

# Radomír D. Kokeš

Masaryk University

## Spiral, Slasher, and Sequel: Case of *Happy Death Day* (2017) and *Happy Death Day 2U* (2019)

This article is going to focus on the films *Happy Death Day* (2017) and *Happy Death Day 2U* (2019). *Both* are movies from Blumhouse Productions. *Both* were directed by Christopher Landon. *Both* follow the same group of young characters confronted with a mysterious serial killer in a baby mask. Above all, *both* handle *the spiral narrative*. As I wrote elsewhere<sup>1</sup>, as such, we can recognise a specific storytelling pattern with a protagonist stuck in an iterative segment of space, time and causality – and this protagonist is not only fully aware of this situation but also tries to deal with it. What for other unaware characters is a *closed* loop is for the protagonist an *open* experience with an odd number of turns of time spiral. That is why I call it *the spiral narrative*, which is known mostly from high-budget films such as *Groundhog Day* (1993) or *Edge Of Tomorrow* (2014). Nevertheless, as will be explained, it occurs in dozens of other theatrical films, VOD films, television films or television shows.

However, what are the reasons why, when there is an extensive set of works to choose from, do I take just the doublet of *Happy Death Day* films? (1) On their example, the article is going to discuss my general hypothesis about spiral narrative works as a series of applications of the *innovative narrative schema* as

<sup>1</sup> See: Kokeš, 2018; Kokeš, forthcoming.

an aesthetic tool. Such a hypothesis consists of three broader dimensions: (a) the *aesthetic dimension*, i.e. the spiral schema as a part of the artistic work; (b) the *creative dimension*, i.e. the spiral schema as part of the problem-solution process of filmmaking; (c) the *production dimension*, i.e. the spiral schema as a part of the competition of audiovisual production. (2) An even more important reason, though, for selecting just these two films has been the very fact that *Happy Death Day 2U* is a sequel of *Happy Death Day*. In the “post-classical era” of global franchises, sequels, prequels, remakes, reboots and transmedia storytellings, this does not seem to be exceptional. However, in the context of the spiral narrative, this is an unprecedented step that raises several questions.

It is possible to say that since the 1990s creators have appealed to this schema *to innovate already established patterns*. It may be the established development of a character (such as a “grumpy and selfish person becomes a better man”, e.g. *Groundhog Day*). It may be subject matter (such as the “significance of Christmas for family values”, e.g. *Christmas Every Day*, 1996). It may be a way to effectively motivate the construction of reasonably extreme situations in which the protagonists of long-term television series are involved (only until 1999, I have discovered eleven episodes of American long-running television series using the spiral schema). Nevertheless, most often, as we will see, the spiral narrative schema seems to be used as a tool of *another* genre or subgenre innovation. In other words, with the help of the schema application, they can show well-known techniques, situations or characters in a new context. Does it mean that before the 1990s spiral narrative appearances were rarer? No, before the 1990s there were none<sup>2</sup>.

As was suggested, there are three dimensions in which we can think about spiral narratives. Although this article is mainly formally an analytical one, the questions connected to the aesthetic dimension of the spiral narrative will not stay in the centre. Questions like: Based on what principles do spiral narratives work as formal systems? What types of fictional worlds do they establish? What

<sup>2</sup> I refer primarily to North American audiovisual production. This is because, although we can speak of several instances of spiral narrative audiovisual works outside North American production, such applications of the schema are highly uncommon. As far as I know, we could not find a country outside the United States and Canada where more than one such film was made (South Korea, Italy, Sweden, Czech Republic, Germany). Quite specific examples of spiral narratives are represented in a Russian film from 1987 and a Japanese film from 1984, because both of them are significantly different from all other spiral narratives, in their mood as well as in the parallel narrative techniques they involved. It is a question of if they were known outside their domestic countries before the first American applications of the spiral schema were shot (1990 short film *12:01 PM* based on the short story by Richard Lupoff, 1993 television feature film *12:01* based on the same story, 1993 *Groundhog Day*). Of course we can consider other predecessors like Charles Dickens’s novelette *A Christmas Carol*, films about one-more-chance to do something (e.g. 1947 *Repeat Performance*, 1987 *Peggy Sue Got Married* or 1990 *Mr. Destiny*) or European loop narrative films (e.g. 1987 Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *Blind Chance*). More about this in *ibidem*.

logic do they follow? For us, more important will be the questions focused on creative and production aspects. In the former dimension, we can ask: To what extent and in what ways do filmmakers use a spiral narrative schema to innovate already established patterns? To what degree and how do they negotiate with various patterns, models and traditions? In what ways do they deal with the necessarily repetitive features of such storytelling? How do they guide our attention? In the latter dimension, there is another question: Based on what likely strategy producers consider as a good idea to look for innovative potential in a spiral narrative schema? Because despite its modifiable potential, the application of the basic narrative situation is still fairly overlapping. It should be said that on the one hand, it is not in the possibilities of this article to answer this relatively complex set of questions<sup>3</sup>, while on the other hand, the article is going to consider them while explaining *Happy Death Day* and *Happy Death Day 2u*.

