

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

Honors College

Spring 5-2020

Can Spoilers in Online Reviews Impact Viewer Enjoyment?

Marshall Abbott

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

CAN SPOILERS IN ONLINE REVIEWS IMPACT VIEWER ENJOYMENT?

by

Marshall Abbott

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Media Studies)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2020

Advisory Committee:

Michael Grillo, Associate Professor of History of Art, Advisor

Robert W. Glover, Associate Professor of Political Science and Honors

Judith E. Rosenbaum, Assistant Professor of Media Studies

Clinton Spaulding, Ph.D. Student and Instructor of Communication
and Journalism

Jennie Woodard, Lecturer in Honors

©2020

ABSTRACT

Spoilers research has produced contradictory findings when it comes to the impact they have on enjoyment (Eden, Johnson, Udvardi, & Rosenbaum, 2019). The relationship varies based on viewers' personality traits, the medium, as well as the genre. To answer these research questions, this study uses a naturalistic study featuring a horror film from 2003 called *Gothika*. The study used a convenience sampling of college-aged students, a population that commonly watches horror movies (Eden, Johnson, Udvardi, & Rosenbaum, 2019). I designed the study to consider different groups watching *Gothika*. The individuals were divided into two categories: those who read neutral spoiled reviews and those who read neutral unspoiled reviews. There was a maximum of four participants in each group. Just before screening the movie, each group read a selected review. After watching the film, I interviewed participants about how spoilers impacted their thinking and how they impacted their enjoyment. After ten groups the findings showed that unspoiled review groups enjoyed the film more than the spoiled groups.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Review of Pertinent Literature.....	3
Methodology.....	8
Sample.....	8
Environment/Methods.....	9
Genre.....	10
Film.....	11
Hypothesis/Qualitative Data.....	12
Reviews.....	12
Transcriptions.....	13
Findings.....	14
Enjoyment/Involvement.....	14
Other Notes.....	15
Discussion.....	17
Fluency.....	17
Fandom.....	19
Things to Improve.....	20
Why This Research is Important.....	21
Conclusion.....	24
References.....	26
Appendix: IRB Approval.....	29
Author’s Biography.....	36

INTRODUCTION

If someone were to tell you that Rey and other characters using “The Force” in the *Rise of Skywalker* win at the end of the movie, the last movie of the largest franchise in film history, that would technically spoil it for you. Spoilers are either remarks or information pertinent to the plot that would give away an ending or a twist involved in film, TV, or other time-based media. But you would likely still go see the movie, right? It is widely thought that negative reviews can ruin a movie at the box office before its release date. Is this because some reviews contain spoilers or because people just care about what a reviewer says more than forming their own opinion? The present research was undertaken to find if spoilers negatively impact enjoyment of films. Enjoyment can be defined as the resultant of pleasure or meaning derived from an activity or experience. Enjoyment is subjective but can be measured and perceived in different ways including; single item, multi-item, and multidimensional inventories (Johnson, Udvardi, Eden, and Rosenbaum, & 2019). As well as, “ratings, open-ended descriptions, and physiological responses (Zillman, Hay, & Bryant, 1975).” Enjoyment was measured in this study via interview questions asking for open ended descriptions and observations during a film showing of the film *Gothika* (2003). In this study, we will look to find the role that spoiled movie reviews play in viewer experience. Spoilers have become a much larger phenomenon recently and have caused society to put on proverbial “blindfold” when it comes to what is being seen. Audiences will stay off social media now until they can first view the film so as not to ruin their enjoyment. Is the thing ruining their entertainment the spoilers within the review? This question is important for the film industry because it

could help to clarify different marketing strategies or change other steps such as review and spoiler embargos. This study aims to answer these questions by examining past research, interviewing participants about their perspectives and developing qualitative findings. More importantly, this research could help movies in the box office by maximizing audience enjoyment, leading to higher profitability. The overall goal would be to minimize advertising content that would be considered a spoiler to maximize anticipation and enjoyment as well as box office success.

REVIEW OF PERTINENT LITERATURE

As with any academic study, the first measure to start this research project was looking at the research previously completed. While the question of the impact of spoilers is a currently growing concept, there is still a decent amount of studies and research that have been completed. A majority of research on spoilers has been quantitative, utilizing surveys and data analysis. To complement these quantitative studies, this research sought to develop a methodology that focuses on qualitative elements.

Jones, Nelson, and Sompel (2018), provide a working definition for spoilers by calling them, “chunks of information for which a fan wants to control time and place of consumption, preferring to consume them in the order intended by the fictional work.” Spoilers have thus been paired with negative connotations since, “the word spoiler comes fully-loaded with pejorative and aberrant connotations. Spoiling or spoils, after all, are most commonly associated with milk left out on a warm summer day or ill-gotten gains from war... (Gray & Mittell, 2007).” Based on this research, perhaps a new term should be used as to not give off a negative vibe, possibly a phrase along the lines of “plot reveal” or some other neutral terminology.

The same human impulse of curiosity that draws us into stories makes viewers want to learn about a story (or film) before watching it. To satisfy that curiosity many seek opinions or read a review about the film. A study by Berg and Raddick (2017), investigated whether good or bad reviews affect box office numbers. The authors posited that bad reviews would hurt the box office for films from the top studios. Their methodology had them analyzing the interaction among four variables: release date, gross

box office numbers, critic reviews, and audience reviews. They plotted all of these numbers on graphs and data tables to analyze them. They concluded audience reviews may affect the box office more than critic reviews; and more surprisingly, that critic reviews did not truly affect numbers. Chintagunta, Gopinath, Venkatarama, and Pentheny (2010), all did studies that yielded similar conclusions as well, reinforcing this point. These studies illustrate there should technically be no correlation between a critic review and whether someone is willing to see a movie or not. Negative reviews can also have the same impact as spoilers since people often use such reviews to decide if they will see a film. This information proved helpful when determining what type of review to use in the study since one of my research questions is if spoilers within reviews are what impact enjoyment. Reinstein and Snyder (2005) investigated specifically if Siskel and Ebert reviews affected box office opening weekends for movies. They applied a “difference-in-differences approach to circumvent the problem of spurious correlation. (Reinstein & Snyder, 2005).” Their study led to their concluding that, “the measured influence effect is smaller though still detectable. Positive reviews have a particularly large influence on the demand for dramas and narrowly-released movies.” *Gothika*, however was not a drama or narrowly released movie.

