Scientific Research Publishing

Art and Design Review, 2026, 14(4), 359-368
https://www.scirp.org/journal/adr
ISSN Online: 2332-2004
ISSN Print: 2332-1997

Bodily Discipline and Moral Punishment: The Representation of Female Characters in *Happy Death Day*

Zilin Wu

EIT Data Science and Communication College, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, China
Email: 20252154@zyufl.edu.cn

How to cite this paper: Wu, Z. L. (2026). Bodily Discipline and Moral Punishment: The Representation of Female Characters in *Happy Death Day*. *Art and Design Review, 14,* 359-368.
https://doi.org/10.4236/adr.2026.144018

Received: October 10, 2026
Accepted: November 16, 2026
Published: November 19, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Open Access

Abstract

The female protagonist Theresa (hereafter Tree) in the American teen horror film *Happy Death Day* (2017) displays several characteristics typical of the "transgressive woman" in traditional horror cinema. Unlike traditional slasher films, however, *Happy Death Day* uses a time loop as its narrative mechanism, transforming death, formerly a one-off event in film, into a bodily experience that can recur. Tree's fate also departs from the conventional narrative pattern in which "transgressive women" become victims because of their sexual behaviour or moral transgressions. Instead, she survives and actively kills the murderer. Grounded in feminist film theory, this article takes Carol J. Clover's "Final Girl" theory as its principal point of entry and draws on Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze and Michel Foucault's theory of bodily discipline to analyse the female body, moral reform, relations of looking, and the construction of subjectivity in *Happy Death Day*. It argues that the film does not simply reproduce the traditional slasher formula "transgressive woman = death"; rather, through the time loop, it transforms one-off bodily punishment into an ongoing process of discipline. Through repeated deaths, Tree continually acquires information, reflects on her behaviour, repairs interpersonal relationships, and reconstructs herself, eventually gaining the possibility of ending the loop and surviving. By making Lori, who bears the outward characteristics of the traditional "good girl", the murderer, the film reverses horror cinema's conventional blonde/brunette binary and breaks the simple correspondence between sexual conservatism and moral goodness. It thus both reworks female character types in contemporary horror cinema and retains the narrative logic that "women must reform themselves in order to survive". Rather than making a complete shift from punishing women to liberating them, the film transforms terminal bodily punishment into cyclical bodily discipline.

Keywords

Happy Death Day, Final Girl, Bodily Discipline, Feminist Film Theory

1. Introduction

Christopher Landon's (2017) film *Happy Death Day* unfolds on a college campus. Its central character, university student Tree Gelbman, gets murdered by an unknown masked assailant on her birthday—only to wake right back where she started. Caught in this grim cycle of dying and reliving the same day, she tries to piece together who wants her dead.

Tree's arc is about far more than beating her would-be killer. Much of what matters happens before she gains that ability. Early on in the film, she comes across as pretty dismissive toward people around her. She is having an affair with Gregory, a married professor, and treats her roommate Lori with noticeable coldness. These choices complicate how we read her against Clover's (1992) idea of the Final Girl—that figure who outlasts killer violence and eventually finds the strength to fight back.

A good body of Final-Girl-focused scholarship has looked at how female rule-breaking, moral standards and survival overlap within horror. Trencansky (2001), writing on 1980s slashers, explores how youth-centred stories and character transgressions muddle the genre's seemingly straightforward take on social norms. Weaver et al. (2015) take an empirical route, running quantitative content analysis across thirty commercially successful slasher films spanning three decades. Their data suggests Final Girls tend to show less prominent on-screen sexual activity, act more prosocially, and possess stronger survival-driven agency compared to other female roles. Their work gives us solid ground for thinking through what kinds of behaviour get tied to a Final Girl's survival.

More recent work frames the Final Girl as a flexible archetype, one whose meaning shifts across contemporary popular media. In Final Girls, Feminism and Popular Culture, Paszkiewicz and Rusnak (2020) compile research on modern-day Final Girl portrayals across film, television, fiction and more. Moving well past classic slasher boundaries, the edited volume grapples with gender, sexuality, race, spectatorship and female forms of identification. Almwaka (2022) offers another useful angle, unpacking the messy agency of women in Western as well as Middle Eastern and North-African horror. For her, the Final Girl trope can reinforce patriarchal ideas just as easily as it can push back against them. Taken together, these studies warn us against reading female survival in horror as simple, uncomplicated empowerment. Instead, we often see friction: growing female agency sitting alongside enduring gender-based expectations.