### Problems, intentions, artworks

However, we are confronted with a problem: How can we actually consider a work of art as the result of an innovative process? Let us turn to several suggestions formulated by art historian Michael Baxandall who offers thoughts about the artist in terms of problem and solution: “The maker of a picture or other historical artefact is a man addressing a problem of which his product is a finished and concrete solution. To understand it we try to reconstruct both the specific problem it was designed to solve and the specific circumstances out of which he was addressing it. This reconstruction is not identical with what he internally experienced [...]” (Baxandall, 1985, pp. 14–15). “Indeed I want explicitly to eschew any ambition to construct a narrative of how [the man] came to his design. [...] What we are faced with is simply the task of organizing, in relation to a complex *form*, a number of heterogeneous *circumstances* that appear to have had a part in the designer’s conception” (ibidem, p. 30).

But how to formulate such a problem in the case of an *artwork* and how to grasp the eternally elusive concept of an artistic *intention*? Baxandall writes that “the intention to which I am committed is not an actual, particular psychological state or even a historical set of mental events inside the heads [of artists]. [...] Rather, it is primarily a general condition of rational human action which I posit in the course of arranging my circumstantial facts or moving about the triangle of re-enactment” (ibidem, p. 41). By triangle, he means the relationship between concepts of problem, concepts of culture (resources used or not used) and con-

<sup>3</sup> For some answers see ibidem. In my thinking about innovative schema I loosely appear from Ernst Gombrich (Gombrich, 1960; Gombrich, 1971).

cepts serves for our description of the artwork. The most important for us is that “what we do if we want to know about [the artist] is to play a conceptual game on the triangle. [...] Indeed the whole basis of what I am calling inferential criticism is that one brings all three corners of the triangle, in an active relation to each other, to description of the object. Description and explanation interpenetrate each other” (ibidem, 34).

It is time, to sum up, what we can borrow from these considerations for our own interests (however, only in necessary simplifying of *ad hoc* inspiration). It should be just the conceptual game of inferential criticism that is going to remain at the centre of our attempt to explain the creative as well as the production dimension behind *Happy Death Day* and *Happy Death Day 2u*. The aim of this conceptual game is not reconstructing the *actual* narrative of the creative process, the *actual* form, order and causality of artistic decisions in the intentional flux (cf. ibidem, 62–67). The aim is to understand these films concerning the solved creative and production problems: To innovate an established horror subgenre of slasher. To design a sequel to a film with such a specific narrative constellation that had never been “sequelised”. To promote and sell such a film in competition with other films. We could only work with a general knowledge of Hollywood production practice or the history of Hollywood genres, cycles and trends (cf. Neale, 2000; Nowell, 2010; Zoë, 2019). However, I do propose to include in this inferential game the kind of historical material rarely used to analyse films, the so-called *press kits*. Of course, such materials tell us rather little about how the film was *actually* made, combining reliable and unreliable information, rearranging the chronology and causality of events, changing the roles of individual participants of the creative process.

As John Thornton Caldwell writes, through press kits “public relations officers, publicists, and marketers traditionally provided ‘useful’ background and backstory about films and television programs. [...] Structurally, EPKs [electronic press kits, but the traditional as well] provide a fundamental connection and means of communication between the industry’s producing cultures and audience’s consuming cultures” (Caldwell, 2008, p. 291). Kristin Thompson is slightly more sarcastic when she explains EPKs as a godsend for journalists working in the world of infotainment: “You know only what the publicists want you to know, but you know enough to appear well-informed. You can cover the film as if it were news, illustrating your piece with images and footage, all the while hitting the notes that the marketers want hit” (Thompson, 2007, p. 123). In other words, EPKs offer the desirable narrative behind the creation of the film we should believe that is the actual one. Reading such materials, bearing in mind

that they offer only *a story* about the filmmaking process, can be a useful source of cues as to which problems for solving and which artistic decisions the creators want us to believe they consider central ones. It is only one corner of the triangle, but one we can effectively relate to another one: the explanation of the film(s)<sup>4</sup>.