In her essay, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva “explores the complex notion of “the abject,” an element of the human that is neither us nor not us, neither inside nor outside, and therefore destabilizing to the boundaries that define us. The abject, epitomized by bodily fluids, is both repellent and compelling, strange and familiar (Mittman, Simon, Hensel, 2018, p.67).” The “abjection” in horror films leads audiences to dissolve the boundaries between the viewer and the source of fear. This type

of a study is a precursor to spoiler research, in which the reactions of the viewer are similarly analyzed.

Johnson and Rosenbaum (2018), evaluated the correlation between movie spoilers and enjoyment. In their research they conducted three different experiments in which they surveyed groups and showed clips containing spoilers to see how it affected audiences. They gave participants a write up to provide a context to what they were watching, and half of the write ups would contain spoilers. They showed clips from television series such as, *Broadchurch*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Veep* as well as clips from films such as *Gone Girl*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, and *The Hangover Part 3*. Using multidimensional conceptualization on enjoyment they found that, “Taken as a whole, the findings illustrate that, just as in previous experiments using short stories, spoilers for television and film appear to have quite small and qualified effects on audience responses to these programs.” The goal of my study is to see if these findings hold up when analyzing qualitative data.

Johnson and Rosenbaum (2018), also explain how enjoyment can be measured by saying, “The classic perspective on enjoyment comes from excitation-transfer theory (Zillmann, 1971) and suggests that physiological arousal generated by suspense and narrative uncertainty, coupled with a positive resolution of the uncertainty to which arousal is then misattributed, accounts for the enjoyment of all kinds of entertainment. (Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2018).” It is also worth noting they follow this point up by saying, “However, if enjoyment is more multifaceted than just suspense and resolution, it is possible that prior theories about the importance of uncertainty in audience experience

are incomplete, and spoilers may increase some forms of enjoyment (Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2018).”

In common parlance, in a boring conversation the speaker is often told to “cut to the chase” because a good story engages the listener. To be told the “end” of a story or prematurely the fate of a character or the outcome of a trajectory is both frustrating and “spoils” the tale. The study conducted by Johnson, Udvardi, Eden, and Rosenbaum (2019), looked at spoilers specifically within the horror genre because as they define it it’s, “a genre reliant on suspenseful thrills.” The researchers showed participants clips from a horror film and altered the clip segments with spoilers depending on the group. They used a single item perceptions scale from 1-7 to collect data. They highlighted specific themes in their questions such as: measuring enjoyment, horror fandom, suspense, and fluency, etc... They found the spoilers had no effect on overall enjoyment of the media as a whole but might influence the effectiveness of smaller plot points. They reasoned it is very difficult to spoil something like a jump scare or tension since these shocks are sensed as an immediate experience instead of having the narrative complexities of a plot. It is all about *how* you get there instead of *what* is there. To specify, viewers are interested in how the characters are moving through situations, even when the outcome is known. An example of this is seen in the classic horror film *The Shining*. The main character dies at the end of the movie. You can tell someone this, but they would still want to know the how and why and thus the spoiler does NOT deter viewership because it would discredit the entirety of this film. This finding was key to my research as it helped me select the genre for the film best for my study.

Another factor in the study done by Johnson, Udvardi, Eden, and Rosenbaum (2019), was fluency, which is the way, or ease, that audiences are able to understand and interpret narrative. This concept will play a significant role in the study since participants shouldn't have to have a higher threshold for perceptual fluency. This is important when selecting the film to show as well as the review that will be given beforehand. If the film is too complex or the review doesn't outline the narrative well enough than it can lead to undesired consequences such as confusion, disinterest, and lack of concern for characters.

Why do viewers persist in seeing films which may have been spoiled for them in various ways in reviews or in marketing ploys? The subjective viewer experience or anticipated experience may be further illuminated by a qualitative approach. These studies provide mostly *quantitative* results, which is what really motivated me to ask more nuanced questions that only *qualitative* research could address. Qualitative data would enable me to learn extended opinions on these topics and also get a more detailed view on how people feel about spoilers as a whole and if they impact their enjoyment of a film. It also would enable me to find out why people still view films even if they are "spoiled."

METHODOLOGY

For this study, the naturalistic group interview method was used to conduct research; people were interviewed in a group with whom they usually watch media content. The design of this study included finding participants to make up small groups: specifically, to watch the film *Gothika* in a casual research environment. The groups were divided into two categories: those reading spoiled reviews and those reading unspoiled reviews. Twenty-one subjects participated. Demographically they were 70% female and 30% male, all ranging in age from 18 to 23. All were University of Maine students. There were ten different groups, each of which composed of two to three participants. Before the movie they read a selected review that was created using two different sources. One of the two categories read a neutral unspoiled review and the other read a neutral spoiled review. During the film, handwritten notes were taken to record interactions between participants. After the film, questions about how it impacted their thinking were asked and how it impacted their enjoyment. The film viewing and questions took approximately 2 hours in total, with the questions portion occurring directly after the film and lasting approximately 15 minutes. Responses were audio recorded and then later transcribed. The film *Gothika* was watched in a dorm room, which is where most college aged people watch movies besides the theater.

Sample

In further detail, after receiving the University's IRB human subjects research approval, I recruited participants through the snowball method, which is described by Goodman (1961) as, "interviewing selected individuals in the target population who serve

as initial contacts (first wave). The individuals of the second wave are chosen by those of the first wave. And the process continues until we reach the target number of individuals.” Participants mostly wanted to watch the film with only one other person since they typically only had one friend that they would regularly view movies with.

Environment/Methods

The identified purpose of the study was to gauge enjoyment based on spoilers for film. The easiest way to do this was to create a naturalistic and familiar environment for participant viewing. This attention to setting was key to the inception of this project because it would replicate a format in which undergraduate students usually watch films: in their dorm rooms or in a living space with their friends. In watching films in their usual environments, people are more likely to be honest because it duplicates the candor they have with friends and other people they’re comfortable around. Saul Mcleod (2015), describes this approach, “this technique involves observing and studying the spontaneous behaviour of participants in natural surroundings. The researcher simply records what they see in whatever way they can.” This form of data collection aligns with other qualitative studies. The reason naturalistic group interviews were selected was the nature of the relationships between participants, who knew each other. “The groups are formed naturally by individuals who are colleagues, friends, neighbors, or family members. Because the members of the naturalistic group know each other from a context other than the group interview setting itself, they tend to engage in elaborate discussions with each other, allowing the researcher to collect natural accounts of interpersonal communication (Eckhardt & Bengtsson, 2010).”

