One fateful summer evening, I hurried home from work, eager to catch up on “Game of Thrones.” I don’t have cable, so I often watch my shows a day or two after they air, usually via some streaming service or an app. At the time, I had become an obsessive avoider of spoilers, the kind of person who stayed off Instagram and Twitter during live episodes of popular shows, even going so far as to turn off notifications to avoid reading about a reveal or twist that would ruin a surprise.

That night, blissfully unaware of what was to come, I switched on my television, expecting to be greeted with the medieval tones and three-dimensional map of Westeros that signal the show’s start. Instead, I was confronted by a massacre: This episode was “The Rains of Castamere,” popularly known as the Red Wedding. Some friends and I shared an account, so the episode began where the previous person stopped watching, at the precise moment a pregnant character is stabbed in the stomach. I felt as if I had been stabbed in the stomach. I had invested nearly 30 hours into one of the biggest buildups of modern television only to have it — and my preciousness about spoilers — ruined.

The celebrated film critic Pauline Kael once wrote that movies function as
escape pods, portals to parallel universes that can be radically different from emotional norms and societal conditioning of our own. What she meant was they parceled out freedom, allowing viewers to lose their selves in an effort to find greater connection to the self. “A good movie can make you feel alive again, in contact, not just lost in another city,” she wrote in 1969.

Since then, movies — and now, increasingly, television shows — have become more intense and immersive, ensuring that we lose ourselves more freely in them. Today’s directors aim for attention totality in order to capture easily distracted audiences. A 2015 study conducted in part by James Cutting, a psychologist at Cornell University who chronicles the evolution of Hollywood cinematography, found that filmmakers have adapted their shooting styles to try to keep up with changes in our attention spans. Since the 1950s, the average shot time has dropped to less than four seconds from 12 seconds. Volume and cadence are manipulated to keep our eyes glued to the screen — think about the dubstep subwoofer beat drop that happens right before the tidal wave hits, or when a superhero performs an elaborate stunt involving an aerial body roll over a flaming vehicle. In other words, the highs are higher, and the lows are nonexistent.

And maybe it works — for adrenaline junkies. But losing myself in a film almost guarantees an anxiety attack. Most times, at the movies, my stress levels are ratcheted up so high that I can barely sit through the full production without excusing myself, clutching people next to me or crawling out of my seat, incapacitated by the unknown.

Yet I love TV and movies, so in order to keep watching, I started spoiling them for myself. Spoilers have become a virtual Xanax, triggering a relaxing sensation that envelopes my entire body. For a little while, the world unspooling before my eyes makes complete sense, and I can be assured of no unwelcome surprises. It’s a simulacrum of comfort of my own making, and I indulge in it as much as I can.

Luckily, the internet has made my habit easy: Reddit threads prepared me for the nauseating baby-cannibalism moment in “Mother!” and helped me stomach the tension building up during “Big Little Lies.” A surreptitious Google search during Kathryn Bigelow’s “Detroit” gave me the grit to endure its grim relentlessness. And a handy site called TheMovieSpoiler.com readied me for the
excessive bloodiness of “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri.”

I’m not a total barbarian: I never divulge endings or let on that I know them. There’s even some evidence that the audience’s enjoyment is heightened when they have a sense of what’s going to happen. Once I’m clued in, I can actually let myself be spirited away, as the directors and screenwriters intended, enjoying the things I’m normally too wired to enjoy: the sweeping landscape shots, skillful cinematography, meticulous wardrobe choices. The more films and TV shows I spoil for myself, the more I am convinced that truly interesting stories can’t be ruined — the plot thickens with the viewing like a rich sauce. I’ve become a much better student of the movies, and a better companion at them.

My constitution has been weakened by the current political and ecological climate: It’s less fun to watch a movie about people lost at sea or adrift in space when I’m also genuinely worried about cities struggling to recover from a devastating hurricane, a torrential downpour, a mudslide or raging wildfires. Entertainment isn’t an escape if it’s offering windows into the exact same kind of stress we’re experiencing third hand, around the clock, piped in via social feeds and news alerts. TV shows and movies are a rare form of atemporality, and in an ever-changing, always-on world, spoilers feel irrefutable — sheer access to them gives the illusion of control.

Kael wrote that “when we go to the movies, we want something good, something sustained, we don’t want to settle for just a bit of something, because we have other things to do.” This is what entertainment has most to offer. My only condition is doing it without raising my blood pressure.

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