Through the statements of the creators in these press kits, I am going to infer how they were aiming to innovate the horror subgenre of slasher and what their main goals might have been (concepts of problem). Then, in a brief formal analysis regarding these problems, I will explain what particular narrative and stylistic tactics have been used in the form of a particular film (concepts of our description of the artwork). Subsequently, I will offer a possible production explanation of why Blumhouse Productions decided to make their own spiral narrative in 2017 – although audiovisual spiral narratives began to increase after 2014 (concepts of culture). In the last part of my article, however, I want to move beyond these explanations. As suggested, the following 2019 *Happy Death Day 2U* is not only another spiral narrative, but it is the *very first sequel* to a spiral narrative film. The filmmakers thus faced another aesthetic challenge. How to innovate in a sequel to a movie that was already an innovation – in both cases through using the spiral schema that it builds on a repetitive play?<sup>5</sup>

### The creative dimension: one set of problems

The small film studio Blumhouse Productions – which produced *Happy Death Day* – specialises in rather low-budget horror films. In this case, the filmmakers decided, therefore, to innovate the horror sub-genre: *slasher*. That might be considered as a surprising creative decision because even the slasher underwent a similar innovation in the mid-1990s<sup>6</sup>, with *Scream* (1996) being the most important for us. It was precisely the *Scream* that represented a similarly self-consciousness sub-genre innovation as *Happy Death Day*.

On the one hand, as Valerie Wee writes, *Scream*, apart from its widely commented postmodern elements, “updated the defining conventions of the slasher-film genre - in particular, how the series has revised the treatment of the monster-villain and the final female survivor, two of the key narrative ele-

<sup>4</sup> Another approach is offered by Vinzenz Hediger in his article about the making-of films as a set of four discursive indexes: authorial, technological, star, filmmaking as great fun as well as hard work (Hediger, 2005, pp. 332–341).

<sup>5</sup> All following quotations are from official US press kits for both films, which were kindly provided to me by a Czech distributor (CinemArt; I would like to thank Petr Slavík for them).

<sup>6</sup> Sotiris Petridis writes about a seven-year long “Self-Referential Cycle”. He identifies *New Nightmare* (1994) as the first important film of this cycle. See: Petridis, 2019 [cited from the Kindle version; without pagination]. In relation to the *Scream* trilogy cf. as well Henderson, 2014, pp. 152–154.

ments central to the slasher-film genre” (Wee, 2006 p. 50). On the other hand, according to Fran Pheasant-Kelly, *Scream* was significantly different from its predecessors: “*Scream* was marked by irony, cleverness and knowingness, and often positioned itself in opposition to its predecessors. In other words, even though it stimulates other films, it is at the same time often antithetical to them, and, even though it is a copy, it has come to replace the original” (Pheasant-Kelly, 2015, p. 160).

To a certain extent, we can similarly consider *Happy Death Day*. However, the film’s creators have chosen different ways compared to *Scream*. In *Happy Death Day*, techniques for engaging irony, cleverness, and knowingness concerning the slasher formulae are intended solely for the knowledgeable viewer, while the characters themselves are not aware of them, rather the contrary. While *Scream* exploited the diversity of existing approaches to slashers by unifying them into one system of rules, *Happy Death Day*, on the other hand, uses this actual hypothetical system of rules against our knowledge of them and builds on diversity. In other words, in the case of *Scream*, it was precisely this cultural encyclopaedia and the set of formulae extracted from previous slashers that were used as the innovative pattern. In the case of *Happy Death Day*, this very knowledge of unified slasher’s formulae is what is innovated. On the one hand, the plot does not depend on the gradual killing of a group of young characters, but on the repeated killing of the same character. On the other hand, this is only possible thanks to the application of the spiral narrative schema.

According to the press kit for *Happy Death Day*, the initial creative impulse seems to be the one that Scott Lobdell, the writer of the film, speaks of: “Like most horror fans, I noticed the staple where the bad girl dies at the beginning of the story and the good girl is left to stand alone against the killer. I was intrigued by the challenge of writing a movie where the bad girl and the good girl were one and the same.” It is essential for two reasons. Firstly, we can notice the same ambition to revise the “final female survivor”, as was discussed in connection with *Scream* by Valerie Wee. Secondly, as we will see, the spiral narrative in this context seems to be the most appropriate way to achieve this innovation. Indeed, the same can be said about most protagonists of spiral narrative film as the creators say about the heroine called Tree. According to them, she “starts out as an incredibly unlikeable and selfish person, and it is a joy to watch her evolve into someone that you come to care and root for.” In the case of slasher, however, this is a necessary condition for the very narrative functionality in the context of the spiral schema application. If the protagonist were nice, it would be quite unpleasant for the audience to watch her die. Con-

versely, when the protagonist is exceptionally horrible, it is fun to watch her die – and not just once, but repeatedly.