Genre

The nature of my thesis is the emotional experience of having a film spoiled and thus impacting its enjoyment. Focusing on an experiential encounter, I needed a genre which easily would lend itself to emotional engagement, which typically forms around fear or sadness. I chose fear. Fear is most present in the film genre of horror. The horror genre is the least likely to be affected by spoilers since it is more about the viewing experience (Johnson, Udvardi, Eden, and Rosenbaum (2019)). There is a subjective experience to fear, which can come in the form of slow burn or in jump scares. The next step was to find a movie that close to no college students would have seen before, for that way the movie could be able to be spoiled based on the review that they were given. This qualification led me to movies from the late 90's to early 2000's since this era is around the years of the participants' birth cohort. The study needed to select a lesser-known title, because if the movie was highly acclaimed during that time frame, the participants would have already been inclined to see it. IMDb's (2020) list of top 100 grossing films of all time does not include any films in the horror genre. This lack of making it into lists of most popular films applies to horror movies that have come out in recent years as well. Films from earlier eras had too much of a chance to become known as classics, which college students would most likely have already seen. To narrow the selection further, I wanted to find films that got middle of the line reviews as to help participants form their own opinions on whether it was good or bad. In addition, highly rated movies always have a higher chance of being viewed. An example of this is the movie *The Sixth Sense*; it is a late 90's horror film, but it is highly acclaimed so therefore more people know about it and it's twist ending. This narrowed the film selection down to only a handful of films,

and thus it did not matter which was selected as long as they met the overarching criteria. Horror is a unique genre; it invokes the emotion of fear from its viewers. It has a smaller target audience, and typically there are no blockbuster horror films with the exception of a very few (IMDb, 2020). This audience is mostly comprised of thrill seekers. Unlike other films, the plot technically matters less than the amount of jump scares or overall sense of slow burn fear. There are also many categories of horror; gothic, slasher, psychological thriller, found footage, zombie and supernatural are some examples. Each draws its audience in with the lure of being afraid or excited and yet it can add different specific dimensions for increased intrigue.

Film

I ultimately selected the film *Gothika*, a film about a doctor, named Miranda Grey, who ends up a patient in her own psychiatric prison. Participants stated they were interested by the film to start since it had stars like Halle Berry and Robert Downey Jr. They also mentioned the premise was attention grabbing as well. The film has a short run time of 1 hour and 38 minutes, which makes it hard to lose the viewers' attention, nicely making it more accessible for participants. The whole study would take a maximum of only two hours. The film itself is an homage to gothic horror between its set, color palette, and feel; although it also seems to be a psychological thriller/possession film. Critically it received mixed reviews, scoring a very low 15% on Rotten Tomatoes, but it still more than tripled its \$40-million-dollar budget and made \$141 million overall. There is no clear message to the film. The ending reveal is very convoluted, but what makes the film enjoyable is the all-star cast and the scares along the way.

Hypothesis/Qualitative Data

My hypothesis is that spoilers will negatively influence audience enjoyment. Since it was a qualitative study, I interviewed participants after the movie ended. These discussions would help me to understand their reactions to the film further and to find out their thoughts about it. Although there has been quantitative analysis on similar hypotheses, I am more concerned with human behavior from the participant's perspective, specifically to gain insights into the participant's dynamic of the enjoyment of the film. This type of information is not necessarily available with quantitative methodology. Enjoyment is a difficult thing to quantify since it is subjective. The way that I measured enjoyment in this study was via in depth interview and observations. Films are quintessentially stories and thus are based on experience.

Reviews

After researching reviews on *Gothika*, a Roger Ebert review (a widely known film critic) was located via the internet. For this study a critic review was used since Berg and Raddick's (2010), research findings indicated this would not impact their feelings about the movie compared to an audience review. The initial review itself was not spoiled so I added a couple of sentences to finish outlining the plot, reveal the ending, and "spoil" it. I elected not to do a pretest because the spoiled nature of the review was obvious. This was intentional since plot spoilers have little to no effect on enjoyment of horror, as noted above in the study by Berg and Raddick (2010). It was also very complicated finding critic reviews for *Gothika* from 2003. The reviews that are there are mostly ratings and a few sentences of write up on why we should or shouldn't see the film. The review itself

only needed to serve the purpose of conveying to the audience a gist of what the film is, but depending on the group, the study decided for which group to spoil the plot or to not include any spoilers. In further detail, groups reading spoiled reviews would know major plot points going into the film. Groups reading unspoiled reviews would only know basic plot points and not the denouement. It is also of note that participants were not told whether or not the reviews were spoiled or unspoiled ahead of time so that it would be based around the specifics of the review they read.

Transcriptions

Once the interviews were transcribed it was important to code them. I did not specify in my IRB approval that the interviews would be shown in my thesis or to anyone so I could not include them. I based my coding scheme on the basis of research undertaken by Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, and Pedersen (2013), who developed a coding strategy called, “code families—that is, several codes reflecting different aspects of a general theme.” I grouped the transcript by similar answers and themes. I coded the transcripts in terms of spoiler related enjoyment, non-spoiler related enjoyment, spoilers in general, disappointment related to spoilers, fandom, speculation (for *Gothika*), and interaction. Interactions were recorded via handwritten notes during the film. These grouped answers and themes supported my findings.

