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Loop Structures in Film (and Literature): Experiments with Time Between the Poles of Classical and Complex Narration

Much has been written about the trend towards more complex narrative structures in film and TV series which, starting during the 1990s, gained momentum and breadth in the 2000s, and continues to influence the way stories are told in audiovisual media today[1]. Catchy terms such as 'mind-game films' (Elsaesser 2009), 'modular narratives' (Cameron 2008), or 'mind benders' (Johnson 2005) have been introduced to label the films contributing to this trend. The assessment of the phenomenon has not, however, been unanimous, since a dispute arose over the question whether enhanced narrative complexity should be considered as merely expanding, or rather deliberately breaching, classical norms of storytelling. David Bordwell and Warren Buckland are two major opponents in this disagreement, with the former emphasizing the conventional nature of many narrative devices in films such as *Run Lola Run* (Germany 1998) or *Memento* (USA 2000) and the latter stressing the non-classical and anti- mimetic quality of the same films.

In my opinion, the debate suffers, at least as far as the extreme positions are concerned, from a lack of differentiation and methodological rigour. Bordwell is right to point to the many redundancies in *Memento's* exposition (2006: 78), but do they outweigh the film's innovation in combining backwards narration with a double twist ending? His analysis of classical cohesion devices and aids to com-

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[1] I would like to thank Joseph Swann for the revision of the manuscript.

prehension in forking-path films (2002) has its merits, but how many of them still hold true for a film like *Mr. Nobody* (Belgium/Germany/Canada/France 2009), which goes two steps further in narrative experimentation? Warren Buckland, on the other hand, is right to highlight the degree to which a film like *Lost Highway* (USA/France 1996) defies norms of classical storytelling (2009), but does this hold true to the same extent for films like *The Sixth Sense* (USA 1999) or *Run Lola Run*, which in his anthology are subsumed under the same term ('puzzle films') as *Lost Highway*?

Ease versus lack of cognitive control

More generally speaking, how do we measure adherence to or departure from classical norms of storytelling? A simple count of classical versus anticlassical devices is certainly not enough to answer this question. Rather, we need to determine which quality we regard as central for the classical mode of narration. Simplicity of narrative structure comes to mind immediately, since in the ongoing debate classical narration is usually opposed to complex narration. But Bordwell (2006, 72) rightly points out that classical Hollywood could also accommodate quite elaborate structures, such as the flashback within a flashback within a flashback of *The Locket* (USA 1946).

Rather than looking exclusively at structural patterns, we should also assess the way narrations are processed and made sense of by spectators. And in this respect we can safely say that classical narration (as opposed to complex narration) tends to favor a sense of rapid cognitive mastery and to avoid effects of mental overload or dissonance, especially those of an enduring nature. Reconsidered in these terms (which resemble those proposed by Kiss and Willemsen [2017]) as a specific way to dispatch narrative information and to design the sensory impact of audiovisual material, narrative complexity can only be legitimately predicated of films which create in spectators a sense of imperilled cognitive control, either temporary (in weaker cases) or permanent (in stronger ones)[2]. Ease of cognitive control is admittedly not the only criterion for determining the degree of classicism a specific film exhibits, but it is central, considering the direction narrative innovation has taken in the last three decades.

Another problem for any general statement about narrative complexity is the diversity of the films under discussion. Considering narrative structure alone, Charles-Ramirez Berg (2006) has distinguished no less than twelve categories of alternative plot formations (ensemble, parallel, multiple personality, daisy chain,

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[2] See also Brütsch (2018), pp. 147–149.

backwards, repeated action, repeated event, hub and spoke, jumbled, subjective, existential, and metanarrative plot). Global characterizations of this broad field of narrative experimentation are bound to be cursory, all the more so considering that each category may harbour widely varying levels of adherence to classical norms. On the other hand, the explanatory power of an examination of a handful of instances from a single category (such as Bordwell's analysis of four forking-path-films [2002]) is also limited, since the results may be relativized by other examples not taken into consideration.

For these reasons, I will opt for a middle way. I propose to examine a large number of films (more than 50) which, although they share a specific narrative design, have so far been discussed under different labels, most notably as 'forking-path,' 'multiple-draft,' 'loop,' 'repeated action,' or 'multiple personality (branched) plot' films. The common feature of my selection is that their narration constructs a fictional world in which a certain period of time occurs more than once, allowing one or several characters to experience specific events in more than one way. Excluded from my sample are instances in which this kind of repetition is only an imaginary product of one of the characters (as when the protagonist of the screwball comedy *Unfaithfully Yours* [USA 1948] goes mentally through the various ways he could react to his wife's infidelity)[3]. Excluded are also examples of multi-perspectivity such as the flashback structure in *Rashomon* (Japan 1950), where the repetition and variation only pertain to the level of narration and not to the events in the story.

I will use the term 'loop film' as an umbrella term for all the variants of this narrative setup, knowing that my broad understanding of the term contrasts with the more restricted use preferred so far by most film scholars. As the title of this article indicates, I will also consider some literary examples, but my focus will be on loop structures in film narration.

A typology of different kinds of loop structure

I will address the issue of the adherence of loop narratives to norms of classical and complex narration in the final section of this essay. First, I would like to focus, however, on questions of narrative structure and genre. In doing so, I will seek to establish a typology of different kinds of loop structure, an undertaking that has helped me come to grips with the large number of examples I have found in my research on loop narratives. In order to grasp the structural diversity of this class of narratives, I propose to begin with a thought experiment.

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[3] For an analysis of 'game over and restart' patterns in screwball comedies, see Leebrand 2007.