The concept of creative premise (or artistic problem) formulated in the press kit story is one thing, and its possible unfolding in film work is another. What tactics did the filmmakers use to construct their film and to guide our attention? Some techniques are suggested in the press kit, but as usual, it withholds the more interesting ones. Nevertheless, the primary technique has already been mentioned – and the lead actress, Jessica Rothe amusingly recaps it: “Tree is a true modern-day scream queen, and her transformation from bitchy victim to badass heroine is one you do not get to see often.” Another vital hint comes from Lobdell again: “Most teen slasher movies feature a series of victims being picked off throughout - once you are terrorized and killed you are never heard from again. I was interested in the idea of a character who gets to react to her death - one who can stalk her killer and who is given the opportunity to make the most of the last day of her life.” But how? To answer this question and understand how creators innovate on the aesthetic level of the film itself with the aid of a spiral narrative, we need to proceed to a formal analysis.

### **The aesthetic dimension: three formal tactics**

I presume that the film follows three broader formal tactics. The first tactic is primarily typical for this film in order to innovate a slasher subgenre. The second tactic is connected with the broader set of aesthetic norms of spiral narratives. The third tactic points to the profound interdependence of the application of the innovative schema with so-called classical norms of Hollywood storytelling.

Before moving to these tactics, I would like to summarise some story information about *Happy Death Day*: The film’s spiral is driven by the schedule of one day... Regardless of when and how Tree dies, she wakes up to the next turn of her time spiral with a hangover on her B-day at 9 a.m. in the room of a student called Carter in the dorm<sup>7</sup>. During that day, she should meet her ex, her roommate, her posh classmates, her (married) lover – and her killer in a baby mask. She should also meet her father, but she is trying to avoid this and does not answer his phone calls. On the same day as Tree repeatedly dies, a mad killer named Tombs escapes from the local hospital.

The first tactic deals with the standard artistic challenge of spiral narratives at the level of the overall film construction: How to keep our attention when a repetitive formula is applied? In the case of *Happy Death Day*, the plot is di-

<sup>7</sup> A similar pattern is used in the Netflix spiral show *The Russian Doll*.

vided into three larger blocks, each of which has a different function. The first block is *genre self-referential* and somewhat corresponds to the techniques we remember from *Scream*. The second block acts as a *narrative resumption*. The third block follows the function of *narrative refocusing*. We can begin with the assumption that when the creators refer solely to slasher when talking about *Happy Death Day*, they do not tell us the whole truth. In fact, in the middle of the film, slasher's aesthetic norms tend to be abandoned, and the filmmakers turn instead to the aesthetic norms of criminal fiction. It is remarkable, however, how slasher norms are utilised in an innovative way, especially in the first block of the film plot<sup>8</sup>.

The opening block of *Happy Death Day* consists of the first thirty-eight minutes of screen duration. These include the first three turns of time spiral – and the first three murders of Tree. All these turns communicate spectacularly with knowledgeable viewers as they vary three different settings where slashers' murders are usually carried out: in public parks, at student parties and in the apparent security of home. The important thing is that unlike the characters of *Scream*, Tree does not know scary movies. Therefore, she is not aware of the slasher conventions at all – and each of her next rational steps finally leads her to the next modification of the slasher and her next murder. In the first turn of the time spiral, Tree is killed in the park while heading for a student party. The second turn, following the aesthetic norms of spiral narratives, represents one great *déjà vu* in which the character refuses to believe she is in the spiral and considers the previous turn to be a dream. But just before Tree enters the park where she would be killed again, she decides to take a different path – and get to the relative safety of the student party, where she obviously can't die among a lot of people. Of course, she will die there. The third day and the third turn of the time spiral lead her to the next rational step: I cannot die when I am securely locked in at home. Of course, she will also die this time.

Each of these three turns is stylistically different. With each of them the creators are gradually increasing the expressiveness of techniques suggesting a deeper and deeper level of subjectification. After these three turns, however, it is possible to say – with the help of Murray Smith's terms – that we as spectators are gradually moved from a distance alignment with Tree to a phase of allegiance with her (cf. Smith, 1995, pp. 82–86). Moreover, with the fourth turn, desperate Tree finally becomes more active and creates an alliance with Carter. The concise second block is mainly an attractive montage sequence:

<sup>8</sup> The great variety of types of murders cannot be considered in any way innovative, yet there have been too many slasher films before and hundreds of people have been murdered in the oddest ways in them.