Scholars studying modern horror have also kept returning to female bodies, and how they intersect with violence and power. Wijaya et al. (2025) analyse three Indonesian horror texts, observing how female characters swing between victim-

hood and supernatural power within patriarchal storytelling. Prasetyo et al. (2025) reach similar territory in their own work on contemporary Indonesian horror, pointing out this ambiguous dual status: bodies that are both fragile and potentially powerful. These analyses operate within a very different cultural context from *Happy Death Day*, yet they help build our broader understanding of how modern horror navigates female vulnerability, agency and gendered power dynamics.

Happy Death Day's time-loop premise gives us an interesting case for digging into this very friction. Tree does not escape after one narrow brush with death; she dies over and over, forced to restart her birthday each time. The knowledge she accumulates helps her hunt for the murderer, yet these repeated cycles also reshape her personal relationships—most evidently with her father and with Lori. This paper works through two interlocking questions: how does repeated physical violence within the film reshape Tree's conduct, and does her eventual survival challenge traditional Final-Girl-linked moral standards, or merely recycle them under a new guise?

A quick note on terminology: when I use the phrase "transgressive woman" in this article, I am not passing personal moral judgement on female behaviour. I use it to describe characters who fall outside gender-inflected behavioural norms embedded within horror conventions and the film's own narrative. Tree's sexual autonomy should not itself count as a moral failure. Her affair with married Gregory raises separate issues of deception and interpersonal responsibility, while her harsh treatment of Lori belongs to another set of relational problems. It makes sense to keep these dimensions analytically distinct rather than lump them under one broad label of female immorality.

This paper draws on qualitative textual analysis to unpack constructions of female subjectivity in *Happy Death Day*. I focus on key scenes that shape the film's treatment of gender, violence and narrative agency: Tree's first encounter with the masked killer, her multiple deaths, her attempts to identify and evade the murderer, her interactions with Gregory, Lori and her father, and her final confrontation with Lori. I examine these scenes for narrative purpose, character dynamics and formal cinematic choices, framing, editing, point of view and so on. Comparing different loops against one another, I track shifts in Tree's knowledge, behaviour, responses to violence, and interpersonal ties across repeated iterations of the same day.

Three theoretical bodies of work inform my reading. Clover's (1992) Final Girl framework lets me trace how the film engages slasher tropes and builds gendered conditions for on-screen survival. Laura Mulvey's (1975) writing on the gaze helps unpack Tree's body as an object for visual consumption, alongside the gradual growth of her own capacity to observe and to act. I also turn to Foucault's (1977) discussion of disciplinary power. It allows me to ask whether repeated bodily harm brings more than practical, tactical survival skills; whether these cycles also foster internalised moral standards and habits of self-surveillance. Bringing these theo-

retical lenses together, I explore the tensions that emerge as female agency expands, even as gendered forms of moral regulation persist.

2. The Death of the Blonde: A Tradition of Moral Judgement in Western Cinema

A recurring convention in some slasher films is that sexually active young women are killed, while a more restrained female character survives. The pattern can also be expressed visually through contrasts between blonde victims and a dark-haired Final Girl. It would be misleading, however, to treat hair colour as a rule that determines who lives or dies. Clover's (1992) account of the Final Girl is concerned less with a fixed visual type than with the character's changing position in the slasher narrative: she is initially vulnerable to the killer but eventually becomes capable of resisting him. The films discussed below do not all use this pattern in the same way, so their different treatments of female violence need to be considered separately.

In his films, Alfred Hitchcock portrayed blondes as "women who might be driven mad by love, become trapped, or fall victim to violence; dependent on men, they become the vulnerable and sacrificed figures in love, conspiracy, and struggles over material interests" (Jiang, 2020: pp. 147-148). Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) helped establish this screen tradition. Marion Crane, a blonde woman who embezzles company money and flees with it, is murdered in a shower. The stabbing is shown in sustained close-ups and the sequence contains several bloody images. In the classic 1980s slasher *Halloween*, two blonde victims are subjected to prolonged stabbings and strangulation for their supposed sexual permissiveness; their death scenes are extended, while the survivor is a conservative, sexually restrained brunette. The Italian giallo film *The New York Ripper* (1982) intensifies the representation of murder as sensory spectacle through scenes of prolonged violence and bodily mutilation. In post-2000 splatter horror films such as *See No Evil* (2006) and *Wrong Turn* 2: *Dead End* (2007), the deaths of blonde women are presented in full and spectacularised, with particular emphasis on bodily suffering, making them examples of punitive death. Filmmakers consume the female body through the visual spectacle of sexuality and slaughter, thereby producing emotional release.