In his book *The Way Hollywood tells it*, David Bordwell wrote in the chapter on network narratives: 'My colleagues who teach filmmaking tell me that students often hit on eccentric formal schemes before they have worked out the story action. ("I want to begin and end my film with exactly the same scene, only it will mean something different the second time")' (Bordwell 2006, 75). Let us imagine we are teachers in a screenplay or a creative writing class and a student proposes to write a script or story with a time loop in it. What questions could we ask to find out what kind of narrative structure the student has in mind? Here are some proposals: Should the loop structure dominate the whole narrative or just part of it? How long should the intervals be, measured in story time? How many rounds are there? And how many and what part of them are you going to tell about? Who is conscious of the loop and remembers the previous run-throughs? Do the characters redouble with every turn or not? Do they actively create the loop or merely endure it passively? Are the intervals fixed or variable? At what point does the narrative start: before the first round or in the middle of the looping process? Are the repetitions due to a circular time structure or to leaps back in time? Is there a way out of this temporal prison? And do you give any explanation of why time repeats?

We could also ask questions concerning genre, mood or theme of the narrative, of course. But let us stick to the structural component first. My list of questions addresses twelve key features with roughly two to three variables for each of them. If we examine loop films that have already been made and loop stories that have already been written, we can see in table one that there are examples for all the variables listed:

Table one: Questions concerning the structural patterns of the loops

Loop dominates?	yes	no	
Examples	12.01; EDGE OF TOMORROW	DR. STRANGE; THE MISFITS	
Length of interval?	minutes / hours	days / months	years / decades
Examples	SOURCE CODE; RUN LOLA RUN	DAY BREAK; THE MAN WITH RAIN IN HIS SHOES	THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT; *Replay (novel)*
Number of intervals in story?	two / a few	20–50	infinite
Examples	REPEAT ERFORMANCE; BLIND CHANCE	PREMATURE; ABOUT TIME	'12:01 p.m.' (short story); TRIANGLE

Shown in discourse?	one	a few	20–50
Examples	REPEAT PERFORMANCE; THE I INSIDE	PROJECT ALMANACH; RUN LOLA RUN	GROUNDHOG DAY; THE LAST DAY OF SUMMER
Awareness of loop?	zero characters	one character	two / a group of characters
Examples	RUN LOLA RUN; MORIR (O NO)	'Doubled and Redoubled'; PREMATURE	11.22.63; REPEATERS
Redoubling?	yes	no	
Examples	CRONOCRÌMENES; DARK COUNTRY	EDGE OF TOMORROW; BLIND CHANCE	
Time manipulation?	active	passive > active	passive
Examples	ABOUT TIME; PROJECT ALMANACH	THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT; RETROACTIVE	DAY BREAK; REPEAT PERFORMANCE
Intervals fixed?	yes	partly (their beginning)	no
Examples	SOURCE CODE; REPEATERS	EDGE OF TOMORROW; PREMATURE	ABOUT TIME; PROJECT ALMANACH
Discourse entry?	before first round	with first round	middle of process
Examples	EDGE OF TOMORROW; GROUNDHOG DAY	12.01; X-FILES: MONDAY	'Doubled and redoubled'; TRIANGLE
Looping trajectory?	circular time	leaps back in time	not specified
Examples	DARK COUNTRY; TWILIGHT ZONE: JUDGEMENT NIGHT	RUN LOLA RUN; PROJECT ALMANACH	GROUNDHOG DAY; CHRISTMAS DO OVER
Way out?	yes	no	
Examples	È GIÀ IERI; THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT	THE I INSIDE; TRIANGLE	
Explicit explanation?	yes	no	
Examples	SOURCE CODE; EDGE OF TOMORROW	GROUNDHOG DAY; RUN LOLA RUN	

The table suggests that there is a very large number of possible combinations and thus of possible kinds of loop structure. Not surprisingly, however, my analysis of some 50 examples has established a far smaller number of actual

living species out there in the habitat of our screens and books than would be theoretically conceivable. There are two main reasons for this. First, some of these variables work well together while others are mutually exclusive. If the number of reruns is infinite, you cannot have a way out, for example, and if no character is aware of the loop, you cannot have active time manipulation by any character. Second, once a specific combination has proved successful, it tends to be reused for other projects.

Temporarily stuck in a (lousy) day

All in all, I have found four major kinds of loop structure. The first one I call the 'temporarily stuck in a (lousy) day' variant. The most famous specimen of this variant is *Groundhog Day* (USA 1992). But let me show its mode of operation with a lesser-known example, 12:01 by Jack Sholder (USA 1993). Here is a synopsis of the story: Barry Thomas, a low level employee in the human resources department of a high-tech company experimenting with particle acceleration, has a rough start to the day. The alarm clock won't be silenced, his mother calls to inquire about his (non-existent) love live, and a road accident delays his arrival at the office, where his supervisor receives him with a series of admonitions including a threat of dismissal. The situation worsens when his clumsy advances on Lisa, an attractive co-worker from the science department, are harshly rejected and his hopes to still win her over are shattered when she is shot dead before his eyes in front of the office building. After drowning his frustration in alcohol with his office buddy, dropping his cap in the fish tank and knocking over a flower vase, Barry finally turns in to end his horrible day.

Next morning, the vase is inexplicably intact again, there is another road accident to delay him, and the piles of documents he had dispatched the day before are back on his desk. Barry is even more confused when he encounters Lisa alive and without a scratch. It is only when he reads in a newspaper headline that the ongoing scientific experiments could cause time to repeat that he suspects what is happening: he is reliving the same day a second time. He tries to convince Lisa of this fact and save her life, but she won't listen and gets killed again.