Tree reduces the list of suspects, while she is repeatedly dying in a fun way – and the narrative summarises all of the characters. And right here – in the middle of the film – the superiority of innovation of the slasher conventions ends, because there seem to be no suspects left. In the third block, the narrative *refocuses* on the mad hospital killer who escapes that night. That means not only a change in Tree and Carter’s goals while trying to prevent the madman from escaping from the hospital. That also means the displacement of existing *Happy Death Day* internal norms: once again, Tree is killed by the murderer in a baby mask, the next time she deliberately kills herself, and the third time she dies by “mistake” after everything looks happy. As a result, Tree finally realises it was her roommate who had been hiding under the baby mask. Besides, this final twist effectively connects the second half of the film with the first half – and the whole system is unified.

The second tactic solves a long-term artistic problem of spiral narratives: The creators need to maintain the awareness that we are following the same iterative segment of space, time and causality. That means the same series of states of affair and events that differ only in the impact of the protagonist’s actions in the spiral. At the same time, they need us to be entirely oriented without having to repeat all the events. In the case of *Happy Death Day*, the filmmakers apply a tactic I call *referring to plot chunks*. As for *plot chunks*, I understand them as the established, recognisably discrete sequences of events, settings and talks inside the turn of the time spiral. For filmmakers, these chunks are essential reference points with which they can work effectively without having to repeat them in their entirety in each turn of the time spiral. *Happy Death Day* relies on these chunks especially in the first block: (a) Tree’s waking up at Carter’s dorm in the morning and meeting his friend Ryan; (b) going home around the same groups of characters; (c) a brief encounter with a former boyfriend with whom Tree had only one date; two dialogues in her house, namely; (d) with her classmate Danielle and; (e) the roommate Lori; (f) an afternoon meeting with classmates; (g) an afternoon meeting with her lover, dr. Gregory; (h) the way to the party. While the representations of later chunks are more and more elliptical or eliminated – since Tree chooses a different way through “her” day, the early chunks at least at the level of shots tend to be preserved. The second block then refers to the individual chunks of the first block, and the third block supplies new ones – especially the intrusion into the hospital, where the mad killer Tombs is. By referring to these chunks, the filmmakers can maintain the effect of a unified spiral – while simultaneously developing parallel or alternative storylines.

The third tactic is connected to the convention that “usually the classical [plot] presents a double causal structure, two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance [or another private line of action], the other one involving another sphere – work, war, a mission or quest” (Bordwell, 1985, p. 157). The work line of action is superior in *Happy Death Day* and takes the form of clear goals, even explicitly formulated tasks. In contrast, the private line of action does not take the form of goals. Romantic motifs, as well as the trauma from her mother’s death and necessity to find common ground with her father, appear later in the film, gradually resulting from the context and serve primarily to build our allegiance with Tree. Moreover, the origin of the spiral is not explained, which – similar to *Groundhog Day* – eventually leads to an emphasis on the axiological transformation of the main character into a better person and establishing a happy heterosexual relationship.

In the previous paragraphs, I have tried to explain some aspects of innovative work possible to do through a spiral narrative schema, using the example of *Happy Death Day*. On the one hand, the creators served it as a tool for further innovation of the slasher; on the other, it represented an aesthetic challenge in following specific narrative tactics. Scott Lobdell himself says in the press kit: “When you have to keep experiencing the same day over and over again, it is easy to fall into a trap. We establish the day and then we repeat it, so that the audience and the character understand what is happening. Once we do those things, we immediately take Tree off course. She starts to try to outsmart her own death - and in doing so - the story takes the audience to different places and gives them unexpected experiences.” To some extent, this passage represents a bridge between the creators’ starting points and the observations of my analysis. I believe that through understanding the form of *Happy Death Day*, it has offered several explanations of how they achieved their goals.

### **The production dimension: many spiral narratives**

So, why did producer Jason Blum likely consider it a good idea to invest just in the “spiral” innovation of the horror genre? That is not a pointless question since the number of audiovisual works with spiral narratives has increased significantly since 2011: *Source Code* (2011), *12 Dates of Christmas* (2011), *A Wedding Christmas Date* (2012), *Edge Of Tomorrow* (2014), *Premature* (2014), *Arg* (2016), *Time Rush* (2016), *Christmas all Over Again* (2016), *Valentine’s Again* (2017), *Before I Fall* (2017), *Naked* (2017), *When We First Met* (2018), *Russian Doll*, and *Boss Level* (announced 2020). Admittedly, it is outside of the possibilities of this article to demonstrably reveal the logic behind production

decisions. Nevertheless, the question cannot be ignored in the future: Why do specialised genre filmmakers not mind that they just use the innovative schema that many others use at the same time to innovate, thus losing exclusivity? I can offer a purely working hypothesis, for which clues can also be found in the press kit.

