavy Rain* (2010), your character Scott Shelby is the serial killer you have been searching for the whole time. In *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), you are the Sith Darth Revan. You do not have free will, but are conditioned to do the bidding of Andrew Ryan in *BioShock* (2007). The cake is a lie in *Portal* (2007). Your wife in *Silent Hill 2* (2001) did not die from a chronic illness: you euthanized her, and/or the figure behind all the strange events is a dog.

These are just some of the biggest spoilers in video game history (Van Allen). All the examples are narrative spoilers and plot twists as we know them from other media, especially films. And as with films—maybe even more so—spoiling games is absolutely condemned in game culture. The debate about spoilers is thus an inherent part of this culture. Spoilers seem to endanger games even more than other media because of the specificity of the gaming experience: to find out what happens, you have to invest nontrivial effort (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 1), you have to play the game and work for it, which might take up to hundreds of hours of playtime. But are narrative elements all that can be spoiled about a game? Can you also spoil its puzzles? Its mechanics? Since there is a whole category of paratexts dedicated to give away the game, so to speak—namely, walkthroughs and Let's Plays—this seems possible. Interestingly though, while walkthroughs spoil elements of games, they are widely accepted and thus not considered spoilers. Apart from these points, the connection between games, play, and spoilers might go even deeper. In the words of cultural historian Johan Huizinga, whose *Homo Ludens* is among the most influential books on games and play, spoiling a game can shatter the world of the game and the play.

There has not been much research into the connection between spoilers and games, at least, not from a cultural studies perspective, and even less on the connection between spoilers and play. My aim in this chapter is to explore these connections. I will start with the spoiler discourse in video game culture and game studies, looking specifically at the role of walkthroughs and Let's

Plays. Next, I will focus on the way games can be spoiled and how this relates to their media specificity. Finally, I will widen my perspective to think about the role of spoilers and spoiling in play at large.

Origins and electronic/digital culture

It is hard to discern how long the concept of spoilers has been part of games discourse. Like with film, the concept might be older than the term. But as most twentieth-century game culture was either shared orally or through the early internet and its forgotten precursors, it is hard to pin down when the term “spoiler” first appeared in relation to video games. Games magazines have not been systematically digitized yet, so they do not provide conclusive sources for the use of the term. Findings in already-digitized media only offer circumstantial evidence or possible traces. If, for instance, the 1994 publication *Net Games: Your Guide to the Games People Play on the Electronic Highway* uses the term “Spoiler FAQ” (Maloni et al. 110) without further explanation, we can conclude that the term was already in circulation at that point. Anecdotal evidence points toward an even earlier use in electronic media, as “the ‘SF-Lovers’ mailing list hosted by the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory” started using spoiler warnings in late 1979 (Zimmer). From then on, spoiler warnings became part of netiquette, as Ben Zimmer notes:

I first encountered spoiler alerts when I delved into Usenet newsgroups in the late '80s. Spoiler alerts were particularly common on newsgroups devoted to puzzles (such as *rec.puzzles*, which took over from the earlier *net.puzzle*). A post revealing the solution to a puzzle would require “SPOILER” in all caps. Netiquette also dictated the use of “spoiler space” (a screenful of blank lines after the spoiler warning) or some other method of concealing or encrypting the answer, such as ROT13 (shifting letters 13 places in the alphabet).

Although puzzles and games, especially video games, are not identical, they are related. It is a small step from using spoiler warnings or tags for puzzles to using them for video games. A cursory search of the Usenet Archives shows that the term spoiler was self-explanatory by 1989 at the latest (Littau). Going back to 1982, the concept of game spoilers still had to be explained:

I have an idea. Some people think that figuring things out about the game is part of the fun and don't appreciate having answers thrown into their lap, while others enjoy sharing information with everyone. So, when you're giving hints that require lots of playing experience, like when monters [sic] appear/disappear, and how to use a specific item, why not let everyone know up front that's what your're [sic] doing

by including the word “spoiler” in the title? Like, for example
Subject: monster info (SPOILER)
Wouldn't that be nice? (Ken)

Ken's idea, posted in the group for the game *Rogue* (1980), caught on.¹ This might not be the first use of spoiler warnings in relation to video games, but it shows that in electronic/digital culture, the two have been linked for quite some time. A 1999 guide for the creation of computer networks seems to confirm this as it explains the ROT13 encryption:

ROT13 is used in many situations where the recipient will want to avoid seeing the plaintext until later: mainly, puzzle answers and movie or video game “spoilers.” Most newsreaders and many e-mail clients have ROT13 built in (in Netscape Messenger, this feature is under View > Unscramble). (Parnel 323)

Therefore, even though the term “spoiler” probably originated in the context of film, it was widely used in digital culture even before the advent of the World Wide Web. This is also evident in the fact that markup languages or newsreaders did and do have a specific spoiler function, which allows hiding text from sight until a user clicks a button or scrolls down (Ihnatko 45).² It seems that because computer-based discussions are—or were—inherently text-based, warnings on the content of a message are/were especially important. This indicates that not just the content but even the structure and form of digital media, in the broadest sense, are inherently connected to popular culture and its discursive practices; how popular culture deals with spoilers directly feeds back into digital forms of mediation. In other words, the importance of spoilers for game culture and the debates about them have their origins not just in the medium itself but also in its primary discussion space: the internet.

Spoilers and game culture

Debates and fears about spoilers are rampant and ingrained in video game culture. This is evident from the abundance of articles, posts, discussions, and so on about spoilers. It is an ongoing and iterative debate. Spoiling is not merely considered a faux pas; it is a violation of the rules of games discourse. Research findings indicating that spoilers might make media con-

1 I searched the Usenet-Group, and following Ken's post, it seems spoiler warnings were added to posts; see “empty scroll”; “hints (?) for Rogue”; “Hints from a Total Winner”.

2 See also Simon Spiegel's chapter on this.

sumption more enjoyable (Yan and Tsang), or that deep discussions cannot be spoiler-free, seem of no concern to these discursive rules. Like any other community, game culture is not interested in facts but in complying with what Foucault calls the “requisites for the construction of new statements” (59). It is interested in delimiting and controlling its discourse; or rather, the frequently uttered aversion to and fear of spoilers is an essential part of that discourse. Spoiler warnings have thus become almost ritualistic utterances.

This applies not only to social media, forum debates, or other forms of communication between players. A cursory glance at recent headlines and articles from games journalism outlets also confirms that spoilers are a central topic (Polygon Staff; Grayson). This is probably one of the differences between film and games. While both seem to have a problem with spoilers, game discourse discusses the issue at length, which also has repercussions for games journalism. In this field, every article or essay—and not just reviews—is expected to include spoiler warnings. The same goes for video formats and podcasts. The in-depth discussion of a game in a podcast is even called a “spoilercast.”

The fear of spoilers extends to previews, trailers, and other marketing materials, as well as possible leaks (the publication of information about a game without the approval of the designers/publishers). It even led Sony to introduce an anti-spoiler system for the PlayStation 5 (Wimmeroth). This is significant for two reasons: first, that companies are invested in this discussion, and second, that resources were poured into finding a technical solution. This shows how deeply the aversion to spoilers is ingrained in games culture. However, there are two forms of (possible) spoilers that seem to be acceptable in this culture: walkthroughs and Let’s Plays.

Walkthroughs and Let’s Plays

Walkthroughs—that is, game or strategy guides—have been around for decades in different forms and media. Mia Consalvo describes them as follows:

Walkthroughs are detailed guides to how a player should play a game sequentially to find all of the hidden bonuses and surprises, how to avoid certain death, and how to advance past difficult puzzles or trouble spots to best play and win the game. (“Zelda” 327–28)

Sebastian Domsch calls walkthroughs one of “the various attempts to represent games in passive media like print or film” and “a fascinating new narrative genre in its own right” (49):

They are in a sense a relinearization of video games, though they can themselves also be non-unilinear in structure. Interestingly, it is the older medium of print that is better capable of retaining something of the nodal and non-unilinear structure of video games, and thus of their architecture. Film, on the other hand, is able to provide an almost lossless representation of a video game’s protocol. (49)

What Domsch means by protocol is that the linear medium of video can only show one way of playing and finishing a game, while a written walkthrough can accommodate several paths and solutions. The latter focuses more on the “game’s architecture” instead of the “direct representation of the game’s experiential level” (50). These paratexts can vary widely in their form. “Walkthroughs can be purely imperative, clearly prescribing the one correct option, or rather give a number of options” (51). While this shows how walkthroughs vary in their form or structure, it is also important to differentiate between fan-made examples, those published by media outlets, and officially published walkthroughs. The latter are often called game or strategy guides. There are also websites that collect walkthroughs, like *GameFAQ*, which has been around since 1995. All in all, walkthroughs are a well-established form of paratext for video games and one that is accepted as a helpful tool—especially for games researchers (Fernández-Vara 34). Interestingly, they are not widely associated with spoilers or are regarded as acceptable or necessary types of spoilers (Consalvo, *Cheating* 179)—with the caveat that using walkthroughs is sometimes understood as a form of cheating (Newman 409; Consalvo, *Cheating* 88–90) and thus diminishing one’s “gaming capital” (4).³ Reading or viewing a walkthrough is not something that happens without purpose. The goal is to help a player successfully play a game; thus, a walkthrough must share information about the game and its different paths, and so on. As the purpose of these paratexts is clearly indicated, they might be understood as spoiler territory even though they still try to focus on gameplay and to omit narrative consequences of players’ actions (Domsch 51).

The case of Let’s Plays seems to be a bit more complex. While videos of people playing games might have started out as video walkthroughs, Let’s

3 Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola regard the use of walkthroughs for single player games as a form of internal rules (80), “subjective constraints and goals that players adopt as guidelines they follow as they play.” But even if the use of walkthroughs might be an individual decision, the influence of game culture and discourse on these decisions should not be ignored.

Plays have become a media format in its own right, though one that is notoriously hard to define:

Let's Plays are distinguished from other gameplay videos due to the commentary provided by the person playing the video game. It's best described as being similar to going to a friend's house and watching them play through a video game, combined with watching a DVD with director's commentary of a movie made by a person who did not actually make the movie. The purpose of a Let's Play is to have a new experience with a video game even if the observer does not have enough time to fully play through the game. (Taylor 251–52)

On platforms like *YouTube* and especially *Twitch*, live-streamed footage of games has become an extension of the media environment and economy of games (Johnson and Woodcock). Similarly to walkthroughs, the act of watching a Let's Play means accepting possible spoilers, especially if it is live-streamed (678). In contrast to walkthroughs, the purpose of Let's Plays is not that clear-cut. They can be used to get helpful information, but they are mostly watched for pure enjoyment. On the one hand, some companies have worried “that the game exposure created by the streamers to the game community, including revealing plot twists, characters, and possible gameplay actions may hurt in-house marketing and community-building efforts” (Poretski et al. 1). On the other hand, Let's Plays are seen as “a great contributor to fostering public's interest in the game by increasing awareness of the community and contributing to the decision to buy the game,” thus acting more as “a preview of the game that serves the public by informing it about the product” (4). Therefore, the fear of spoilers in relation to Let's Plays comes less from potential players, who can easily avoid watching them, and more from game companies who adhere to the logic that Let's Plays potentially spoil games and thus hurt sale numbers. It is worth noting though that most game companies have started using Let's Plays themselves; many use streaming as (often free) advertisement for upcoming games. However, it is telling that not only players or the game community discuss spoilers, but game companies, too. This leads to my next question: How does the field of game studies handle spoilers?

Spoilers in Game Studies

In the case of games, the fear of spoilers even extends to academia. Game studies publications regularly include spoiler warnings (Grampp; Shaw). Clara Fernández-Vara calls them “part of the etiquette of writing about games” (54). This may have to do with the overlap between researchers and fans, known as aca-fans (Deterding 525), but it is probably also due to how

much game studies and game culture are intertwined in a more abstract way: while their discourses generally follow different rules, there is still a significant overlap (Gekker 76; Unterhuber, "Metagame" 48). Of course, adhering to the avoidance of spoilers makes analyzing and interpreting games rather difficult.

What is more, avoiding spoilers is diametrically opposed to the "transparency and clarity" (Holmes 5) research needs and even to the discursive discipline of most academic fields. Clara Fernández-Vara states:

In the case of humanistic writing, it seems that the no-spoilers policy goes against the writing tradition of the field, because the assumption is that the reader is familiar with the text/game, and if not, the writing has to provide enough information to understand it. Spoiling the game is part of being able to discuss it in depth, so it is important to be able to talk about it without constraints, and not spoiling the readers' experience should not be one of them. (54)

But some researchers not only avoid spoilers, they even let the fear of spoilers inform the structure of game studies as a discipline. For instance, José P. Zagal argues against a game canon for game studies: not because canons as such are highly problematic, or because it is impossible to come up with a meaningful canon (Unterhuber, "Kanones"), but rather, he opposes a canon primarily because of its potential for spoilers:

There are also social reasons to avoid popular, significant, or otherwise notable games. For instance, the aversion to "spoilers", surprises in a game's narrative or gameplay, means that it's socially problematic to discuss popular games in depth. People often don't want to know the ending or the surprises along the way because they harbor the hope of someday playing the game (even if they may never). (Zagal 671)

Another example of games researchers' problems with spoilers can be found in Espen Aarseth's exploration of different possible approaches to game analysis. While his research leads him to the conclusion that cheats and walkthroughs might be helpful tools for game analysis even though they take away the researcher's "free enjoyment" and "the game's challenges" ("Playing research" 5), he starts out from a very different position:

This brings another style of play to our attention: the *cheater*. This lowly creature [...] can often be spotted far into the ranks of game scholars as well as among the average players. It is with great and increasing regret that one reads papers on game analysis where the author unashamedly admits that yes, I used a cheat code, or yes, I consulted a walk-through. [...] While it is understandable that academics with not too much time on their hands find it difficult to spend the hundreds of hours necessary to master a game, [...] it is hard to imagine excellence of research arising from such practices. Where is the respect for the game? And, more importantly, how is the flavor of the game kept intact? (4)

Aarseth's aversion towards the use of cheats and walkthroughs has nothing to do with the "excellence of research" and all to do with the adherence to gamer capital, the ideology of merit (Paul 2) and thus the discursive rules of game culture. Aarseth's claim that he "was no longer in love with the game" (5) after using a walkthrough underlines this point, as the love for a medium might be the basis for fandom but not for academic research (Jahraus 15).

I agree with Fernández-Vara that these approaches conflict with how we normally think of academic research. As in literary or film studies, "spoilers are part of the job" in game studies (Fernández-Vara 54). While the concept of spoilers is largely unknown or seen as insignificant in literary studies (perhaps because of the field's long history) and is seen more as a research subject in film studies (as this publication shows), it is rather remarkable that game studies are so concerned with them. This leads to my next questions: Why are spoilers especially feared in relation to games? And, more fundamentally, what can even be spoiled in a game?

Types of spoilers

What can be spoiled about a film or book might seem like a banal question (though, as this volume shows, it probably is not). With video games, the question becomes much more complex. While games as a narrative medium can have their story spoiled—especially the ending, the fate of characters, and so on—there are other types of spoilers as well. A game spoiler could reveal:

- The ending
- The way
- The rules
- The world

Therefore, a preliminary typology of game spoilers would include:

- Narrative spoilers
- Solution spoilers
- Mechanical spoilers
- Worldbuilding/lore spoilers

Narrative spoilers seem to be media-independent, and their subtypes might be identical across media. Especially because of the connection between narrative media and ever-present forms of remediation (Bolter and Grusin), plot twists, for instance, are as pertinent in games as in other media. The examples

mentioned in the first paragraph of this essay demonstrate this. Obviously, narrative spoilers are only important in narrative games. Spoiling the end of *Tetris* (1984), if there is one, might also be possible but can hardly be considered a narrative one. Solution spoilers as well as mechanical spoilers might be specific, not only to video games, but to games in general. Telling someone the solution to a riddle, puzzle, or other task in a game or telling someone how the games' mechanics work, how to use or exploit them effectively, also count as spoilers. Solution spoilers—solutions to riddles, puzzles, and so on—deprive players of the opportunity to figure out a solution for themselves. Starting with arcade games, this might be the oldest type of game spoiler. Mechanical spoilers are found especially in games following an occult and esoteric game design, in games like *Dark Souls* (2011) and its descendants (Sigl), which intentionally obfuscate the game's mechanics. Worldbuilding/lore spoilers, by contrast, might again be media-independent, as they are concerned not so much with the specific plot of a game but with knowledge about the story or game world. This can include the location of specific places, or the history of the world or specific characters: that is, the building blocks of possible narratives, or a backstory which is not necessarily contained in the plot of the game itself.⁴

As mentioned, this typology is a preliminary attempt. There are probably other types of spoilers. But even this attempt already shows that there might be more ways to spoil a game than to spoil other media. This could also be a reason why the spoiler discussion is so prevalent in game culture.

Game spoilers

What makes games special in relation to spoilers, or what differentiates video game spoilers from other media spoilers? The immersive quality of the medium might offer an explanation:

I experience games. [...] When I'm invested in something, I try to block out the real world and fall into the fantasy so hard that it becomes real. As the characters interact and learn about the world, so do I. This connection I form with things makes the experience all the more impactful. Perhaps that is why I am so against spoilers. Knowing the twists, knowing turns, knowing who lives and who dies, makes it impossible for me to fall in. I stay one level removed, watching not as a participant

4 In Pen & Paper RPGs information about the game world is differently distributed between game masters and players. Thus, since the 1980s, texts in publication are often marked with descriptions like "game master information" or "for game masters only."

anymore but as an outsider. I distance myself from the events and wait for the moment that I was told about. (Boyne)

Immersion is a concept that has been used to describe video games at least since the 1990s (Murray 123–53), but we can even go back to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which describes the importance of immersing oneself in a game (11). However, the concept has come under criticism in games research for several reasons (Nieser). Firstly, games are far from the only medium with an immersive quality: you can get lost in a film, a book, and so on. Secondly, if all attention is on immersion, other aspects that are constitutive of the act of playing—which might even counter the feeling of immersion, for example, a critical perspective—are lost or become invisible. Immersion also focuses exclusively on a subjective experience, which contradicts the distanced perspective of games research:

In its worse incarnation, the resistance to spoil a game may derive from an extreme personal attachment to games, where some people find it impossible to put any distance between the game as the text being analyzed and themselves. (Fernández-Vara 53)

While this emotional entanglement is a problem for game studies, it is vital for game design, as it keeps people playing. To describe this, Britta Neitzel uses the term “involvement strategies.” She thereby shifts the perspective from the player's experience to the game, looking at how it deploys strategies to keep players invested, be it through actional, senso-motoric, audiovisual, spatial, narrative, temporal, social, or emotional means (219–34). But again, most other media can use the same or at least similar strategies. The main difference, which is part of the specific quality of games, is that their recipients need to be more active. This active form of consumption or reception is often called interactivity or agency. But why is this important for spoilers? Espen Aarseth—with hypertexts as well as video games in mind—describes media that require an active role of the reader/player as “ergodic literature” (*Cybertext* 1). They require a “nontrivial effort [...] to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1). This means that you have to play to find out what a game is about, and that playing means putting in an effort—be it cognitive, physical, mental, and so on—and investing time. The length of a game can range from several minutes to hundreds of hours, making the act of playing a nontrivial effort simply because of its sheer duration. Greater length also raises the stakes for the impact of spoilers.⁵

5 There might also be a difference between spoiling a feature film and spoiling a series.

The term “ergodic,” derived from the Greek words for “work” and “path,” indicates that players have to put in work to follow the paths of the text/game. From pushing buttons to solving puzzles to understanding and interpreting the narrative, players are involved in the game. And because they put in effort, reaching goals—whether beating the game or finding out how the story ends—is considered a reward. Spoilers come into play at the intersection of work and rewards. Spoiling a game renders the work a player has invested meaningless and the reward shallow, as it was not properly earned. Video games generate a subjectivity that focuses on agency, personal responsibility, individuality, and success. The achievements and successes of individual players by their own merit are core ideas perpetuated by video games. Therefore, and because of games’ origin in the military-industrial complex and their rise in a political climate of increasing economization, this subjectivity is closely linked to neoliberalism and hyper-capitalism (Baerg; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter; Unterhuber, “All work, all Play”). This ideological framing exacerbates the problem of spoilers. But the role of spoilers in relation to games possibly reaches even farther: to the phenomenon of play itself.

Spoilers in play

While the idea of spoilers in games has been around at least since the 1980s, the idea of spoilers in relation to play is even older. Johan Huizinga’s 1938 study of play elements in culture, *Homo Ludens*, builds on the thesis that culture springs from play, as play is a universal phenomenon among all living creatures. In his idealized definition of game and play, Huizinga points out several features. I will concern myself with only three of them: 1) that play is different from ordinary life, while 2) “absorbing the player intensely and utterly,” (Huizinga 13) and 3) that it creates its own order through the absolute nature of its rules:

Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it “spoils the game”, robs it of its character and makes it worthless. (10)

Rules are thus not only a social construct surrounding play: they define and create play as “[t]hey determine what ‘holds’ in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow

no doubt” (11). Huizinga defines two types of players who come into conflict with the rules:

The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a “spoil-sport”. The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. (11)

Perhaps surprisingly, Huizinga sees the spoil-sport as more problematic than the cheat, even though the latter robs other players of their possible win. But for Huizinga, it is more important that the cheat at least accepts the premise of play, while the spoil-sport denies it wholesale and thus makes play precarious:

It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its *illusion*—a pregnant word which means literally “in-play” (from *inlusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*). Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community. (11)

Huizinga puts it even more drastically: “The spoil-sport breaks the magic world, therefore he is a coward and must be ejected” (11–12). Even though Huizinga’s theory of play might be more of an ideal than a description of actual play, and even though video games might only partly match his definition, Huizinga’s point is more fundamental than a first glance reveals. What he describes also applies to other aesthetic experience besides games and play. If we think of film, literature, and other media as a form of play on a higher level—whether because of the role of creativity and playfulness in their production and consumption, or because storytelling can be described as play (Koschorke 12) or a game of make-believe (Molinari)—Huizinga can help us understand why spoilers are seen as so threatening. It is not just that spoilers rob us of moments of suspense. They threaten the game world and thus the very idea of these experiences.⁶ Therefore, spoiling a movie, a game, a book, and so on does not only spoil the specific media experience. It threatens the concept of experiencing media itself. And if the world is only perceivable through media, one might rightfully call this world-shattering.

6 Moving this concept to a metalevel, the reaction of game culture to feminist positions on games reveals that game culture understands them as intrusions that threaten its homosocial and thus its “magic circle” (Boluk and Lemieux; Unterhuber, “Metagame”).

Conclusion

This journey from the precursors of the World Wide Web to the role of spoilers in game culture and game studies to the world-shattering impact of spoiling play shows that the connection between game, play, and spoilers must be explored further. This preliminary survey has only offered first glances, yet it is not free of spoilers. But, as Fernández-Vara writes, it cannot be the goal of academic work to be completely spoiler-free. Research as a method of revealing, if not truths, then at least new understandings and perspectives, cannot be concerned about spoilers in its own practice. But as a research object, spoilers are more than compelling: perhaps precisely because they are diametrically opposed to our own approach as researchers.

Ludography

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Playing with the Plot Twist: Perspectives on Spoilers in Games

A well-known British nobleman, Mr. Boddy, has been murdered in his country house. There are six suspects who represent enduring archetypes of crime fiction: a mysterious femme fatale, a grumpy-looking military officer, an elderly housekeeper, an obscure businessman, a scholar, and a widowed socialite. The alleged murder weapons, among them a candlestick, a rope, a revolver, a lead pipe, a wrench, and a dagger, are as generic as the suspects and the scene of the crime. If you are familiar with the tropes of a classic whodunit, it will come as no surprise that there are secret passages in the library, the conservatory, the lounge, and the kitchen of the remote villa owned by the victim.

This scenario could be straight out of an Agatha Christie novel featuring Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple. It provides the setting for the board game *Clue* (1949)¹. Of course, it would be a narrative spoiler to reveal the identity of the murderer. But in contrast to traditional murder mysteries in literature or film, spoiling this setup in a board game like *Clue* works quite differently, since the murderer changes with every new game. You would not spoil the enjoyment a narrative provides, but by giving away the murderer you would spoil the game, just as if you had manipulated the dice in a game of chance. The solution depends on which cards are drawn and placed in an envelope in the center of the game board at each new session. So, there are no narrative plot points to spoil. We can only violate the rules of the game by looking at the three hidden cards that determine murderer, murder weapon, and crime scene.

Clue was devised by Anthony E. Pratt in 1943. He took inspiration for the game from British crime novels that are based on the structure of a typical murder mystery. In recent decades, *Clue* has become the prototype for board games based on traditional crime fiction. Pratt turned the scenario and the cast of a prototypical detective story into an abstract system of rules and game mechanics. Instead of one fixed solution, there are different options determined by chance, but unlike recent crime card games with a narrative solution, these variations lack any narrative motivation and background story. Psychological profiling which would offer possible reasons for the crime and

1 The game called *Clue* in the United States originated as *Cluedo* in the UK and Europe.

the backstory wounds that motivate the suspects in a crime novel, are not relevant to a game of *Clue*. The game cannot be spoiled by giving away the motives of the murderer, since there are only statistics and no psychological explanations.