On the third run-through, Barry is already more skilled in convincing Lisa about the time bounce (and in flirting with her). He heroically saves her from her killers and wins her heart at their hideaway. The fourth time round, Barry is even quicker in winning Lisa's trust and they find out that Dr. Moxley, head of the science department, has fired the particle accelerator despite orders from the government to shut it down. The fifth retake of the day ends quickly, since Barry, eager to stop Moxley, drives to work too fast and is killed in an accident.

Frustrated at first, but then with new vigour, Barry, in his sixth attempt, succeeds in shutting down the accelerator (thereby ending the looping process) and earning Lisa's love for good.

The following literary and film texts exemplify the 'temporarily stuck in a (lousy) day' variant[4]:

- *Doubled and Redoubled*, M. Jameson, 1941 (short story)

- *One Fine Day*, Leon Arden, 1981 (novel)

- *Groundhog Day*, USA 1992

- *12.01*, USA 1993

- *Christmas Every Day*, USA 1996

- *The X-Files: Monday*, USA 1999 (season 6, episode 14)

- *Stork Days (E Già Ieri)*, Italy/Spain/UK 2004

- *Christmas do Over*, USA 2006

- *Day Break*, USA 2006 (TV series)

- *The Last Day of Summer*, USA 2007

- *Repeaters*, Canada 2010

- *Wake up and Die (Volver a Morir)*, Columbia 2011

- *Pete's Christmas*, Canada 2013

- *Premature*, USA 2014

- *Edge of Tomorrow*, USA/Canada 2014

- *Before i Fall*, USA 2017

The selection of variables for this type, represented in a schematic way, is shown in table two[5].

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[4] My list makes no claim to exhaustiveness, especially concerning the literary examples.
[5] Indications in bold print apply most frequently, those in italics apply in some cases, and those in standard print and brackets do not apply at all for the category in question.

Table two: Distribution of variables for the 'temporarily stuck in a (lousy) day' variant

Length of interval?	(minutes / hours)	one day	(months decades)
Number of intervals in story?	(two / a few)	6–300	(infinite)
Shown in discourse?	(one)	(a few)	6–50
Awareness of loop?	(zero characters)	one character	two / a group of characters
Redoubling?	(yes)	no	
Time manipulation?	(active)	(passive > active)	passive
Intervals fixed?	yes	partly (their beginning)	(no)
Discourse entry?	before first round	with first round	(middle of process)
Looping trajectory?	(circular time)	leaps back in time	not specified
Way out?	yes	(no)	
Explicit explanation?	yes	no	

The basic pattern can be summarized as follows: a day repeats itself a considerable number of times, but only one character (or in rare cases a group of characters) is conscious of the loops[6]. He or she (it is usually a he) cannot do anything about it, except in some cases influence the end-point of each repetition. The day usually ends prematurely when the hero dies (*12:01, Groundhog Day, X-Files: Monday, Edge Of Tomorrow, Volver A Morir*) or is knocked out (*The Last Day Of Summer*); in *Premature*, a high school comedy counting on coarse humour, it does so when the protagonist ejaculates. The narration starts before, or with, the first round and ends when the hero has found a way to break the cycle. Thus there is a way out, but rarely any (explicit) explanation as to why the loops occurred in the first place[7]. The temporal confinement is enhanced in some instances by spatial confinement to an island (*E Già Ieri*), a town (*Groundhog Day*), a village (*Christmas Do Over*), or a house (*Volver a Morir*).

What are the attractions of this kind of loop structure? There is potential for irony: the days in question – often festive occasions like Christmas – are supposed to be enjoyable but turn out to be boring or downright disastrous, and

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[6] *Day Break* and *Repeaters* are the only examples with two or three characters experiencing the repetitions.

[7] One Fine Day comes up with a quite hilarious explanation, involving the unfortunate coincidence of God's intervention to adjust the speed of the earth's rotation with a magic spell cast by a clairvoyant woman. *Edge of Tomorrow* and *12:01*, the two examples firmly belonging to (or borrowing from) science-fiction, give a pseudo-scientific explanation involving alien super-intelligence and quantum physical machinery respectively.

when they are finally over they start all over again. The irony is even greater, when, as in the short story Doubled and Redoubled, the best day of the protagonist's life begins to recur and turns into hell simply because of its repetitiveness.

The hero is caught in a temporal prison, but as he is the only one who remembers, he can take advantage of his superior knowledge. There is much potential for comedy here, and it can come as no surprise that most of the examples on my list are either full-blown comedies or feature at least a number of comic scenes[8]. The accumulation of knowledge may also help the main character solve a mystery, as in *12.01*, analysed above, or in the TV series *Day Break*, in which detective Hopper, framed for murder, finds a new clue every day to help him prove his innocence.

While the basic looping structure is one of repetition, the main character inevitably changes during the process. The development typically contains all (or some) of the following phases: confusion, disbelief, comprehension, taking advantage, searching for help, anger, resignation, and acceptance[9]. Acceptance and inner change are often the key to finally earning a way out of the vicious circle. Hence the structure is well suited to coming-of-age narratives in which character development is the main topic[10].