There are spiral narratives in which film stars play and have a big budget. One such film was *Edge Of Tomorrow* with Tom Cruise. And then there are spiral narratives that have innovated another genre: a romantic comedy for adolescent boys (*Premature*), a romantic drama for adolescent girls (*Before I Fall*) or a television audience on holiday (Christmas movies, *Valentine's Day*). In the case of movies with film stars for a broad audience, producers like Jason Blum (from Blumhouse Productions) seem to know that they cannot compete with them, so they explicitly use them as a reference framework: "Multiple films across various genres have elegantly pulled it [plot device] off - from Doug Liman's *Edge Of Tomorrow* to Richard Curtis' *About Time* - and Scott Lobdell's screenplay for *Happy Death Day* tackles this premise with surprising results." More surprising is the case of films such as *Premature* or *Before I Fall*, whose young audience might appreciate a spiral horror film – but the creators of *Happy Death Day* do not mention these films in their press kit. Why? Perhaps because in such a case, they could no longer sell their film as one based on such an innovative idea. As director Christopher Landon says in the press kit: "That was [application of the spiral schema to slasher] when the light bulb turned on, because the concept alone was a slam dunk to me - it was just really clever." If the press kit admitted that many other genre filmmakers have had a similarly clever idea in recent years, it would probably be less "really clever". Thus, if I can judge from my research so far, the spiral narrative schema application is either suppressed in the promotion (*Edge Of Tomorrow*), or other spiral narrative films are concealed. The filmmakers probably assume that their audience is mostly unfamiliar with them – and will, therefore, appreciate the innovative value of applying a spiral narrative schema for their film.

### The sequel problem

So we can say that the spiral narrative schema is so recognisable, on the one hand, that the creators seem to be trying to conceal most of its existing applications. Sometimes they even emphasise non-spiral aspects of their films, even though spiral narrative construction is their main attraction (*Source Code*, *Edge Of Tomorrow*). On the other hand, this schema is so effective that filmmakers

keep coming back to it – but until recently, they have not tried a film *sequel*. There were many rumours about a sequel to *Groundhog Day*, but filmmakers never really even started working on it. Danny Rubin, the screenwriter of *Groundhog Day*, wrote in his book: “Here’s my idea [about the sequel]. Open with a grand sequel title, such as ‘It’s Groundhog Day – Again!’ Or ‘Groundhog II: Return to Punxsutawney.’ After that, just [show] the original movie” (Rubin, 2012; [cited from Kindle version; without pagination]). Since 2014, similar rumours have been spreading about a sequel to *Edge Of Tomorrow*, but even its creators have not yet made significant progress. In October 2019, Doug Liman, as the director of the first film and a possible sequel, declared that they had finally finished the screenplay. But now it seems unlikely that they will start making the film before 2021 or 2022, if at all<sup>10</sup>.

It is probably obvious why I have devoted so much time to thinking about a sequel to a spiral narrative film. I do this because only the creators of *Happy Death Day* decided to break this rule of not doing sequels and find a way to deal with the potential obstacles. From the perspective of Blumhouse Productions’ existing films, however, this seems to be simply a reasonable step that followed the company’s long-term production strategy: If your horror movie becomes successful enough, create a series based on it<sup>11</sup>. They verified the functionality of this approach in film series such as *Paranormal Activity* (six films so far; 2007–2015), *Insidious* (four films so far; 2010–2018), *The Purge* (four films so far; 2013–2018), or the two films by M. Night Shyamalan *Split* (2017) and *Glass* (2019), which were connected to his much older *Unbreakable* (2000). Moreover, at least in the cases of *Paranormal Activity* or *The Purge*, they were also based on strong innovative concepts that did not seem suitable for their re-applications in sequels.

<sup>9</sup> There is a television show *Day Break* (2006) whose creators tried to develop a spiral narrative schema over thirteen episodes – but it was cancelled after six episodes for lack of audience. Fortunately, it appeared as a whole legally available on the Internet and was also released on DVD, so we have this unique narrative experiment available in its entirety (for upcoming analysis).

<sup>10</sup> See for example on-line: <<https://hnenentertainment.co/doug-liman-says-edge-of-tomorrow-sequel-script-ready-may-shoot-once-tom-cruise-finishes-next-two-mission-impossible-movies/>>, <<https://www.cinemablend.com/news/2484260/will-edge-of-tomorrow-2-actually-happen-heres-what-doug-liman-says>> (both cit. 31st October 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Such a hypothesis is not only analytical. Producer Jason Blum explains it fairly explicitly: “On originals, I never think about what a sequel could be. I can’t. [...] On sequels, it’s the opposite. On *Purge 2* or *Insidious 4*, we totally think about the sequel because we know one is coming. When we have an original and the original connects with audiences, then we see if we can make a second one. Sometimes you can’t. I don’t know if there’ll ever be a sequel to *Get Out*. Some of them work for sequels and some of them just don’t. We tackle the sequel if the movie’s a big success. But then, once we’re living in the franchise, we do think about not putting ourselves at a dead end story-wise, so we have a place to go to make more. Like we do with *Purge* and *Insidious*” (Kaye, 2019).