Nevertheless, in recent years, narrative spoiler warnings have become central to gaming culture.² This article will trace the roots of this paradigm shift in analogue pen-and-paper role-playing games (RPGs). The hybrid nature of current video games will be discussed by applying ludic and narrative lenses to the medieval adventure game *Pentiment* (2022). This story-driven game was inspired by game mechanics taken from board games such as *Clue* as well as successful novels such as the medieval murder mystery novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) by Umberto Eco.

The classic board game structure of *Clue* has given way to complex story-based games such as adventure and role-playing games which can be spoiled both on a ludic level of gameplay by breaking the rules, and on a narrative level by giving away plot points.

First, I consider how spoilers got into games and why they are closely related to genre rules. Second, I look at the media-specific rules of spoilers and their transformations across media in relation to current adaptation theory. According to literary theorists like Linda Hutcheon, adaptation as a transmedia process no longer focuses on fidelity to a supposed urtext (6–22), but rather on the dynamic transfer of motives, stories, scenes, and characters across media.

The complex interactions of adaptations as open-ended processes that can be influenced by authors and designers as well as players and participatory fan cultures is also discussed by Paul Booth in his two seminal studies *Game Play* (2015) and *Board Games as Media* (2020). The phenomena discussed in adaptation theory provide very prolific intersections with current developments in game studies, especially in the emerging field of board game studies, which has inspired numerous conferences, special issues, and journals in recent years.

The issue of adaptation is of particular interest to the study of spoilers, since games can be spoiled in a number of ways on the ludic level, either by poor balance in the construction of the game system, or by players cheating and ignoring the rules of the game. That a game can be spoiled in the same way as a mystery novel or a psychological thriller—by giving away the

2 See also Tobias Unterhuber's chapter.

ending—is a fairly recent development that concerns narrative architecture rather than game mechanics.

Over the past three decades, board games have increasingly incorporated narrative forms, largely inspired by the design of role-playing games (RPGs). RPGs offer experiences that go beyond the conventional tie-in board games associated with franchises such as James Bond in the 1960s and 1970s. In *Game Play*, Booth discusses instructive examples of board games that are part of larger transmedia ecosystems as well as segments of larger story worlds. The case studies featured in his analysis range from the Lovecraft-inspired *Arkham Horror* board game series (since 1987) and cooperative games based on J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth to board games based on television series such as the *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA* reboot (US 2003–2009, Creator: Ronald D. Moore), *STAR TREK* and *THE WALKING DEAD* (US 2010–2022, Creator: Frank Darabont). Booth argues that it is important to understand these examples from both a ludic and a media studies perspective. In *Board Games as Media*, he therefore suggests a multi-method approach to the analysis of games—drawing on the one hand on elements from textual analysis, performance studies, media studies, and ludic design, and on the other hand on ethnographic studies of gaming cultures and autoethnographic playing sessions.

Adaptations of source material taken from literature, film, and television such as the board games discussed by Booth have parlayed the transformation of plot twists into game mechanics by also referring to the narrative structure of the source material, rather than being reduced to the merely decorative function of iconography. In narrative board games such as *Battlestar Galactica* (2008), the plot twist that several members of the crew are treacherous cyborg creatures becomes part of the game mechanics. Several players may learn about their true identities halfway through the game and have to cheat the other players, which goes against the conventions of traditional board games, but is in keeping with the narrative structure of the television series.

Remediations between games and narrative media result in hybrid combinations of storytelling and ludic challenges in digital video games as well as analog board and role-playing games. Sometimes the goals and challenges in a game are created by narrative plot twists that influence the progress of the game. Plot twists can be used to move the narrative in a different direction than expected, similar to the second act of a film adding further obstacles that keep the protagonists from reaching their goals. Often, the narrative suspense associated with these plot twists is combined with procedures and actions that interrupt the flow of the game mechanics and might be considered to spoil

the experience in a traditional board game. Cheating your team or destroying a token in a board game would be considered foul play in most traditional games. In a narrative board game that adapts the paranoia of a conspiracy thriller, it provides an interesting surprise for the players.

The issue of spoilers in a game of *Clue* seems to support the position of orthodox ludologists who think that games are better off without narratives (e.g. Eskelinen). The not so mysterious murder mystery in *Clue* employs stock characters and a generic setting, which allows for immediate familiarity with the situation and lets players know what to do in it. In this setup, interrogating suspects controlled by the other players and investigating potential crime scenes is more important than the story implied by the game, which does not develop at all. Even the player controlling the murderer does not know about the avatar's crime. You cannot really spoil the narrative of *Clue*, and it is probably even an exaggeration to call the tokens representing the six stock characters avatars. But you can spoil the game by breaking the rules.³

Clue operates according to the definition that ludologist Jesper Juul introduced in his classic game model in 2005. He identifies six elements that make up the core of traditional games. These are fixed rules, variable outcomes, valorizations of the outcome, player efforts, negotiable consequences, and a certain attachment the players feel to the outcome (44).

As an *activity*, a game is a system that changes state according to a set of rules that are implemented by humans, computers, or natural laws. The game is such that its outcome is undetermined, variable, and quantifiable. The players are aware that some outcomes are more desirable than others. The players are able to exert effort in order to influence the outcome. The players feel attached to the eventual outcome. Finally, the consequences of the game *have been* negotiated, ideally before the beginning of the game. (45)

In addition to traditional games as described by Juul, there are also borderline cases that employ ludic forms but are not conventional board or card games. These include games of pure chance, skill-based and chance-based gambling, open-ended simulations, and pen and paper RPGs. The idea of pure games based on Juul's six core elements has been increasingly undermined by the emergence of new game types created by combining genres. The genre of RPGs reintroduces all sorts of backstory wounds, traumas, and other motivations for potential murders into a whodunit that *Clue* omitted from its rather abstract rules. An RPG version of *Clue* could also continue after the murderer

3 On the spoilsport, see also Tobias Unterhuber's chapter.

has been revealed by having the player whose character has committed the crime escape from the other players in an additional round.

In genres such as RPGs and adventure games with narrative elements (both analog and digital), a game can be spoiled by giving away the murderer, just like in a film or a novel, because these game genres construct ludic fictions that offer interactive story worlds and genre settings based on stock scenes and character prototypes adapted from film and literature. This background knowledge offers an entry point into the game system and its mechanics. Since players are vaguely familiar with the behavior of pirates or secret agents, the dangers lurking in the dark corners of a haunted house, and the investigations of a private detective, they can navigate games that refer to these genre tropes and traditions more intuitively, without consulting the game rules after each turn (Rauscher).

Adventure and role-playing games combine beats—which screenwriting consultant Robert McKee defines as “the smallest element of structure [...] an exchange of behavior in action/reaction” (37)—with the consequences of game rules. Narrative information is therefore turned into a gaming resource, and decisions about the state of a game system can have narrative implications. In digital adventure games and in analog choose-your-own-adventure books, the description of a scene is followed by the question of what the avatar will do next. The player can influence the protagonist’s actions by choosing the next narrative beat. The different storylines are organized in branching paths that meet at several decisive plot points.

Game scholar Espen Aarseth calls ludic story systems *cybertexts* or *ergodic texts*, derived from the Greek words “ergon” and “hodos” for work and path (1). Advancing within their structure can depend on elements of chance such as rolling dice. But moving ahead can also require intellectual or physical skills, such as applying logical thinking or hitting a control button to a given rhythmic pattern. This more or less “non-trivial effort is required to traverse the text” (1).

As a consequence of this development, a multitude of potential spoilers have become available. Revealing the solution to a puzzle in a game is quite different from distracting someone who is trying to pass a so-called quick time event, which requires the player to repeat a sequence of buttons displayed on the screen at the right time on the controller. The integration of narrative elements into games also makes it possible to spoil the ending, since many games can only be played once, just like a puzzle can only be solved once, and a linear story usually has one ending. The genre of escape room games that became popular in the 2010s is a key example of this phenomenon:

you can spoil an escape room game extra-diegetically by giving away the solution at the beginning or diegetically by acting out your role in a way that does not contribute to finding the way out.

The emergence of story games in the 1970s and their game mechanics also affected board and video games. The mixture of strategy games, improvisational theater, games of chance, and collaborative story mapping brought about different forms of RPGs, from *Dungeons and Dragons* (since 1974) to modern video game franchises like *The Elder Scrolls* series (since 1994) and *The Witcher* (since 2007). Even crime board games have left Mr. Boddy's mansion and started including narratives. But instead of charting new territories, they often revisit settings familiar from Agatha Christie or Arthur Conan Doyle. Regarding these predecessors in crime fiction, recent adaptation theory offers a helpful framework for understanding the ludification of the mystery novel and other genre structures as well as their attractions and associated spoilers.

Adapting Spoilers and the Ludification of Genre Tropes

Since its first release, the game *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* (1981), which combines gamebook and board game, has seen several reissues and expansion packs with new mysteries. The cases to be solved are included in a gamebook that is similar to campaign books for RPGs, with descriptions of the setting and events as building blocks for the plot to be hosted by a game master. The *Sherlock Holmes* game box includes a map of London, a phone directory, and a newspaper providing hints about several actions, descriptions of places, and clues. The hints in the newspaper and the assumptions based on studying the surroundings of the crime scene lead to certain paragraphs in the gamebook. As in a choose-your-own-adventure book, the navigation between several scenes and encounters described in non-linear paragraphs allows players to select a path of action around London. The game consists of ten cases, each providing a scenario for one session. According to the ludification of narrative elements that synchronizes story beats with game moves, players earn points by finding the correct answers to their investigations. But they also lose points for having to return to a location after missing a clue on their first visit. In contrast to a film organized by editing or a video adventure game structured along cut scenes and other pre-scripted interludes, players must figure out for themselves when and how to move ahead in solving the case.

There are two very different kinds of spoilers for this type of game design which seem to be symptomatic of the challenges of balancing the players' experience between fun and frustration in both analog and digital games. A certain friction is created by using the idea of a spoiler in a very narrow sense, in terms of narrative information given in advance, and in a very broad sense, as a ludic experience that can be spoiled by interrupting the flow of the game or by deviating from established rules.

If the answers to the questions concerning the crime can be found too easily, we are disappointed, much like when we recognize the murderer in a whodunit a few minutes into the film or after the first chapter of a book. Conversely, and perhaps even more frustratingly, the game comes to a standstill if no player is able to combine the clues and discover the next step towards the solution. I have experienced this situation myself during a failed attempt to play *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* with a group of board game aficionados whose patience was tried by the detailed examination of clues.

In addition to revealing plot twists in advance or infringing the rules of the game, a spoiled experience can also result from an imbalance between individual skills and the demands of the game. This kind of spoiler experience can be discussed in the terms of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow", which "describes a state of concentration and satisfaction that a person experiences when performing an activity" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 149). Csikszentmihalyi

suggests that a person establishes her own rules, objectives, and rewards, and lets herself be absorbed by a powerful goal. But this goal will only work if it is balanced with the person's abilities: the task should not be too difficult or we will experience anxiety, nor too easy because we will then get bored. (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 150)

The tension between the game as a designed artifact and the subjective experience of the player who sets the game system in motion is also crucial for Booth, who divides his study *Board Games as Media* into two parts; one focusing on the game as an object of textual analysis, and one on the ethnographic study of the players and their cultural practices of experiencing the game.

The danger of getting stuck in the plot of a game raises the stakes for achieving a well-balanced game design. On the one hand, games like *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* offer a higher degree of immersion with role-playing elements like studying the newspaper or the map of Victorian London. On the other hand, the game can reach a dead end and become frustrating in ways that a linear narrative or a replayable game like *Clue* would not.

Game researcher Marco Arnaudo discusses the influence of *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* in his study on *Storytelling in the Modern Board Game*: “The arrangement made it possible to mislead the players in a certain direction to spring a major surprise on them later, thereby giving them the pleasure of being intelligently fooled that is typical of fiction” (180). Story games take design elements that would spoil a traditional game—such as suddenly changing the rules of the game by introducing special rules, e.g. for dealing with the traitor in the *Battlestar Galactica* board game mentioned above—and turn them into enjoyable twists that affect both the plot structures and the gameplay concepts. This effect is achieved by turning actions that would be considered cheating or breaking the rules in Juul’s classic game model into narrative developments that introduce a different mode of play. Turning against your team would be considered foul play in any traditional team sport. In a story game about a haunted house that suddenly takes possession of a player character, such as the board game *Betrayal at the House on the Hill* (2004), it is in keeping with the narrative tropes of gothic horror stories.

The game mechanics and procedures of *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* are part of a larger process found in many board and video games that integrate narrative structures and elements. Stock scenes, character types, and narrative tropes known from popular genres are adapted for game scenarios and systems. The cues associated with their iconography and settings create expectations that inform the actions on a ludic level as well as the expectations on a narrative level.

In her *Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon discusses different modes of engagement. In contrast to more traditional approaches to the relation between adaptations and their source texts, she considers adaptation to be an ongoing process. Adaptations can create chains of meaning that do not originate from a single source text but rather process multiple variations of a story, character, trope, or setting across media:

[T]he idea of “fidelity” to that prior text is often what drives any directly comparative method of study. Instead [...] there are many and varied motives behind adaptation and few involve faithfulness. Other earlier adaptations may, in fact, be just as important as contexts for some adaptations as any “original”. (xiii)

The adventures of Sherlock Holmes are an important influence on different forms of analog and digital gaming. An ongoing adventure video game series, which even features crossover encounters with Arsène Lupin and H. P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos, and continuing additions to the board game discussed above demonstrate the enduring relevance of Doyle’s detective for game de-

sign. It is not surprising that the successful modernization of the character and his cases in the BBC series *SHERLOCK* (UK 2010–, Creator: Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat) are strongly influenced by game aesthetics. The detective's point-of-view scanning his surroundings is reminiscent of the interface in an adventure video game (**fig. 1a–b**).



Fig. 1a–b: The protagonist of *SHERLOCK* is scanning his mind

The process of ludification not only affects the semantics of the adaptation, but also the syntactic structure of the series.⁴ When Sherlock Holmes falls to his supposed death at the end of the episode *THE REICHENBACH FALL* (S02E03, UK 2012, Director: Toby Haynes), the final shot already hints at his return. Unlike in the original story published in 1893, the potential narrative spoiler of Holmes' survival no longer concerns the audience. The serial format and common knowledge of the lore surrounding the character and his nemesis, Professor Moriarty, have already preconfigured the adaptation. The time between two seasons was used for a kind of alternate reality game inviting fans to speculate about how Sherlock Holmes has staged his death. The first episode of season 3 presented several theories about Holmes's return depicted as short interludes within the larger episode. This kind of adaptation process across media integrates different forms of common knowledge created by cultural practices.

Hutcheon also notes that understanding adaptation as a process requires taking into account various media beyond the usual suspects on the page, onscreen, or onstage: "Videogames, theme park rides, Web sites, graphic novels, song covers, operas, musicals, ballets, and radio and stage plays are thus as important to this theorizing as are the more commonly discussed movies and novels" (XVI). Ludifications adapt narratives, characters, and settings to game structures and systems across media. This process can expand subplots and background stories from other media. It can also condense a narrative into a compact set of game mechanics and rules. Examples for this kind of adaptation are found in board games based on modern film classics, offering a nexus of ludic and cinematic genre forms. The board game based on *THE SHINING* (US/UK 1980), Stanley Kubrick's idiosyncratic adaptation of Stephen King's novel, informs the players from the beginning that one of them will take the part of Jack Nicholson's groundskeeper at the Overlook Hotel. He or she will go insane during the lonesome winter nights spent in the isolation of the uncanny Rocky Mountains resort. Like the return of Sherlock Holmes after being thrown down the Reichenbach Falls, the image of Jack Nicholson's crazed stare from *THE SHINING* had become common pop culture knowledge long before the rise of internet memes. The game design is no longer concerned with the narrative plot twist that someone will succumb to the evil hidden in the Overlook Hotel. The character development has turned into a game mechanism, and the question is which player will go mad and secretly

4 For a detailed discussion of the semantics and syntax of genre, see Altman.

try to sabotage the cooperative game. The process of ludification in adapting *THE SHINING* to a board game translates the plot into a rule system and game mechanism. The original spoiler revealing who will go insane and who will survive is remediated; as a result, every player can take on the part of Jack Nicholson's protagonist. It no longer affects the development of the plot. In contrast to Stephen King's novel, blowing up the hotel is no option in the game.

Similar patterns for turning plot twists into game mechanisms are also found in the belated board game adaptations ludifying *Jaws* (US 1976) by Steven Spielberg and the first film in the *ALIEN* series by Ridley Scott (UK/US 1979). Hunting the shark controlled by one player, who fights against the others in the 2019 board game, is reminiscent of a game of *Battleship* expanded by analogue algorithms orchestrating additional events. The thriller elements of Spielberg's film—for instance, the first-person camera and the memorable score by John Williams—make way for the abstract experience of a strategy game. The cooperative 2021 board game *Alien – Fate of the Nostromo* confronts the players with the full-grown creature from the beginning. In contrast to the game, the advertising campaign for the film's release in 1979 kept the look of the Xenomorph designed by H. R. Giger secret until it was unleashed onscreen, becoming a pop culture icon. Later spin-offs like the *Aliens vs. Predator* comic book, which has been adapted as a tabletop and video game series as well as a film by game adaptation auteur Paul W. S. Anderson, treated the Alien as one of two extraterrestrial stars of the franchise crossover.

If the genre rules of a diegetic system are not considered by a game, the ludic experience can be spoiled. The players expect to have a certain agency implied by the character of Sherlock Holmes or by the *ALIEN* films. If Sherlock Holmes were not able to interpret the clues found, or if the Alien did not follow the life cycle created by H. R. Giger and Ridley Scott, the ludic experience would deviate from the players' expectations. The situation is comparable to a game master in a RPG who is not familiar with the lore of the universe it is set in. At the same time, a sudden rule change that follows the code of the genre setting can provide an enjoyable plot twist. From a strictly ludic perspective, we could speak of a spoiled game when your cowboy avatar in the video game *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) is caught cheating during a card game in the saloon. Without warning, you are challenged to a duel on the Western town's main street. Within a few seconds, the gameplay switches from a poker simulation, including the option to cheat at your own risk, to a gunfight. The controls in the two mini-games are quite different, and the duel situation is not explicitly mentioned in the rules. From a ludic perspective, this is a

spoiler ruining the game flow because the game design did not inform players about the consequences of cheating in the saloon. But from the perspective of the Western genre, it is evident that cheating in a card game would not be condoned by the outlaws gathered at the poker table. Instead of being shot on the spot by your opponent or other dead ends that would have been examples of bad game design, you are allowed to defend yourself with quick reactions, demonstrating your skills in the gunfight mini-game.

In another part of the game, the task is to save a friend from the gallows by shooting the noose. Anyone vaguely familiar with the films of “Spaghetti Western” maestro Sergio Leone will recognize this as a reference to his influential classic *THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY* (1966), starring Clint Eastwood, Eli Wallach, and Lee Van Cleef. The setup inspired by Leone remedies and expands the well-known scenario of Eastwood’s nameless stranger saving the likeable rogue Tuco, played by Wallach, from execution, and raising the bounty on him by allowing him to escape. If you didn’t have the option of freeing your companion by shooting the noose, even though the game clearly references the scenario from Leone’s film, it would spoil the gaming experience by breaking with the ludic expectations created by the narrative.

Hutcheon discusses three different types of adaptation that are helpful for understanding scenes like those from *Red Dead Redemption*:

1. Adaptations that work as “a formal entity or product, [...] an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works” and “can involve a shift of medium” (7). This category concerns the games based on *THE SHINING*, *JAWS*, *ALIEN*, and other films as well as video games based upon well-known literary and/or cinematic predecessors.
2. Seen as “a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation, this has been called both appropriation and salvaging, depending on your perspective” (8). The obvious reference to *THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY* in *Red Dead Redemption* falls into this category. Games can even give additional meaning to the story worlds inspired by a film or franchise. The games in the *STAR WARS* franchise, for example, have been moving increasingly further away from the films for several decades, creating their own settings and storylines within the galaxy far, far away. The role-playing game *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) riffed on rather well-known narrative twists from the original films. Narrative twists that would have triggered a spoiler warning had they existed in 1980 are turned into ludic moves. The main character’s dark secret allows the player to decide whether to join the forces of evil

or reject the temptation of the dark side, as Luke Skywalker does during an unexpected family reunion in *STAR WARS: EPISODE V – THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK* (US 1980, Director: Irvin Kershner).

3. Finally, “seen from the process of its reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations [...] as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation” (8).

The third category is especially interesting for game studies as well as game design, since the ludic process depends on feedback created by the reception, that is, the players’ reaction to the situation imposed upon them by the game.

In this context, the remediation of plot twists concerns not just their adaptation from narrative structures into game rules and systems. They can also be used as a device in game design, contributing to the dramatic buildup and intensifying the players’ experience. This recent phenomenon, which entered gaming culture with the introduction of narrative elements and story-world settings, lends itself to the ludic transformation of narrative spoiler material, as I discuss in the next section.

Remediating Narrative Spoilers for Ludic Dramatization

The reason that narrative plot twists became part of game design—rather than optional game board adornments—is related to the above-mentioned paradigm shift initiated by role-playing and adventure games. The consequences Juul discusses in his classic game model are not always negotiable. In games with storytelling structures, the result of a ludic phase can also introduce the next chapter of the story. The remediation from linear narratives to more open forms in games can turn ludic tasks into building blocks of a larger chain of events and the diegetic economy of the plot and the depicted story world.

Like the game based on *THE SHINING*, the popular horror-themed board game *Betrayal at the House on the Hill* uses plot twists as a crucial element. In the game’s first phase, which is similar to the setup of a traditional haunted house story, three to six players explore a run-down mansion together. The map of the building is rearranged with every new game by drawing and combining cards from a pile. After the countdown to the haunting—represented by a movable token on a scale—ends, another phase of the game begins, and the hitherto cooperative players are betrayed by one player. The traitor learns about a new goal from a gamebook that features fifty different cases.

The new goal remains unknown to the rest of the group, who instead receive information on how to defeat the traitor. In *Betrayal at the House on the Hill*, spoilers concern both the narrative and the ludic level. There is a background story that affects the behavior of the player character who becomes a traitor. If every player knew the background story and its effect on the gameplay in advance, the game would be spoiled on a narrative level in the same way that a novel or film is spoiled by revealing a crucial plot twist. At the ludic level, actions that would make the traitor a spoilsport according to the classic game model are justified by adapting the rules of the game according to the narrative twist.

The game design of *Betrayal at the House on the Hill* is a significant example of hybrids resulting from the combination of ludic storytelling in role-playing games and traditional board game elements. It represents the shorter form of scenarios found in so-called long-form games. Within a larger role-playing campaign, a game like *Betrayal at the House on the Hill* would comprise the events of a single gaming session played in one evening. Game scholar Amy Green defines long-form games in her book *Storytelling in Video Games* as

those that require at least 40 hours to complete. Although the designation is somewhat arbitrary, its purpose is to establish a demarcation between shorter and longer stories, in much the same way that literature is categorized into the short story and the novel. This designation implies no inherent degree of value, [...] but rather it denotes scale. (66)

So-called *Legacy* games like *Risk Legacy* (2011) and *Pandemic Legacy* (2015) adapt the long-form principle into a structure consisting of twelve sessions. In contrast to traditional board games, these twelve sessions can be played only once, since there are changes to the game board over the course of the game, and components like cards and tokens can even be destroyed. The aspect of repeatability, one of the defining characteristics of conventional games, has been replaced by a ludic point of no return. It would definitely be a spoiler to reveal what happens around the midpoint of the twelve sessions in a *Legacy* board game. Having experienced two board games in the *Pandemic Legacy* series, appropriately labeled “seasons” like in a TV or streaming series, I can confirm that the plot twists made the original goals appear in a different light. Actions pursued with the best intentions turned out to have fatal consequences, and supposed achievements proved to be deceitful. Arnaudo summarizes the consequences of this development in recent game design:

The convention that a game always starts in the same way, with no influence from previous game sessions, has been replaced with arcs of interlinked scenarios that

emulate the breadth and architecture of fiction [...] There is nevertheless an element of fiction that board games have struggled to capture until very recently, as to do so would have meant to attack one of the holiest pillars of conventional gaming. This narrative element is the plot twist, and the pillar it threatens is replayability. It is an accepted fact that a mystery novel or movie will be fully enjoyable only once, but millennia of game design have led us to expect that we should be entertained a large number of times by a game. (179)

The process of hybridization in games like the *Legacy* series indicates that the transfer of forms does not move exclusively from analogue to digital games, but that the algorithms of video games also create feedback loops into board game design.