A glimpse at Sisyphus

I call my second type of loop structure 'a glimpse at Sisyphus'. My example to illustrate this variant is *Triangle*. In order to elucidate its structure, an extended synopsis is necessary: The film opens with a scene in which Jess comforts her autistic son Tommy, who has apparently just woken from a bad dream. The next scene shows Jess preparing to take him on a sailing trip with her friend Greg, when suddenly the doorbell rings, but nobody is at the door. Arriving at the harbour without her son, Jess explains that he is at school, but she appears confused and says sorry to Greg for no apparent reason. Together with four of Greg's friends they set out, but Jess immediately retires to her berth, falls asleep and dreams of being washed ashore on a sandy beach. Asked how she feels after waking, Jess replies that she had a nightmare but cannot remember what it was about. After sailing for some time, the boat is caught in a storm and capsizes, but the group manages to take refuge on the overturned boat. Luckily, an ocean

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[8] *Volver a Morir*, a gory horror film, and *Repeaters*, a violent drama, are the exceptions to this rule.

[9] *Groundhog Day* is a case in point showcasing all the phases in comic exaltation.

[10] Contrary to most reviewers, I consider *Groundhog Day* a parody of Hollywood's propensity to submit its heroes to profound reformation, not least because Phil's character arc is so over stretched, and Bill Murray is so much funnier as a misanthropist than as a philanthropist.

liner soon passes; they wave and yell for help and manage to board it. The ship seems to have been abandoned, but Jess has a strong feeling of déjà vu. They are suddenly attacked by a burlap-masked person who kills everyone except her. She succeeds in throwing the aggressor overboard, but just before she has done so, the attacker implores her in a desperate (female) voice: 'They'll return. You have to kill them. It's the only way to get home!' Shortly afterwards, Jess hears shouting and returns on deck, only to see the overturned boat with herself and her friends standing on it, waving for help. The group boards the liner and events start to repeat. Jess hears an inner voice urging her to kill the new arrivals but decides to break the cycle by refusing to shoot them. She cannot prevent their deaths, however, since a new masked attacker appears and again kills everyone except herself and her second self, whom she witnesses throwing the attacker overboard just as she had done before. At this very moment cries for help resonate again from the upturned boat and Jess realizes that the cycle restarts each time everybody (except herself) is killed. She decides to put on the mask and kill everybody herself, with the intention of saving the next arrivals by not letting them board the ship at all. Jess's plan is thwarted, however, by her newest alter ego, who corners her and throws her overboard.

The next scene shows Jess washed ashore on a sandy beach. She pulls herself up, rushes home and is relieved to see her son through the window of her house. But then she catches sight of another version of herself packing for the sailing trip. Impatient with his autism, this other self begins to chide her son abusively. Upset by this, Jess rings the doorbell, fetches a hammer from the shed, sneaks into the house, kills her double, and tries to comfort her son by making him believe that what he has witnessed is just a bad dream. On their way to the harbour (with the dead body in the boot), a seagull hits the front window of their car. Throwing the dead bird over the edge of the road, Jess discovers dozens of other seagulls already lying there. Back on the road, she is distracted by her son and crashes into a truck. Her son dies and the body of her alter ego lies on the road as if also killed in this accident, while she stands apart, unharmed. She turns away and takes a taxi to the harbour to meet Greg and set off on another sailing trip.

'A glimpse at Sisyphus' is a rarer species than the 'temporarily stuck in a (lousy) day' variant. I have only found five examples:

- *The Twilight Zone: Judgement Night*, USA 1959 (season 1, episode 10)

- *The i Inside*, GB/USA 2004

- *Triangle*, GB/Australia 2009

- *Dark Country*, USA 2009

- *Mine Games*, USA 2012

And among these *Triangle* is also a special case in that it features a loop within a loop. I will get to this particularity shortly, but must disregard it for now in my description of the basic pattern. The structural variables are distributed as shown in table three.

Table three: Distribution of variables for the 'glimpse at Sisyphus' variant

Length of interval?	(minutes)	hours / days	(months / years / decades)
Number of intervals in story?	(two / a few)	(20–50)	infinite
Shown in discourse?	one	(a few)	(20–50)
Awareness of loop?	(zero characters)	one character (only at the end)	*a group of characters (only at the end)*
Redoubling?	yes	(no)	
Time manipulation?	(active)	(passive > active)	passive
Intervals fixed?	yes	(partly / beginning)	no
Discourse entry?	(before first round)	(with first round)	middle of process
Looping trajectory?	circular time	(leaps back in time)	(not specified)
Way out?	(yes)	no	
Explicit explanation?	yes	no	

The interval in this variant is of the order of a few hours or days, but the looping process goes on forever, so there is no way out of it. However, the film only shows one full round: not the first one, but a specimen from somewhere in the middle of the process. Only the protagonists are aware of the repetitions, but – in contrast with the first category – they only learn about it towards the end of the movie when the interval starts to repeat. This discovery is triggered among other things by the confrontation with the second self and the already once experienced scene; so – again in contrast with the first category – the looping trajectory is circular and characters reduplicate. The fact that we are in the middle of an endless repetition is usually visualized by the accumulation of specific items or objects which testify to the recurrence of certain actions. The dead seagulls in *Triangle*, the wine bottles in *The I Inside*, and the graves in *Dark Country* are cases in point.

The events experienced are strange, incoherent and imbued with a strong sense of déjà vu. The mood prevailing is bleak and ominous. The most suitable label for the genre is existential drama, with a strong touch of horror present in most examples. One of the main assets of this structure is the unexpected revelation of the loop, which occurs much later than in the 'lousy day' variant. There are more or less explicit hints to the circular structure throughout, but in the most convincing examples they remain subliminal, with the result that viewers, like the protagonist(s), are caught off guard when they finally discover that the actions of the film lead to the point in time where the story first began.