FINDINGS

Enjoyment/Involvement

The interview portion of the study yielded varying results with some unforeseen outcomes that provided additional insights for the study. The majority of groups in the spoiled category said the spoilers did not ruin their enjoyment of the film. A majority of the spoiled-review participants coded responses for spoiler related enjoyment included sentences such as, “I kind of knew the entire plot, but if anything that made it more anticipatory... cause like knowing that the sheriff had done it you were just wondering how he would get caught.” That being said, in this study, the unspoiled groups were increasingly likely to get involved with the movie, interacting with each other more during the movie. They did this by either talking through what happened or made guesses about how the film was going to end. Interaction was key to gauging enjoyment since it showed participants enthusiasm towards the viewed media. Specifically, when asked what they thought of the movie unspoiled participants coded responses for non-spoiler related enjoyment said sentences along the line of: “No, I thought it was Robert Downey Jr. the whole time. And then it was Doug and I was like oh. And then they were like there was an accomplice. There’s an accomplice out there. I was like oh it’s Robert Downey Jr. and it still wasn’t... It definitely kept me guessing.” The unspoiled groups tried to figure out the ending and who the murderer was before the big reveal. The unspoiled groups tried to fit all the puzzle pieces together out loud, which is something that would happen in a dorm, but definitely not in a theater. When asking the same question to spoiled groups, they would provide answers like, “Well it did turn out the way I expected it to because I read a spoiler. You gave us pretty much the whole movie. It gave away the

twist, so I wasn't as interested because you knew it was the husband anyways." This statement illustrates that even if they still liked the movie, they may not have been as invested in it. In this study, the spoiled groups cared less about the movie based on observations of their minimal interactions with the film and the higher amount that they checked/went on their phones.

Other Notes

There were participants in the spoiled groups that had the same reactions as the unspoiled groups. Interviews with subjects revealed, they noted that it had to do with their forgetting the review during the film because of their inattention to the review when they had initially read it. An example of this can be seen with this quote: "I forgot what I read. If I had remembered it would have spoiled it." Another thing to note was that a majority of the participants claimed to still like the movie even though the ending was given away, to them it was more about how the plot would bring them there.

The participants all were able to give concise and similar definitions for what they understood as a spoiler. Gray and Mittell (2007), in their research about lost fandom and online spoilers note that, "the definition of 'spoiler' varies somewhat in the eyes of the beholder, as any revelation of yet-to-unfold narrative developments could be viewed as a spoiler by some, ranging from a leaked script of an unfilmed episode to a network preview of next week's program." They are right when they say spoilers can mean different things to different people and how something that is viewed as a plot point to one person could be viewed as a spoiler to another. Gray and Mittell also say that spoilers have not been studied much in academia since they are always associated with negative connotations. The reason that this is important to note is because of some group's

reaction to the review. Every group had a mixed feeling about the review in general since it might have been confusing, but a majority of the participants that read the spoiled review all wondered why I would spoil the movie for them. This wariness is shown by responses like: “Yeah, it gave away the twist, so I wasn’t as interested because you knew it was the husband anyways.” And, “well if it hadn’t been ruined, it would have been a good twist.” Participants almost begrudgingly watched the film, but in the end found that the convoluted ending was far more intricate than they had imagined. They also were glad that they learned how everything happened as opposed to just knowing what happened. Participants who read the spoiled review mostly said, “I did like how everything pieced together in the end.”

DISCUSSION

Fluency

The frequency of spoiled participants interacting with their phone could be attributed to fluency, “which is the ease, or fluency, with which a narrative is understood (Johnson, Udvardi, Eden, and Rosenbaum, (2019).” Almost every participant went on their phone at some point during the film screening. The spoiled groups went on their phone with greater frequency, and this is most likely due to the fact that they became disengaged since they assumed that they already had a greater understanding of the narrative or major plot points. The research revealed that viewer disengagement was due to primarily knowing what happened instead of other underlying reasons, such as having trouble following the plot, relating to it, or their own personal contexts. The transcriptions dictated that spoiled viewers in this study were disengaged simply because of the nature of the spoiled review provided. An example of how visual fluency was impacted is noted by a few participants that were taken out of the film by either disappointment with the plot or CGI. This is illustrated by the following: “It was good beside the CGI, which really bothered me on a lot of levels.” And, “It is fun to watch because you can talk about it while you are watching it... The script is not good. The CGI is bad. It is from 2003, but I don’t care.” Spoilers can enhance fluency of the narrative, but this may hinder suspense and enjoyment.

If this research were to be replicated, then it should dig further into the processes of fluency for participants. This further research should include analyzing differences between disengagement factors such as disinterest, age, and boredom. The elements of boredom have to do with the quality of the film being viewed itself. The elements of

disinterest due to spoilers relate to the viewers' "spoiled" knowledge of the major plot points.

Fluency aids the understanding of the narrative, but this can lead to consequences such as diminished engagement due to cell phone use. A study done by Thornton, Faires, Robbins, and Rollins (2014), illustrated how the participants even having their phones available might have lost some of the features of both the review and the movie itself. They say, "Results of this study provide support for a 'mere presence' effect of the cell phone in reducing attentional capacity and performance, but only when the task was more attentionally and cognitively demanding." The horror genre depends on suspense and anticipation for its enjoyment, but when disengaged, viewers might miss out the best parts of the experience. A spoiled viewer may have a 'false fluency' of the narrative due to overconfidence of their thinking that they fully know the film when they only know a rough sketch from the spoiled review. This means they preemptively assume the entirety of the events and nuances that will transpire within the film. However, since they do not know exactly how the narrative unfolds or minor plot points it might make spoiled viewers mistakenly believe they have total comprehension of the film. This concept is important when analyzing horror films since it is a genre that contains unpredictability in the form of jump scares, tension, and subjective experiences. These elements belie spoilers. This ungrounded conviction is illuminated by quotes from spoiled participants saying, "It's like, well, I thought this movie was going to be about one thing and then it changed it all around." To reiterate, it has been pointed out in earlier research that best part of the narrative journey is how you arrive rather than the destination.

Fandom

Another finding in this study was that participants all agreed that they would still see a movie after it had been spoiled, especially if it was a big blockbuster film like *Star Wars* or the *Avengers*. This determination more or less had to do with fandom. Fandom overcomes spoilers; people will see a movie regardless of reviews as they are so strongly attached to the content. Fans will make their own opinions and will disregard reviews from critics because they just can't get enough of a particular franchise. Participants noted they would view Rotten Tomatoes' scores except if they were talking about a franchise film where they said they, "would not even look, as it had no impact on them viewing nor liking a film."