The narrative structure of the *Pandemic Legacy* games uses the design of the original *Pandemic* board game created by Matt Leacock in 2008 as a starting point. Like in the stand-alone, replayable board game, the players try to find a cure against a dangerous virus spreading across the globe. But as if in anticipation of the 2020 Covid crisis, the lockdown imposed upon certain areas has unexpected consequences, and the virus mutates. Instead of the game restarting from scratch, everything that happened in the first round remains relevant in subsequent rounds—even as the situation deteriorates, with the military and scientists pursuing opposite plans. With every new round, additional tokens, cards, and goals are added. Opening the boxes containing these new elements is reminiscent of opening an advent calendar. We would spoil the game by opening the additional boxes in advance, just like a game of *Clue* would be ruined by peeking at the three hidden cards. The spoilers contained in the game's story structure—for instance, unexpected rule changes, the introduction of new tokens, or the irredeemable loss of characters—add to the intensity of the experience. Like in the examples discussed before, going against established game conventions by featuring plot twists affecting the rules must no longer be considered to be an act of spoiling the game. It becomes a valuable tool for the design of engaging long-form games. Within the context of a game narrative that takes ten hours or more, turns calling for a spoiler warning can be used not only as plot twists, but also to create thematic undertones. They can reflect and question game tropes and genre conventions through reinterpretation and intertextuality as discussed by Hutcheon in her theory of adaptation:

For audiences, such adaptations are obviously “multilaminated”; they are directly and openly connected to recognizable other works, and that connection is part of their formal identity, but also of what we might call their hermeneutic identity. (21)

The medieval crime adventure video game *Pentiment* created by Josh Sawyer, Hannah Kennedy, Matthew Loyola, and their co-workers at Obsidian Entertainment is clearly inspired by Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980). The game's save function even references the palimpsest of a text being overwritten by new events. In the early 16th century, a young painter from Nuremberg, Andreas Maler, becomes involved in a series of murders at an abbey in Upper Bavaria. As in Eco's novel and its film adaptation by Jean-Jacques Annaud (IT/DE/FR 1986), the setting of the abbey and its neighboring village serves as a backdrop for the historical conflicts surrounding the plot. The game adopts the strategy used by Eco in his novel of combining the traditional genre pattern of a mystery story with philosophical reflections on the Middle Ages and with an elaborate setting that includes an isolated monastery and a labyrinth hiding arcane books. In his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, Eco points out the importance and momentum of the world-building for his novel. In story-oriented video games, the world-building becomes even more important because it presents players with different options. They must choose sides in the conflicts surrounding a series of murders in a monastery, and they must decide which one of different narrative branches they want to follow.

In *Pentiment*, the rise of Protestantism, the uprising of German peasants against their oppressors, and the conflict between Enlightenment and pagan traditions are interwoven with the investigations. Many of the situations that Andreas Maler encounters are inspired by similar scenes in *The Name of the Rose*: There is a secluded library holding mysterious books about the early days of the nearby village before the Romans arrived, as well as the threat of inquisitors arriving at the crime scene, and the conflicts between clergy and peasants. Compared to *The Name of the Rose*, the story of *Pentiment* unfolds in a less Aristotelian way. It does not feature the missing second book of the Greek philosopher's *Poetics*, and it is less concerned with the unity of place, time, and action. After the investigation of the first murder comes to an ambiguous end, the story turns epic. It jumps ahead several years for the second act, which deals with a similar murder case. The third act shifts the perspective to another protagonist and offers a resolution two decades later, while the theme of the relationship between art and reality becomes as important as the protracted murder case.

Pentiment offers a perfect example of Hutcheon's view of adaptation as reinterpretation and intertextuality. The process of adaptation is even taken a step further, creating a feeling of helplessness and desperation reminiscent of noir fiction. The element of spoiling the game by not being able to find

a completely convincing solution to the murder case becomes an important device for evoking the feeling of being lost in a labyrinth and unable to find satisfying answers. At the beginning of the second act, the avatar must come to terms with the revelation that he has failed to identify the true villain responsible for the murder. This could be considered a breach of contract under traditional game rules. Just imagine finding out at the end of *Clue* that you had identified the murderer, but that he or she was just a pawn to distract you from the real opponent.



Fig. 2: The ending of *Pentiment*

The trope of a mental labyrinth is introduced at the beginning, with the protagonist visiting his mind palace for discussions with various representations of his subconscious. The gradual destruction of the mind palace suggests that relying on the strengths of reason and logical thinking alone will not bring the investigations to a satisfying conclusion (fig. 2). The plot in this adventure with a traditional point-and-click-interface follows the structure of a classic whodunit. But the investigation is spoiled by the subversion of expectations, both on a ludic and a narrative level. Players always run out of time to gather evidence, and the murder mystery cannot be satisfactorily solved in the first two acts, as there are always hints of a larger conspiracy yet to be uncovered. However, the narrative does not allow the avatar to investigate further. When the Archdeacon arrives at the end of the first act, the player is forced to name a suspect to be executed for the murder of an intellectual nobleman, without

having all the clues to the solution of the crime. The execution is shown in a sequence that reduces the player to the status of a helpless observer.

No matter which suspect we name, we're always left feeling like we did not get the complete picture. In addition, there are spoilers on a ludic level, where half-baked pieces of evidence have deadly consequences for the suspect, and some surefire clues are overshadowed by doubt and moral ambivalence. The murdered nobleman who initially seemed like an open-minded intellectual and renaissance man turns out to have had a violent side. A nun who was molested by him is thus much more understandable in her actions than the quirky whodunit stereotypes in *Clue*, as she is provided with a relatable back-story wound. In the second act, when a smart representative of the peasants' uprising against the church is killed, we discover evidence that one of the farmers is not who he claims to be. The references to the film *LE RETOUR DE MARTIN GUERRE* (*THE RETURN OF MARTIN GUERRE*, FR 1982, Director: Danile Vigne) and its American remake *SOMMERSBY* (US/FR 1993, Director: Jon Amiel) provide more than an intertextual framework. They undermine the progression of the game by creating a guilty conscience and a moral dilemma for players familiar with the historical drama of an impostor posing as a deceased man. Unlike the peasants who hang the wrong man for a crime he did not commit, in the game the decision to accuse him is left to the player. Morally, he or she should expose the con man, but knowing that the accused will be convicted of the wrong crime creates a sense of unease. In *Pentiment*, intertextuality and reinterpretation are used in combination with spoiling the genre conventions of a traditional whodunit crime game. The emotional effect of this experience adds to the characterization of the avatar and the overall ambivalence of the story development. The interruption of the ludic flow creates situations enabling the players to reflect on the situation and the consequences of their actions. Adventures like *Pentiment* reintegrate psychological perspectives and deep characters into the game. The introduction of narrative elements into games has not only remediated traditional plot twists, resulting in spoiler warnings for game narratives. The open processes of adaptation led to a hybridization of ludic forms. They turned the act of spoiling a game into a dramatic device, creating a diverse and complex ludic and narrative experience in both board and video games. Actions that would have been considered a breach of contract in terms of traditional game definitions, such as playing against your own team in a cooperative game, can provide a satisfying payoff on a narrative level. The spoilsport becomes an element of the game mechanics and is motivated by the narrative structure. In contrast to a traditional party of *Clue*, being forbidden to achieve the

original goal of the game becomes a meaningful experience on a narrative level. Breaking with the expectations created by the rules corresponds to plot twists that are defining for narrative structures, but not for traditional games. Since the introduction of storytelling elements into games in the 1970s with tabletop games and RPGs, revealing information about the plot of a game can be considered a spoiler, just as it is in films, books and other narrative media. The balance between spoiling a game on a ludic and a narrative level for creative purposes and a deeper experience for the players could be another instructive building block in discussing transmedia aesthetics and dramaturgy from a ludic point of view.

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THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY. Director: Sergio Leone. IT 1966.
JAWS. Director: Steven Spielberg. US 1976.
THE NAME OF THE ROSE. Director: Jean-Jacques Annaud. IT/DE/FR 1986.
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SHERLOCK. Creator: Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat. UK 2010– .
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THE SHINING. Director: Stanley Kubrick. US/UK 1980.
SOMMERSBY. Director: Jon Amiel. US/FR 1993.
STAR WARS: EPISODE V – THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK. Director: Irvin Kershner. US 1980.
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Part 4: Reception

Spoilers and the Narrative Experience: Lessons From Over a Decade of Empirical Research

Nobody likes a spoiler. Or do they? Spoilers, “premature and undesired information about how a narrative’s arc will conclude” (Johnson and Rosenbaum, “Spoiler Alert” 1069), are often seen in a negative light. However, considering the ubiquity of promotional materials as well as people’s familiarity with genre conventions—one only needs to watch a few romantic comedies to know how they turn out—one can argue most people are never truly spoiler-free (Hassoun; Livingstone). In fact, many media users actively seek out spoilers and in some cases use them to decide whether a show is worth watching (Gray and Mittell; Perks and McElrath). Nevertheless, the notion that spoilers are “bad” prevails (e.g., Mecklenburg).

These conflicting ideas about spoilers point to a need for research into how spoilers impact people’s narrative experiences, i.e., what people think and feel about a story. Although spoilers are likely as old as stories themselves, empirical research into how spoilers affect enjoyment and related variables is only about fourteen years old. Since 2011, media psychology research has used experiments and surveys to examine the relationship between spoilers and enjoyment. Lay beliefs about the negative effects of spoilers notwithstanding, so far findings seem to indicate that spoilers have little to do with people’s narrative experience, affecting their enjoyment only some of the time and under certain circumstances.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will unpack these findings by providing an overview of this first decade and a half of spoiler research.¹ I will start by conceptualizing enjoyment and then discussing foundational research into the relationship between spoilers and enjoyment. Next, I will dive into research that addressed a variety of factors that could influence that relationship, such as the nature of the spoiler and people’s involvement with a narrative. Finally, I will present some of the challenges faced by current investigations and discuss opportunities for future research

1 While no overview is ever complete, every attempt was made to include articles that approached spoilers from a media-psychological perspective (i.e., using quantitative methods and media-psychological theories). Articles were located through database searches as well as backward and forward cited-reference searches.

Enjoyment, Spoilers, and the Narrative Experience

What makes people like any kind of narrative, especially those where their favorite characters may face distress, fear, and loss? Excitation transfer theory (Zillmann et al.) explains that watching scary or suspenseful content creates negative physical arousal. This unpleasant arousal is significantly reduced with the resolution of the narrative suspense. This reduction is perceived as pleasant, a feeling that people then (mis)attribute to their enjoyment of the ending of the narrative. Shows that present more threat and greater suspense thus lead to greater enjoyment through higher levels of negative arousal.

Media users' relationships with the characters in a narrative matter too: affective disposition theory (ADT) argues that media users enjoy narratives because of the emotional connections they forge with characters in the story. Enjoyment comes from liked characters facing happy or positive endings, and disliked characters seeing a negative outcome (Raney, "Psychology"; "Role of Morality").

Another driver of the nature of the narrative experience is the ease with which media users are able to construct *mental models*. To make sense of a narrative, media users construct models that capture their understanding of the story. These models incorporate people's knowledge of the story, their understanding of the story's genre, and real-world knowledge that informs how they make sense of the narrative (Busselle and Bilandzic). Constructing a mental model means placing oneself in the story to the point that the world of the story becomes more 'real' than the actual world, and the reader is fully engaged with the story. Full engagement with the story, and thus with the construction of a model of this story, leads to higher enjoyment of the narrative.

Enjoyment is situated at the center of the debate about spoilers. The main concern with spoilers is, after all, whether they might ruin one's enjoyment of a movie, show, or book. Oliver and Bartsch argue that enjoyment is made up of two dimensions: appreciation and enjoyment. Appreciation refers to a eudaemonic experience, i.e., one focused on growth and personal reflection. Media experiences that are seen as moving and thought-provoking and that leave a lasting impression (e.g., *SCHINDLER'S LIST* [US 1993, Director: Steven Spielberg] or *HOTEL RWANDA* [US/UK/ZA/IT 2004, Director: Terry George]) are forms of appreciation. Conversely, enjoyment refers to the hedonistic experience that is more commonly associated with entertainment: a narrative experience that is best described as suspenseful and fun (e.g., a romantic comedy or a horror movie).

Transportation, or the ability to lose oneself in a story, is seen as a central element of a positive narrative experience as well. Transportation allows media users to leave “one’s reality behind” (Green et al. 315) and focus solely on the act of constructing mental models that capture the narrative (Busselle and Bilandzic). Transportation is made up of a cognitive (“I was mentally involved in the narrative”), affective (“the narrative affected me emotionally”), and imagery-based (“I could picture the events in the story”) dimension (Green and Brock, 704).

Examining the Basics: Do Spoilers Spoil?

With the exception of a few sporadic studies that examined spoilers (e.g., Gray and Mittell), empirical research into whether spoilers impact people’s enjoyment did not start until about a decade and a half ago. In 2011, Leavitt and Christenfeld published the first empirical study on the subject (“Story Spoilers”). They conducted an experiment among college students who read either a spoiled or an unspoiled version of a classic literary story. Using a ten-point scale that asked participants how much they enjoyed the story, Leavitt and Christenfeld were able to determine that there was no difference in enjoyment between the spoiled and the unspoiled version of the same story. This finding was deemed groundbreaking; it countered Zillmann et al.’s excitation transfer theory by positing that enjoyment does not hinge on the resolution of suspense, as people who knew how the story turned out reported similar levels of suspense as those who did not.

However, these counter-intuitive findings were put to question when the first study to replicate this experiment, a project run by Benjamin Johnson and myself, produced contradictory results (Johnson and Rosenbaum, “Spoiler Alert”²). Our experiment also relied on literary short stories but made a few, significant changes. First, we replaced Leavitt and Christenfeld’s single-item measure of enjoyment with the twelve-item, two-dimensional measure of enjoyment developed by Oliver and Bartsch. Single-item measures often do not produce reliable and valid measures of people’s experiences (e.g., Diamantopoulos et al.), and merely asking about “enjoyment” does not capture the breadth of possible narrative experiences. Second, we included transportation as a part of the narrative experience that might be influenced by spoilers,

2 This paper was first presented at the 2013 IAMCR conference in Dublin, Ireland, using data collected in 2012.

arguing that transportation, or one's ability to lose oneself in a story, is part of enjoyment, too. And finally, we examined whether people would select a spoiled over an unspoiled story.

The findings from this second study showed that, first of all, unspoiled stories were—in line with excitation transfer theory as well as affective disposition theory—enjoyed more than spoiled stories. Unspoiled stories were seen as more moving and thought-provoking as well as more fun and suspenseful. In addition, people exposed to unspoiled stories displayed more cognitive transportation than those reading spoiled stories. Interestingly, and counter to the lay belief that all spoilers are bad, we did not find any difference in story preference when the preview for a story was spoiled versus when it was unspoiled.

Explaining differential effects of spoilers

After these two initial publications, it was obvious that spoilers are not unequivocally good or bad; more research was needed to determine under what conditions spoilers might affect enjoyment. Follow-up studies thus examined several factors that were assumed to play a role in the relationship between enjoyment and spoilers: processing fluency, personality traits, and construal level.

Processing fluency, or the ease with which someone can make sense of a story (Reber et al.), was the first factor scholars considered as playing a role in how spoilers might impact enjoyment. Spoilers, by providing information about the narrative, should increase processing fluency, and because of that, enhance enjoyment. Results from studies that examined this, however, produced contradictory results.

In a follow-up to their first study, Leavitt and Christenfeld (“Fluency”) showed that spoiled stories were both easier to follow and more enjoyable. Interestingly, they also found that the complexity of the stories played a role here; if stories were easy to understand, a more complicated spoiler did not enhance enjoyment by increasing fluency, but a simple spoiler did. A few years later, Levine et al. examined how the placement of spoilers in short stories influenced enjoyment and transportation and included processing fluency as a factor in this study (which will be discussed in more detail below). Assessing fluency in terms of reading time, they found that reading time was not impacted by spoilers, and that people who took longer to read, purportedly showing less fluency, reported higher enjoyment.

Studies that examined the relationship between processing fluency and spoilers using TV and movie clips produced equally contradictory findings. In a follow-up study using TV and movie clips, Benjamin Johnson and I did not find processing fluency to interact with spoilers to impact enjoyment or transportation (Johnson and Rosenbaum, “Don’t Tell,” study 1). Yet, in a study wherein we focused on fans’ experiences with and appreciation for season 5 of *GAME OF THRONES* (US 2011–2019, Creator: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss), we found that processing fluency of the show’s episodes was positively influenced by exposure to book-consistent spoilers, and negatively by spoilers that were discrepant with the original book (Johnson and Rosenbaum, “Don’t Tell,” study 3). Conversely, an experiment carried out a few years later—where we used clips from horror movies to examine the impact of major and minor spoilers—found that major spoilers (i.e., those that revealed major events in the storyline) produced more fluency than minor spoilers, but that this did not lead to more enjoyment or transportation (Johnson et al.). At the same time, a recent study I was involved with that examined the impact of spoilers on unexpected endings found that, under some circumstances, spoilers can enhance processing fluency (Ellithorpe et al.). It thus appears that while processing fluency plays a role in how spoilers impact narrative experience, this influence is highly circumstantial.

Individual differences play a role in how people make sense of a story (e.g., Hall and Bracken; Krcmar and Kean), so it follows that they may impact the relationship between spoilers and enjoyment, too. Spoiler research has considered several of these differences. One is people’s *Need for Cognition* (NfC). NfC centers on how much people enjoy thinking (Cacioppo and Petty), and how actively they engage with and search for information (Verplanken et al.). Johnson and I were the first to examine the role NfC played in the impact of spoilers on enjoyment. In this follow-up to our original spoiler study, we used an experiment that again relied on literary short stories and found that people with a low NfC, i.e., those who do not enjoy thinking deeply, preferred spoiled stories (possibly because they believed it would help them make better sense of the narrative) but did not enjoy them more. In other words, NfC plays a role in the story *selection stage*, rather than the *experience* of the story (Rosenbaum and Johnson). This finding underlined that people are not very good at *affective forecasting*, i.e., people may think a spoiler will impact their enjoyment a certain way, but their predictions often turn out to be incorrect (Yan and Tsang). Interestingly, Levine et al. found that NfC was positively related to enjoyment when a story was unspoiled; individuals with a higher NfC reported higher enjoyment of unspoiled stories. This could be attributed

to the notion that people high on NfC pay more attention to details, and thus will not benefit from the information gleaned from a spoiler.

Need for Affect (NfA) refers to people's desire to experience or avoid emotional situations (Appel and Richter; Maio and Esses). People with high levels of NfA tend to experience emotions as something positive (Bartsch et al.) and therefore seek out more emotionally stimulating content "to maintain their optimal arousal level" (Rosenbaum and Johnson, 277). Using spoiled short stories, the experiment described in the previous paragraph found that people who reported higher levels of NfA reported greater enjoyment for unspoiled stories, a finding that reflects excitation transfer theory (Rosenbaum and Johnson).

Another factor to consider is *construal level*, or how abstractly people think about something (Yan and Tsang). Using short movies as well as fabricated newsgroup messages about movies, Yan and Tsang determined that people with a higher construal level, i.e., who are more likely to think abstractly and focus on the narrative outcome, predict less enjoyment and a lower desire to watch a film that is spoiled than people with a lower construal level, who are more likely to focus on a narrative's secondary features—which can include all kinds of features that do not involve the story's outcome, such as the quality of the acting, the cinematography, or the costumes.

The nature of the narrative and the nature of the spoiler

As spoiler research grew, scholars started to investigate how spoilers work for different genres and different media, and how different kinds of spoilers might impact one's narrative experience. Research to date has investigated the role played by medium and genre, the type of spoiler, spoiler placement, the scope of the spoiler, and the complexity of the narrative.

Common sense suggests that the nature of the narrative medium as well as the genre of the narrative would play a considerable role in how much a spoiler impacts enjoyment. Reading a book means one has the ending to the story in one's hands and can easily flip to the end, whereas this is much less convenient when streaming a multi-episode television series, and impossible in a movie seen in the theater. At the same time, some genres, like romantic comedies, can withstand spoilage better than others, such as whodunits, for example. Yet to date, very little research has examined how the medium in which the narrative appears as well as its genre impact the relationship between spoilers and enjoyment. Results from one experiment that Benjamin Johnson and I carried out, while not entirely straightforward,

suggested that people who were familiar with a television show experienced a positive impact on enjoyment when this show was spoiled. For movies, the interaction was the opposite: if participants were familiar with a movie, a spoiler would reduce enjoyment (Johnson and Rosenbaum, “Don’t Tell,” study 1). We proposed that this could be attributed to the mental models people have of television shows; since TV shows are serial, people have the expectation for spoilers built into their mental models for these shows. Films, on the other hand, are usually a one-time event, and so mental models may not account for the possibility of a spoiler encounter. Conversely, two similar experiments by Daniel and Katz that used short stories and episodes from a television show found that spoilers affected the enjoyment of the television episodes, but not short stories.

Furthermore, only one small study (Johnson and Rosenbaum, “Don’t Tell,” study 1) has compared the impact of a spoiler on different genres, suggesting that the enjoyment of a superhero movie was positively affected by spoilers, while a comedy was enjoyed less when it was spoiled. One possible explanation we suggested was that the superhero movie used (*CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER* [US 2014, Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo]) was complex; a spoiler could increase fluency, enhancing enjoyment. The fact that the comedy clip (*THE HANGOVER PART III* [US 2013, Director: Todd Phillips]) was enjoyed less could be attributed to the fact that the enjoyment of comedy comes from its punchlines, which in this study was ruined by the spoiler (Topolinski).

Most research to date looks at spoilers that give away the ending, so-called *outcome spoilers*. However, enjoyment does not solely hinge on knowing the outcome of a narrative. After all, large numbers of movies and television shows are based on real events that people know about, and yet knowing their outcome does not seem to hurt people’s desire to see them or their supposed enjoyment. This could be attributed to people’s curiosity about the *process* behind the resolution (Yan and Tsang). An experiment using a short film found that an outcome spoiler reduced people’s *expected* enjoyment, while having very little impact on their *actual* enjoyment. Conversely, people who received a process spoiler, one that told them about various events in the narrative but not the ending, did not predict any negative impact on their enjoyment, yet this spoiler did harm their enjoyment of the movie. This can be explained through the construal level addressed above; people tend to use a high construal level when predicting their enjoyment, i.e., they focus on the outcome, yet while consuming the narrative, they focus on the process of the story, using a much lower construal level.

Another question that scholars have tackled is whether the framing of a spoiler, i.e., identifying it as such, matters. It is fairly common that people only know that something is a spoiler before engaging with a narrative because the information is labeled as such. This raises the question whether identifying a spoiler influences its impact on enjoyment. Johnson and I (“Don’t Tell,” study 2) found that framing a movie preview as a spoiler made people experience *reactance* (the perception that they lost the freedom to choose), which for people with high levels of NfA led to a lower desire to watch the film and lower anticipated enjoyment. Building on this, Daniel and Katz established that framing a preview as spoiled had no impact on short stories, but that this did lead to a lower enjoyment rating for a television episode.

Several studies have also examined the role played by the timing of spoiler exposure. In an era when most people watch movies and series at a time convenient to them (so-called *time-shifted viewing*), sometimes long after a series has ended, being spoiled while watching a show is a much greater risk to enjoyment than being spoiled beforehand (Perks and McElrath-Hart). Yet research found that when people saw a spoiler while reading a short story but before reaching its denouement, this did not impact enjoyment, while spoilers presented prior to reading the story did (Levine et al.). This could, speculatively, be attributed to the construal level of the respondents: people who were spoiled before reading a story were primed to consider the ending as highly relevant, creating a high construal level. People who were already invested in the story were more focused on the story’s process than its outcome, so then an outcome-based spoiler would not affect their enjoyment as much. Contrarily, in our examination of the impact of spoilers on horror fans’ experiences of horror movies, we found that when people were exposed to a spoiler before watching the second scene in a sequence of three scenes from a movie, they reported lower levels of processing fluency, which influenced enjoyment and transportation. This discrepancy could, tentatively, be attributed to the nature of horror, whose enjoyment hinges in part on the thrill of seeing morally unacceptable violence (Johnson et al.).

The amount of information revealed in a spoiler, or *spoiler intensity*, has been shown to matter, too. When the quality of a film is not immediately clear from reviews or other information, and people are exposed to a spoiler that reveals additional information about the film, they are more likely to want to see the movie. This especially applied to movies with a limited theater release, average user reviews, and a smaller advertising budget. Spoilers thus help to reduce uncertainty about movie quality (Ryoo et al.). In addition, for viewers of horror movies with a higher NfA, a minor spoiler that revealed an upcom-

ing scare or twist in the next scene had a positive effect on enjoyment and transportation. For people with a lower NfA, minor spoilers had a negative impact on their enjoyment (Johnson et al.).

Research has also examined whether the perceived complexity of a narrative influences people's desire for a spoiler. A narrative can be perceived as cognitively or affectively challenging, i.e., as making high intellectual or emotional demands of its consumers. This raises the question whether the perception of challenge influences people's decision to expose themselves to a spoiler, and how this might impact their subsequent enjoyment. With Kryston et al., we used findings from two separate experiments and found that participants were likely to select a spoiler if it would allow them to make better sense of a story or ensure that the content would not overburden their emotional capabilities. On the other hand, people with a high NfA avoided spoilers if they thought going into the narrative unspoiled would increase their affective arousal.

Engagement with the content

Not everyone is engaged with media content in the same way or for the same reasons. This implies that spoilers could have a varying impact on people's enjoyment, depending on how they engage with the content that is spoiled. As a result, spoiler research has examined various aspects of user involvement with media narratives, including mood management, fandom, self-protection, and concern for self and characters.

People generally use media to make positive moods last as long as possible and to quickly resolve bad moods (Zillmann, "Mood Management"). Engagement with a narrative is commonly seen as a positive experience: the more deeply people are absorbed creating a mental model for a story, the higher their enjoyment of that story. As a result, scholars have hypothesized that the desire to maintain the positive mood that comes from enjoyment might lead people to avoid spoilers. Maxwell's study showed that this idea held up: in this study, spoiler avoidance was linked to higher levels of narrative engagement as well as higher levels of hedonistic enjoyment, lasting impression, and suspense. In other words, people perceive spoilers as undermining the positive moods associated with their enjoyment and narrative engagement.