A three-part loop within a loop

With its loop within the loop, *Triangle* is the most sophisticated example in this regard. In view of Jess's experiences, we realize quite early that she is caught in a loop (the short-lived one on the liner till the next group arrives), and from this point on the dramatic question dominates: will she be able to escape? We first think she will, since she manages to divert events from their preordained path by refusing to play the role of the attacker. But things get more complicated when the killer reappears, apparently as a third version of Jess. The 'first' Jess, by trying to avoid her predestined end, precisely fulfils it[11], since it transpires that the loop progresses not in a two-part but in a three-part cycle, with Jess first being the victim who defeats the attacker, then the observer who tries to divert the course of events, and finally the attacker who is thrown overboard. But the completion of the three-part cycle does not seem to restart it since Jess, instead of resurfacing on the upturned boat (as structural logic would suggest) is washed ashore and free to go back to her son. And only at this point near the end of the film do we realize that she is caught in an even bigger loop which contains every single event we have witnessed and which will bring her back to the ocean liner after all. This revelation takes us by surprise since it comes after two apparent escapes, the second of which seemed permanent, yet still it makes perfect sense (within the twisted circular logic established throughout) because several 'accumulation-scenes' on the liner (showing countless notes, necklaces, and dead bodies) indicated that this shorter cycle is endless as well, thus requiring a re-entry point which the surprise ending provides[12].

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[11] This is a common development in loop films of this variant.

[12] It takes several viewings to grasp the structure of *Triangle*. Even if the film's action may be said to follow a certain logic, this logic is manifestly paradoxical. Not all commentators agree on how exactly to unravel the entangled storylines, as the many controversial interpretations in reviews and discussion forums on the Internet demonstrate.

In cases of a two or three-part cycle with the protagonist redoubling at each stage, the disclosure of the recurring nature of events is usually delayed by concealing the identity of the first doppelgänger with the help of a mask (*Triangle*), a disfigured face (*Dark Country*), or a bandage (*Timecrimes*)[13] – a device apt to enhance mystery and suspense. When the confrontation with the other self eventually occurs, the paradoxical nature of the circular structure is made obvious, allowing for allegorical interpretations of a split-personality kind. In the case of *Triangle*, we may speculate about the protagonist's wish to suppress her impatient and aggressive side, which seems unable to cope with her autistic son.

Do the loop-films of this category offer any explanation why events repeat? Three out of five establish with their final revelation the expiatory scenario of a guilt-ridden soul in post-mortem agony trying in vain to undo past misconduct. *Twilight Zone: Judgement Night* has a German submarine captain responsible for the sinking of an American freighter endlessly re-experience his own crime from the perspective of his victims. *The I Inside* features a protagonist killed in a car accident who feels responsible for the death of his brother and perpetually tries to undo what happened. And *Triangle* may also be interpreted in this sense if we construe the car crash scene as the threshold to a life after death: the first Jess we see lying on the road is Jess killed by the accident; the second one standing by unharmed is Jess as a ghost contemplating her own death and then heading off for another round in purgatory. In *Dark Country* and *Mine Games*, no moral explanation of this sort is provided.

The loop structure as described – with the protagonist realizing his or her predicament at the end but not aware of it at the beginning – presupposes a loss of memory from one cycle to the next. In *The I Inside*, this mechanism is made explicit (the hero wakes up in hospital diagnosed with amnesia), while *Triangle* and *Mine Games* interject a scene with dream-filled sleep supposed to be interpreted (in retrospect) as having the same effect.

A display of alternative versions

I call my third type of loop structure 'a display of alternative versions'. The following examples belong to this category:

- *Blind Chance (Przypadek)*, Poland 1981

- *Smoking / No Smoking*, France/Italy/Switzerland 1993

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[13] *Timecrimes* (like 'By his Bootstraps' and *Predestination*) only partly adheres to the logic of the 'glimpse at Sisyphus' variant.

- *Too Many Ways To Be Nr. 1*, Hong Kong 1997

- *Morir (Un Moment Abans De Morir)*, Sergi Belbel, 1994 (play)

- *Run Lola Run (Lola Rennt)*, Germany 1998

- *Sliding Doors*, GB/USA 1998

- *To Die Or Not (Morir [O No])*, Spain 1999

- *Notre Univers Impitoyable*, France 2008

- *And Then Came Lola*, USA 2009

- *Mr. Nobody*, Belgium/Germany/Canada/France 2009

- Life After Life, Kate Atkinson, 2013 (novel)

Films like *Blind Chance* or *Run Lola Run* are usually referred to as 'what if' or 'forking path' plots but I prefer not to use this designation, because in my fourth category the 'forking path' and 'what if' elements will be even more prominent[14]. I will, then, exemplify the principles of this type of replay structure with a lesser-known example, *To Die (Or Not)*, directed by Ventura Pons and based on a play by Sergi Belbel.

The film presents seven episodes ending with the death of their main characters: a script writer dies of a heart attack, a drug addict of an overdose, a young girl chokes on a bone while eating, a hospital patient succumbs to a pulmonary thrombosis, an old woman commits suicide, and a young man is run over by a police car. In the last episode, a contract killer is about to shoot an elderly man who implores him to have mercy. The killer gives his victim five minutes to call on God for help, but there is no response and he pulls the trigger. After a fade to black, a sign appears reading 'Not to die', the image (so far black and white) turns to colour, and the scene is reinstated half way through the five-minute deadline. This time, the victim starts to rebuke the killer in a way suggesting that God is talking through him. This saves his life. The other episodes now also resume in reverse sequence from the sixth to the first, which not only turns out to be their proper order, but also reveals unexpected connections between them (the junkie is the young girl's uncle, the patient her neighbour, etc.). However, more important for our concerns is the fact that the killer's reluctance to shoot his victim in the second version of the final episode triggers a chain reaction which alters each subsequent episode in such a way that the lives of their protagonists are also eventually saved.