Another reason the horror genre was important in this study is that there are several reboots of popular older films, which depends on an already existing fandom for films like *Friday the 13th* or *Halloween*. Additionally, horror is a niche genre where fans will go see a horror film because it is a horror film specifically, and not for any other reason. An instance where fandom plays a large role is on social media. Participants stated they would stay off of social media "at least a week" before a premiere of a franchise film to avoid learning too much and thus spoiling the thrill. An example of this avoidance was the two-week spoiler "embargo" on social media for *Avengers: Endgame*. While this was not enforced by platforms, it was a concept that the directors said they wanted people to be aware of, for they wanted to give everyone two weeks to develop their own conclusions to the ten-year build of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Things to Improve

If this research were to be done again, I would suggest finding or creating a review that is more general and less likely to point the reader in a specific direction, especially if the direction pointed towards a dead end. The wording of the review is vitally important since, for the purposes of this type of study, it has to remain completely neutral about the film. Ebert's review was neutral in the sense that it didn't label the movie as good or bad, but it wasn't neutral in the sense that he didn't take as seriously as he could have. The review was the least successful part of the study since it meandered and talked about aspects of the film that ended up not being important to the participants. There were even a few cases where participants were led to believe that Robert Downey Jr. was the killer the whole time (he was not). It had to mostly do with how the critic did not take the review seriously and even slightly made fun of the movie at times. As mentioned before, it was difficult to find a review for this movie since it is a subpar horror film from early 2003. The review didn't say anything interesting about the plot and was more opinionated about certain aspects of the film more than anything. After reading the spoiled review, participants tended to comment on how the review was spoiled (by giving them the ending) and wondered why I would make them read it if we were going to watch the film anyway. What is interesting about this lament is that some groups, while unhappy with the spoilers, had forgotten about the spoilers by the end of the movie anyway as mentioned above.

Another thing to change could be the number of groups used in the research. For a larger project there could be four groups where groups were divided by positive and negative reviews as well as spoiled or unspoiled. This further division would open up

more opportunities to really see how spoilers might impact enjoyment, and also allow further investigation into how spoilers are viewed both negatively and positively. There are many things to examine for next time a study like this is conducted: including the film being used, the content of the film, the genre, and well as the message the film conveys. Another thing that could alter any findings is the age groups; I used college students for participants which narrows the age range down to a span of a couple of years. It would be interesting to see how someone in an older or younger age group would react to spoilers.

One final important note for improvement would be to monitor and count amount of times participants interact with their phones, their peers and the film in general. This revelation was discovered when coding the transcriptions and handwritten notes.

Why This Research is Important

The importance of this work is the film industry needs to know how spoilers may impact the box office. Recent studies done by Berg and Raddick (2010), Pentheny (2015) and Chintagunta, Gopinath, and Venkatraman (2010), show there seems to be no correlation to box office numbers and spoilers, but audience perception often believes it has a negative impact. The film industry should avoid putting spoilers into advertising and merchandise which typically generates more buzz when the film or media initially releases. A recent article written by Sam Cheng (2019), calls this “The Baby Yoda Effect”, which describes how in the recent hit show, *The Mandalorian*, the ending of the first episode presents the audience with a cute new character only referred to as “the child,” but fans and the online world alike blew up with reactions seeing that this cute little baby held a striking resemblance to the character Yoda from the original *Star Wars*

films; hence dubbing the child with the name ‘Baby Yoda’. The character became an instant sensation across the internet with fans and non-fans alike since the character was idolized and immortalized by being turned into memes. There was no mention of the character in merchandising (where the *Star Wars* franchise makes most of its money) or in advertising for the show. This television series is a spin-off from an extraordinarily popular film dynasty. The reasoning behind this coy introduction was that the creator of the show, Jon Favreau, wanted to keep it a secret to surprise audiences upon their first viewing. The show needed to be a big hit since it launched with Disney’s new streaming app “Disney Plus.”

Disney listened to Favreau’s pleas and didn’t advertise the cute baby Yoda character. This decision worked hugely to Disney’s advantage. *Business Insider* (2019), and other sources reported that *The Mandalorian* had become the top streamed show in the U.S. almost instantly, hence “the Baby Yoda effect.” What is interesting here is they treated a whole character as a spoiler. Baby Yoda is a plot point as well throughout the whole season, but by treating this surprise character as a spoiler and keeping it under wraps, they garnered success. *Screen Rant* (2020), as well as other news sources reported Disney lost about \$2.7 million in sales by not having merchandise for this character ready in time, but those numbers, amazingly enough, are relatively low for one of the largest entertainment companies in the world.

This example relates to my study in how film companies use the success of enjoyment to maximize profit as well as box office success. *The Mandalorian* is just now coming out with Baby Yoda Merchandise, which is still flying off the shelves. It is likely doing so even more than if it was marketed before release, which raises possibilities for

spoilers to act as means of building audiences for films. As mentioned before, this is due to the fact that they treated this character as a spoiler. When it released, enjoyment for the show was most likely higher than if audiences already knew about this cool new character. This aligns with Leavitt and Christenfeld (2011) who said that, “It is possible that spoilers enhance enjoyment by actually increasing tension.”

CONCLUSION

Spoilers may not impact overall enjoyment of a film, but they could be used (if employed properly) to increase enjoyment. By keeping a character or plot point secret, like ‘the Baby Yoda effect’, the film industry could potentially have as much success as Disney did with *The Mandalorian*. This qualitative data is important because it was able to offer a view that numbers cannot provide and illustrates how college age students feel about movie spoilers. While a majority of participants do not read reviews before the movie, they will still see a movie even if it has been spoiled because of fandom. When it comes to major franchise movies like *Star Wars* or the *Avengers*, they will still enjoy it even if a minor part of it is spoiled in advance. This study finds that if it is spoiled, overall enjoyment can be considered lower than if it wasn’t spoiled, based on viewer engagement and involvement. This research focused on the interaction individuals have with films when viewing movies within the horror genre. Involvement in a movie engages our visual, intellectual, and emotional resources, but horror encompasses all of those spheres as well as the draw to an adrenaline rush via fear. Therefore, gathering the qualitative data is crucial because it was able to offer a view that numbers cannot provide such as how people feel about enjoyment and spoilers as a whole. It is also important to study horror films qualitatively since the genre has *experience-based* viewing. Viewers have a potentially visceral reaction from spoilers. Spoilers can perhaps impact their decision to see certain films. When provided with a film in the horror genre, people will *still* see it. Horror cannot be spoiled because reaction to fear cannot be predicted. Spoilers may impact the complex emotive reactions to horror films as well. However, spoiled

experiences are nuanced, as anticipation of fear, and excitement are factors in the final enjoyment of the film. This qualitative study shows this sort of analysis on spoilers, enjoyment, fluency, and the role it plays in the viewing pleasure of audiences.