Spoilers, by their nature, assume that a reader or viewer is unfamiliar with the narrative as it unfolds. But how does this play out for fans? Fans are more familiar with backstories, possible narrative developments (so-called fan theories), and the world in which the narrative takes place than regular media

consumers. As such, they might be more likely to be exposed to spoilers or have accurate theories about upcoming plot twists. At the same time, it is possible that fans, due to their elevated engagement with the story and its characters, want to avoid spoilers even more than non-fans.

Whether fans really do have a different relationship with spoilers was questioned by Johnson et al.'s study on horror movies, which found that spoilers did not hurt enjoyment for horror fans any more or less than they did for non-fans. However, investigations of fans' motivations and social norms for sharing spoilers reveal that while spoilers are overall seen as undesirable, some fans will share spoilers to enhance people's curiosity about upcoming shows, or out of a need to discuss the series (Meimaridis and Oliviera). Völcker connected the differences in fans' attitudes and behaviors towards spoilers to how fans view themselves. In his study, STAR WARS fans who identified as "hardcore" saw spoiler seeking and consumption as an essential and unavoidable part of their identity as fans. Spoilers helped them better understand the narrative and regulate their own emotional responses to story developments. Fans who identified as less hardcore and more "generalist" (157) were more likely to avoid spoilers. The importance of fan attitudes to their beliefs about spoilers was echoed by Castellano et al. Furthermore, Ellithorpe and Brookes found that people who were exposed to fan theories with correct predictions about the season finale of *HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER* (HIMYM, US 2005–2014, Creator: Carter Bays and Craig Thomas) reported increased enjoyment of the final episode.

The discussion about how spoilers impact fan enjoyment is further complicated by the rise of book-to-screen adaptations (Athreiya), which introduces questions about the impact of book-consistent/discrepant spoilers on enjoyment of the on-screen narrative (Johnson and Rosenbaum, 2018, "Don't Tell," study 3; see discussion above). In addition, as shown by Castellano et al., fans' decisions about when and where to share spoilers about book-to-screen adaptation hinge on their perceptions about the originality of the on-screen narrative. Unfortunately, media-psychological research into fans and spoilers is limited. Most of the research that addresses fan identities and spoilage takes a humanistic approach, and thus falls outside the scope of this paper.

Finally, most research into spoilers assumes that spoilers somehow hurt enjoyment. Ellithorpe and Brookes, however, asked whether it was possible that spoilers serve a positive function for some. Using a two-wave survey study wherein long-time viewers of the series HIMYM completed questions about their familiarity with various fan theories prior to watching the series finale, their exposure to spoilers, and their narrative experience before and

after watching the finale, Ellithorpe and Brookes found that exposure to spoilers and fan theories that came true helped people make sense of the events in the show more easily. This in turn enhanced enjoyment and reduced the distress that many long-time viewers experience when a show comes to an end. In other words, in some cases, spoilers can serve a highly positive role for long-time viewers of a show.

Extending this line of thinking, Brookes et al. investigated whether *empathic distress*, or the concern that people might feel for the characters in a narrative, as well as the worries people might have about their own responses to narrative developments, might be a reason for selecting spoilers. Using a stand-alone episode from the series *ELECTRIC DREAMS* (US 2017–2018, Creator: Ronald D. Moore and Michael Dinner), we found that people who were concerned about how the show might make them feel were more likely to select a spoiler preview before finishing the episode. Interestingly, whether participants selected a spoiler did not predict their ultimate enjoyment or experienced suspense, showing that while spoilers can serve a positive function for some media consumers, they are not highly relevant to enjoyment.

Looking Back and Moving Forward: Challenges and Opportunities

After more than a decade of empirical research into spoilers, our understanding of how spoilers impact people's narrative experience has increased significantly. However, research also shows that the relationship between spoilers and enjoyment is highly complicated and circumstantial, and that any effect that spoilers have on the narrative experience is small.

Most importantly, the lay conception that spoilers always ruin enjoyment and are to be avoided at all costs is not always correct. While spoilers can hurt enjoyment, in many cases they do not, and when they do, it is under very specific circumstances. In some instances, spoilers can in fact enhance people's narrative experience, especially for those who enjoy experiencing emotions and those who consider stories from a low-construal, more process-oriented perspective. Furthermore, spoilers can increase people's ability to make sense of a narrative by facilitating their construction of the mental model of the story. Media consumers have also been shown to actively select spoilers, especially when they are highly concerned about their own emotional responses to a narrative, or when a story is perceived as challenging. Especially noteworthy is the finding that, overall, people are not very good at predicting how much spoilers will actually impact their enjoyment.

Challenges

Like any collection of empirical studies, the research into spoilers is characterized by several shortcomings. First, few studies rely on actual media content that the participants, most often young adults of college age, consume. Earlier work relied on literary short stories, and while more recent work has moved into using clips from movies and television shows (e.g., Johnson and Rosenbaum, “Don’t Tell”; Johnson et al.) as well as trailers (e.g., Kryston et al.), viewing a brief clip is not going to engender the kind of engagement one might feel with a full episode or movie. Although a few studies have begun to mimic the actual viewing experience by having participants watch entire episodes of TV shows, these are also characterized by high levels of attrition, i.e., large numbers of participants do not watch the entire episode and thus have to be removed from the study before analysis (Brookes, et al.; Ellithorpe et al.). This makes it more difficult to produce reliable findings. In addition, the findings from these studies, because of their focus on a single piece of media content, are more difficult to generalize.

A second challenge is in the populations studied to date. Most studies rely on student samples, usually young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 who are enrolled at a four-year institution. While this age group does consume a great deal of media, their media consumption is not necessarily representative of how people in different age categories consume media. Younger media users are more likely to binge watch (e.g., Rubenking and Bracken; Sabin) and watch shows through streaming services rather than live television (Rainie), thus time-shifting their viewing (Loechner). Moreover, they are more active on social media (Auxier and Anderson), where the chance of running into spoilers is ever present (Cotman; Romaguera). As a result, it is possible that this age group is more used to accidental spoilage and better able to incorporate spoilers into their narrative experience than people in other age groups. Yet little is known about the influence of age on how media consumers interpret a spoiler, or how a spoiler might impact the narrative experience of older media consumers.

A third issue is the use of self-reports. All studies to date ask participants to report their feelings about the narrative after watching or reading the story using survey measures. While self-reports are generally seen as reliable (Haefel and Howard), arousal (the physical sensation that resolves into enjoyment) also includes a biological component (Vorderer et al.; Zillmann, “Sequential Dependencies”). Relying solely on people’s self-reports for assessing their enjoyment thus ignores their physiological response. In addition, by measuring

people's enjoyment *after* they viewed or read a narrative fails to assess how people's enjoyment might vary throughout the show or movie, and how this might be impacted by a spoiler. In studies where shows are stopped to expose viewers to a spoiler (e.g., Brookes et al.), this might occur too early or too late for some viewers, whose arousal (and thus desire for a spoiler) peaked at a different time.

A final challenge centers on defining what a spoiler is. In most of the empirical research to date, spoilers are defined as “the premature release of salient information about a narrative” (Johnson and Rosenbaum, “Don’t Tell” 583). However, as research became more complex, researchers introduced distinctions between various kinds of spoilers, from process and outcome spoilers to major and minor spoilers. While research almost always assesses whether the participants perceive the spoiled review as spoiled, the spoiler is usually designed by the research team, not the participants, failing to address varying perceptions of what constitutes a spoiler.

Moving Forward

So how should the challenges above be addressed? A start would be to rely on a more mixed-methods approach. To date, all media-psychological studies into spoilers have employed quantitative measures in the form of surveys and experiments. While these allow for easy replication and generalization, they cannot provide the kind of robust insight into the wide variety of people's opinions of and purposes for spoilers that qualitative research can (Taylor et al.). Incorporating this approach into spoiler research might shed light on some of the contradictory results produced by the quantitative approaches used in the field to date.

In addition, future research should replicate actual viewing experiences and use more naturalistic approaches. That is, studies should use full episodes and movies and replicate the settings in which people consume content to better mirror how viewers engage with spoilers in real life. A few ongoing projects are implementing this in their study design, but no data has yet been reported. A challenge here includes finding content that is engaging yet unknown to most respondents, and preparing for high rates of attrition.

Furthermore, spoiler research should consider using physiological measures, such as heart rate monitors and skin conductors, to assess enjoyment (e.g., Zillmann et al.). Understanding how physiological responses to media entertainment are impacted by spoilers may provide better insight into how spoilers truly impact enjoyment, considering the bad reputation that spoilers

have had for decades. Research into spoiler selection especially could benefit from using physiological measures to determine people's arousal levels.

Finally, media psychology-based spoiler research should consider the work carried out in the humanities and vice versa. Both fields could benefit from a dialogue with the other, in terms of theoretical as well as methodological approaches. The fact that this happens only rarely can likely be attributed to the fact that scholars in either field often consider their work to be so inexorably connected to their particular research paradigm (i.e., post-positivist v. hermeneutic/constructivist) that any collaboration with research reliant on another paradigm is perceived as impossible. Yet, work that has combined a critical with a more post-positivist approach, such as the research into the global reception of *LORD OF THE RINGS* trilogy (NZ/US 2001–2003, Director: Peter Jackson) by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (“Watching”), has shown that such a collaboration is not only possibly but also fruitful (Barker and Mathijs, “Researching”).

Media psychologists who research spoilers should consider two specific aspects of how the humanities examine spoilers: their tendency to focus on analyzing media texts and their understanding that media reception and interpretation occur collaboratively. These could both be useful ways to expand media psychologists' understanding of how individuals engage with media content. For instance, work by scholars such as Hassoun, who uses the genre structure of comics to show why spoilers are not all bad, and Gray and Mittell, who take an in-depth look at fan communities, provide excellent insight into how people and texts collaborate to inform the meaning of spoilers. Yet, their findings are rarely used to inform media-psychological work into spoilers: a true loss for the field.

At the same time, humanities-based work into spoilers should consider media-psychological perspectives. Research into fandom and spoilers is an especially fertile ground for collaboration between humanities-based and media-psychological perspectives. Fan studies that consider spoilers often examine fans as members of their fan communities, foregoing a consideration of the characteristics that shape the fans as individuals. Scholars such as Henry Jenkins, for instance, discuss how fan communities work together to unearth spoilers about the popular reality show *SURVIVOR* (US 2000– , Creator: Charlie Parsons and Mark Burnett). While these kinds of studies provide helpful insights into the mechanics of the group, they do not consider how these group dynamics are constituted by fans' individual motives, perceptions, and narrative experiences. Using media-psychological measures to understand how individual fans experience texts, and how these experiences

are shaped by personality traits and states, would greatly augment insight into the dynamics of these fan communities.

Conclusion

When Benjamin and I collected our first data on spoilers back in 2012 (“Spoiler Alert”), we never imagined that over a decade later people would still be talking about spoilers and what they mean for media entertainment. Understanding how spoilers work has proven to be far more complex than anyone had ever imagined. Spoilers, as closely tied as they are to the media users’ personality traits, emotional states, and narrative engagement, capture the complexity of the media entertainment experience. As we implement the ideas suggested above and collaborate more closely with humanistic approaches to media entertainment, our understanding of the relationship between spoilers, enjoyment, and transportation should continue to grow. And until then, just know that a spoiler is often not as bad as one might think.

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Filmography

CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER. Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. US 2014.

ELECTRIC DREAMS. Creator: Ronald D. Moore and Michael Dinner. US 2017–2018.

GAME OF THRONES. Creator: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. US 2011–2019.

THE HANGOVER PART III. Director: Todd Phillips. US 2013.

HOTEL RWANDA. Director: Terry George. US/UK/ZA/IT 2004.

HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER. Creator: Carter Bays and Craig Thomas. US 2005–2014.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING. Director: Peter Jackson. NZ/US 2001.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING. Director: Peter Jackson. NZ/US 2003.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS. Director: Peter Jackson. NZ/US 2002.
SCHINDLER'S LIST. Director: Steven Spielberg. US 1993.
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Spoiler Warnings: Negotiating Originality, Genre Expectation, and the Enjoyments of Repetition

Literary criticism tends to return again and again to a few central points of complicated negotiations and contentious debates: the role of the poet as originator or conduit; the emotional or edifying effects on the audience; and the role of art as reflecting or imagining reality. There is substantial value in the question of the *mirror* or the *lamp*, as M. H. Abrams shorthanded the contrast between the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth xvii) that dominated the Romantic poetic imagination as opposed to George Eliot’s microscope metaphor for the close observation and reflection of Victorian realist fiction.¹ But even the most ardent supporters on each side clearly understood that both aspects were required and necessary. After all, William Wordsworth’s poet composes in contemplation, relying on emotional memory, on “feelings recollected in tranquility” (Wordsworth xvii). Even T. S. Eliot, who describes the poet as a mere catalyst, admits that “[t]here is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate” (Eliot 43). Throughout, however, the authorial text remains central. Aesthetic theory, in its attempts to understand the power and purpose of poetics, may veer towards positioning the agency in the poet (in his genial solitude) or in the influence of historical and cultural contexts, but rarely does any critical philosophical approach focus on the reader as anything more than a receptacle.

In fact, Anglo-American literary education through the latter half of the twentieth century has been dominated by the New Critics, who declare any focus on the reader’s emotional responses as an affective fallacy. Poststructural critiques rejected this exclusion of the reader as part of the rhetorical model of reading, and both reception aesthetics and reader response theory began to study and theorize audiences. In the wake of Roland Barthes (“Death” and “From Work”) and Michel Foucault, the author seemed to be pushed aside as the central arbiter of textual meaning. The reader who took center stage instead, however, was a stylized reader, by turns deemed competent, ideal, intended, or informed (Culler; Iser, *Implied Reader* and *Act of Reading*; Jauss;

1 For discussions of George Eliot’s use of the microscope as a metaphor for writing, see Wormald.

Fish). Like contemporaneous psychoanalytic film theories, these models tended to ultimately be more about the text than the reader: they discussed readers as a function of the texts they studied and analyzed rather than looking at how people were actually reading.² By making readers a function of the text rather than acknowledging their specific personal, possibly quite idiosyncratic, agency, reader response criticism continued to privilege the text and, to a degree, the author. It is this focus on the author (or the text as its own entity with certain rights to integrity) at the expense of the reader that I discuss in this essay. Specifically, I focus on the concept of spoilers: of readers sharing specific parts of a text in order to prevent surprise revelations or unexpected emotional reactions. Discussions of spoilers play out against a complex background of differing convictions about the purpose of art, its relationship to reality, and its responsibility to its readers. In so doing, debates surrounding spoilers ultimately reveal a lot about competing models of reading.

Spoilers

Debates about spoilers tend to collapse aesthetic and ethical concerns; spoilers are often conceptualized as leading to an inferior, if not deficient, *aesthetic* experience. This gives substantial power to the authors/creators who envision a specific audience experience that can be marred by spoilers. But spoilers are also considered unacceptable in a more nebulous *ethical* sense, as if they were somehow harming readers. Looking up “to spoil” in the OED, we go back to the fourteenth century, with dozens of variations of violent encounters, in which the assailant may strip, plunder, ravish, and pillage. Contemporary use tends to be more metaphorical, but the damage remains substantial, offering synonyms such as destroy, ruin, and invalidate. We spoil/destroy a tasty dish when we add too much salt; we spoil/ruin a wedding by making an embarrassing scene; we spoil/invalidate a ballot by not filling it out properly. Those are some high stakes, and they place the person who spoils into the role of aggressor and position the act of spoiling as a morally suspect one—something one ought not to do! Furthermore, if the act of spoiling is aesthetically and ethically suspect, what does that say about a person who enjoys

2 While the rise of British Cultural Studies, especially Stuart Hall’s model of the incorporation/resistance paradigm, helped to establish audience and fan studies (Hall), those theories tended to focus almost exclusively on popular cultural texts, such as youth magazines (McRobbie), romances (Modleski; Radway), fan fiction (Jenkins; Bacon-Smith), soap operas (Ang; Harrington and Bielby), or pornography (Williams; Kipnis).

spoiling and being spoiled? I am such a person. I love spoilers! I actively seek them out. I enjoy a text more when knowing key events. Nevertheless, far from trying to convince anyone of my position or preferences, I merely want to challenge the apparent truism that spoilers are *ipso facto* bad. Different ways of reading, watching, and listening are not inherently good or bad; no approach is aesthetically or ethically superior.

This essay explores negotiations between readers and writers and discusses the ethical and aesthetic values we attach to their expected (and actual) interactions. Discourses surrounding spoilers often rely on aesthetic values that privilege certain types of texts, namely those that value authenticity, originality, and genuine surprise. Moreover, the discourses surrounding spoilers often rely on a reading process that privileges the author/auteur in favor of the reader/viewer. Obviously, authors control *what* readers see, but continuing debates over interpretations indicate that there is a clear desire to also control *how* readers see. So, beyond my desire to speak up for readers who want familiarity, like rereading, enjoy genre tropes, and prefer accessing a text randomly and not necessarily linearly, I also suggest that there is a form of power struggle embedded in this conversation. Many contemporary readers want to control *if* and *when* and *how* they engage with a text. As such, I look at the ever-growing popularity of tags as metadata: serving as trigger and content warnings, but also as categorization and advertising tools.

In the following, using Gérard Genette's concept of paratexts, I regard paratextual material as forms of spoilers that need not ruin or destroy but instead may facilitate and enhance audience enjoyment. (1) I begin with a brief look at historical theories of authorship and their far-reaching philosophical, aesthetic, and legal influences. Ideas of authority and originality are particularly fraught in the context of generic tropes and repetition, and I suggest that such literary frameworks may not fully work in particular genres and traditions. (2) Genre and fan fiction are especially reliant on contextually shared awareness and knowledge, including a clear reader/writer contract that is often acknowledged in paratextual materials. (3) Fan fiction fans have been experimenting with paratextual content clues such as headers and tagging systems for decades, and their discussions, especially surrounding trigger warnings and content notes, address many of the concerns raised in spoiler discourses. (4) Ultimately, I suggest that desiring tags, warnings, or spoilers are all means through which readers control their reading experience. And if taking control comes at the expense of a surprise twist or shocking moment, I, for one, find that trade well worthwhile.

Originalgenie

Let me start with a brief overview of how the role of the author was established and reified over the past two centuries, and how this development was far from disinterested.³ In fact, the invention of the author as an aesthetic, economic, and legal category was deeply tied in with shifting perceptions of personhood, patronage, and notions of originality and authenticity. While not all writing before the eighteenth century was collective or anonymous, the relationship between an author and their work underwent substantial changes during that time: a different understanding of the artist caused and necessitated different models of ownership, which, in turn, required new aesthetic and legal understandings of creative works. In the previous world of patronage, artists received financial support to create works for their patrons, and the notion of art was mostly understood as a craft, often collective, and divinely inspired (Pease; Bennett; Minnis). In contrast, eighteenth-century artists began to be positioned as engaging with the world in particular ways which, in turn, allowed them to elevate their work from mere craftsmanship into art.

With changing market economies and a rapidly rising middle-class readership, the eighteenth-century writers increasingly started living off their works—and thus demanded legal protection and economic reimbursement. This new understanding of artistic production was most eloquently (and far from objectively) articulated by British Romantic and Poet Laureate William Wordsworth in his aesthetic theory of imagination and originality. Wordsworth acknowledges external stimuli and inspiration, yet according to his model, the poet is vital in creating and shaping the artistic work: the poetic genius is “the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe” (“Essay” 104). Wordsworth clearly privileges thinking and writing that is radically new and different, that is original rather than transformative of older ideas. This thinking represents the *zeitgeist*: Germany’s *Sturm und Drang* period likewise elevated the concept of the *Originalgenie* as the paradigm of creativity. Viewing authors as original, autonomous, and rebellious is strikingly self-serving: the artwork becomes an abstract object that, according to these changing aesthetic theories, possesses its own aesthetic value and ideal interpretation, as well as entailing its proper form of reception and ideal audience.

3 For an expanded version of this argument, see Busse, “Return of the Author.”

Moreover, these aesthetic theories cause and require shifts in legal and economic approaches to art as well. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno juxtaposes Romantic ideology and Enlightenment philosophy with earlier artistic practices where material was easily repurposed. He connects the historical concept of originality and its socio-economic impacts, describing originality as “enmeshed in historical injustice, in the predominance of bourgeois commodities that must touch up the ever-same as the ever-new in order to win customers” (226). In other words, for authors to earn a livelihood from their artistic works, they needed an aesthetic theory that would assign originality to their ideas. In an age, *pace* Walter Benjamin, that increasingly afforded artists the ability of mechanical reproduction, it became incumbent on artists, especially authors, to safeguard their livelihood by creating legal protections in the form of copyright laws (Woodmansee; Biagioli et al.; Dobranski). Copyright offers authors a way to establish ownership over their words and, with artistic works becoming a commodity that can be owned and sold, a means to a livelihood. In an era that foregrounds the individual and their rights and abilities, the concepts of original genius and intellectual copyright are clearly enticing and mutually supportive. To theoretically justify ownership of their literary creations, authors become the sole creators and owners of their words and the law of author’s rights is established as a natural law. Not incidentally, Wordsworth was a central proponent of copyright in Great Britain (Rose; Swartz 192), thus illuminating the close connections between the *legal* notion of copyright, the *economic* notion of the ownership of ideas, and the *artistic* notion of the original genius.

Repetition

Different periods of literary and philosophical thought place different emphases on the respective roles of originality and repetition, yet modern aesthetics continue to privilege the artistic genius. This obsession with originality as a prime attribute of artistic excellence casts a long shadow: we remain in an aesthetic landscape that all but dismisses types of creativity that do not rely on originality, instead favoring repetition and transformation. In that vein, complexity of plots and characters are often regarded as functions of quality and, in turn, familiarity and repetition tend to be relegated to mythology, folktales, or fairy tales, and or often dismissed as generic and clichéd. And yet, repetition is central to creative works on the linguistic and narrative level:

Complete originality, with all familiar and recognizable narrative conventions removed, may engender a narrative so incomprehensible that the reader cannot understand, let alone aesthetically appreciate it; in contrast, stories that employ familiar themes and narratives establish a groundwork of comprehension within which they then can challenge or subvert these shared paradigms. (Busse, *Framing* 133)

I contend that all these components are closely intertwined and ultimately affect the way we think of spoilers: modern conceptions of authorship; aesthetic value judgments that privilege originality; and the dismissal of popular literatures and genre writing.

Focusing on genre and tropes rather than surprises and plot twists requires a very different way of looking at the act of reading. In fact, it is not incidental that the scholars who have most forcefully pushed the study of readers and viewers are primarily concerned with popular and mass culture. Genre literature lends itself to more holistic approaches that trace similarities among a larger set of texts, most importantly explored in structuralist approaches.⁴ Examining shared character types, successful plot lines and popular settings is a useful tool for audience studies. Audience studies often focus on large-scale reception in lieu of specific close readings of a particular text, and thus encourage the study of genres and their related tropes. This is important for identifying characteristics of popular works, thus creating models that can be explored and analyzed but also disrupted, challenged, and subverted. In other words, if we do not know which tropes are being questioned, a text's original engagement remains somewhat invisible. Or, to put it more bluntly: only through the repetition of words, phrases, images, and tropes does a text's originality become meaningful.

One large and fertile subfield of audience studies focuses on fan fiction communities. Fan fiction produces transformative works, primarily based on popular audiovisual texts and published mostly for a dedicated community of fellow fans. Such communities offer a large number of writers and readers who create works that enhance, criticize, and transform popular culture texts while sidestepping most financial restraints that plague other published art.⁵

4 For structuralist approaches to folktales and genre texts, see Propp; Cawelti; Todorov; Altman.

5 Before the age of digital self-publication, fanzines were among the few outlets of artistic expression not curtailed by capitalist market forces. For the role of fanzines in the development of media fandom, see Jenkins; Bacon-Smith; Verba. For the role of economics in fan culture, see Stanfill and Condis; Busse "Feminism and Fandom"; DeKosnik; Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*.

Within literary studies, fan fiction stories, just like genre fiction, are less seen as literary texts in their own right and more as cultural artifacts that tell us something about the communities that write, share, and read the stories. A genre approach to fan fiction with a focus on tropes and elements of repetition offers various directions for studying audiences. For one, it showcases the role of interpretive communities and offers models through which specific ideas or interpretations of the source texts are disseminated. Moreover, it illustrates the role of feedback and shared creation of artistic artifacts. Finally, and for this essay most importantly, it challenges many of our traditional ideas of originality.

The fan experience is all about repetition. Fans re-watch favorite shows to get to all the nuances, but they also re-watch simply because they enjoy re-viewing certain scenes and spending time with favorite characters. Fan fiction celebrates repetition on all levels: its *raison d'être* is a repeat engagement with the worlds and characters. For Francesca Coppa, the repeated retelling of the same story, ever so slightly different, situates fan fiction closer to drama than fiction: “in literary terms, fan fiction’s repetition is strange; in theatre, stories are retold all the time” (“Writing Bodies” 229). Like in theater, the script is only the starting point; like in theater, the actual performance, the specific implementation and reimagining, matters. We are happy to see Hamlet as a US college student and Faust in the twenty-first century. Likewise, a Marvel fan may enjoy Thor working as a barista or Bucky Barnes as an Iraq war veteran.⁶

In their interpretive and analytic encounters, fans will return to a particular moment in the source, telling the story over and over again, playing out every possible minor variation, feeling, and response. For fans, there can never be just one story; instead, fans want the same moment explored in many different ways. Fan fiction means variations on a theme, repetition with a difference. It means an ever-widening body of works, which continuously interact with and comment on the source text and its copious fannish engagements. Abigail Derecho encompasses all these qualities in her description of fan fiction as “archontic,” “a term [she borrows] from Jacques Derrida’s definition of archives as ever expanding and never completely closed” (“Archontic Literature” 61).