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[14] 'Multiple draft' is another label fitting this group of films.

To Die (Or Not) combines its double draft structure with elements of backwards and episodic narration. Most other examples on my list are less complex, however, centering on the display of two or more versions of certain events. Schematically, the distribution of the variables for this kind of loop structure may be outlined as in table four:

Table four: Distribution of variables for the 'display of alternative versions' variant

Length of interval?	minutes / hours	days / months	years / decades
Number of versions in story?	2–6	(20–50)	(infinite)
Shown in discourse?	(one)	2–6	(20–50)
Awareness of loop?	zero characters	(one character)	(two / a group of characters)
Redoubling?	(yes)	no	
Time manipulation?	(active)	(passive > active)	passive
Intervals fixed?	yes	(partly / beginning)	(no)
Discourse entry?	before first round	(with first round)	(middle of process)
Looping trajectory?	(circular time)	leaps back in time	(not specified)
Way out?	yes	(no)	
Explicit explanation?	(yes)	no	

The basic pattern may be described like this: the length of the intervals varies considerably, but their number is normally between two and four, and all replays are shown. Characters do not reduplicate, they are not directly responsible for the replays and, above all, they are not aware of them. There are simple jumps back in time between the different versions[15], and no explicit explanation is given for their multiplication. In the previous two categories, we shared the superior knowledge – or lack of knowledge – of the protagonists concerning the looping process. In this category, only we know about it, allowing for effects of dramatic irony and establishing a distance between characters and viewers.

The so-called butterfly effect is a central topic in this type of loop film. After some time, the narration reverts to a point already passed in the story, stages a minor or major deviation from the first account, and goes on to show its consequences[16]. One or several nodal situations are thus presented, and the ensuing

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[15] *Sliding Doors* and *Notre Univers Impitoyable* jump back and forth between the different versions, while the other examples show uninterrupted run-throughs.

[16] Catching or missing a train or subway (*Blind Chance*, *Sliding Doors*, *Mr. Nobody*) are favoured variables at the crossroads to the different versions.

versions indicate that the slightest change of circumstances may drastically alter the course of events. A sense of openness and virtuality prevails and some authors (e.g. Schenk 2013; Bode 2013) for this reason call these examples 'future narratives.' Some of the examples (especially *Run Lola Run*) exhibit a playfulness derived from computer game logic.

Try to change (your) destiny!

The label I choose for my fourth type is 'Try to change (your) destiny!', and I shall illustrate the structure with the example of the TV miniseries *11.22.63*, based on Stephen King's novel of the same title. Its main storyline can be summarized as follows: in a closet of his diner, Al Templeton reveals to Jake Epping a time portal to 1960. Dying of cancer, he asks his friend to use the portal to prevent the killing of John F. Kennedy, a goal he himself sought to achieve in vain. He explains that each passage through the portal resets the past, erasing the alterations caused by previous interventions. Endowed with Al's insights, Jake transits to 1960, blends into society by taking a job as an English teacher, and secretly investigates the question whether Harvey Lee Oswald had a handler or acted on his own. At the school he falls in love with Sadie, the librarian, who eventually gets to know his secret. Together, they succeed in preventing the assassination; but, during the fight with Oswald, Sadie is fatally wounded. Jake goes back to 2016 only to discover that the world lies in ruins after decades of riots and wars following Kennedy's two presidential terms. Determined to restart life with Sadie, Jake returns to 1960, but a tramp – who seems the only other person to experience the replays – assures him that she will inevitably die again. Jake decides not to interfere with the past again, and looks up Sadie, now an old woman, in the present instead.

These are examples of the 'try to change (your) destiny' variant:

- *Turn Back The Clock*, USA 1933

- *Repeat Performance*, William O'Farell, 1942 (novel)

- *It's a Wonderful Life*, USA 1946

- *Repeat Performance*, USA 1947

- *Peggy Sue Got Married*, USA 1986

- *Mr. Destiny*, USA 1990

- *Retroactive*, USA 1997

- *The Man With Rain in his Shoes*, Spain/France/GB/Germany/USA 1998

- *The Butterfly Effect*, USA 2004

- *If Only*, USA/GB 2004

- *Slipstream*, USA/Zambia/Germany 2005

- *Déjà Vu*, USA 2006

- *The Butterfly Effect 2*, USA 2006

- *The Door (Die Tür)*, Germany 2009

- *The Butterfly Effect 3: Revelations*, USA 2009

- *Being Erica*, Canada 2009–2011 (TV series)

- *Misfits*, GB 2009–2013 (TV series)

- *11.22.63*, Stephen King, 2011 (novel)

- *Source Code*, USA/France 2011

- *About Time*, GB 2013

- *Project Almanach*, USA 2015

- *11.22.63*, USA 2016 (TV series)

- *Twelve Monkeys*, USA 2015–2018 (TV series) The structural variables are distributed as outlined in table five:

Table five: Distribution of variables for the 'try to change (your) destiny!' variant