By rationalising the slaughter of women through moral transgression and then constructing terrifying and suspenseful plots, these films carry out moral instruction and discipline directed at women. The blonde became a classic horror-film figure partly because she catered to dominant patriarchal ideas of the period: "stereotyped blondes possess both mature, beautiful bodies and childlike intelligence and minds, and can therefore arouse many men's desire to protect them" (Zhu, 2022: pp. 178-180). The first wave of feminism emerged in the early twentieth century, as large-scale women's movements pursued political and economic equality with men and challenged men's established social position and discursive power. "The second wave of feminism occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. During this pe-

riod, Western feminists sought to establish a space of subjectivity for women. They gradually came to believe that only by adopting an uncompromising rejection of male values and comprehensively dismantling the social systems and ideas embedded in patriarchal culture could women achieve further liberation after securing gender equality" (Zhou & Cheng, 2018: pp. 52-53). The blonde figure catered to men's desire to protect women and alleviated male anxiety, while cinema, as a mass medium, also served to impose social moral discipline on women.

3. From One-Off Punishment to Ongoing Discipline

3.1. Sensory Horror and Moral Punishment

In traditional slasher films, the restoration of moral order often depends on the death of a female body. At the beginning of the story, a female character who disrupts the moral order is established and contrasted with a female character who conforms to and upholds that order. As the plot progresses, the "bad woman" is often the first to be harmed by an evil force, and the harm is usually presented to the audience as physical abuse. The logic is that women who disrupt the moral order are eliminated through the destruction of their bodies, while women who conform to it survive in triumph and continue to embody and uphold that order. In other words, the films follow an equation: immorality = deserving punishment. As Robin Wood (1983) argues, "the slasher film is a means by which capitalist culture punishes female sexual freedom and women's liberation" (pp. 63-65).

Extreme bodily punishment produces intense visual stimulation and creates the sensory horror characteristic of the genre. "The only object of horror is the body" (Crane, 1994: p. 9). Sensory horror is an important means by which horror films generate shock, creating an immediate and highly concentrated stimulus on screen. In *Happy Death Day*, this is manifested in the brutal killing of Tree, whose behaviour violates moral injunctions. Blood, weapons, and a horrifying crime scene together provide intense sensory stimulation for the audience.

The filmmakers' choices in depicting Tree's deaths imply an attitude towards and judgement of her. *Happy Death Day* shows in detail how her body is destroyed: she is struck with a blade, burned, strangled, and poisoned. Although these varied deaths serve the visual effects of horror cinema, their detail and variety can also be read as extreme physical punishment inflicted on Tree. By taking bodily punishment to the limit of death, the film generates intense sensory horror while also exerting moral pressure, reminding viewers that morality and life are closely linked, that the loss of morality inevitably leads to the loss of life, and that this loss occurs in an exceptionally brutal manner.

3.2. External Violence and Internal Surveillance

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) discusses how modern power shifts from public, concentrated, and terminal punishment towards continuous, fine-grained, everyday discipline. Discipline, in his account, is not simply prohibition. Through the sustained control of bodily movements, time, space, and processes

of behaviour, it gradually produces bodies that can be managed.

In earlier horror films, death usually occurred only once. Rather than emphasising moral ideas, such films often foregrounded the terror of death arriving suddenly. The time-loop device in *Happy Death Day* changes the one-off correspondence between sensory horror and moral punishment, forcing the audience, along with Tree, to experience repeated attacks. Death is thereby transformed from a single horrific event into a continuing pressure. This pressure compels Tree to reflect on her behaviour and to change in order to survive.

Foucault's writing on discipline offers a useful way to think through Tree's transformation, largely because the time loop keeps sending her back into the same set of circumstances, forcing her to revisit and re-evaluate what she has done. Early on, her priorities are narrow: she just wants to stay alive and dodge the next assault. As the cycles drag on, though, her focus starts to spill outwards, toward other people around her. Her strained relationship with her father is a clear case in point. She slowly recognises the rift between them and, by the end, actively attempts to mend it. She also grows more ready to risk herself for someone else's sake.

These shifts unfold alongside the constant threat of murder, yet the film never frames any single death as a direct penalty for one specific misstep. What the loop does is place Tree's bodily exposure to harm and her evolving behaviour side by side, leaving the audience to draw that link between them. Read this way, the recurring loop carries a disciplinary quality. It is not simply that an outside party watches and attacks her; over time, Tree starts watching herself, judging her own choices and adjusting how she acts.

That said, we need to be careful not to conflate tactical adjustment with the deeper work of forming a disciplined subject. Tree learns to predict the killer's patterns, steer clear of risky spaces, and draw on things she found out in earlier loops. All of this points to sharper practical know-how and strategic agency. Taken on their own, these skills do not automatically mean she has internalised a new set of moral rules.