This constantly evolving self-reflexive corpus of fan creations likewise requires a revision of the concept of genre as it relates to fan fiction. Rather than

6 On re-reading, see also Dana Steglich’s chapter.

thinking of genre as a fixed taxonomical system inherent in a text, more recent approaches understand genre as a constructed and ever-shifting category created in the interplay between producers, audiences, and cultural contexts.⁷ What that means is that interpretations of texts shift with context and with readers, that personal and cultural context as well as industry marketing and circulation may indeed shape generic expectations. Fandom, of course, complicates the producer paratext/audience reception dichotomy, because roles and modes of engagement shift constantly in fandom: most fans are creators, readers, and critics in turn, and fan works are assigned to genres, tropes, categories by all the participants. Thus, generic categorization occurs via a folksonomy with fans as creators, recommenders, feedbackers, and readers.

Header and Tags

Where paratextual material offers the reader a host of information before even beginning a story, generic tropes create expectations throughout the text that the reader assumes will be fulfilled, at least to an extent. Genre categories offer readers and viewers directions in several ways: they give us clues for how to understand the text; they guide reader expectation; they offer pleasure in familiarity and fulfilled expectations; and they enable us to anticipate plot and characterization, whether by fulfilling or defying genre categories. This is a difficult concept to grasp for literary scholars, who often approach genre writing as formulaic and tropes as clichés. In fan fiction, however, generic tropes are a feature, not a bug. Genre and generic tropes are one of the central building blocks of fan fiction and fannish discourses. Accordingly, fan communities were early adapters and adopters (if not actual inventors) of robust paratextual tagging conventions that have recently spilled over into parts of professional fiction. In fact, many of the conversations we are now seeing on book sites and in academic contexts are debates that roiled fan communities a decade or more ago. Historically, fan fiction started formalizing certain shared conventions during the zine days of the 1970s and 1980s, a process that became more uniform in the 1990s, when fan fiction moved online.

Fandom tags have always functioned as both warning and advertisement. In *STAR TREK* fan fiction fandom, fans hotly debated whether Kirk and Spock were friends or lovers. In response, fans used a virgule between Kirk/Spock,

7 For examples from film and television studies using this approach to genre, see Naremore; Mittell; Stein. For a more complex genre approach to literature, see Wilkins et al.

and the term *slash* became shorthand for homosexual pairings.⁸ In her essay on trigger warnings, Alexis Lothian describes how

warnings functioned as an author-led system of identification, flagging sexually explicit content with keep-out signs allowing the uninterested to avoid the uncomfortable, while also marking the entryway to secret worlds of erotic kinship. (745–46)

Fan writers and publishers clearly identified their zines not only with fandom and central characters or pairings, but also declared whether the content was adult or not and whether it was hetero- or homosexual. In so doing, they allowed readers to make an informed decision. Fans who enjoyed the gay sexual content and wanted to read the Kirk/Spock slash stories created their own subcultural communities.⁹ At the same time, others could easily avoid material they preferred not to read. When fandom moved online in the late 1980s and early 1990s, fannish conventions and early internet conventions for Usenet *alt.sex* communities cross-connected to establish fairly standardized fan fiction headers. In her study of early internet fan fiction communities, Abigail Derecho points out “how significant this first group was in terms of setting up templates and rules and precedents that other online groups followed” (*Illegitimate Media* 146–47).

By the turn of the millennium, headers had become standardized across large swaths of online fan fiction fandom, featuring fandom, title, author, rating, and, most importantly, additional content notes. The STAR TREK fan fiction site *Trekiverse.org*, for example, suggested optional content codes, including *angst*, *bd* (bondage), *ds* (dominance and submission), *nc* (nonconsensual), and *viol* (violence). For every reader who wants to avoid non-con stories (or stories featuring torture or character deaths), there is another reader who searches specifically for such stories. Early archives allowed simple sorting by publication date or author names, but by the late 1990s, fans had created search engines that would allow readers to find stories more easily. The vocabulary was fixed, but it allowed a site-wide search with genre categories and content warnings to include and exclude. During the 2000s the rise of blogs and bookmarking sites increased the popularity of freeform tags:

8 For the role of STAR TREK in the development of fan fiction fandom, see Coppa “Brief History.” For early extended discussions of STAR TREK fan fiction, see Jenkins; Bacon-Smith.

9 Those zines were sold under the table at conventions and required proof of age from buyers. The con panels discussing these stories were put on late in the evening only, and not all slash zines made it through customs when they were shipped internationally.

while a limited vocabulary provided potential tags and facilitated searches, freeform tags allowed creators to make up any tag, however idiosyncratic.

When a group of fans came together in 2007 to create the multi-fannish fan works archive *An Archive of Our Own* (AO3),¹⁰ they agreed on a complex tagging system with a robust inclusion/exclusion search function that uses both standardized mandatory and freeform voluntary tags. The archive requires mandatory tags, comparable to the traditional story header: fandom, pairing, characters, rating, warnings. Additionally, however, users can add modifiers as user-generated freeform tags. Where fixed taxonomies limit users to pre-established categories, folksonomies suffer from a lack of consensus, which makes them difficult to organize. In order to maintain a shared, fixed base vocabulary while also permitting user creativity in tags, AO3 uses a curated folksonomy that mixes user-defined and controlled vocabulary (Johnson; Fiesler et al; Bullard). Volunteers organize the tags into existing structures: tags with the same meaning are internally connected and sorted into hierarchical structures. Writers thus have all the freedom of a folksonomy while the system nevertheless retains some of the hierarchical structures and search abilities of a proper taxonomy.

This dual system allows readers to micromanage their reading preferences by including and excluding desired categories and tags. In fact, fandom often organizes itself through tags (Busse, “Fan Fiction Tropes”). Different interpretive communities may choose specific tags to indicate their interpretive framework. In Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) fandom, *shrinkyclinks* is a fannish shorthand tag for Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes that specifically pairs a pre-super-serum Steve with the Winter Soldier. Likewise, content tags can function as a conceptual framework that guides reading and understanding. For example, the tag *they live in avenger’s tower and everything is happy and good* tends to suggest a particular dynamic among the Avengers, where they all cohabitate in Stark Tower. To an MCU fan fiction reader, this tag indicates not just a particular moment in the canon, it also suggests a specific tone and general approach to the characters. Seeing this tag, I would expect no major character death, no rape/dubcon, no extreme violence, but possibly some

10 AO3 is part of the nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), whose other projects include a legal, academic, and historical framework to study and preserve fan cultures. AO3 is the result of a conscious effort to create a platform that could not be censored or deleted by commercial entities and that was free of advertising and its potential influence. In late 2025, AO3 hosts about 15 million works about 75K fandoms with more than 8.5 million registered users. For the early days of AO3, see Coppa, “An Archive.”

fannishly shared characterizations, such as a Pop-Tart-eating Thor. That is to say, tags carry specific connotations that are often used to indicate particular interpretive communities with a network of intersecting interpretations.

Trigger Warnings

When we look at actual fan fiction headers on AO3, we see a number of mandatory tags that every fan work must fill in before publication: fandom, rating, characters, and relationships, if applicable, which are all pre-established categories. It is in the additional tags, however, where content and trigger warnings become important. It's also clear how a tag may serve both as ad and warning: many tags may simultaneously draw in or repel different readers (or even the same reader depending on their moods). Even though the format of header conventions has not changed much in the past two decades, the same cannot be said for their functions. Whereas warning labels used to be understood as a polite way to signal to readers potentially fraught topics, they are now seen as a mandatory accessibility requirement enabling readers to avoid potential triggers.¹¹ Drawing from PTSD terminology, the conversation has moved from issues of preference and readerly comfort to mental health concerns: if a story does not list clear triggers, then the writer consciously refuses to create a safe space and thus endangers traumatized readers. Not incidentally, the AO3 archive, which was designed and coded around the time of these changing tagging conventions, mandates certain warnings, such as underage and non-con but also allows a general "Choose Not to Warn" tag as a sort of compromise for fan writers who want to avoid tagging.¹² It is this tag genealogy that connects tags in fan fiction fandom to trigger warning debates in classrooms and various other online spaces. Ali Vingiano describes how "[t]he phrase [trigger warning] evolved from clinical psychiatry, moved from

11 This shift occurred as part of a more general change within online fannish spaces toward increased awareness of various implicit biases, especially racism, and the responsibilities of fans individually and collectively. Most notably, the 2009 Trigger Warning Debate created extensive meta discussions, in which dozens of fans debated these issues throughout multiple Livejournal posts; see fanlore.org/wiki/Trigger_Warning_Debate_(2009). The discussion pitted the autonomy and rights of the author against the rights of readers, especially those with PTSD triggers.

12 Indeed, writers may quite purposely yield inherent power through their specific header choices as they "manipulate the readers with faulty or obfuscating headers, or by withholding information" (Busse, *Framing* 204).

LiveJournal fan fiction to Tumblr to mainstream media, and eventually ended up on college syllabi.”

I find it most useful to think of warning tags as a paratextual way to negotiate the reader/writer contract. Fan fiction fandom has historically been understood as a feminist space, and it is within this context that warning discourses make sense. I mostly draw from the_drifter’s discussion, which conceptualizes warning as a request for consent:

By continuing past cut-tags, headers, and preliminary pages, the reader implicitly consents to what may follow....As readers, we are responsible for knowing our own limits, our own boundaries, and crossing those limits with forethought and care.

Following this framing of tags as a form of negotiated consent, we can think of the reader-writer contract as risk-aware consensual kink:

The writer promises that these are the features that the story will contain, and furthermore that it does not contain others that collectively are considered noteworthy. In turn, the reader takes responsibility for her own reading experience when opening the story. (Busse, *Framing*, 208)

As such, most fan fiction that requires warnings tends to be consciously and conscientiously framed: within the story, but also in its paratextual material via tags, content notes, or trigger warnings. What these conversations suggest is that readers may want to spoil a story themselves or come to a book with no knowledge or expectations, but that it is never the author’s right to control any of the reader’s behavior or reading processes. There clearly are readers and viewers who love spoilers, and offering spaces for them makes them neither wrong nor challenged: it merely indicates different tastes and different approaches to reading, viewing, and enjoyment.

Author-Reader Power Struggle

In the past few years, the complex tagging system of fan fiction has spilled over into formally published fiction due to a variety of changes. More and more published authors come from fan fiction communities and are familiar with the debates surrounding content warnings and headers. The rise of self-publishing forces many authors to create their own PR, often putting them in more direct contact with readers and their desires and demands. Finally, reader-focused websites often offer an external recommendation system that adds tags even when the books themselves do not offer them. Unsurprisingly, many who participate in tagging discussions are authors and readers of genre

fiction, notably young adult (YA) and romance but also science fiction & fantasy (SFF) and mysteries. Romance, especially with its recent expansion into queer love stories, shares a large reader pool with fanfic readers, and recent trends in YA literature have focused intensely on paranormal romance, with many of the best-known authors being current or former fan fiction writers. The same is true in SFF fandom, clearly illustrated by the recent winners of the genre's most prestigious writing awards, such as the Hugo Award (World Science Fiction Convention) and the Nebula Award (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America).¹³ The overlap between reading and writing communities and the lessening impact of established publishing companies explain how fannish norms and expectations have moved into these genre fiction spaces.

Meanwhile, many authors do not want to tag their fiction. As with the debates within fan fiction communities a decade earlier, once trigger warnings came to the attention of professional writers, many decried them as destroying their artistic integrity. Colleen Hoover, a beloved writer of often traumatic plotlines in seemingly straightforward romances, wrote a blog post in 2016 empathetically declaring that she does not use trigger warnings and never will. She explains it as follows: "I prefer my readers to go in blind. I write my books in such a way that I feel the majority of people benefit from the reading experience more if they go in blind." In a response blog, fellow author Porter Anderson doubles down in a facetious post where he and most of the commenters mock readers who prefer content warnings, declaring unspoiled readings "good storytelling," "rightful operation of [...] authors," more "educated," "art" rather than "entertainment," and allowing for "growth" in the reader. In turn, the desire for content warnings is described as "populist fondness for a safety-netted existence," as "censorship," and repeatedly as childlike, if not childish: "Too many people seem intent on child-proofing the world rather than world-proofing the child (or themselves)." These two posts are basically exemplary of the general sentiments that were ever-present during the mid-2010s when trigger warnings expanded out from feminist and fannish

13 Media fandom tends to describe the primarily female fan communities that develop beginning in the late 1960s in response to *STAR TREK: THE ORIGINAL SERIES* (US 1966–1969, Creator: Gene Roddenberry). Using knowledge and skills acquired in science fiction fandom, these offshoot fan groups defined themselves as primarily media rather than *book* fans. When the *Archive of Our Own* won the 2019 Hugo Award for Best Related Work, it closed this gap opened fifty years earlier, clearly indicating that the two communities are not entirely separate.

spaces into general academia, journalism, and publishing.¹⁴ In all of those debates, the underlying arguments tended to focus on readers: the questions usually addressed the way tags, spoilers, and trigger warnings would prevent the proper experiences of literary texts including exposure to uncomfortable ideas. There are a range of arguments for the worth of a text—educational value, aesthetic appreciation, intellectual challenge—but pleasure, enjoyment, and comfort are rarely considered worthwhile literary goals.

As the brief quotations above indicate, many opponents of warnings are quick to posit an ethically charged dichotomy between literature, classics, maturity, and learning, on the one hand, and entertainment, safe spaces, pleasure, and ignorance, on the other. Learning, we are told repeatedly, requires exposure to unpleasant and painful ideas; not wanting to be exposed to such depictions without warning, the argument goes, prevents this emotional and intellectual reckoning. Except that this is far from self-evident. After all, to focus briefly on the academic side of the debate, academia thrives on and often requires spoilers. They are our *raison d'être* in many courses, such as introductory or survey classes. We often teach metonymically, picking a representative poem, short story, or excerpt to give a general sense of an author, movement, or literary period.¹⁵ Case in point: I teach Classical Mythology, and I spend a substantial part of my class time spoiling texts for my students! When we start the *Iliad*, they not only need to know the main characters and their interpersonal strife but also the complicated reasons why the gods favor or loathe specific characters or sides. After all, the complex background mythologies would be well-known to those hearing or reading the epic throughout antiquity and beyond. Familiarity with the source material will indeed deepen the enjoyment rather than detract from it, with allusions, characters, or references effectively providing Easter eggs for those in the know. Myth and genre texts share specific reader expectations and a well-defined author-reader contract.

The exaggerated defense of spoiler-free texts is not, in fact, in the service of the reader as much as it is in the service of the author. This is supported in discussions surrounding the *GoodReads* alternative *Storygraph*. This reader-focused website allows readers to track their readings, write reviews, and

14 For some of the conversations surrounding trigger warnings in academia, journalism, and feminist online spaces, see Vigniano; Neutill; Lothian; Knox.

15 Another argument against trigger warnings is their actual feasibility. Triggers can be very specific, if not idiosyncratic, and thus hard to enumerate. This is a problem for those who must decide which potential triggers to list, especially when the absence of a given trigger suggests that a text might be harmless when, in fact, it is not.

collectively tag the books they read. The more users mark a specific warning, the more likely it may indeed be relevant to a potential new reader. For example, Diana Gabaldon's historical time-traveling romance *Outlander* (1991) has over two hundred readers tagging it for rape, but only one reader tagging it for xenophobia. Like any open site, accidents and deliberate mistakes can happen, and some authors have been quite vocal in their dislike of giving readers that much power. Silvia Moreno-Garcia, author of *Mexican Gothic* (2020), points out that reader tags may be "wildly inaccurate. I had someone content warn one of my works for poverty. Another one for animal death (the dog lives)." She adds that trigger warnings are often weaponized against minority writers: "At this point I've written I think *three* threads about how TWs can be weaponized and used against POC by taking works out of context." All of these are valid and important objections, but misrepresented plot points or bad character interpretations are not necessarily a function of tags or trigger warnings as much as they are part and parcel of differing reading skills.

I would like to distinguish between two types of misinterpretations. A *bad* reading is one where the reader fundamentally misunderstands the text—whether they did not read carefully and thus missed obvious context clues, or whether they purposefully misread and misinterpreted the text. In contentious fandom spaces, reactionary and toxic fan readings are intentionally bad readings that ignore content and context to create a shadow straw text, all the easier to destroy and dismiss (Stanfill, "Introduction" and *Fandom is Ugly*). In contrast, a *poor* (or maybe, more accurately, *impoverished*) reading is one where the text itself is lacking. Such a text, which does not afford the reader sufficient information, is ultimately a function of the author, not the reader. It may mean that the text contains layers the author is not aware of or that the author's world building or characterization is not effectively shared in the published text. This is where I want to return to the contentious reader-author relationship. When authors want to control the content of book review sites, they overstep their role. Far from just demanding the book be *read* correctly (i.e., unspoiled, in linear order, not skimming, and with full attention and focus), some authors now demand that it be *interpreted* and *reviewed* correctly as well. Moreover, it is a question of audience: review sites are ultimately by and for readers, and readers do not want to be told when, where, and how to read a book. And yet, it is not coincidental that the largest book review site is owned by the largest bookseller. While most of this essay has been concerned with the relationship between readers and authors, with questions of ethics and aesthetics, we should not forget the intricate interdependency between aesthetic, economic, and legal issues with which I began. The function of

tags within professional fiction may be neither in the hands of readers nor of authors but instead under the control of publishing houses and book sellers. Paratextual material has traditionally been under the purview of publishers, and the future role of that material will be more dependent on sales numbers and income streams than on the aesthetic arguments I have made in this essay.

Filmography

STAR TREK: THE ORIGINAL SERIES. Creator: Gene Roddenberry. US 1966–1969.

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“I don’t need to be carried, bro.” SURVIVOR Edgic, Knowledge Communities, and Narrative Pleasure

For the past few decades, we have been living a new digital age, in which viewers are no longer passive but active participants in shaping and decoding the media they consume—through their demands placed on producers and in their pooling of knowledge within digital forums and platforms. Some of the most engaged participants are what Henry Jenkins refers to as “knowledge communities,” which are “held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge” (27). While other scholars have examined the knowledge communities that Jenkins discusses at length in *Convergence Culture* (2006), fewer have picked up the thread of his examples regarding the American reality television show SURVIVOR (US 2000– , Creator: Charlie Parsons), which I find worth revisiting for two reasons: first, because of the unique ways the show’s devoted fans interact with each other and with the producers; second, for the ways in which the Survivor fan community has evolved since Jenkins wrote about it.

SURVIVOR premiered on CBS in the summer of 2000 and was an immediate success. According to Nielsen Media Research, 51.7 million viewers tuned in for the first season finale, more than for any telecast of the season except for the Super Bowl (Johnson). The concept of the show is simple: sixteen US Americans (in later seasons, up to twenty) are stranded on a deserted island and divided into two teams, or “tribes.” They work together to build camp, survive on limited rations, and try to win challenges. The tribe that loses an “immunity challenge” must go to “tribal council,” where they are forced to vote out one of their own tribe members. This process continues until “the merge,” when the remaining contestants in both tribes are combined into a single tribe. At this halfway point in the game, immunity challenges become individual. Contestants form “alliances” with each other to vote others out, until finally, when two or three contestants remain, a “jury” of eliminated contestants votes for the winner to receive a million dollars at the final tribal council. The editing style of the show, which has become common in the “gamedoc” subgenre of reality television (Oullette and Murray 3), features documentary-style footage of contestants interacting on the beach and in challenges. The edited narrative is punctuated by interviews with contestants,

or “confessionals,” in which contestants speak directly to the camera and share their thoughts and feelings about other contestants, their personal struggles, or their strategy in the game.

As Jenkins explains, when the show first aired in the summer of 2000, SURVIVOR fans took to the internet in order to “spoil” the show by identifying filming locations through satellite photographs, looking for episode clues frame by frame, and digging for information on cast members in online forums. Jenkins argues that knowledge communities allow fan culture “to exert greater aggregate power in their negotiations with media producers” (27). This was clearly the case with SURVIVOR, in which producer Mark Burnett had to fight against the unexpected collective power of the spoiler community by planting false information and red herrings to derail them from discovering the winner of the first season (Jenkins 46). From that point on, a cat-and-mouse game developed between the producers and the fans. However, as Jenkins points out, the fun of this game was ruined in the show’s sixth season, SURVIVOR: THE AMAZON (US 2003), when an online participant named ChillOne suddenly released information that included, among other crucial spoilers, the identities of the final two contestants. Although the online SURVIVOR fan community was engaged in a collective search for spoilers, ChillOne went further. While vacationing with friends in Rio de Janeiro, they made their way to the Amazon and discovered that the production staff was staying at Ariau Amazon Towers while filming the current season of US SURVIVOR (Jenkins 32). ChillOne gathered information while staying at the hotel, thereby skipping the steps of the traditional online spoiling process. Their unorthodox methods only served to anger the fan community:

As one participant grumbled, “We have turned spoiling into a non-cooperative game.... ‘Winning’ means spoiling the whole season; hiding how you know about it and making others second guess you all season so you can humiliate them. ChillOne won. Everybody else lost.” (Jenkins 51)

According to Pierre Levy, whom Jenkins quotes, knowledge communities in the digital age are “central to the task of restoring democratic citizenship” (Jenkins 29) because everyone is allowed to participate; however, Jenkins argues that ChillOne’s disruption of this democratic process by “[dumping] information out there without regard to anyone else’s preferences holds a deeply totalitarian dimension” (55). As a result of ChillOne’s “totalitarian” disruption, the SURVIVOR spoiler community was forced to redefine its purpose. Nearly twenty years later, these communities have found homes within various media, including podcasts such as *Rob Has a Podcast* and *The Tribe*, forums on *Reddit* and *Survivor Sucks*, cast members’ *Twitter/X* feeds,

“I don’t need to be carried, bro.”

Facebook pages, fantasy SURVIVOR game sites, and other websites dedicated solely to the discussion and analysis of SURVIVOR. But even now, ChillOne’s disruption of the spoiling game between the producer and the SURVIVOR fan community calls into question the purpose of the game itself. Is it a zero-sum game of “winning” at all costs, or is it a collaborative effort that relies on the reciprocal exchange of information within the knowledge community?

This paper focuses on a controversy that erupted during the 32nd season of SURVIVOR in 2016, which shares similarities with the ChillOne incident in 2003. A comparison of these two important moments that polarized the SURVIVOR fandom sheds light on the various ways fans interact with a show and with other members of the fan community, which can at times come into conflict with each other. One particular knowledge community that became the focus of the 2016 incident are Edgic users, who use a fan-made system for analyzing and decoding the editing patterns of the show. A portmanteau of “edit” and “logic,” Edgic was created in 2002 by fans on *Survivor Sucks*, the original internet forum (now defunct) for SURVIVOR fandom, to not only predict the winner of the season but to construct that season’s narrative.

The Edgic system, which is easy to use and accessible to all SURVIVOR fans, includes three major criteria for analyzing and decoding the editing patterns for each contestant: character rating, visibility, and tone. Edgic users assign their own ratings using these criteria, which are largely subjective, and they often post their ratings on forums to share with other Edgic users. Sometimes Edgic users disagree with each other on certain ratings, but most ratings tend to be agreed-upon by a majority of fans based on discussions on social media platforms, comment boards, forums, and podcasts. For instance, as Ben Lindbergh of *The Ringer* website points out, the different Edgic charts made by the SURVIVOR Edgic Reddit thread *r/Edgic*, *Unspoiled Edgicers Unite*, and *Inside Survivor*¹ all differed slightly for season 39 in 2019, but there was broad agreement across communities that Tommy Sheehan would be the winner based on his consistently high ratings in the Edgic system throughout the season (Lindbergh).

Within a given episode, each contestant is assigned an Edgic score based on these three measurements that allow Edgic users to follow editing patterns over the course of the season. Some of the factors Edgic users examine: which contestants receive more screen time than others, which contestants are portrayed more positively, and which contestants are more central to the

1 Survivor Edgic Reddit thread (www.reddit.com/r/Edgic/); *Unspoiled Edgicers Unite* (www.tap.atalk.com/groups/unspoilededgicersunite/); *Inside Survivor* (insidesurvivor.com).

season's overarching narrative. These criteria make it easier for Edgic users to not only make sense of the unpredictable narrative but to also predict the outcome of the show more accurately. Due to the deeper levels of analysis required to use Edgic, Edgic participants tend to be devoted "super fans" of the show, even more so than fans who listen to an occasional podcast, read the occasional recap online, or even participate in online fantasy drafts.

Despite its requirement for more active engagement with the show, Edgic fits the description of Levy's democratic knowledge community because it is open and accessible to anyone who wants to join in the game. This makes it different from the spoiling community in the early days of SURVIVOR described by Jenkins, which was essentially a gated knowledge community led by brain trust factions. Spoiling the show is generally not why fans participate in the Edgic community: instead, it is the *process* of assembling and arranging an orderly and linear story out of the show's unpredictable and seemingly random plot structure that gives the participants a sense of narrative pleasure. Ironically, however, Edgic users were accused of threatening the narrative pleasure of other SURVIVOR fans in 2016 during the 32nd season of the show.