Length of interval?	minutes / hours	days / months	years / decades
Number of intervals in story?	two / a few	20–50	(infinite)
Shown in discourse?	(one)	two / a few	(20–50)
Consciousness?	(zero characters)	one character	two / a group of characters
Redoubling?	yes	no	
Time manipulation?	active	passive > active	(passive)
Intervals fixed?	yes	partly / beginning	no
Discourse entry?	before first round	with first round	(middle of process)
Looping trajectory?	(circular time)	leaps back in time	(not specified)
Way out?	yes	(no)	
Explicit explanation?	yes	no	

As in the previous type of loop structure, we have nodal situations and forking paths. But here, most of the protagonists go back in time with the deliberate intention of correcting the course of past events in order to prevent major calamities from occurring[17]; so, in contrast with the previous category, the protagonists are active and knowing. And they have found a special gateway to the past, either of a supernatural or of a (pseudo-)scientific kind. It may simply be a portal, door, or cupboard (as in *11.22.63*, *The Door*, and *About Time*), or a sophisticated technological device (as in *Retroactive*, *Project Almanach*, *Déjà Vu*, and *Twelve Monkeys*). Occasionally a divine or magical intervention is necessary (*It's a Wonderful Life, Mr. Destiny, The Man with Rain In His Shoes, Being Erica*).

There are three main variants of this category: First, a plainly utopian version staging a fantasy of retroactive prevention of human catastrophes (*Retroactive, Slipstream, Déjà Vu, Source Code*)[18] or, in the mild version, of being able to catch up on missed opportunities (*Peggy Sue Got Married, Being Erica, About Time*). Films like *Déjà Vu* and *Source Code* demonstrate that in the post 9/11 era, the strong version of this variant lends itself to enacting the illusion of undoing terrorist attacks.

Second, there is a more sober and ambivalent version in which the original goal of the protagonist cannot be achieved, either because destiny, forced to take a different path, still leads to a similar endpoint (*Repeat Performance, If Only, The Man With Rain In His Shoes, The Door*), or because the alterations brought about have unforeseen negative consequences which can only be corrected by giving up the initial objective. *11.22.63* belongs to this subgroup, since the achievement of the goal (the prevention of Kennedy's assassination) not only comes at a high price (the loss of Sadie) but also belies the hope of changing the world for the better. 'Don't mess with the past' could also be the slogan of *Project Almanach* or *The Butterfly Effect* and its sequels, for in these films every attempt at rectification causes new problems[19]. This is why the protagonists ultimately feel compelled to renounce, or even destroy, the means they use to travel back in time, despite the personal loss this implies – perfect for a bittersweet ending.

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[17] In some cases, the (first) leap back in time is unintentional (*Turn Back The Clock, Repeat Performance, Peggy Sue Got Married, The Door, The Butterfly Effect, If Only*), but the following ones (if there are any) are always deliberate.

[18] *Back To The Future* 1–3 and *Terminator* 1–3 follow a similar logic, even though their focus is more on time travel than on time loops.

[19] The TV series *Twelve Monkeys* (USA 2015–2018), featuring a protagonist attempting to retroactively prevent the outbreak of a deadly virus, builds on all sorts of complications the undoing of past events may entail in order to create new episodes for the TV series now in its fourth season already.

Thirdly, there is an 'educational' version featuring a protagonist discontented withordinary life who dreams of a more glamorous and affluent existence. When the chance comes to 'turn back the clock' and actually live a different life (*Turn Back The Clock, Mr. Destiny*), or at least to see what difference the desired changes might make in the present (*It's A Wonderful Life*), the protagonists quickly realize that their existing lives are much better than the alternatives they had wished for.

Genres and rules of the game

Two genres dominate the 'Try to change (your) destiny!' type of loop structure: drama and romantic comedy. In most cases a love affair takes either centre stage or at least complicates the hero's quest. Horror plots, well represented in categories one and two, are absent here, presumably because they only thrive when the protagonists are at the mercy of the temporal scheme and cannot influence it. Horror also builds on the main characters' awareness of the loop, a prerequisite for their suffering, which is absent in the third category. As in category one, comedy may arise from the display of repeated scenes with minor variations and the superior knowledge shared with the main character. Or it can build (like drama) on the surprises the butterfly effect has in store for the main characters.

The examples on my list featuring protagonists with a portal or time machine at their disposal usually establish specific rules concerning the outreach and consequences of the jumps back in time. Time spans may be limited to a few minutes (*Source Code*), hours (*Retroactive*, *Slipstream*), days (*Déjà Vu*), or decades (*11.22.63*), and only in some cases can they be extended by using extra effort or power (*Retroactive*, *Slipstream* and *Project Almanach*), thus allowing for suspenseful last-minute rescues. Characters using diaries (*The Butterfly Effect*) or their memory (*About Time*) to go back in time are freer to choose their entry point (within the limits of their life span), but they are nonetheless subject to the fact that every return revokes earlier changes and may, through the so-called butterfly effect, have unforeseen consequences for the present. Girlfriends won and lost, or one's own child swapped for a stranger, are some of the bitter lessons careless time travellers experience in this type of replay structure.

Deviations from the established types of loop structure

I do not claim to capture every possible kind of loop narrative with my four categories; within the genre of science fiction especially, time travel to past events, and other forms of time warp, are commonplace, and their diversity far exceeds the prototypes I have established. Nonetheless, I would maintain that the categories outlined in this essay cover a large segment of the fictional

works (especially films) based on loop structures in the broad sense defined above. And I hope that this overview may provide some orientation and serve as a starting point for further in-depth analysis and interpretation of individual examples, especially those difficult to categorise, such as *Primer* (USA 2004) and *Plus One* (USA 2013), or those combining elements from different categories, such as the short stories 12.01 p.m.' (1973) and '12.02 p.m.' (2011), which essentially adhere to the 'stuck in a lousy day' variant but – as in 'glimpse at Sisyphus' – never release their heroes from their temporal prison; or the novel Replay, which also features a protagonist forced to relive not just a single day but entire decades of his life again and again, prompting him to attempt to change his destiny[20].

