



*#spoiltheconference*  
An Interdisciplinary Conference on Spoilers

University of Zurich  
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Organising committee: Natalie Borsy, Christine Lötscher, Simon Spiegel

Spoilers seem to be everywhere these days – or rather, the fear of producing or encountering them. By now, spoiler warnings are no longer confined to online media; even reviewers in the most traditional newspapers try not to reveal too much about the plot. It is almost universally accepted that there are few graver social missteps than spoiling a TV show, movie, or recently released book. This is quite stunning, since the concept of the spoiler is rather new.

The concept has always existed in some way, as Richard Greene argues. As long as there have been stories, it has been possible to divulge in advance how they end. Still, the concept of the spoiler as we know it today is rather young, and its emergence seems to be inextricably linked with the rise of online media. Not only was the term ‘spoiler’ in its current meaning first used in a post to a Usenet newsgroup; more importantly, spoiling requires a media system where information is broken down into small bits which can be shared almost instantly. While it is easy to skip a review in a printed newspaper and avoid potential spoilers, it is impossible to ‘unsee’ a Tweet or a Facebook post.

The rise of a general fear of spoilers coincides with a notable change in how popular stories are structured. Whether they are called complex narratives (Jason Mittell), or puzzle and mind-game films (Thomas Elsaesser), the new millennium has seen a shift toward narratives which do not adhere to the seeming simplicity of classical Hollywood films, but instead present themselves as intricate constructions full of riddles and twists. There is, in other words, not only a growing fear of spoilers, but also an increase in the kinds of narratives that can be properly spoiled.

Spoilers, however, are first and foremost a discursive phenomenon connected to a particular peer group. Different fan communities react to spoilers in fundamentally differing ways. While some fans try to avoid spoilers at any cost, others seek out as much information in advance as possible.

The fear of spoilers has changed the way we talk about narrative media; and yet, much about spoilers is still not well understood. Not only has their history never been thoroughly researched, it is also by no means clear how spoilers work, whether they actually do spoil the experience of watching a film or reading a novel. Empirical research done in this area by media psychologists proves to be contradictory, and has been largely ignored by the fields of film and literary studies, with almost no interdisciplinary exchange.

*#spoiltheconference*, jointly organised by the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies and the Department of Film Studies at the University of Zurich, is the first international conference on spoilers. Since spoilers touch on a wide variety of fields, our goal is to host a fundamentally interdisciplinary event. We strive for fruitful exchange between the disciplines, and therefore emphatically invite proposals from literature, film, media, and game studies, as well as from reception and fan studies, and psychology or sociology.



Proposals may include, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- The prehistory of the modern spoiler. For example, how did spoilers affect 19th-century serials? What about famous examples like the Agatha Christie play *The Mousetrap* or Alfred Hitchcock's *PSYCHO* where the audience was asked not to reveal the final twist?
- When and how exactly did the modern spoiler emerge? What role did online media play in its rise?
- The psychology of the spoiler. What does empirical research tell us about the (cognitive and emotional) effect of spoilers?
- Spoilers and narration. What is the relationship between complex narration and the rise of spoiler panic?
- Spoilers and series/franchising. Today's TV series and mega franchises like the Marvel Cinematic Universe seem especially prone to spoiling. Why is that so? And what role do spoilers play in the promotion of these franchises?
- Spoilers and genres. Spoilers seem to affect certain genres more than others. What is the reason for this? Can science fiction films be spoiled more easily than social dramas? And are spoilers restricted to fiction, or can nonfiction forms be spoiled as well?
- Spoilers and fan cultures. How do different fan communities deal with spoilers?
- How do spoilers affect the way we talk about stories? How has the fear of spoilers changed the job of the film or literary critic? How do we deal with spoilers in the classroom?

Please e-mail us your 300–500 word abstract, accompanied by a short CV, to [spoiltheconference@isek.uzh.ch](mailto:spoiltheconference@isek.uzh.ch) by 30 June 2021. Acceptance notices will be returned by the end of July.

We are looking into organising funds for at least some portion of travel expenses. More details to follow.

If you have any questions, please email us at [spoiltheconference@isek.uzh.ch](mailto:spoiltheconference@isek.uzh.ch). The latest updates will be published on our [website](#).