SURVIVOR: KAOH RONG Edgic Controversy

A controversy similar to the 2003 ChillOne incident erupted in 2016 during the show's 32nd season, SURVIVOR: KAOH RONG (US 2016), in which Edgic users correctly predicted the season's winner, Michele Fitzgerald, despite denial from the rest of the SURVIVOR fan community. Most non-Edgic fans were predicting a win for the more popular Aubry Bracco, and to the non-Edgic viewer, her edit, which was often central to the narrative of the season, seemed to support that assumption. When the self-proclaimed "Michele truthers"² were proven correct in the season finale, they were met with outrage from the rest of the fans, who claimed that Edgic users had ruined their enjoyment

2 Sean Richey explains that "Trutherism" has its roots in the "belief that Bush had foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks and that they were allowed or even surreptitiously committed by the United States" (466). Although "truther" typically refers to one who believes in conspiracy theories, Survivor fan HowlingMermaid points out that "SURVIVOR the TV show, and even the most salacious rumors about production don't really border on conspiracy. Truther is just a hyperbolized term to be silly and have fun" ([reddit.com/r/Edgic/comments/18d4hun/truthers/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Edgic/comments/18d4hun/truthers/)). See the following Reddit thread for an example of how this term is used playfully and ironically by certain members of the fan community: "My Fellow Michele-Truthers, who are you 'truthing' this season?" (www.reddit.com/r/survivor/comments/54sd8k/my_fellow_micheletruthers_who_are_you_truthing/).

“I don’t need to be carried, bro.”

of the show. For instance, SURVIVOR fan Ian Walker shared his reaction to the SURVIVOR: KAOH RONG season finale, which speaks for much of the fan community’s reaction:

Throughout the entire season, I had been an Aubry person. From early on in the season, I latched onto her, and as the season went along and her story gained more traction as she emerged as a real power player, I became pretty convinced that she would be the eventual winner. But how could you ignore the “Michele truthters,” you ask? I was certainly aware of them and did think that their argument held a lot of merits. But I never fully committed to the idea for one simple reason: Michele wasn’t the focus of the overall arc of the season and, therefore, I believed, didn’t have the narrative support like Aubry did. (“Why Michele Didn’t Have a Winner’s Story (Even Though She Won)”)

It was not the surprise of Michele’s win that disappointed Walker and a large population of SURVIVOR fans, but more the fact that she was not the “focus of the overall arc of the season,” as Aubry had been.

While at first glance, this controversy seems to mirror the ChillOne incident described by Jenkins, the difference is that Edgic users who predicted Michele’s win did not have special access to spoilers like ChillOne had: instead, they simply cracked the editing code and used their collective intelligence to make a correct prediction. A deeper look into how Edgic users were able to correctly identify Michele as the winner may shed light on how this led to a fracture within the fan community. I will explain in more depth the three main Edgic criteria of visibility, tone, and character rating, and compare Michele’s and Aubry’s edits to show how Edgic users predicted a Michele win, which, like ChillOne, disrupted the narrative pleasure of the non-Edgic SURVIVOR fan community.

Visibility

Visibility is the most straightforward data point in the Edgic system because it tracks a contestant’s visibility within each SURVIVOR episode on a scale of 1 to 5. Edgic users count visibility as screentime, which can mean anything from a contestant shown engaging in dialogue with another contestant on the beach to receiving prominent focus during a challenge. However, “confessionals,” personal interviews in which contestants break the fourth wall and speak directly to the camera about their feelings or plans within the game, hold the most weight in terms of visibility.

VISIBILITY SCALE				
5	4	3	2	1
Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low

Fig. 1: *Visibility Scale.* SURVIVOR contestants are rated on a scale of 1 to 5 for each episode, depending on how much screentime they receive. Retrieved from insidesurvivor.com/survivor-Edgic-an-introduction-3094

If a contestant receives low visibility throughout the season, then he or she is not likely to win the game or even to play an important role in the season's narrative. Contestants who are central to the narrative will obviously receive more screen time than those who are not. Also, contestants who are not necessarily central to the narrative but give entertaining "sound bites" or provide funny, shocking, or compelling material will likely receive more visibility. However, perhaps most telling is when a contestant scores high on the visibility scale even when he or she is neither particularly entertaining nor important to the episode's narrative. This is the case with Michele, who was not an important factor in the story until the final few episodes of the season. Knowing that Michele would win the season and not wanting the audience to forget that she was on the show, the editors chose to include random confessionals or moments involving Michele that reminded the audience of her presence. For example, in episode 3, none of the storylines directly involved Michele, yet she was given two confessionals commenting on the relationship between her tribemates, Caleb and Tai:

Michele (1/2): They're just two totally different personalities that you wouldn't think connect, and somehow, they just get each other.

Michele (2/2): The bromance is real out here. They bicker like a married couple, and then they kiss and make up.

Although Julia, Michele's other tribemate in her "Beauty alliance," also received a similar confessional commenting on Tai's and Caleb's "bromance," the fact that Michele received two confessionals indicates that the editors wanted her to be more front of mind, even when she was not directly involved in the narrative. Moments such as these were flagged by Edgic users, leading them to believe that Michele was a likely winner within the first few episodes.

In comparison to Michele, fan favorite Aubry received a higher visibility rating overall, especially in the first half of the season. However, when we

“I don’t need to be carried, bro.”

compare the visibility of Aubry and Michele throughout the season, some interesting patterns emerge. The following chart tracks visibility for both Michele and Aubry over the course of the 15 hours of the show. The transcripts of all the confessionals for the entire season were uploaded into Voyant, an open-source, web-based application for text analysis. When “Michele” and “Aubry” were input as whitelist words, the following visualization appeared:

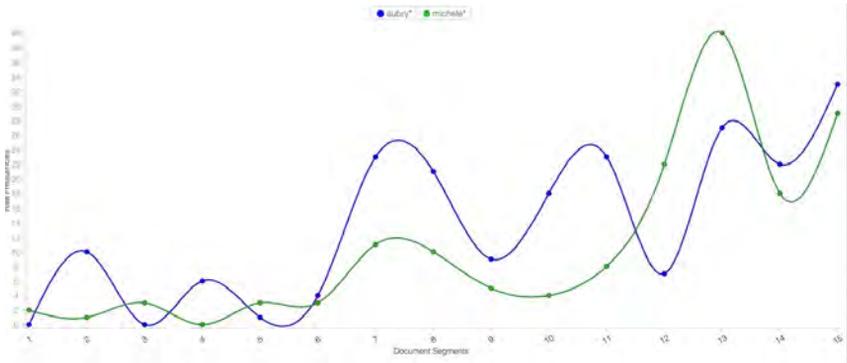


Fig. 2: A comparison of Michele’s and Aubry’s visibility throughout the season based on dialogue tags, created using Voyant

The transcripts uploaded into Voyant include the contestant’s name before every confessional. Therefore, analyzing the transcripts can accurately show the number of confessionals throughout the season. In addition, a contestant will appear more frequently on the graph if another contestant mentions her name during a confessional. Both instances of names relate to visibility, since the name of a contestant is not likely to be mentioned if she is not involved in the episode’s narrative. The graph shows that Aubry is more visible throughout the season, especially during episodes 7 and 11, which comprise a bulk of the postmerge game, sometimes referred to as “Act Two” of the show’s three-act structure: this is the phase of the game in which the competing tribes merge into one tribe and the gameplay shifts to an individual mode, with strategy becoming more important than physicality. Aubry, because she originated on the “Brain” tribe and values logic and strategy over athleticism, comes into her own after the merge. The narrative often centers on Aubry’s strategic decisions as she grapples with how to defeat the Brawn alliance, whether to betray her ally Debbie, and how to sway Tai to join her alliance.

Michele, by contrast, is shown as a more passive player who is sometimes unaware of the strategic conversations between the other power players. However, her visibility spikes between episodes 12 and 15, the final stretch of the game, in which she wins multiple immunity challenges and emerges from the shadows as an actual threat. Because Michele becomes more central to the narrative at the end of the season, her visibility spike makes sense. However, what is most striking about Michele's edit is her consistent visibility earlier in the game when she is not an important player within the narrative. Her comment about the Tai and Caleb bromance in episode 3 has already been mentioned. Another example is in episode 8, where Michele has no central role in the main story yet has two confessionals reacting to Jason and Scot's decision to hide the tools in retaliation against the women's alliance:

Michele (1/2): The boys think that they can break us down and keep us down by doing these things, but we just use our smarts and figure out another way. We don't need you big burly men to do it for us. We can figure it out. Within twenty minutes, we figured out a new method.

Michele (2/2): I just don't like that kind of behavior. I don't tolerate it in my regular life, and I d-- I don't want to tolerate it out here either. So they can keep the power struggle going on, but we're not going to back down. You know, we're always going to find a way.

Because Michele is not involved in the strategic conversations in the episode, the editors decided to show her personal reactions to Jason and Scot to remind the audience of her presence on the show and place her in opposition to the antagonists to gain favor with the audience. While these confessionals paint her in a positive light, it is not enough for the audience to necessarily root for her to win, since she is still only a supporting character and not all that essential to much of the season's narrative. However, Michele's consistent visibility, despite her nonessential role in the story arc, is one of the ways Edgic users picked up on a potential winner edit.

Tone

Tone is another factor used by Edgic users to determine how a contestant is portrayed by the editors. A contestant's edit within a given episode can receive a Super Positive (PP), Positive (P), Neutral (no value attached), Mixed (M), Negative (N), or Super Negative (NN) score.

“I don’t need to be carried, bro.”

TONE	DEFINITIONS
PP super positive	The character is so unbelievably and overtly positive that it deserves special recognition. The character may get special, rare, heroic, soaring music. Other characters may refer to them in terms that make them seem saintly, heroic, or sympathetic.
P positive	There is significant evidence of editorial footage for the character in the positive direction. Positive (e.g., sympathetic) music paired with a character’s words/actions. Other characters speaking about the character in an unambiguously positive way.
Neutral	The edit pairs the character’s words/actions with no special musical cues, other characters do not comment on the character in an evaluative way, and the overall narrative does not convey anything about the character that is inherently good or bad.
M mixed	It technically is a type of Neutral Toned edit, but where the player has amounts of notable negative and positive scenes in the same episode. There should be a notable amount of P and N manipulation.
N negative	There is significant evidence of editorial footage for the character in the negative direction. Negative (e.g., “dopey”/“evil”) music paired with a character’s words/actions. Other characters speaking about the character in an unambiguously negative way.
NN super negative	The character is so incredibly vile that it deserves special recognition. The character may get special, rare, “evil” music. Other characters may refer to them in terms that make them seem incredibly terrible to coexist with.

Fig. 3: Tone. Six different tone ratings applied by Edgic users to contestants, based on “positive” or “negative” edits. Retrieved from insidesurvivor.com/survivor-Edgic-an-introduction-3094

The tone is determined by the choices a contestant is shown to make, whether they are positive (i.e., performing well in a challenge, bonding with another contestant, or sharing their genuine feelings in a confessional) or negative (i.e., performing badly in a challenge, clashing with another contestant, or speaking badly about another contestant in a confessional). As suggested by the chart above, music also plays an essential role in the tone. For instance, in *SURVIVOR: GAME CHANGERS* (US 2017), the show’s 34th season, inspirational music is used to underscore four-time contestant Cirie Fields’s physical struggle to walk a balance beam over the water, which influenced Fields’s tone rating towards a Super Positive (PP) score. By contrast, in *SURVIVOR: CARMOAN* (US 2013), the show’s 26th season, dramatic music plays as contestant Brandon Hantz, who later is taken out of the game due to his unstable mental state, loses his temper and dumps out all the tribe’s rice. Instead of underscoring the tragic event of an unstable contestant’s struggle with mental health, the music serves to paint Hantz as the villain of the season. Unsurprisingly, Edgic users gave Hantz a Super Negative (NN) tone rating for the episode.

For Edgic users, tone is used to distinguish between the contestants who are portrayed in a positive light versus those portrayed in a negative light. For example, both Aubry and Michele mostly receive positive, or at least neutral,

edits for most of their episodes. By contrast, contestants such as Nick, Jason, and Scot receive negative edits, since they are often shown boasting about themselves, bashing other contestants in their confessionals, or even bullying or clashing with contestants during scenes on the beach. In one scene in episode 6, Michele is speaking with her ally Nick about who to vote for if their tribe loses the next immunity challenge. Nick comes across as condescending and rude, both within the scene and in his confessional:

Nick (6/6): I have to almost coach Michele in this game. She's young and she doesn't really know how to manipulate. So that's going to be my job from here on out—making sure Michele is under my wing and making sure she says the right things and comes across the right way.

While Nick's disrespectful treatment of Michele was already apparent from his interactions with her, the inclusion of his condescending confessional paints him in an even worse light. He becomes an antagonist who "mansplains" to Michele because he does not believe she can think for herself. Although Michele does not confront Nick directly, she also receives her own confessional, in which she shares her feelings about their conversation:

Michele (6/6): Right now, what I'm gonna do is just let Nick baby me and make him believe that I need all the help that he can offer, like the innocent little girl, like I'm stupid, but actually, I'm a strong, independent woman, and when it comes time to make a move, then I will. I don't need to be carried, bro.

In contrast to Nick, Michele is portrayed in a positive light, not as a victim, but as a "strong, independent woman," who is clearly annoyed with his behavior but will continue to use him for her own personal gain, until the time is right to make a move against him. As shown in this scene, tone is used to distinguish between the contestants we are supposed to root for (such as Michele) and those we are supposed to root against (such as Nick).

Some recent winners have received an overall "mixed" tone rating: for instance, Adam Klein in *SURVIVOR: MILLENNIALS VS. GEN-X (US 2016)*, who often fumbled his way through the season by voting incorrectly in a handful of episodes and even tripping goofily when searching for an idol in the season finale. But the contestants with overtly negative edits are (usually) ruled out by Edgic users as potential winners because the editors of the show want the audience to be satisfied with a winner they were rooting for throughout the season.

“I don’t need to be carried, bro.”

Character Rating

Character rating is perhaps the most important tool utilized by Edgic users to define each contestant’s role within the season’s narrative. A contestant may be assigned a variety of character ratings throughout the season, depending on how he or she is portrayed within different episodes. However, as the season progresses, certain patterns emerge, allowing Edgic users to see how a contestant fits within the overarching story. The character ratings are Invisible (INV), Under the Radar (UTR), Middle of the Road (MOR), Complex Personality (CP), and Over the Top (OTT).

RATING	DEFINITIONS
INV invisible	A character, within the episode, that is edited to be irrelevant or insignificant to any of the stories. No confessionals or tribal council questions. Almost absent from the episode. No complexity and no development.
UTR under the radar	A character, within the episode, that is edited to be either under-utilized or deliberately hidden. They may have a role in the story but are being kept out of focus. When the episode ends, the character's overall development is virtually unchanged.
MOR middle of the road	A character, within the episode, that says and does more than a UTR edit, but is lacking in character development. In terms of story, these characters tend towards being a supporting character. Receives moderate levels of game relevant development.
CP complex personality	A character, within the episode, that emerges as a "personality" that is well-rounded and well-developed. We see their strengths and weaknesses and their choices are presented to the audience so that we get an insight into their thinking.
OTT over the top	A character, within the episode, that is over-simplified or presented as one-dimensional. In terms of story, these characters are usually used to create drama. They are the ones we love to love or love to hate.

Fig. 4: *Character Rating.* The most subjective of the three criteria, these five character types are assigned by Edgic users to SURVIVOR contestants in each episode. Each character type takes into account the quality of content in the confessionals and the overall narrative. Retrieved from insidesurvivor.com/survivor-Edgic-an-introduction-3094

Although visibility is related to character rating, character ratings have more to do with how much character development the contestant receives within the episode. This is mostly determined by players’ confessionals. A confessional itself does not determine a contestant’s character rating, as it does with visibility; instead, it is the content of the confessional that counts. For example, if a contestant admits in a confessional that she misses a family member and begins to cry on camera, then that contestant will most likely receive a CP rating for that episode. Martin Holmes, the manager of the fan site *Inside Survivor*, points out that a CP rating is the “sweet spot” since it is typically a good indicator that the contestant is a winner candidate (Holmes,

“Survivor Edgic—An Introduction”). An MOR isn’t bad either since an MOR can change into a CP later in the season. An OTT rating is reserved for characters who are generally underdeveloped or stereotypical but provide a lot of drama or entertainment value. Finally, UTR and INV ratings are indicators that the contestant is not important to the episode’s narrative, and if a contestant receives a lot of UTR or INV ratings, then that contestant is ruled out as a possible winner. The following chart from *Inside Survivor* shows the “postmerge” contestants (the final eleven contestants that made it to Act Two of the game) and their assigned character rating values for each episode, combined with visibility ratings (indicated by a number between 1 and 5) and tone ratings (indicated by the shade of each color).



Fig. 5: An Edgic chart for the final eleven contestants of SURVIVOR: KAOH RONG, which combines visibility, tone, and character ratings. Retrieved from insidesurvivor.com/survivor-kaoh-rong-Edgic-episode-14-12975

As shown in the chart, a contestant may receive a variety of character ratings throughout the season. However, Redmond assigned an overall character rating to each contestant at the end of the season. According to the key, regular and super positive CP (Complex Personality) character ratings are in dark

“I don’t need to be carried, bro.”

blue and light blue. The only four contestants to receive overall CP ratings that do not include mixed or negative tones are Michele, Aubry, Cydney, and Julia. When comparing Michele’s and Aubry’s character ratings over the course of the season, it becomes clear that, although Aubry is slightly more visible in more episodes, her edit is not as consistent as Michele’s. For example, Aubry has a mixed-tone OTT rating in episode 1, in which she experiences an anxiety attack. And in episode 2, she disappears entirely and receives an INV rating. While Michele receives a few UTR (Under the Radar) and MOR (Middle of the Road) character ratings throughout the season, she never receives an OTT or an INV, so her character rating is generally more consistent than Aubry’s overall.

Crucially, because the editors show Aubry’s flaws and struggles throughout the season, and because she was more central to most of the narrative throughout the season, a majority of viewers aligned themselves with Aubry as the protagonist of the show and expected her to overcome her obstacles and claim the title of Sole Survivor. On the night of the season finale, fans took to comment boards and subreddits to express their shock and dismay at the reveal of the winner. On one SURVIVOR subreddit thread, a fan named Lenian wryly noted, “I felt a great disturbance in the subreddit, as if millions of Aubry fans suddenly cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced,” to which FancyBBQ responded, “they are anything but silent.” Tabloid journalists also expressed their disappointment; for instance Daniel Fienberg, writing here for *The Hollywood Reporter*:

Michele won 5-2 and ... Yeah. I don’t get it. The problem is that almost none of that was what Michele presented at the jury. She had no strategic resumé and so she relied on talking about being underestimated and playing the game as an underdog. In contrast, Aubry carefully went through all of the things she’d done to get the game to this point.

Even viewers who were not self-proclaimed Aubry fans were surprised by the reveal. One fan, Kapon24, admitted, “I’m not even an Aubry fan but I simply don’t understand how Michele won.” Despite the editors’ efforts to involve Michele within the narrative, she still came off as a mostly passive and unengaging character who was not driving most of the decisions. This is part of the reason the larger audience of SURVIVOR was upset with Michele’s win over Aubry: they weren’t involved in her journey like they were with Aubry’s. The Michele truthers, because they were so adamant about being right, only served to pour salt in the wound of an audience of already bitter viewers. In other words, the Michele truthers ruined the narrative pleasure of the non-Edgic fan community.

Narrative Pleasure

Narrative pleasure, which depends on a carefully designed plot structure, and games, which depend largely on the unpredictability of chance, seem at odds with one another. However, *SURVIVOR* combines narrative pleasure with a game structure, and as a result, offers two levels of pleasure for viewers—unpredictability and a satisfying narrative of a contestant overcoming external and internal obstacles in her pursuit of victory. Marie-Laure Ryan contends that a “necessary condition [of games] is the pleasure dimension: games are freely played, and played for their own sake” (177).³ Ryan’s point about pleasure as an essential component of games seems self-evident, yet pleasure more broadly construed is distinct from *narrative* pleasure, which is the expectation of a story unfolding before the viewer’s (or participant’s) watchful gaze. Mary Beth Haralovich and Michael W. Trosset, writing about the pleasurable viewing experience of watching *SURVIVOR*, place unpredictability at the forefront of that experience. They claim that narrative pleasure, at least in the case of *SURVIVOR*,

stems from the desire to know what will happen next, to have that gap [between cause and effect] opened and closed, again and again, until the resolution of the story [...]. In *SURVIVOR*, unpredictability whets the desire to know what happens next, but how that gap will be closed is grounded in uncertainty due to chance [...]. In its invitation to prediction, *SURVIVOR* is more like a horse race than fiction. (9–11)

Although Haralovich and Trosset are correct in identifying unpredictability as an important factor in the narrative pleasure of watching *SURVIVOR*, the comparison of the show to a horse race ignores that the show has a narrative in the first place. While fans tune in to be surprised by a sudden turn of events, especially when a contestant is unexpectedly blindsided, if a shocking moment without cause and effect occurs, the narrative ceases to be pleasurable. In other words, the outcome of the show cannot be determined by a simple roll of the dice. A good season of *SURVIVOR* combines *agon*, the category of competitive games where “rivals seek to excel one another in pursuits requiring physical skill or ingenuity,” with *alea*, a category of games “that invokes an element of chance,” typified by games such as roulette, lotteries, and dice (Carlisle 108). The ideal winner in agonist play is “someone who conquers by pure merit,” while *alea* “invokes an element of chance and therefore seemingly negates the skill and practice of *agon*” (108). In *SURVIVOR*,

3 See also Tobias Unterhuber’s chapter on spoilers in games.

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winners are typically those who both merit a win through strategic game play and who are favored with good fortune at crucial points in the game. Some winners are more dominant in their gameplay, while others seem to rely more heavily on chance, which of course leads to heated debates about whether a winner “deserved” their win. The most important aspect of the editing, however, is that the contestants’ motivations, though at times surprising, need to make sense within the context of the episode, or else the audience is left confused or even angered. Due to this audience expectation, the editors of *SURVIVOR* are tasked with striking a balance between unpredictability and narrative pleasure.

An example of this balance between unpredictability and narrative pleasure is the season finale of *SURVIVOR: THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK* (US 2001), the show’s second season, cited in Haralovich and Trosset’s essay. The final three contestants were Keith, Tina, and Colby. The winner of the final immunity challenge would be able to choose which of the other two contestants would be voted out and which contestant would stay in the game to compete in the final tribal council. Due to Colby’s strong immunity challenge track record, most fans predicted that Colby would win the final immunity challenge, vote out Tina because she was a much bigger threat than Keith, and go on to win the game against Keith. Based on these assumptions, the predicted boot order was Tina-Keith-Colby. While the fans were right about Colby winning immunity, they were wrong when it came to Colby’s decision. They assumed Colby valued winning the game above all else; however, they failed to consider how highly Colby valued his friendship with Tina. In a shocking move, Colby voted out Keith instead of Tina and lost to her by one jury vote at the final tribal council. The actual elimination order turned out to be Keith-Colby-Tina. This example shows that despite the shocking outcome, Colby’s decision wasn’t based on a simple roll of the dice: it was based on human motivations that were true to his character. If the editors did their job right, the fans who had a firmer grasp on Colby’s character could have at least entertained the possibility of his decision to keep Tina in the game. Thus, the show is less of a horse race and more of a hybrid between game shows like *JEOPARDY* (US 1964–, Creator: Merv Griffin) or *FAMILY FEUD* (US 1976–, Creator: Mark Goodson) and scripted dramas such as *LOST* (US 2004–2010, Creator: Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof) or *YELLOWJACKETS* (US 2021–, Creator: Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson), where a blend of unpredictable game elements and compelling human drama both contribute to narrative pleasure.

In the case of Michele's edit, one of the problems may have been that the audience was unable to firmly grasp her character or her role within the narrative, despite the editors' attempts to make her a complex character. One of the limitations of reality television storytelling is that the editors only have a certain amount of material to work with. As one fan on the *r/Survivor Reddit* thread, *treeshugmeback*, observed, "Imagine if they edited the season without knowing the winner. We would have seen next to nothing of Michele, and when she won, people would have said 'who the fuck is that?'" In *SURVIVOR: KAOH RONG*, they couldn't change the outcome; Michele had already won. Therefore, their job was to make the audience feel satisfied with Michele winning. However, despite the editors' best efforts, there just wasn't enough material available to make Michele's win narratively satisfying for most of the audience, especially compared to Aubry, who was a much more complex and visible player throughout the season.

Haralovich and Trosset also take for granted that *SURVIVOR* is like any other formalized game, overlooking the combination of narrative with a game structure and the fact that the show invites participation from its audience. That participation can take a variety of forms. Casual viewers can participate in the action through "armchair quarterbacking," a term borrowed from sports fan terminology to describe fans who root for their favorite players or teams but who do not necessarily invest their time in fantasy football leagues. These viewers, Ryan explains, "imagine scenarios for the action to come and make strategic decisions for the participants. This activity is made possible by the rigidity of the rules that determine the range of the possible" (141). Casual *SURVIVOR* fans have an investment in their favorite players, and they not only root for specific contestants but debate with other fans those players' strategic gameplay and their chances of winning. These discussions typically center on winning as the end goal. In this respect, these viewers are not all that different from traditional sports fans watching a football game.