REFERENCES

- Berg, J., & Raddick, M. J. (2017). First You Get the Money, Then You Get the Reviews, Then You Get the Internet Comments: A Quantitative Examination of the Relationship Between Critics, Viewers, and Box Office Success. *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, 34(2), 101–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2016.1156426>
- Campbell, J. L., Quincy, C., Osserman, J., & Pedersen, O. K. (2013). Coding In-depth Semistructured Interviews: Problems of Unitization and Intercoder Reliability and Agreement. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 42(3), 294–320. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124113500475>
- Carmody D., Susan D., Richards S., (Producers). Mathieu Kassovitz., (Director) 2003. *Gothika* [Motion picture]. United States of America: Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Cheng, S. (2019, November 30). *The Baby Yoda Effect: Creating Organic Meme Marketing as Powerful as the Force*. Medium. <https://medium.com/@samuelc1231/the-baby-yoda-effect-creating-organic-meme-marketing-as-powerful-as-the-force-41d089b87f16>
- Chintagunta, P. K., Gopinath, S., & Venkataraman, S. (2010). The effects of online user reviews on movie box office performance: Accounting for sequential rollout and aggregation across local markets. *Marketing Science*, 29(5), 944-. Academic OneFile.
- Eckhardt, G. M., & Bengtsson, A. (2010). Naturalistic group interviewing in China. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 13(1), 36–44. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13522751011013963>
- Goodman, L.A. (1961) Snowball Sampling. *Annals of Mathematical Statistics*, 32, 148-170. <https://doi.org/10.1214/aoms/1177705148>
- How Much Money Has Disney Lost by Not Making Baby Yoda Toys?* (n.d.). Retrieved March 9, 2020, from <https://screenrant.com/baby-yoda-toys-disney-christmas-money-lost/>
- Johnson, B. K., Udvardi, A., Eden, A., & Rosenbaum, J. E. (2019). Spoilers go bump in the night: Impacts of minor and major reveals on horror film enjoyment. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000252>
- Johnson, B. K., & Rosenbaum, J. E. (2018). (Don't) Tell Me How It Ends: Spoilers, Enjoyment, and Involvement in Television and Film. *Media Psychology*, 21(4), 582–612. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1338964>

- Jones, S. M., Nelson, M. L., & Van de Sompel, H. (2018). Avoiding spoilers: Wiki time travel with Sheldon Cooper. *International Journal on Digital Libraries*, 19(1), 77–93. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00799-016-0200-8>
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Leavitt, J. D. & Christenfeld, N. J. S. (2011). Story spoilers don't spoil stories. *Psychological Science*, 22, 1152–1154. 10.1177/0956797611417007
- Martin, G. N. (2019). (Why) Do You Like Scary Movies? A Review of the Empirical Research on Psychological Responses to Horror Films. *Frontiers in Psychology*, NA. Retrieved from https://link-gale-com.wv-o-ursus-proxy02.ursus.maine.edu/apps/doc/A603119118/HRCA?u=maine_orono&sid=HHHR&xid=cc94b75e
- McLeod, S. A. (2015, June 06). *Observation methods*. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/observation.html>
- Mittman, Asa Simon, and Marcus Hensel. *Classic Readings on Monster Theory*. Arc Humanities Press, 2018.
- Particip@tions Vol. 4 (1): Article—Jonathan Gray & Jason Mittell*. (n.d.). Retrieved March 9, 2020, from https://www.participations.org/Volume%204/Issue%201/4_01_graymittell.htm
- Pentheny, J. R. (2015). The Influence of Movie Reviews on Consumers, 49.
- “*The Mandalorian*” beats “*Stranger Things*” as top streaming show in US - *Business Insider*. (n.d.). Retrieved March 9, 2020, from <https://www.businessinsider.com/the-mandalorian-beats-stranger-things-as-top-streaming-show-us-2019-11>
- Reinstein, D. A., & Snyder, C. M. (2005). The Influence of Expert Reviews on Consumer Demand for Experience Goods: A Case Study of Movie Critics*. *The Journal of Industrial Economics*, 53(1), 27–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-1821.2005.00244.x>
- Thornton, B., Faires, A., Robbins, M., & Rollins, E. (2014). The mere presence of a cell phone may be distracting: Implications for attention and task performance. *Social Psychology*, 45(6), 479–488. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a00021>
- Top Lifetime Grosses*. (2020) Box Office Mojo. Retrieved May 12, 2020, from https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW

Zillmann, D. (1971). Excitation transfer in communication-mediated aggressive behavior. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 7, 419-434.

Zillmann, D., Hay, T. A., Bryant, J. (1975). The effect of suspense and its resolution on the appreciation of dramatic presentations. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 9, 307-323.

APPENDIX: IRB APPROVAL

1. Introduction

Bad reviews can ruin a movie before it even comes out. Is this because the reviews contain spoilers or because people just care about what a reviewer says more than forming their own opinion? In this study we will look to find how spoiled movie reviews affect viewer experience. Spoilers are becoming a much larger phenomenon recently and have society putting on proverbial “blindness” when it comes to what is being spoiled. Audiences will stay off of social media now until they view the film so that their enjoyment is not ruined. Is the thing ruining their enjoyment the spoilers with the review?

I will answer these research questions using a naturalistic experiment featuring an early 2000s horror film called *Gothika*. I will be using a convenience sample of college-aged students, a population that commonly watches horror movies (Eden, Johnson, Udvardi, Rosenbaum 2019). Considering the participants’ age and the fact that the movie was not critically acclaimed means it is highly unlikely that the participants will have seen the movie. If they have, they will be excluded from the study. The participants will be college age students so they would have been 4-6 years old when it came out in 2003.

Spoilers research has produced contradictory findings when it comes to the impact that spoilers have on enjoyment (Eden, Johnson, Udvardi, Rosenbaum 2019). The relationship varies based on viewers’ personality traits, the medium, as well as the genre. Recent research looked at horror movies and found “no main effects of spoilers for enjoyment, transportation, suspense, processing fluency, or reactance” (Eden, Johnson, Udvardi, Rosenbaum 2019). Horror, as a genre that relies on jump scares as well as narrative resolution to produce suspense, is especially interesting, as spoilers commonly only focus on the narrative resolution. This study will thus specifically look at the role played by spoiled/unspoiled reviews for horror movies.