A Foucauldian interpretation really takes hold where the film ties her repeated encounters with violence to a re-examination of her obligations to others, and a revised sense of what counts as acceptable behaviour. Her transformation, then, unfolds along two connected, yet separate tracks. On one hand, she picks up concrete survival tactics. On the other, she slowly adopts a moral framework she can use to assess herself. The loop keeps cycling both of these processes again and again—even if we cannot say definitively that every death lands as a targeted punishment for a particular moral failing.

4. The Bad Girl Who Can Be Saved: Tree's Generic Identity

When she first appears, Tree is a character whom the audience is unlikely to like. As the story progresses, however, her moral outlook changes in a direction more acceptable to mainstream society. By the later stages of the film, she has become

sincere, responsible, and willing to make sacrifices. She ends her affair with Gregory, actively repairs her relationship with her father, acknowledges her past mistakes, helps others, and sacrifices herself for someone she loves. These actions are not isolated incidents; together, they constitute Tree's transformation for the better. The film thus establishes a clear narrative structure: the old Tree dies repeatedly while a new Tree gradually emerges. Her rebirth demonstrates that she can be saved and can make amends for her moral flaws.

5. From the Object of Looking to the Subject of Looking

Tree's first encounter with the masked killer presents her mainly as someone being watched, pursued and attacked. The sequence initially allows the spectator to share her uncertainty about the danger around her. When she thinks she has escaped, the shot reveals the killer standing behind her. The sudden revelation changes what both Tree and the spectator know about the space: the apparent safety of the moment disappears, and the attack follows. The scene ends with Tree's death. In this opening encounter, the viewer is encouraged to anticipate violence against her rather than follow an investigation led by her. This is the position from which the later changes in her use of looking can be understood.

Later in the film, Tree is no longer simply waiting for the next attack. She begins to watch the people around her, follow clues and test her suspicions. The spectator receives information through these attempts to work out who the killer is. This changes the way the film positions her: in the opening sequence, attention is directed towards the danger approaching her body; in the investigative scenes, attention increasingly follows what she notices and how she interprets it. Tree remains vulnerable to violence, but she also becomes an active observer whose decisions move the plot forward.

Mulvey's (1975) theory of the gaze helps to clarify this change. Tree's body remains the site of repeated violence, and the film continues to invite the spectator to watch her suffer. What changes is that the spectator also begins to follow her observations and decisions. Tree is therefore not simply removed from the position of the looked-at woman. Instead, the film gives her a more active role in directing attention and gathering information. The tension between these two positions is important: she remains visually vulnerable while becoming more capable of acting as a subject who looks.

6. Reversal of Identity and the Superficial Appearance of Women's Liberation

Returning to the central question raised in the introduction: does the reversal of the film's binary female character types signify women's liberation? At the level of the overall plot, *Happy Death Day* does not simply inherit the conservative Western climate of the 1970s to the 1990s; it also rebels against it to some extent. The blonde protagonist Tree survives after repeated cycles of death and rebirth, identifies the killer, and remains alive. By contrast, Lori, the actual murderer, is a dark-

haired woman who appears well-behaved and pure; she ultimately falls to her death from a window during her fight with Tree. This complicates the conventional opposition between the sexually transgressive woman and the morally respectable female survivor, and reveals the limitations of judging female characters through outward appearance or presumed sexual conservatism.

Although *Happy Death Day* reverses some familiar slasher conventions, Tree's survival is still tied to the question of whether she has changed. She ends her affair with Gregory, tries to repair her relationship with her father and becomes more willing to help others. By the end, she is also romantically involved with Carter. The film presents these developments positively, and they contribute to the audience's sympathy for her. Yet the poisoned cupcake episode complicates any suggestion that moral improvement guarantees survival: Tree continues to die even after she has begun to change. Her final escape depends on practical knowledge and her confrontation with Lori as well as on her personal development. The issue is therefore not that the film makes moral reform a simple condition for survival. Rather, it encourages the audience to approve of Tree as she becomes more caring and responsible, while also allowing her to survive through her own actions. This raises a question about the kind of female subject the film ultimately rewards. Tree is given agency, but the narrative also makes her transformation part of the basis on which that agency becomes acceptable.

7. Conclusion

Happy Death Day revises the representation of women in horror cinema first by rejecting the most direct moral logic of the traditional slasher: a young woman who is sexually liberal and lives freely no longer has to die simply because she transgresses. Tree ultimately survives, not through the protection of a male character, but by saving herself through investigation, judgement, action, and physical resistance. In this sense, the film does grant its female character greater subjectivity.