Edgic fans, however, participate at a deeper level, focusing not only on the end result but on the unfolding of the narrative itself. These fans are less like spectators at a sporting event and more like detectives attempting to decode and solve a mystery. By searching for clues in the editing patterns and sharing their discoveries with other fans, Edgic users experience a sense of narrative pleasure, even as they play the game on a higher level than the casual fans. The rooting interest in the participation of the Edgic game is not economic or social capital but the ability to take part in a specialized knowledge community, similar to how *SURVIVOR* fans pooled their knowledge in their competitive interplay with the producers during the early seasons. As

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Johan Huizinga in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* points out, a formalized game must have “no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it” (13). In addition, it “proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” and “promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise and other means” (13). Roger Callois adds to Huizinga’s theories of participatory game play, arguing that “play creates bonds between players, giving rise to collectives of like-minded persons who tend to exclude the uninitiated” (qtd. in Carlisle 107). Instead of competing with one another in an agonistic game of one-upmanship, Edgic users often share their knowledge with each other in order to collectively decode the story of the show, which includes not only identifying the winner but also deciphering the patterns and themes of the narrative of that particular season.

Conclusion

While it is true that consumers can be actively engaged in playing a game with the producers in the construction of the narrative, as shown by the devoted SURVIVOR fan community, there are various levels of active participation. This leads to a wide variety of knowledge communities, each with its own level of participation, even within a single fan culture such as the SURVIVOR community. Edgic users are perhaps one of the most active knowledge communities within SURVIVOR fandom. While the unsatisfying conclusion to SURVIVOR: KAOH RONG can be linked in part to the limitations of reality TV storytelling, the Michele truthers only exacerbated the pushback against Michele’s win by broadcasting their predictions across the internet throughout most of the season. Unlike ChillOne, who threatened the democratic system of the knowledge community by spoiling SURVIVOR: THE AMAZON, the Michele truthers did not spoil the show in the traditional sense because they did not have access to true spoilers. Their transgression of the unspoken democratic rules within SURVIVOR fan culture was to leave their own Edgic knowledge community and infiltrate other non-Edgic knowledge communities with their findings. What this incident shows is that for democratic citizenship to thrive within knowledge communities, each community must respect the other communities’ boundaries and preferences of media engagement. Transgressing those boundaries can jeopardize the narrative pleasure experienced by other communities through varying levels of participation, thereby threatening the democratic citizenship of the collective intelligence.

Filmography

FAMILY FEUD. Creator: Mark Goodson. US 1976–.

JEOPARDY. Creator: Merv Griffin. US 1964–.

SURVIVOR. Creator: Charlie Parsons. US 2000–.

LOST. Creator: Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof. US 2004–2010.

YELLOWJACKETS. Creator: Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson. US 2021–.

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Tender Gestures

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

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

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

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

The Spoiler Warning is a Gesture of Tenderness

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 See also Simon Spiegel’s chapter.

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

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

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

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

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

The Spoiler Warning is a Form of Imagined Identification

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Filmography

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Part 5: Conversations

“It’s like an allergic reaction.” A Conversation with Joshua Astrachan

Joshua Astrachan may not be a household name, but he has been working in the film industry for several decades. Among other things, he has acted as producer for two icons of US independent cinema. He produced Robert Altman’s last three films, *GOSFORD PARK* (IT/UK/US 2001), *THE COMPANY* (US 2003), and *A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION* (US 2006), and through his company Animal Kingdom produced Jim Jarmusch’s two most recent films, *PATERSON* (US/DE/FR 2016) and *THE DEAD DON’T DIE* (US 2019).

In addition to classic independent films like those of Altman and Jarmusch, and the critically acclaimed *SHORT TERM 12* (US 2013, Director: Destin Daniel Cretton), Astrachan has also produced genuine genre pieces. *IT FOLLOWS* (US 2014, Director: David Robert Mitchell), which cleverly plays with established horror tropes, earned many times its tiny budget of \$1.3 million and has already been called a modern horror classic. Another horror film, albeit of a rather different kind, is *GOODNIGHT MOMMY* (US 2022, Director: Matt Sobel), a remake of the highly acclaimed Austrian film *ICH SEH, ICH SEH* (*GOODNIGHT MOMMY*, AU 2014, Director: Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala), produced for Amazon.

There is a general feeling that people have become much more sensitive to spoilers. Do you share this impression?

I guess in general, I would agree with that. And I have to think that it’s related to the flood of information that we are now all endlessly subjected to. It has become so difficult to do anything discreetly, without a thousand reports along the way. We are all being marketed to without pause, even if that marketing is just the endless tap-tap-tapping for our attention. This makes it very hard to have anything happen quietly, and it makes it very hard to experience a real surprise. I have to think that’s at least part of the reason why we may have become so spoiler-averse. In short: we live in a world where the spoilers never stop, where every possibly intriguing hiccup of culture and news is ceaselessly being dangled to grab our attention—click here, click here, click here.

The overdose of information leads to an aversion to too much information.

I think so. It's like an allergic reaction. Like you'd rather just have no exposure to peanuts, so your allergy is not inflamed. We don't want spoilers, because we're exhausted by information overload.

You have been in the film industry for more than three decades, working as an executive producer and a producer, among other things. How much has the changing attitude toward spoilers influenced the way you work?

To be honest, I think it's relatively minor. Our sensitivities to spoilers have indeed perhaps been heightened, but I think to a degree, like everything in film, much of this depends on the director. Everything comes from that person and their personality: the outlook, desires, and background of that human being. That's a cliché, I fear, but it's true.

So, for instance, I had the incredibly good fortune to be part of Robert Altman's world for the last ten years or so of Bob's wild, loop-the-loop career. I think it's fair to say that Bob reinvented film in a number of ways—particularly in the way that we hear films—and in the braided, multiple storylines that he was so celebrated for, as in *NASHVILLE* (US 1975) or *SHORT CUTS* (US 1993). But Bob was not very much concerned about keeping things close to his chest.

Jim Jarmusch, on the other hand, with whom I've also had the incredibly good fortune to work, cares very much about keeping the work private as he is making it.

Altman did not care as much about that and was a lot less careful in general. I don't mean that in a derogatory way. They are just very different people, and their character is also expressed in their films. Bob's films, I think it's fair to say, have a great deal of chaos in them—and that's part of the fun, if you enjoy it. It's also how his imagination worked. And Bob's films were, to many, up-and-down affairs that are perhaps of a piece with this chaos. David Thomson wrote of Altman in the 2003 edition of *Biographical Dictionary of Film* that “no one else alive is as capable of a dud, or a masterpiece.” I love Thomson, and in Bob's office, it became our tradition to give that book to interns as a thank-you at the end of their time with us. In the summer of 2006, that book was on the table at the end of a lunch observing an intern's last day with us. Bob came into the office before that lunch had finished, sat down at the table, and I just thought, “Please don't open that book, please don't open that book.” But of course, Bob did. And he read that line aloud, smiled, closed the book, and said, “Yup.”

You said that Jim Jarmusch is very protective of his films. Which is surprising in a way, because, at least on the level of the story, there is very little to spoil in his films. They are not really based on exciting plots with unexpected twists. The whole point of a film like THE LIMITS OF CONTROL (US 2009) is that genre expectations are not met, that nothing much happens. And PATERSON is all about repetition and variation. It is much more concerned with rhythm and mood than with plot.

As a rule, Jim’s films are indeed not about plot. At least not in the traditional sense. They’re much more concerned—apologies for over-simplifying them—with *being*. With a Jarmusch film, you have to be there and experience time in Jim’s very particular way, and spend time with the singular characters that Jim and his casts create. Again, Jim is careful, precise, and caring—and he wants himself and all of the artists that he invites to join him, to work outside of the public glare as much as possible.

I am not certain of this, but I think that Jim has likely always felt this way, even before we lived in the digital age. Jim just—very reasonably—doesn’t want to share a film until it’s ready. His sensitivities along these lines have perhaps been heightened in the current era, because of how easy it is now for anything to spill into the public sphere—i.e., where your work can be placed into the open before you’re ready to put it there.

Bob, again, was very different. His films, as a rule, are much plottier: multiple narratives necessarily have multiple stories. But Bob’s mindset seemed to be: “Look at my amazing cast, look at my amazing movie. I don’t care what you think you know about it, it’s gonna surprise you anyway.”

Which is interesting, because a film like GOSFORD PARK, which you produced, is a classic whodunit and thus eminently spoilable, at least on a superficial level.

It is, but at the same time, it isn’t. In a way, the question about the identity of the murderer isn’t really that interesting. I took my then thirteen-year-old goddaughter to see GOSFORD PARK and she said, “Not much happens.” When I told Bob that, he said, “She’s on to us.” Because GOSFORD PARK is much more about the characters and the tensions between upstairs and downstairs. The murder—and solving the murder—are there to motor us along, but the film’s real concerns are elsewhere (**fig. 1**).



Fig. 1: Robert Altman's GOSFORD PARK

There is a wonderful story about the way GOSFORD PARK came into being. Bob Balaban, who also produced and starred in the film, was at a cocktail party with Bob Altman, and Balaban said, “Would you ever wanna make an Agatha Christie story?” And Altman, in a very Altman-y way, said, “Only if we follow the servants out of the room.” Because, of course, in a classic whodunit, that rarely if ever happened; in the classics of the genre, the servants feel more like part of the furnishing. It was so perfectly like Bob to think about that other dimension.

Besides typical independent films like those of Altman and Jarmusch, you have also produced horror movies such as IT FOLLOWS and GOODNIGHT MOMMY, which rely much more on surprise twists and are therefore more susceptible to spoilers. Are spoilers more of an issue when you work on a film like that?

Perhaps. Something that is true of almost all films now is the mandate that there can be no photos taken on set and—especially—no images posted on social media. That’s not necessarily about spoiling the plot. That comes, perhaps first, from the concern of wanting the film to be made in private, i.e., please let us all be creative people working together, we’ll take the film to the world when we’re ready to. But I think it’s also about spoilers: let’s please not have the *world* of this film glimpsed before we want it to be, and let’s not have the rest of the world grow tired of us, before we’ve even had a chance to finish the film.

To speak about IT FOLLOWS: you could indeed argue that it is possible to spoil that film, but what is so beautiful about that movie is its vision and the way it sees the world. Part of that vision is of course expressed in the story—how *it* is coming for you, how you get *it*, how you acquire *it*. But ultimately,

the movie is much more about the wild, impossible-to-dial-down dread and worry that the story evokes than it is about the way the plot turns. It’s about the spell the movie casts—and you can only experience that by watching the film.

GOODNIGHT MOMMY, which is a remake of the Austrian movie *ICH SEH, ICH SEH*, works differently though.

That’s right. It’s connected to *THE SIXTH SENSE* (US 1999, Director: M. Night Shyamalan) in that you’re not aware that one of the main characters is not alive—and, in the case of *GOODNIGHT MOMMY*, that he only exists in his twin brother’s imagination and fantasy. We produced this movie for Amazon, and when we did test screenings, one of our primary interests was to hear from people who didn’t know the original and had no idea what the story was, to see how the film played for them. We had to assume that the vast majority of our audience would not know the brilliant original, so the plot would not be spoiled for them, and it was critical for us as filmmakers to know how the film played for that population.

At the same time, we also wanted to know if the movie still worked when you indeed knew the twist. If you know the film’s conceit, then you likely begin to notice that when Mother speaks, she only ever speaks to *one* of her sons, and that the brother who is not alive always “speaks” by prompting his brother to say things that he wants said (**fig. 2**).



Fig. 2: The mother only speaks to one of her sons in *GOODNIGHT MOMMY*

We had the unusual spoiler concern with this film of not wanting *those* very things—that you might only notice if you knew the twist—to be *too* conspicuous, i.e., we didn't want to tip our own story too early.

Finally, though, in a way, it's impossible to spoil a good movie anyway, because good movies need a second viewing or at least reward a second viewing. When you're watching for the first time, you are wowed by story turns or things like the cinematography, by performances, by mood, tone and feeling. But when you're re-watching a film, you are, with luck, more sensitive to nuances that you didn't catch the first time you watched—or that you *couldn't* have understood (even if you perhaps *felt* them) the first time.

You worked in theater before you started in films. What role do spoilers play onstage?

I'm not really in that world anymore, but I would guess that for the stage, it's even more about the experience than about a story that can be spoiled. There are certainly plays where a plot twist is important. But although you could theoretically spoil a theatrical piece, I think it is much more about the live event, which you can't tread on. Either it works or it doesn't. And if it does work, there's nothing better. To be in the same room with the actors when they're flourishing is just phenomenal. And, of course, when it's bad, there's nothing worse, then you're all trapped in the room together. It's like being at a bad party that you can't *wait* to leave.

What role do potential spoilers play when you are developing a screenplay together with a screenwriter or filmmaker? Do you think about how to come up with a twist and protect it?

For me, that comes much later. The first worry—and ambition—is always: can we make something good? Can we make something worthwhile? What's the best version of this, and how do we realize it? And you worry much later about how it might spill into public view or get spoiled or be given away. It's just so hard to make a movie, period. And it's even harder to make a good movie. It takes every ounce of your attention and effort; the concern about how the film meets the world comes later.

Is there a difference in this regard between producing an independent film or working for a streaming giant like Amazon?

In my experience, there isn't much of a difference. The streamer I've mainly worked with is Amazon. They are really smart people who are very knowledgeable about film. Obviously, they have an imperative to make films that

meet the mandates of that incredible—and incredibly large—organization. And that informs their priorities. But that’s their job—as it has been, I have to think, at all studios over the years. But what we actually talk about with them is the movie. Again, how do we get the film to be the best version of itself? Those questions come both from the filmmaking team and the studio. Does the film work, does it hold us, where does it take us?

What roles do spoilers play in the marketing of a film?

The job of marketing a film is always tricky because you are giving part of the film away in order to entice the viewer. This is, necessarily, the subject of many, many conversations between filmmakers and distributors—with, among other things, particular emphasis on the trailer. As filmmakers, you are sometimes involved in a dialectic with the studio. They want to show the film *this* way, and you really want them to show it *that* way. And you work it out to, hopefully, arrive at a happy solution. I remember one Altman film where we had 17 different cuts of the trailer. It felt like a lot of different expressions of the film before we were finally able to say: great, this both works on its own and feels like our film.

There are of course trailers that are sometimes famously—or notoriously—very good at selling a product, where the product being sold is very different from the actual film. That’s a whole different kind of spoiling, I guess. Distributors may do this deliberately—and sometimes shrewdly in terms of box office—to attract an audience that can be lured by a particular promise. But if that promise is one that the film itself won’t actually fulfill, there is usually a price to be paid. The film *may* do well at the box office, at least initially, because a particular fan base goes to see it, but those very fans can then end up disappointed and unhappy by what they feel they were bait-and-switched into watching.

Have trailers changed then?

I don’t know if trailers on the whole have changed, but the attitude towards them has certainly changed. There once was a time when watching a good trailer in a movie theater was an experience unto itself. It was once arguably part of what was great about “going to the movies.” But that isn’t true anymore. Before you are sitting in the theater, you’ve likely seen any trailer that will be shown to you a hundred times. Or, at least, you could have if you had wanted to—in this age where an infinite number of digital prompts tap endlessly for our attention. In an analogue era, when things were not so easily available, I think that trailers were more precious because they were rarer.

Filmography

- THE COMPANY. Director: Robert Altman. US 2003.
THE DEAD DON'T DIE. Director: Jim Jarmusch. US 2019.
GOODNIGHT MOMMY. Director: Matt Sobel. US 2022.
ICH SEH, ICH SEH (GOODNIGHT MOMMY). Director: Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala. AU 2014.
IT FOLLOWS. Director: David Robert Mitchell. US 2014.
GOSFORD PARK. Director: Robert Altman. IT/UK/US 2001.
NASHVILLE. Director: Robert Altman. US 1975.
PATERSON. Director: Jim Jarmusch. US/DE/FR 2016.
A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION. Director: Robert Altman. US 2006.
SHORT CUTS. Director: Robert Altman. US 1993.
SHORT TERM 12. Director: Destin Daniel Cretton. US 2013.
THE SIXTH SENSE. Director: M. Night Shyamalan. US 1999.

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“Film Has Turned from a Cultural Asset into a Commodity.” A Conversation with Noemi Ferrer Schwenk

Few people know the European film market as intimately as Noemi Ferrer Schwenk. Over the past twenty-five years, she has worked in almost every part of the film production value chain. She started out with German film distributor Prokino Filmverleih in 1999 and later worked in film funding, first for the Irish Film Board (now Screen Ireland) and then for Eurimages, the Council of Europe’s film support fund. Afterwards, she switched to the production side, working for Zentropa, the production company founded by Danish director Lars von Trier, where she was, among other things, involved in financing *MELANCHOLIA* (DK/SW/FR/DE 2011, Director: Lars von Trier) and *EN KONGELIG AFFÆRE* (*A ROYAL AFFAIR*, CZ/DKDE/SE 2012, Director: Nikolaj Arcel). Today, she works as a consultant for various institutions and boards, including the Icelandic Film Centre and the European Writers Club.

Do you think the attitude towards spoilers has changed in your line of work over time, and if so, when did the shift occur??

I think it has. Since I’ve been living in Ireland, I’ve been reading Peter Bradshaw’s film reviews in *The Guardian*, even though I rarely agree with him. And here, as well as in trade magazines like *Variety*, *Screen International*, or *Deadline*, there has been a visible shift in that they all now include spoiler alerts. That must have started after 2010. I think it’s interesting that this development more or less coincided with the rise of trigger warnings and political correctness. In a way, it seems quite contradictory. On the one hand, people are averse to spoilers, which means they don’t want to know anything about the movie they’re about to see. On the other hand, they want to know as much as possible, because there might be something in it that will affect them negatively.

As Kristina Busse argues in her chapter in this book, spoiler alerts and trigger warnings are closely linked. According to Busse, both are signs of a changing relationship between author and audience: Audiences don't just accept what they are handed by the author anymore, they want to decide for themselves if, when, and how they experience a work.

That makes a lot of sense to me, because it is in line with how audiences have changed in general. In the past, we all watched the same stuff on a limited number of TV channels. Now, everyone can be extremely selective and basically curate their own programming. We all create our own niche, so to speak. But at the same time, and this is quite paradoxical, we still want to be surprised.

In your work, you often have to select promising film projects. Has the fear of spoilers led to any changes in this area?

I have noticed a change in the way projects are presented, whether I'm involved as a distributor or as a member of a funding agency. There has been a distinct evolution in the way log lines, the one-sentence summary of a film, are written. There must be a cliffhanger in the log line now. In the past, the focus was more on explaining what the film was about, on describing its essence. Now it's not just about describing an interesting, suspenseful, or creative story, but also about delivering it in a way that creates suspense. Now there's always something that's going to draw the reader in, because the cliffhanger is already in the log line.

I guess there are two main reasons for this. One is that plot twists have become an integral part of storytelling; so in a way that is related to spoilers. Second, the competition has become much fiercer. You have to make a mark with your project, stand out. In general, filmmakers have become much more aware of the audience, and I, as a representative of a funding body, am basically treated like a normal audience member.

Do you have an explanation for where this might be coming from? Is this a development encouraged by the funding agencies themselves? Or does it come from the filmmakers, who think they need to be better at selling their projects?

We probably have to differentiate between different countries and film cultures. Here in Scandinavia, people are extremely good at pitching their ideas, and there is a strong awareness that you are not telling the story to yourself, but to an audience. I exclude Lars von Trier from this, although he is a real conundrum in this respect. He may seem very unpredictable, but he is actually the most talented marketer in the arthouse sector. If you look at the

teasers and posters for *MELANCHOLIA* or *NYMPHOMANIAC* (DK/DE/FR/BE 2013, Director: Lars von Trier), which von Trier is always closely involved with, you see how brilliantly they target their audience.

In most Nordic countries, there is a kind of functional approach. You want to be successful, you want your movie to find an audience, you want to sell your product. Especially in Denmark: after all, Copenhagen literally means “city of trade” in Old Norse. It’s similar in the UK and Ireland, and now also in Germany and Spain. France, by contrast, is very different. Here, the idea of the auteur still dominates. In a way, this is related to the changing role of the author that we talked about. If the author is no longer the one and only god serving you the work, then the audience becomes more important.

Does the fear of spoilers also affect how scripts are developed? Are writers now more concerned about protecting a plot twist?

I’m not sure whether this is the case, but the way scripts are written has certainly changed. I started in the film industry right before the turn of the millennium; this was the heyday of script doctors and gurus like Linda Seger or Robert McKee. For a time, their books were our bibles, and everything was about the concept of the three-act structure they promoted. This became a self-fulfilling prophecy, of course. Because we were drilled this way by our gods, we also preferred movies that followed the concepts they advocated. And with the three-act structure, which is always headed for a clear resolution, spoilers suddenly become an issue.

Is that really true? Couldn’t you argue that the classical three-act structure can’t be properly spoiled because you always know how the story is going to end? There is no surprise in John Wayne killing the villain and getting the girl.

I see your point, but I would still say that this very rigid structure with its one-dimensional hero depends on maintaining suspense. It is true that in a way you always know how it’s going to end, but you still don’t want to know it in advance. I think *GLADIATOR* (US/UK 2000, Director: Ridley Scott) was a big turning point in that respect, as it was one of the first blockbusters telling us right from the beginning that the hero is going to die in the end. This goes completely against the grain of how big commercial films used to work. By announcing the death of the main character, it becomes a tragedy of sorts.

I think suspense is essential, even for arthouse films, although that’s a different kind of suspense. If you look at an extreme example like Jonathan Glazer’s *THE ZONE OF INTEREST* (UK/PL/US 2023), there is also this constant tension. You are constantly wondering if they are going to show the horrors.

And no, they don't, but the tension remains. Or take *ANATOMIE D'UNE CHUTE* (*ANATOMY OF A FALL*, FR 2023, Director: Justine Triet), which also stars Sandra Hüller. It is an arthouse film but also a murder mystery, a kind of family murder mystery.

*Since you differentiate between blockbuster and arthouse movies: there is this almost paradoxical phenomenon that the fear of spoilers seems to be much greater with big blockbusters like *STARS WARS* or *Marvel* movies. For arthouse films, spoilers are much less of an issue. This seems strange, since the latter are supposed to have less standardized and therefore more surprising plots.*

Maybe this indicates that spoilers only become an issue when an audience no longer thinks of itself as an audience but as consumers? What it comes down to is that we don't want something we've paid for spoiled. The younger generations have grown up in an environment where they are constantly flooded with content. Yes, they can carefully select what they want from this flood, but in most cases that also means having to pay for it. And paying doesn't necessarily mean a paid subscription, it can also mean having to watch advertisements. And once you've paid for something, you are much more sensitive about whether it corresponds exactly with what you expected. So, maybe spoilers are a consequence of the fact that film has turned from a cultural asset into a commodity.

This brings me to something that Thomas Eskilson, the former CEO of Film i Väst, Scandinavia's leading film fund, has been preaching for some time. According to him, in the last twenty years, everything related to public film funding has developed in only one direction: from the promotion of culture to economic development. We see this most clearly with tax rebates granted to film productions. It started with 20 percent; now, many countries give 25 percent. Ireland gives 32 percent, and in the Canary Islands, we are now at a 50 percent rebate. Politicians like to do this because economic development is easier to justify to voters than the support for culture. But what this also leads to—and this brings me back to my original point—is that film is no longer regarded as culture but as an economic asset, a consumer good. And this is where the fear of spoilers comes in again. Because you mustn't spoil something that's meant to be consumed.

One development that has considerably changed how we consume films is the advent of streaming. Would you say that the rise of streaming services has also changed the content being produced?

Definitely. But we have to distinguish between different phases. In the beginning, there were prestige productions like *HOUSE OF CARDS* (US 2013–2018, Creator: Beau Willimon). Lots of interesting, innovative content. Back then, the streamers’ economic model was to attract subscribers and gain as much market share as possible. But that model has hit a wall; there are just too many streaming platforms, and no one can afford to subscribe to five or more services. What’s more, some regions are already oversubscribed; there’s simply no room for growth anymore. The strategy of these global streaming services is dictated by the stock market, and when it became clear that they couldn’t grow anymore and they risked losing shareholders, they radically changed their model. About two to three years ago, they all switched from expensive, high-quality productions to mostly very conservative, schematic genre fare. I remember a representative of Viaplay saying in September 2020 that they were “looking for something that can make noise.” One show they co-produced at the time was Lars von Trier’s *RIGET: EXODUS (THE KINGDOM: EXODUS, DK 2022, Creator: Lars von Trier and Tómas Gíslason)*. Or Netflix produced the fourth season of *BORGEN* (DK 2010–2022, Creator: Adam Price), internationally known as *BORGEN: POWER & GLORY*. That was three and a half years ago. But they didn’t succeed in gaining more market share, which led them to cancel all their boutique productions. Netflix, however, is now introducing advertising-supported video-on-demand. And once you do that, the advertisers want to know what they’re buying into. So the productions become cheaper, less adventurous, more schematic. In a way we are back to good old private television—except everything is on demand now. The difference is that the productions are even more schematic now because everything is driven by algorithms. The streamers know exactly who is watching what, and the shows they produce are fine-tuned accordingly. They know exactly what needs to happen at every moment, what music is needed, and so on.

In big Hollywood productions, it’s become common to make actors sign non-disclosure agreements, or to only hand out portions of the screenplay to them so that it can’t be leaked. Do you see similar things in European productions?

Not at that level. But in general, everyone has become much more sensitive. One reason is that film funding is under constant pressure, especially when there is a conservative government. You have to prove that there will be return, that your film will find an audience. And there is a fear that leaking

a spoiler, for example in the case of a thriller, will lose you 10,000 or 20,000 viewers. Whether that fear is justified is another question, but it is definitely there. Especially PR departments have become very concerned about not leaking anything. With social media, the stakes are much higher. There are no minor slips anymore; any slip is a major screw-up now.