The screenwriter of the first film, Scott Lobdell, did not participate this time, so director Christopher Landon also wrote the screenplay. As we will see, in seeking an innovative approach to the spiral narrative, he has mostly remained faithful to the pattern that directed the first film – but at the same time, he uses our knowledge against us... and against Tree as well. Even this time we could use a parallel with *Scream 2* (1997), in which the sequel principles became the object of innovation and “postmodernist” irony – and the characters wondered which of the conceivable sequel principles might be followed by a killer or killers. Unlike *Scream*, however, *Scream 2* no longer works with a fairly closed system of formulae and the characters are at a disadvantage. Their encyclopedicity does not help them, and even the most knowledgeable character eventually dies. The creators of *Happy Death Day 2U* again choose rather the opposite way than the creators of *Scream 2*. While Tree lacked genre knowledge in *Happy Death Day* and the film was not heading for a unified set of slasher genre rules, in *Happy Death Day 2U* Tree not only *knows*, but a very consistent system of rules directs the fictional world.

Remarkable, however, is the modification of the narrative tactics that were applied in the first film as I explained above. *Happy Death Day 2U* also develops several blocks with different functions: (a) continuation and external variation, (b) returning and internal variation, (c) complete re-genrefication. In the first block, Ryan – the supporting character from the previous film – becomes the protagonist locked in the spiral, while Tree is just a knowledgeable supporting character. However, this is only the trick we expect from the sequel – and the essential fact of the first block is the scientific explanation of the previous film’s spiral through quantum physics. In the twenty-fifth minute of the film’s screening, an explosion will occur in the lab, and it is Tree again who will stay in the *new* spiral.

What is more, she was moved back to the same moment as last time in the first film... but in a parallel reality with some significant changes. First, causal changes. The main murderer is not the same person as last time. Second, the relational changes. Tree’s beloved boyfriend Carter is dating someone else – and, above all, Tree’s mother is alive. Tree must decide whether she wants to stay in this world or her original world. Either way, a complex mathematical equation needs to be solved to end the spiral. Furthermore, because the group of students have a limited time, it is Tree who must remember all the wrong solutions across the turns of the time spiral. So she is not being killed this time; it is she who kills herself to advance the equation.

The plot chunks of the previous film became the narrative key to distinguishing different realities. Carefully established sets of events and dialogues from the first film maintain the transparency of the intricate multi-level causality of

the second film. The third narrative tactic followed by the filmmakers in the previous film is also used and reversed: The working goal becomes just a means of solving primarily private goals to stay in a superior position this time. And what about the exploited genre formulae? This time they are also changing: from slasher through melodrama to a heist. The spiral narrative itself is innovated, if not only for the backward explaining of the spiral effect. However, spiral narrative schema remains a device of effective innovation as well, combined with other related schemas: time travel, parallel realities, changing of innovated genres.

## Conclusions

As already mentioned, Blumhouse Productions is a company that prefers to create film series – and the final sequence of *Happy Death Day 2U* seemed a clear step towards the next sequel. Nevertheless, director Christopher Landon, on July 17, 2019, openly wrote on Twitter that “[s]ince I keep reading stuff about it, I’ll say it loud: There Is *No Happy Death Day 3* In Development. It’s just a rumor...unless @netflix wants to pony-up and finish this trilogy, it just ain’t happening.”<sup>12</sup> However, the two *Happy Death Day* films already in existence have provided us with an unprecedented opportunity to analyse filmmakers’ treatment of spiral narrative schema from a brand new perspective. First, we could see how the filmmakers likely think of the spiral narrative as a useful plot device, reasonably equivalent to our thinking of spiral narrative as an innovative schema. Second, through brief narrative analysis, we revealed and explained some of the tactics that the filmmakers followed in their efforts to accommodate the broader patterns to the needs of a spiral narrative schema application. Thirdly, thanks to the sequel, we were able to compare how they dealt with the obstacles of being forced to innovate their own innovations – and to what extent the spiral narrative has changed from a superior scheme to just one of a pattern that is subject to creative revision. This article primarily aimed to be a formal analytical contribution to the discussion of filmmaking treatment of the spiral narrative schema, on the one hand, and the discussion of ways of innovation in popular storytelling on the other. Nevertheless, I believe that through case studies of *Happy Death Day* and *Happy Death Day 2u*, it has helped to clarify the more general research questions that can be asked about these fields<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> On-line: <[https://twitter.com/creatureshow/status/1151491893663952896?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/creatureshow/status/1151491893663952896?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)> (cit. 10th December 2019)

<sup>13</sup> I would like to thank Ondřej Pavlík and Janka Kokešová for their inspiring comments on the draft of the article. I am also grateful to the students of my lecture series on spiral narratives for their questions and suggestions. And again, I thank Jeremy Pearman for his proofreading.