In addition, through Lori, the film further dismantles the traditional binary of the "blonde woman/brunette girl". Lori has the outward characteristics of the traditional good girl but becomes a murderer; Tree has the outward characteristics of the traditional bad girl but ultimately survives. This suggests that the film no longer simply binds women's sexual behaviour to their moral value, nor accepts that sexual conservatism necessarily signifies goodness.

However, this reversal of character types does not mean that traditional gender discipline has disappeared.

Tree's survival has another important precondition: she must change. She appears to break free from the narrative punishment of female sexual transgression and becomes the Final Girl, yet her body is repeatedly injured and abused throughout the process. If her "sins" were not cleansed through repeated bodily suffering, and if she did not learn to comply with social moral expectations, her capacity to survive could not be developed and she could not achieve self-redemption. Tree

does acquire subjectivity, but that subjectivity is formed through an uninterrupted process of discipline. She does not possess the qualification to become the Final Girl from the outset; she becomes the Final Girl through repeated self-correction.

Tree's survival does not amount to the genuine liberation of female subjectivity. Only after she has endured repeated, simulated bodily deaths and completed moral self-correction does the mainstream order grant her permission to survive. This demonstrates the limited extent of contemporary horror cinema's reform of gender narratives. What *Happy Death Day* truly abolishes is not the concept of moral reform itself, but the narrative rule that a transgressive woman must die immediately. The film makes a partial break with traditional horror cinema and develops the existing types of the bad girl and the Final Girl, but it can also be understood as a transformation of traditional moral discipline within contemporary genre cinema.

On this basis, although the film represents a clear advance over traditional horror cinema, it retains a question: when a subject is formed through continuous self-correction, does this subjectivity signify liberation or a deeper form of self-discipline? The film does not answer this question directly. It is precisely this contradiction in gender politics that allows it to exceed the status of an ordinary teen horror comedy and become a text worthy of further discussion through feminist film theory, genre studies, and theories of power and subjectivity.

This study nevertheless has limitations. Its conclusions are based on a single case study and the analysis of only one film, *Happy Death Day*; the sample is therefore limited. Future research could expand the corpus and conduct comparative analyses of characterisation in contemporary horror films featuring the Final Girl, in order to explore the complexity of gender narratives in contemporary horror cinema.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Almwaka, M. (2022). Complex Female Agency, the "Final Girl" Trope, and the Subversion and Reaffirmation of Patriarchy: The Cases of Western & MENA Horror Films. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 24,* Article 5. https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss3/5/

Clover, C. J. (1992). *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton University Press.

Crane, J. L. (1994). *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film*. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483345253

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books. (Original Work Published 1975)

Jiang, X. (2020). A Brief Analysis of the Characteristics and Techniques of Alfred Hitchcock's Suspense Films. *Home Drama, 27,* 147-148. (In Chinese)

Landon, C. (2017). *Happy Death Day* [Film]. Universal Pictures.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen, 16,* 6-18. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6

Paszkiewicz, K., & Rusnak, S. (2020). *Final Girls, Feminism and Popular Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Prasetyo, D., Saraswati, T., & Bah, Y. M. (2025). Body, Terror, and Gender: The Representation of Women in Contemporary Indonesian Horror Films. *Journal of Social Dynamics and Governance, 2,* 8-22. https://doi.org/10.26740/jsdg.v2i1.39674

Trencansky, S. (2001). Final Girls and Terrible Youth: Transgression in 1980s Slasher Horror. *Journal of Popular Film and Television, 29,* 63-73. https://doi.org/10.1080/01956050109601010

Weaver, A. D., Ménard, A. D., Cabrera, C., & Taylor, A. (2015). Embodying the Moral Code? Thirty Years of Final Girls in Slasher Films. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 4,* 31-46. https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000006

Wijaya, F. R., Puspita, V., Kenny, K., & Sedharta, B. O. (2025). Haunting Narratives: Female Entities and Gender Inequality in Indonesian Horror Films. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 12,* Article No. 1200. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04815-x

Wood, R. (1983). Beauty Bests the Beast. *American Film, 8,* 63-65.

Zhou, Y., & Cheng, J. L. (2018). The Development of Western Feminist Movements and Ideological Changes. *Journal of Jiamusi Vocational College, No. 9,* 52-53. (In Chinese)

Zhu, Z. Y. (2022). Changes in the Status and Value of Blonde Figures in Western Literature. *Literature Education (Part I), No. 6,* 178-180. (In Chinese)