Filmography

- ANATOMIE D'UNE CHUTE (ANATOMY OF A FALL). Director: Justine Triet. FR 2023.
- BORGEN (BORGEN: POWER & GLORY). Creator: Adam Price. DK 2010–2022.
- GLADIATOR. Director: Ridley Scott. US/UK 2000.
- HOUSE OF CARDS. Creator: Beau Willimon. US 2013–2018.
- EN KONGELIG AFFÆRE (A ROYAL AFFAIR). Director: Nikolaj Arcel. CZ/DKDE/SE 2012.
- RIGET: EXODUS (THE KINGDOM: EXODUS). Creator: Lars von Trier and Tómas Gislason. DK 2022.
- MELANCHOLIA. Director: Lars von Trier. DK/SW/FR/DE 2011.
- NYMPHOMANIAC. Director: Lars von Trier. DK/DE/FR/BE 2013.
- THE ZONE OF INTEREST. Director: Jonathan Glazer. UK/PL/US 2023.

“Death Is the Real Spoiler.” A Conversation with Adam Roberts

In the world of science fiction, Adam Roberts is something of a jack-of-all-trades. Not only is he a very productive writer of fiction, ranging from genre parodies (*The Soddit* [2003], *Star Warped* [2005]) to science fiction to murder mysteries like *Jack Glass* (2012), and what might best be described as philosophical science fiction, such as *The Thing Itself* (2015) and *The This* (2022)—based respectively on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He is also one of the genre’s preeminent critics and has, among other things, written a massive history of science fiction (*History* [2006]) and an intellectual biography of H. G. Wells (*H G Wells* [2019]). In addition, he is a prolific reviewer and blogger, writing about all kinds of speculative fiction for both mainstream newspapers and genre-specific outlets. In other words, Roberts has an intimate knowledge of the science fiction genre as a writer, reviewer, and academic, and is therefore uniquely qualified to talk about how the field deals with spoilers.

Let’s start with Adam Roberts, the author of fiction. As a writer, do you consider spoilers a problem? Do you get upset when a review of one of your books contains spoilers?

I suppose my answer is no. I don’t consider it a problem. I’m trying to think how I would feel if I read a review of a science fiction whodunit that I wrote, and the review said who the murderer was. Would that upset me? I don’t think so.

And how is it with Adam Roberts, the book reviewer?

It’s not that different. I don’t consider spoilers to be a problem *per se* in a review. But as a reviewer, I also have to consider the reactions of my readers—and of the author. For example, I reviewed Lavie Tidhar’s *A Man Lies Dreaming* (2014) for the *Guardian*, and Lavie, who is a friend of mine, messaged me to complain. It’s a great novel and my review was very positive, but Lavie thought that I gave too much away. Half of the book is set in a concentration camp and half in an alternate reality where Adolf Hitler, instead of becoming the leader of Germany, works as a private eye in a kind of noir 1930s Britain. There is sort of a twist in the novel that I mention in the review. I didn’t think it was an issue because it’s only halfway through, but Lavie was

pretty upset. He told me that I've spoiled his book for people who've read the review.

Obviously not everyone agrees with that. But when I review a novel or a film, I have to be able to say *something* about it, and there's such sensitivity to the issue. For example, I recently reviewed Geoff Ryman's *HIM* (2023). It's a novel about Christ set in first-century Judea. Its basic conceit is that Christ is biologically born a woman but becomes a trans man. You could probably call that a twist, but when I reviewed it, I couldn't *not* mention it, because if I don't, nothing else I might say about the book makes sense. If you can't discuss that, there is no review. But once I've mentioned it in the review, you might think I kind of spoiled the book. But then again, I don't consider this to be a problem. There might be no surprise anymore, but it's still a powerfully written novel.

My impression is that something has fundamentally changed when it comes to spoilers. Is this also your impression?

There has certainly been a shift with the advent of streaming. Now people all over the world can access a show at the same time. And that leads to different time frames. Some people have seen the new show and want to talk about it, others haven't and don't want it to be spoiled. And they are all on social media.

There was a British TV comedy show called *WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE LIKELY LADS?* (UK 1973–1974, Creator: James Gilbert and Bernard Thompson) about these two Northern men. And in one of the episodes—*NO HIDING PLACE* (S01E07, UK 1973, Director: James Gilbert)—they're going to watch a football match on TV later that night. It's already over, but they don't want to know the score. But everyone else has seen the game and is talking about it. So they're constantly trying to avoid it. They go to a pub, and then people start talking about football, which means they have to run out of the pub. This becomes a kind of comic routine in its own right, but they can avoid it because they can leave. It's all physical spaces. It's much harder to do that when you're in an online environment.

Has this development influenced your own work? Do you write reviews differently than fifteen or twenty years ago? Or do editors tell you not to spoil anything?

I don't think so. I am part of the science fiction fandom, and most of the reviews I do are of science fiction books and films. And I don't think much

has changed in the science fiction community. There has always been a sense among science fiction fans that spoilers are a bad thing and are frowned upon.

What about your teaching? Do your students complain about spoilers?

I mostly teach nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, especially Romanticism and Victorianism. For me, the problem isn't with spoilers, but with students actually reading the books. When they haven't read the whole book yet, they can be uncomfortable about the fact that we discuss the whole novel, and it will spoil the ending for them. But they're probably a bit compromised because they know that they should have finished the novel.

But then again, if we're reading Jane Austen, there's not much to spoil, really. The six novels she wrote all end the same way. Does anyone wonder when reading *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) if the couple will get together? You know that they will. That's the point of a Jane Austen novel.

You said that the fear of spoilers has a long tradition in science fiction fandom. And this is confirmed by research showing that the spoiler discourse first emerged in science fiction fandom in the late 1970s. Why do you think that is?

I am not sure. There are whodunits, like Agatha Christie novels, and I would say that they do not provide the same pleasure in rereading as a Jane Austen or Charles Dickens novel. Because here, everything depends upon the puzzle. It's sort of like a crossword. No one does the same crossword puzzle twice. Once you've solved the clue, that's the pleasure. I've worked that out! But it would of course undo your pleasure in the puzzle if there was somebody leaning over your shoulder telling you the answers before you have a chance to work them out yourself. Is that what a 'spoiler' is, in its purest form? Still, most literature is more than just a puzzle to be solved.

Science fiction, on the other hand, depends on a novelty, a surprise, what science fiction scholar Darko Suvin calls a *novum*. And working through that surprise is kind of integral to what science fiction does. So you could argue that there is a structural similarity between the classic crime novel and science fiction, which would explain why many science fiction fans consider spoiling a problem. But I don't really believe that. I would actually say that the genres are fundamentally different.

In what way?

Linda Hutcheon makes the argument that the crime novel is an epistemological form. It is about knowledge and about finding things out. Science fiction, on the other hand, is an ontological idiom: you are creating a world that's

different from our world. And these two modes, the epistemological and the ontological, aren't really compatible. It's no coincidence that there isn't a long tradition of science fiction whodunits. Isaac Asimov famously wrote some—*The Caves of Steel* (1954), *The Naked Sun* (1957)—and some of my own novels also fall in this space, but these examples do not belong to the core of the genre.

What you're trying to give the reader in a whodunit is that they are going to test themselves on your puzzle. They want to know who the murderer is. There are half a dozen people, it could be any of them, and the reader wonders if they can put the clues together. If they can guess who the murderer is, then you've failed, because you've made it too easy. But if it's too hard, if they couldn't possibly guess it, that's also frustrating. So what you're aiming for is somewhere in the middle. Where you reveal who the murderer is, and the reader goes "Ah, I see, that makes sense." A very particular textual strategy is required to get to that point. You tell a story, and you have to hint at things so that the reader can start to piece together a story behind the story. But that's actually a misdirection, and there has to be another story behind the misdirected story. It is like a conjuring trick.

I have written a number of science fiction whodunits, including one called *Jack Glass*. In this novel, I say at the beginning that the murderer is Jack Glass. It's in three parts with three separate murders, and each time the murderer is the same person, but it's a surprise each time you find out. That was a particular kind of trick I was trying to pull off, a sort of extended structural exercise in misdirection. It's not something that could be spoiled, because I tell the reader at the beginning who the murderer is. But in another sense, it is something that could be spoiled, because there is a different way in which the reveal of the murderer's identity is a surprise each time.

So, would you say that science fiction normally does not use this kind of misdirection?

When I teach science fiction, I sometimes use Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy to explain the genre's specific quality. Metonymy is horizontal, it is a connective process. You go from A to B, from B to C, from C to D. That's the logic of narrative: it connects things. And this is, I suppose, relevant to spoiler culture, because one of the things that we don't want spoiled is what happens next in the story. We do want to find that out ourselves.

While the metonymic is about horizontal connections, metaphor, according to Jakobson, is vertical: it's the action of a simile. The moment where

something changes into something else. And I find that this is key to science fiction: it is what makes the genre so wonderful. Jakobson describes it as a poetic gesture. I have written about that moment in 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (UK/US 1968, Director: Stanley Kubrick,), when the ape man throws the bone into the sky, the camera pans up with its ascent and then, just at its apogee, the film match-cuts to a spaceship in orbit around the Earth (**fig. 1a-b**). To me, this is one of the essential science fiction moments. I find that very beautiful and affecting. But it is a kind of poetic image. It is a way of bringing something unexpected, something novel into the world.

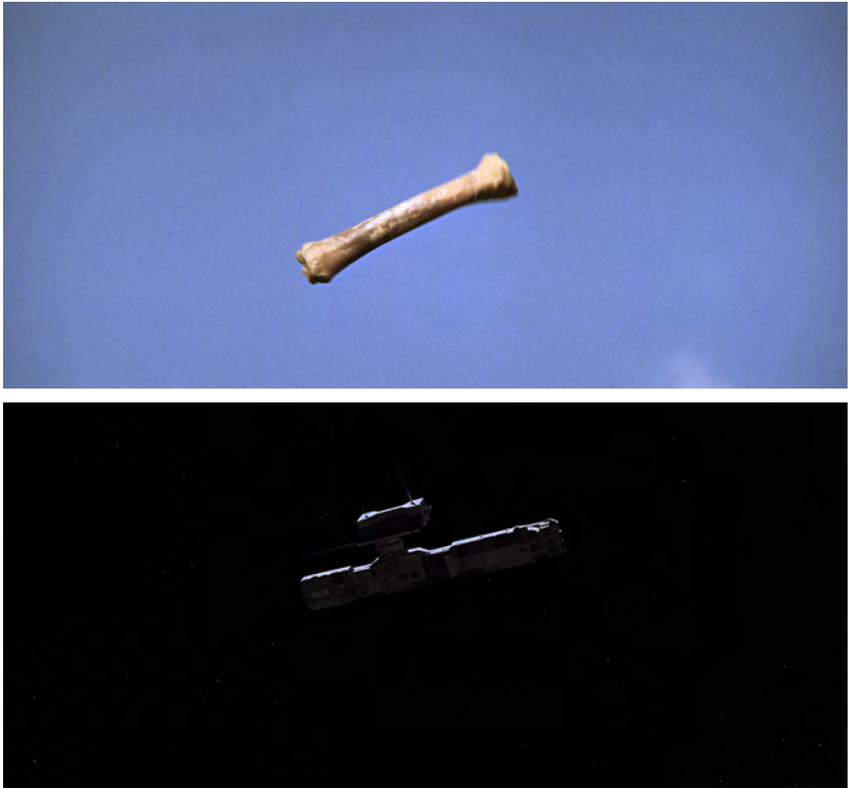


Fig. 1a-b: The famous match cut in 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

In *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649), Descartes praises surprise as the highest pleasure of the soul: “l’admiration est une subite surprise de l’âme, qui fait qu’elle se porte à considérer avec attention les objets qui lui semblent rares et

extraordinaires” (41). Admiration: *Wunder*, “wonder,” the miraculous novelty. Yet the discourse around spoilers suggests that it is also extraordinarily fragile, that even a hint of compromising this unexpectedness will collapse it.

But I don’t know if I agree with him. Science fiction’s ‘sense of wonder’ is something I prize highly, but it does not depend upon unexpectedness and is not harmed by spoilers. The ‘wonder’ I feel when I contemplate a night-time sky resplendent with stars, when I think of the sheer scale of the cosmos—this is not a surprise to me. I know it already; that doesn’t prevent me from experiencing it, in its fullness.

If science fiction is essentially a poetic mode, wouldn’t that mean that it is more or less immune to spoiling? After all, you can’t really spoil a poem.

I guess that’s right. It’s the structure of the metaphor which is not about *knowing* things.

So I am not really sure why spoilers are so important to science fiction fans. Maybe—and I am generalizing here without any empirical evidence—it has more to do with the fans than with the actual texts. This is a community that loves science fiction and engages with its texts in a way that I find very interesting. There are many things about fans that also mark out a scholar. Many fans manifest impressive levels of expertise about their favorite books, films, or shows. I know DOCTOR WHO (UK 1963– , Creator: Sydney Newman, C. E. Webber and Donald Wilson) fans who know everything about the show, every single episode, all the stories and cast, the making-of. And in some fandom engagements with science fiction there is a particular focus on consistency and world building. Everything has to fit together, and inconsistencies have to be explained away.

DOCTOR WHO is interesting in this regard, because the main character can go anywhere in space and time in his magic blue box. So the premise is non-sequential. You can pop back into the history, go into the future, you can go anywhere you want. But the *storytelling* is still sequential and relies upon suspense. A recent story arc (2008–13), running through episodes including the Tenth Doctor (played by David Tennant), the Eleventh (Matt Smith), and the Twelfth (Peter Capaldi), involved a character called River Song (played by Alex Kingstone). She first appears to Tennant’s Doctor, and he doesn’t know who she is. The idea is that she has travelled from the Doctor’s future back in time. Which means she knows stuff that is going to happen to him that he doesn’t know. And whenever he asks her about what’s going to happen in the future, or for some explanation of what’s going on, she says “No spoilers.” That’s the phrase she uses. In effect, she says: “I can’t tell you that. You have

to live your life like a sort of story. You can't have it spoiled.” Obviously, this is a nod to the whole spoiler discussion in science fiction fandom, but given the nature of the DOCTOR WHO universe, it is radically incoherent. Because there can *be* no surprise anyway if you can travel everywhere through time and space. The very premise of DOCTOR WHO is non-linear.

But maybe that is a much more metonymic way of approaching the text, so to speak, which would at least partly explain why spoilers become a problem again.

There is also the fact that not all fans have the same attitude toward spoilers. While many fans try to avoid them at all costs, some actively seek them out. They don't want anything unexpected to happen, but rather try to soften the shock. They want to be prepared when Luke Skywalker dies.

That's fascinating, isn't it? It leads to the question of why and under what conditions suspense or shock and surprise are pleasurable. I suppose they are not universally pleasurable. Indeed, I suppose for some people they are rather anxiety-producing. It can be distressing not to know what is going to happen. I can relate to that to some extent. For example, I consider *rereading* a greater pleasure than reading something for the first time. I have to read so much new stuff, to review, to judge literary prizes, to keep up with what's happening, that it squeezes the time I have to reread stuff. But really, I prefer the latter.

Rereading is, of course, the essential fan activity. The first time you read a novel, or watch a show, you don't know that you're a fan. That only comes when you are familiar with the text, the work. And a true fan will reread. If you're a Tolkien fan, you reread *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) or rewatch the Peter Jackson movies many times.

There is also the point that many texts are predictable anyway. We know that in ninety percent of all Hollywood movies, the good guys will win, the hero will save the day, the lovers will get together.

I am currently finishing a first draft of a history of the fantasy genre, which means I've been reading lots of fantasy. I have reread many books, but I have also been reading a lot of commercially-produced fantasy. There was a huge boom in the 1980s and 1990s; lots of imitations, books that are basically plagiarizing or rewriting Tolkien. There are long series of fantasy books in which each installment is just another turn of the same wheel. For example, the *Dragonlance* novels. There are hundreds of them, and they're all essentially the same novel, with only superficial differences; the same structure, similar characters, similar kinds of adventures. Here, the satisfaction is obviously not surprise. This is about knowing what you like and wanting the same thing

again. There is also an argument about commodification in there, I suppose. You could make a sort of Adorno-Horkheimer argument about the malign side to that. But I think there is also something psychological in it. It is pleasurable to do things over and over again.

Like telling a child the same story over and over again.

Exactly. Children want to hear the same bedtime story again and again. And if you change even a word, they'll complain bitterly.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud talks about the “*fort/da*” game. He was observing his grandchild in his cot, alone (the child did not know he was being observed), playing a game he had invented. It involved a little spindle on a thread. The child would throw the spindle away, out of his cot, and shout “*fort*”—“gone”—and then pull it back, hug it to himself and shout “*da*,”—“there.” And Freud notes that it’s not just the spindle that was gone, but the boy’s mother. The child is anxious because she’s gone, and the game is replaying this separation anxiety in symbolic form, so that the child has, as it were, psychic control over the circumstance. Throwing the spindle away is surprising, a kind of novelty, an adventure, but the greater satisfaction was when the kid pulls the spindle back and hugs it to himself; “*da*”, there, back. That’s the real satisfaction. It’s not the surprise, not the unexpected thing. It’s the return.

And this game is then played over and over and over again, which is what we’re talking about. It’s the kind of repetitiveness of the movies Hollywood produces. The way that it’s just the same movie over and over again. We all know it’s gonna come back. And the real satisfaction is that it’s there: *da*.

Isn't that the opposite of what you originally said? You started with the argument that there's nothing that can be spoiled because we know what's going to happen. But now it's the other way around: it can only be spoiled because it's always the same.

It’s a two-part thing, isn’t it? The *fort/da* structure is there and back again. Children’s literature is full of it. The subtitle of *The Hobbit* (1937) is “There and Back Again.” I can see in a sort of Freudian way: you want to go out on an adventure, but you also want to come home again. You want the satisfaction of *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), where Max, the boy, goes to far lands and sees exciting monsters, but ultimately, he wants to come home (**fig. 2a–b**). He wants his mother to love him again. It’s not a spoiler to say that the “*da*” is part of the “*fort/da*” game.

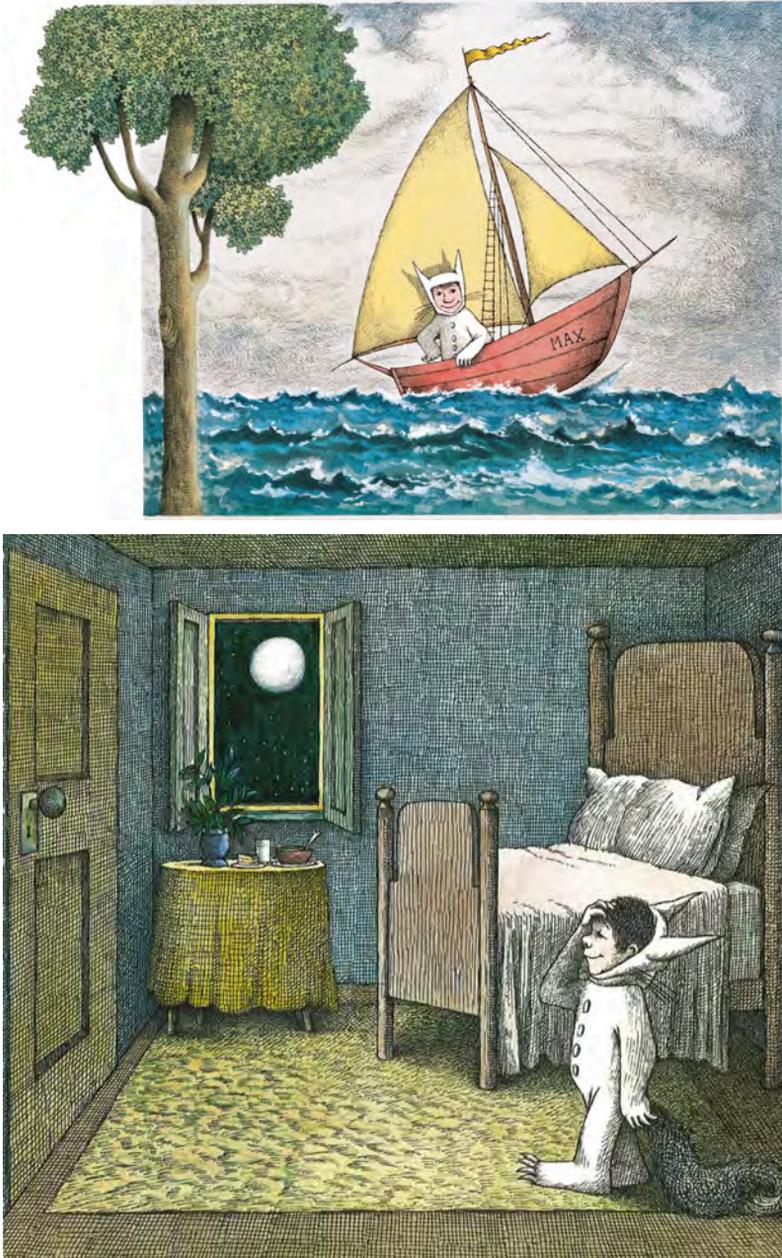


Fig. 2a–b: *Where the Wild Things Are*

I sometimes wonder ... The child plays the game over and over again, because he's both excited and anxious about being separated from the mother, about being cast out into the world—this is growing up, in the largest sense. And he's kind of symbolically controlling that and bringing it back. But he has to do it again and again, because he's *reassuring* himself. Because, fundamentally, we *don't* come back from the final cast of the spindle over the side of the cot. That's not the nature of our mortal reality.

So, the fear of spoilers is basically us grappling with our own mortality?

I'm being a bit morbid now, aren't I? But it's true. I may not know what's going to happen next week or next month, but I know that I will die eventually, that I'm mortal. We all are aware of that. And our mortality is horrifying in its inevitability, but it's also something that we're always trying to distract ourselves from. You couldn't live your life constantly dwelling on the fact that we're all going to die.

I wonder if *that's* the real spoiler. That's the affront the spoiler represents, the thing people object to: being reminded of their own mortality. There is something tragic about that. We don't want to die; we want to carry on. So Sherlock Holmes falls off the Reichenbach Falls, but then he has to come back: *fort, da*. Or characters die in a STAR WARS movie and then come back; everything is recycled and reborn.

Isn't this also a question of an entertainment industry that, as you mentioned before, prefers to recycle the same stories over and over again?

There is that as well. It's really fascinating that we become more and more locked into a commodified culture of absolute repetition. But at the same time, we say that we want surprise and novelty, and we object to the idea that it will be taken away from us by a spoiler.

It's interesting that mass entertainment has not always worked this way. There is an afterword in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Charles Dickens's last completed novel. The novel is based on a mystery. A man who is supposed to have drowned is actually not dead, but has just assumed another identity. The drowned body belongs to someone else. This is revealed about two thirds of the way through the novel. In the afterword, Dickens says that it occurred to him that his readers might think he was trying to conceal what seemed obvious to him from the very beginning—that this character is not dead. In the afterword he says:

When I devised this story, I foresaw the likelihood that a class of readers and commentators would suppose that I was at great pains to conceal exactly what I was

at great pains to suggest: namely, that Mr John Harmon was not slain, and that Mr John Rokesmith was he. Pleasing myself with the idea that the supposition might in part arise out of some ingenuity in the story, and thinking it worth while, in the interests of art, to hint to an audience that an artist (of whatever denomination) may perhaps be trusted to know what he is about in his vocation, if they will concede him a little patience, I was not alarmed by the anticipation. (776)

We can see that Dickens was not interested in the puzzle or conjuring-trick element that later became the core of the whodunit. He is interested in mystery, but here he’s saying the kind of mystery he is writing is immune to the spoiler.

There’s also the famous example of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), an early novel by Dickens. The main character is a pure, innocent girl called Little Nell, and toward the end of the book, there’s the question of whether she will live or die. The book was originally released as a serial, and people were so eager to find out what was going to happen, that when the packet ships came across from Britain carrying the latest installments of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, readers gathered on the pier at New York and shouted to the ships “Does she live?” They *wanted to find out*. And that’s a natural human thing: you want to find out what happens next. Does that suggest spoilers weren’t an issue back then? The tension of not knowing what will happen to Little Nell is pleasurable, in the sense that it keeps us reading the story to find out. But there clearly came a point at which that tension became so great as to become unpleasurable, painful. These readers are no longer looking to the text itself; they just want to know. They *want* the story spoiled.

The dislike of spoilers, if extrapolated, suggests a dislike of consummation as such. I think of W. S. Jevons—to stay in the Victorian era—and his analysis of pleasure in his *Theory of Political Economy*:

Benthani has stated, that one of the main elements in estimating the force of a pleasure or pain is its propinquity or remoteness. It is certain that a very large part of what we experience in life depends not on the actual circumstances of the moment, so much as on the anticipation of future events. As Mr. Bain says, “the foretaste of pleasure is pleasure begun: every actual delight casts before it a corresponding ideal.” Everyone must have felt that the enjoyment actually experienced at any moment is but limited in amount, and usually fails to answer to the great anticipations which have been formed. “Man never is but always to be blest” is a correct description of our ordinary state of mind; and there is little doubt that, in minds of much intelligence and foresight, the greatest force of feeling and motive is what arises from the anticipation of the future. (33–34)

But this becomes paradoxical. If anticipation of a pleasure is more pleasurable than the pleasure, then why would we read anything? Why spoil your anticipation by engaging in the pleasure at all? Keats had it right: we must “burst

joy's grape against our palate fine" to experience joy. It can't be forever in the offering.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung. (127)

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