Goals:

- With this research we will see if spoiler filled reviews do impact enjoyment.
- We will try and find out if there is any specific reason why spoilers might influence audiences to not see a movie.

Methods:

I will be using a naturalistic group interview method to conduct my research; I will interview people in a group with whom they usually watch media content. My design will be finding participants to make up specific groups: specifically, to watch the film *Gothika* (2003) with to create a more casual research environment. The groups will be divided into two categories: spoiled review and unspoiled review. There will be a maximum of 4 participants in each group and there will be 4-6 different groups for each category depending on if data saturation has been reached. Before the movie they will read a selected review that has been created using multiple different sources (see appendix 3). One of the two categories will read a neutral unspoiled review and the other will read a neutral spoiled review. During the film, handwritten notes will be taken to record interactions. After the film, questions about how it affected their thinking will be asked

and how it impacted their enjoyment. The film *Gothika* (2003) will be watched at a location of the participants choosing. The film viewing and questions could take up to 2 hours maximum. The questions portion will take place directly after the film and will last approximately 30 minutes. Responses will be audio recorded and then later transcribed. The question guide can be found in appendix 2. The film viewings will happen in my residence hall (common room, dorm room, etc...) since that is the place that most people watch movies without going to the theater and it will happen at times convenient to participants. The Study will take place in December 2019 and January 2020.

2. Personnel

- **PI:** Marshall Abbott, Undergraduate student in the Department of Communication, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. He currently has no experience with human subjects' research.

Other Research Participants (these individuals will not engage directly with the research subjects but may be involved in analysis of the data and serve as collaborators on presented and published research)

- **FS:** Michael Grillo, Professor of History of Art, Photography, Director of both the interdisciplinary Medieval and Renaissance Studies minor and the Film and Video minor at the University of Maine. He currently has no experience with human subjects' research.
- **FS:** Judith E. Rosenbaum, Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism. Rosenbaum has two decades of experience with human subjects research and has conducted a variety of qualitative and quantitative investigations, including personal interviews, focus groups, surveys, and experiments among children, adolescents, and adults. Her work has been published in journals such as *Communication Research*, *Media Psychology*, *Communication Yearbook*, and *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*. She has also published several book chapters, edited a monograph, and authored a book on digital cultures on Twitter, all based on research involving human subjects.
- **FS:** Robert W. Glover, Associate Professor of Political Science & Honors, University of Maine. Professor Glover has graduate training in political science research methods and extensive experience in human subject research.
- **FS:** Clinton Spaulding, MA, PhD student in the Department of Communication and Journalism, instructor and undergraduate advisor. Spaulding has completed the human subjects training at the University of Maine and has experience conducting research with human subjects.
- **FS:** Dr. Jennie Woodard, Lecturer in Honors, 211/212 Faculty Coordinator. She currently has no experience with human subject's research.

3. Participant Recruitment

For this study, I am seeking undergraduate students that will be the age of at least 18 that usually watch movies with their friends or groups of people. I will start recruitment from my personal network and then continue gathering participants via the snowball method.

Once data collection has begun, participants will be asked if they can recommend other people who might want to participate as well. There will be a maximum of 4 participants per group. There will be 4 to 6 groups for both categories explained. In total this would be at a minimum 32 participants and 48 maximum. Recruitment will occur as soon as approved. PI Marshall Abbott will read from the script included in the appendix (see Appendix III), share informed consent documents.

4. Informed Consent

Informed consent will be given to participants the day before they view the film by handing it to them or via email. Watching the movie and participating in the group interview indicates consent. The consent form is included in the appendix. (See Appendix I)

5. Confidentiality

The interviews will be audio recorded. Participants will be asked to introduce themselves using a pseudonym. Audio recording data will be stored on my personal device that is password protected and all names will be changed simply to “participant 1”, “participant 2”, etc... Handwritten notes will be typed up and stored on a password protected computer. The handwritten notes will be stored in a locked drawer then will be destroyed after they have been typed or on 2/10/20. I will be transcribing the recordings and transcriptions will be stored on my password protected device. Recordings will be destroyed after they have been transcribed or on 2/10/20. Transcriptions and will be deleted on 5/10/22.

6. Risks to Participants

The only risks to participants are time, inconvenience, and if they find the film scary.

7. Benefits

While there are no direct benefits to the participants in this study, the research we conduct may contribute to broader understandings of spoilers within the film industry.

8. Compensation

There will be snacks provided during the film view.

Appendix I.

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Marshall Abbott, an undergraduate at the University of Maine Communications media studies program and Michael Grillo, Professor of History of Art, Photography, Director of both the interdisciplinary Medieval and Renaissance Studies minor and the Film and Video minor at the University of Maine. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. The purpose of the research is to understand more about movie experiences.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to read a film review given to you and watch the movie *Gothika* (2003). This movie is Rated R for violence, brief language, and nudity. Once the movie is complete you will be asked a series of questions such as: What did you think about the movie? What did you like? not like? Did it turn out the way you expected? Why (not)? Handwritten observation notes will be taken throughout the viewing of the film and the group interview at the end will be recorded. The film and interview will take approximately 2 hours total.

Risks

Except for your time and inconvenience, there are no risks to you from participating in this study.

Benefits

While there are no direct benefits to you as a result of participating in this study, the research we conduct may help with research in spoilers and the film industry down the road.

Confidentiality

This study is confidential. You will not be asked for your name or any other questions that might produce identifying information. There will be no records linking you to the data. The interviews will be audio recorded. Audio recording data will be stored on a personal device that is password protected and all names will be changed simply to "participant 1", "participant 2", etc... Handwritten notes will be typed up and stored on a password protected computer. The handwritten notes will be stored in a locked drawer then will be destroyed after being typed or on 2/10/20. The transcriptions will be stored on a password protected device. Recordings will be destroyed after they have been transcribed or on 2/10/20. Transcriptions and will be deleted on 5/10/22. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed since this study is in a group setting.

Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may leave the movie. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Compensation

You will be provided snacks during the movie

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at marshall.abbott@maine.edu or 207-831-3121 or Michael Grillo at grillo@maine.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, 207/581-2657 (or e-mail umric@maine.edu).

Appendix II.