## References

- Baxandall, M. (1985). *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- Bordwell, D. (1985). *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Caldwell, J.T. (2008). *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
- Gombrich, E. H. (1960). *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. London/New York: Phaidon.
- Gombrich, E. H. (1971). *Norm and Form. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*. London/New York: Phaidon.
- Hediger, V. (2005). Spaß an harter Arbeit. Der Making-of-Film, in: V. Hediger, P. Vonderau (eds.). *Demnächst in Ihrem KiNo. Grundlagen der Filmwerbund und Filmvermarktung*. Marburg: Schüren, pp. 332–341.
- Henderson, S. (2014). *The Hollywood Sequel: History and Form, 1911–2010*. London: British Film Institute / Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kaye, D. (2019). *Why Blumhouse's Jason Blum Wanted to make Happy Death Day 2U* [online]. "Den of Geek!" February 15. ProQuest Central.
- Kokeš, R.D. (2018). *Spirála coby inovativní schéma filmového vyprávění*. "Bohemica Litteraria", Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 7–43.
- Kokeš, R.D. [forthcoming]. Notes on 'Spiral Narrative' as a Creative Tactic in Cinema and Television, in: M. Przylipek (ed.): *Cinema and Narration. Fast, Slow and Reverse*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Neale, S. (2000). *Genre and Hollywood*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Nowell, R. (2020). *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle*. Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Petridis, S. (2019). *Anatomy of the Slasher Film: A Theoretical Analysis*. Jefferson: McFarland [Kindle Edition].
- Pheasant-Kelly, F. (2015). Reframing Parody and Intertextuality in *Scream*: Formal and Theoretical Approaches to the 'Postmodern' Slasher, in: C. Wickham (ed.) *Style and Form in the Hollywood Slasher Film*. Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 149–160.
- Rubin, D. (2012). *How To Write Groundhog Day*. Gainesville: Triad Publishing Company [Kindle Edition].
- Smith, M. (1995). *Engaging Characters. Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Thompson, K. (2007). *The Frodo Franchise. How The Lord of the Rings became a Hollywood blockbuster & put New Zealand on the map*. Rosedale/New York: Penguin Books.
- Wee, V. (2006). *Resurrecting and Updating the Teen Slasher: The Case of Scream*. "Journal of Popular Film and Television", Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 50–61.
- Zoë, W. (2019). *Classical Hollywood Film Cycles*. New York: Routledge.

### **Spirals, Slashers, and Sequel: Case of *Happy Death Day* (2017) and *Happy Death Day 2U* (2019)**

This article focuses on the films *Happy Death Day* (2017) and *Happy Death Day 2U* (2019). Both handle the spiral narrative, which is recognised by the article as a specific storytelling pattern with a protagonist stuck in an iterative segment of space, time and causality – and this protagonist is not only fully aware of this situation but also tries to deal with it. What for other unaware characters is a closed loop is for the protagonist an open experience with an odd number of turns of time spiral. The spiral narrative is known mostly from high-budget films such as *Groundhog Day* (1993) or *Edge Of Tomorrow* (2014). Nevertheless, as the article explains, it occurs in dozens of other theatrical films, VOD films, television films or television shows. However, what are the reasons why, when there is an extensive set of works to choose from, does the article take just the doublet of *Happy Death Day* films? (1) On their example, the article discusses the author's general hypothesis about spiral narrative works as a series of applications of the innovative narrative schema as an aesthetic tool. Such a hypothesis consists of three broader dimensions: (a) the aesthetic dimension, i.e. the spiral schema as a part of the art work; (b) the creative dimension, i.e. the spiral schema as part of the problem-solution process of filmmaking; (c) the production dimension, i.e. the spiral schema as a part of the competition of audiovisual production. (2) An even more important reason, though, for selecting just these two films has been the fact that *Happy Death Day 2U* is a sequel of *Happy Death Day*. In the „post-classical era” of global franchises, sequels, prequels, remakes, reboots and transmedia storytellings, this does not seem to be exceptional. However, in the context of the spiral narrative, this is an unprecedented step that raises several questions the article asks.