Between the poles of classical and complex narration

To what extent do loop narratives deviate from established conventions of storytelling? On first sight they appear rather non-classical. That a time span we have already lived through starts all over again is an unnatural phenomenon, alien to our experience. At the same time, it is a process which complicates established rules of narrative presentation, since the basic forward momentum of story time and the coherence of the fictional world are disrupted. Loop narratives seem to ignore classical narration's preference for linearity and consistency and its avoidance of conspicuous repetitiveness and paradox; instead of subordinating their narrative structure to the presentation of story and subject matter, they openly showcase unusual structural patterns. For these reasons, many of the examples on my list are frequently discussed in terms of non-classical, complex storytelling: in Ramirez Berg's taxonomy of alternative plots, for example, the 'repeated action plot' figures prominently (Ramirez Berg 2006: 30–32).

Table six: Overview

Category	Type of loop structure	Prime example analysed
1	Temporarily stuck in a (lousy) day	*12:01*
2	A glimpse at Sisyphus	*Triangle*
3	A display of alternative versions	*To Die (Or Not)*
4	Try to change (your) destiny!	*11.22.63*

Nevertheless, on closer examination many of these examples can be seen to adhere to a number of classical norms. To begin with, in all of my types except in

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[20] *Looper* (USA/China 2012) is another interesting example, combining elements from the 'glimpse at Sisyphus' and the 'try to change (your) destiny' variants.

category three, nonlinearity is considerably attenuated by the fact that we follow the perception of the main characters, and their experiences are ongoing and continuous. The repetitions also prove only partial, since the protagonists' knowledge and actions usually divert the cycle from its preordained path. In many instances, especially my categories one and four, a dramatic structure is established, with classical elements such as the disruption of an initial equilibrium and goal-oriented protagonists who, confronted with obstacles, grow with the challenge and finally achieve either what they initially wanted or what they finally realized to be their need[21].

In most categories, the loop structure is made plain early on (and quite redundantly), and an explanation, or at least an implicit motivation, may be offered for it. Moreover, some loop structures, especially of the first kind, even if they initially seemed unusual, have become conventional through the many remakes and rip-offs. And in the genre of science fiction we in any case expect frequent disturbances of the space-time continuum. So, to a certain degree, Thompson (1997 and 1999: 131-154) and Bordwell (2002) are right to stress the conventional and classical nature of films like *Groundhog Day*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, or *Run Lola Run*.

This evaluation does not, however, hold true for all the categories and examples on mylist. Especially the second type, and to some degree also the third and fourth, include instances which clearly defy many norms of classical storytelling. In general, we can say that the following features enhance departure from the classical paradigm:

- late disclosure of the loop structure;

- lack of explanation for it;

- characters unable to alter or stop the looping process;

- a circular looping trajectory instead of jumps back in time;

- redoubling of the characters;

- impossibility of a way out;

- combination of different looping patterns;

- combination of the loop structure with other alternative plot structures.

If some or all of these conditions are met, the viewer's sense of cognitive mastery is severely challenged, the paradoxical nature of the work is reinforced, the

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[21] Martin Hermann, evoking the literary tradition of the quest narrative, calls *Groundhog Day* and 12.01 'time-loop quests' (2011: 157–160). This may well be a remote influence, but the more obvious pattern of the two films is the simple goal-oriented single-protagonist action plot of classical film narration, often referred to as the (restorative) three-act structure.

usual concentration on a single, active, goal-oriented protagonist is obstructed, and interpretive closure is impeded. Of the examples analysed above, *Triangle* represents this sort of radical breach with narrative conventions, while 12.01 is situated at the other end of the classical-nonclassical spectrum (and *11.22.63* and *To Die Or Not* may be said to occupy a place in the middle) – which demonstrates that the same basic time-loop device can be used to forge narrations which vary considerably in their adherence to or departure from classical norms of storytelling.

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Premature, USA 2014

Primer, USA 2004

Project Almanach, USA 2015

Repeat Performance, USA 1947

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Abstract

Among the many innovations complex or "puzzle" films have brought about in the last three decades, experiments with narrative time feature prominently. And within the category of nonlinear plots, the loop structure – exemplified by films such as *Repeaters* (Canada 2010), *Source Code* (USA/France 2011), *Looper* (USA/China 2012) or the TV-Series *Day Break* (USA 2006) – has established itself as an interesting variant defying certain norms of storytelling while at the same time conforming in most cases to the needs of genre and mass audience comprehension. In the first part of my paper, I will map out different kinds of repeated action plots, paying special attention to constraints and potentialities pertaining to this particular form. In the second part, I will address the issue of narrative complexity, showing that loop films cover a wide range from "excessively obvious" mainstream (e.g. *Groundhog Day*, USA 1992; *12:01*, USA 1993; *Edge of Tomorrow*, USA/Canada 2014) to disturbing narrative experiments such as *Los Cronocrimenes* (Spain 2007) or *Triangle* (Great Britain/Australia 2009). Finally, a look at two early examples (*Repeat Performance*, USA 1947 and *Twilight Zone: Judgement Day*, USA 1959) will raise the question how singular the recent wave of loop films are from a historical perspective.

Key words: puzzle films, nonlinear plot, loop structure