Opening Remark: Now that the movie has finished, we will move on to the recorded group interview. You will not be asked for your name or any other questions that might produce identifying information. Audio recording data will be stored on a personal device that is password protected. The transcriptions will be stored on a password protected device. Transcriptions and recordings will be deleted on 5/10/22. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed since this experiment is in a group setting. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Question guide:

1. Do you ever read reviews or look up plots to spoil yourself? Why? Can you tell me about that? What is your definition of a spoiler?
2. What did you think about the movie? What did you like? not like? Did it turn out the way you expected? Why (not)?
3. Do you often read reviews before watching a movie? Why? How does that work for you? Would you have read a review before seeing this movie? Do you think the review was accurate?
4. What did you think about the review? Was it accurate? How did it shape how you watched the film? Did it spoil it for you? If so, how?

In case of spoiled review: Was the spoiler accurate for you?

5. Do you ever read reviews or look up plots to spoil yourself? Why? Can you tell me about that? What is your definition of a spoiler?
6. Will you watch a movie after it has been spoiled? Why?

Ending Remarks: Thank you for participating in my study! The main purpose of this study is to see when different people are presented with different kinds of reviews, how that will impact their viewing experience. Please refrain from telling anyone specifics about this study. That being said, do you have anyone you know or friends that you think would be good for participating in this study? If so, please give me their Umaine email addresses.

Recruitment Email:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The Study will take place in December 2019 and January 2020. The research is being conducted by Marshall Abbott, an Undergraduate at the University of Maine in the Communications program. You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

I am conducting a research study to understand more about movie experiences. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to read a film review given to you and watch the movie *Gothika* (2003). This movie is Rated R for violence, brief language, and nudity. Once the movie is complete you will be asked a series of questions such as: What did you think about the movie? What did you like? not like? Did it turn out the way you expected? Why (not)? Handwritten observation notes will be taken throughout the viewing of the film and the group interview at the end will be recorded. The film and interview will take approximately 2 hours total and will take place in my residence hall and during a convenient time for your group.

If you would be interested in participating in this study, please contact me at marshall.abbott@maine.edu.

Thank you.

Marshall Abbott

Appendix III.

Reviews:

Unspoiled Review:

In *Gothika*, Halle Berry's character is Miranda Grey, a psychiatrist in a prison straight out of Dickens. She works with fellow shrink Pete Graham (Robert Downey Jr.) and is newly wed to her boss, Dr. Douglas Grey (Charles S. Dutton). I'm thinking, hey, this is refreshing: The beautiful woman is married to an overweight guy for a change. But, no, fat equals fate.

On the obligatory dark and stormy night, Miranda takes a detour and swerves to avoid a ghostly, ghastly girl standing in the middle of the road, who bursts into flames. When she wakes up, she's a prisoner in her own institution and Pete breaks the news to her: She's accused of the brutal murder of her husband. How can this be? She tries to remember, but there's a blank. Chloe (Penelope Cruz), a former patient, now a fellow inmate, explains the rules: Now that Miranda is officially insane, it doesn't matter what she says, since it will be dismissed as her illness talking.

The movie introduces several intriguing characters, including Sheriff Ryan (John Carroll Lynch) and Phil Parsons (Bernard Hill), the prison warden. And it teases us with the possibility that any of them -- or Pete, of course -- could be behind the monstrous misunderstanding. Miranda tries to reason her way free. "Did we have an affair?" she asks Pete. "Did you want to?" Downey and Berry have a lot of fun in a scene where both characters realize they are heading toward a dangerous possibility.

It keeps you guessing all through the movie and supplies so many possible answers that the heroine seems surrounded by threats. And after the movie ends the questions don't bother you, because "*Gothika*" is in a genre with the specific duty of involving, scaring and absorbing us for its precise running time, after which it is over, and we can go home. Some plots have to do with life and must be pondered. Others are engines to cause

emotions in the audience, and if they succeed, they have discharged their duty. (Ebert 2003)

Spoiled Review:

In *Gothika*, Halle Berry's character is Miranda Grey, a psychiatrist in a prison straight out of Dickens. She works with fellow shrink Pete Graham (Robert Downey Jr.) and is newly wed to her boss, Dr. Douglas Grey (Charles S. Dutton). I'm thinking, hey, this is refreshing: The beautiful woman is married to an overweight guy for a change. But, no, fat equals fate.

On the obligatory dark and stormy night, Miranda takes a detour and swerves to avoid a ghostly, ghastly girl standing in the middle of the road, who bursts into flames. When she wakes up, she's a prisoner in her own institution and Pete breaks the news to her: She's accused of the brutal murder of her husband. How can this be? She tries to remember, but there's a blank. Chloe (Penelope Cruz), a former patient, now a fellow inmate, explains the rules: Now that Miranda is officially insane, it doesn't matter what she says, since it will be dismissed as her illness talking.

The movie introduces several intriguing characters, including Sheriff Ryan (John Carroll Lynch) and Phil Parsons (Bernard Hill), the prison warden. And it teases us with the possibility that any of them -- or Pete, of course -- could be behind the monstrous misunderstanding. Miranda tries to reason her way free. "Did we have an affair?" she asks Pete. "Did you want to?" Downey and Berry have a lot of fun in a scene where both characters realize they are heading toward a dangerous possibility.

It keeps you guessing all through the movie and supplies so many possible answers that the heroine seems surrounded by threats. In the end it turns out that Miranda had been possessed by the same ghost she swerved to avoid earlier. The film then relays to the audience that this had all been because her husband and the local sheriff were working together to kill women over the years and the ghost wanted revenge. After the movie ends the questions about the plot don't bother you, because "*Gothika*" is in a genre with the specific duty of involving, scaring and absorbing us for its precise running time, after which it is over, and we can go home. Some plots have to do with life and must be pondered. Others are engines to cause emotions in the audience, and if they succeed, they have discharged their duty. (Ebert 2003)

Sources:

Ebert, R. (n.d.). *Gothika* movie review & film summary (2003) | Roger Ebert. Retrieved November 10, 2019, from <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/gothika-2003>

Johnson, B. K., Udvardi, A., Eden, A., & Rosenbaum, J. E. (2019). Spoilers go bump in the

night: Impacts of minor and major reveals on horror film enjoyment. *Journal of Media*

Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000252>

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Marshall Abbott is an undergraduate media studies major at The University of Maine in the Honors College. Marshall is also a lead resident assistant on campus. He is from Maine and lives in Portland during the summer. His plans are to attend graduate school for Media Studies and to continue to study spoilers and film.