Home Alone a festive film? Hardly – it's the Muppets every time

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*The Guardian*

Come Christmas, I can sit back quietly while others make loud arguments about how Home Alone/Die Hard/Love Actually is the ultimate Christmas movie – but that is only because I have knocked myself into a chocolate coma and no longer have the strength to argue with fools. Because the fact is, all of those annually, if bafflingly, popular suggestions are wrong. A true Christmas movie must adhere to the following scientific, mathematical and logical rules:

1 It can’t just be set at Christmas, it has to be about Christmas.

2 It would feel extremely wrong to watch it at any other time of year.

3 It must leave you feeling – in some seemingly subjective but actually very objective way – Christmassy.

This is why Die Hard is not a true Christmas movie. Yes, everyone and their gran loves Die Hard, but it is no more a Christmas movie than Lethal Weapon, or Eyes Wide Shut, or Diner – all of which, like Die Hard, are set at Christmas, and none of which, like Die Hard, are about Christmas. I have no problem with watching Die Hard (or Lethal Weapon, or Diner) at Christmas – if anything, their lack of festivity can be a palate cleanser, a satsuma among all the stilton. But consider what Die Hard’s happy ending actually is: it’s not Hans Gruber falling out of a window and it’s not the good people of the Nakatomi corporation getting out of the building alive. It’s the nice cop Al getting over his fear of guns after “accidentally killing a 13-year-old” (so inconvenient) and, in the final scene, shooting a man dead. So someone from the LAPD has learned to kill again. Does that make you feel Christmassy, people? No, it does not.

But the real reason Die Hard is not a Christmas movie is that it can be watched at any time of year. For the same reason, Trading Places is not, ultimately, a Christmas movie, as much as we all enjoy the sight of Dan Aykroyd eating fish out of his Santa beard. But it’s not on any level about Christmas, which is why I can and do watch it all year. And before all the diehard Die Hard fans start throwing Quality Street at me in protest, you should know that both of these movies were originally released in the US in the middle of the summer – so not even the film-makers thought they were Christmas movies. So there.

Edward Scissorhands, by contrast, is a Christmas movie, thanks to the Christmas-setting climax, the Winona-dancing-in-the-snow scene and Danny Elfman’s pleasingly spooky-but-festive soundtrack. For me, it’s in the same category as Meet Me In St Louis and It’s A Wonderful Life: none of these movies are explicitly Christmassy in the way White Christmas, Elf, A Christmas Story or Miracle On 34th Street are, but they all have a definite Christmas feel to them, one that is based more on the holiday’s wintry darkness than its neon lights.

Which brings me to Home Alone. Now, Home Alone is certainly a Christmas movie. Indeed, that a film about an eight-year-old who is neglected by his parents and then pursued in his own home by two psychopaths is considered a feelgood comedy, as opposed to a horror movie, really is a testament to the power of the Christmas setting. But whereas John Hughes’ other explicitly festive movie, Planes, Trains And Automobiles, says something joyful, sad and true about the holidays (Thanksgiving, in that case), Home Alone just feels hollow. It was a movie written on autopilot, without any of the soulfulness of Hughes’ previous films, such as Ferris Bueller’s Day Off. After Hughes died in 2009, his former muse, Molly Ringwald, wrote this about his later films, including Home Alone: “They were funny, yes, wildly successful, to be sure, but I recognised very little of the John I knew in them, of his youthful, urgent, unmistakable vulnerability. It was like his heart closed.” A real Christmas movie must have its heart very open.

This is why the greatest Christmas movie is The Muppet Christmas Carol. It was the first Muppet movie released after the death of the Muppets creator, Jim Henson, and it was made with palpable love and care by his son, Brian. Almost all the old Muppeteers helped him, save for one: Richard Hunt, who voiced Statler, Beaker and others, died from HIV/Aids the year before the film came out. It is dedicated to both Hunt and Henson, and is infused with a sense of wistfulness, but also hope for the future – in that it disproved some people’s fears over whether the Muppets could continue after Henson’s death. I’ve watched this film every Christmas for two and a half decades – on my own in India, with friends in Thailand, with my parents in London, and now with my own children – and every time it makes me happy and teary and full of joy, just as Christmas should.

But if anyone puts on Love Actually, I will genuinely smack them in the face.