



# TODAY IS TOMORROW

Preface Added: April, 2020

## PREFACE

The 2020 Pandemic has altered societies around the world in a myriad of ways. The threat of becoming sick, or dying from COVID-19 has created a level of collective fear not experienced in generations. The ubiquity of the disease and speed that it traversed the planet took everyone by surprise. 'Social distancing,' has become the defacto standard for mitigating the spread of the virus, though it is not without its own consequences. We are reminded of a fundamental dynamic – a transparent human truth – the need for others. Social distancing has disrupted fulfillment of that need temporarily, exacerbating our fears and anxieties.

It is with that kernel of human truth in mind that this revised version of Today Is Tomorrow is offered for your consideration. Exploring what on the surface is just another Hollywood Rom-Com movie seems silly right now, unless we can find inspiration in the storyline of Groundhog Day. As with the Victory Gardens of World War 1 and World War 2, this movie is a reminder of the power of perseverance and the inherent good in all of us during times of scarcity and strife.

This decade has roared into our lives with world shaking consequences, but let us keep in mind that we will persevere, we will come through this, healed and whole, even as we care for sick and bury those we've lost. So, let's persevere, let's put aside all of our agendas and focus on surviving the disease, being human and caring for one another. Call friends and relatives or the elderly neighbor. Do what's right, not just what's convenient.

This too shall pass.

*T.M. Ciesla*

# Today Is Tomorrow

## *Ten Thousand Years in Punxsutawney*

By: Thomas M. Ciesla

**H**ave you ever wished that you could repeat a day? It may have been a day of adventure, a day of love and passion, or even a day of regret for things you didn't say but should have. Repeating a day may seem tempting, but as we're about to see, this thought likely falls into the 'be careful what you wish for' category. The movie *Groundhog Day*<sup>1</sup> is a clever romantic comedy that subtly explores mystical, philosophical, and social issues as experienced by a tragic character trapped in a time loop that forces him to relive *Groundhog Day*<sup>2</sup> over and over again. The following is an exploration of a few overarching themes in the movie: time, morality, weakness and strength of the human spirit, and the pivotal role others can play in our lives.

Early in the movie we come to understand that the main character is not a nice person. Pittsburgh's WPBH Channel 9 News weatherman Phil Connors (played by Bill Murray) is a rude, arrogant, self-centered and self-loathing man. Disgruntled for being sent for the fourth consecutive year to cover the *Groundhog Day*<sup>3</sup> celebration in Punxsutawney.<sup>4</sup>

Phil unleashes his caustic wit on everyone around him, from his coworkers to the local townspeople. Travelling to the celebration with his cameraman Larry (Chris Elliott), and producer Rita (Andy McDowell), Phil sums up his jaded view of reality when he

Is it far to go?  
A step – no further  
Is it hard to go?  
Ask the melting snow  
Shall I be gone long?  
Forever and a day  
*Cecil Day Lewis*  
*Excerpt from 'Is It Far To Go'*

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<sup>1</sup> 1993, Columbia Pictures. Original screenplay by Daniel Rubin. Final version co-written by Rubin and Harold Ramis. The second half of the movie was completely re-written during filming.

<sup>2</sup> History of the holiday: Simeon declared that little Jesus was the 'light for the revelation of the gentiles.' This led to a folk belief about that weather had prognostic value. If the sun shone for the greater part of the day, there would be 40 more days of winter. The badger was added by the Germans. On the arrival to Pennsylvania, since the Indians considered the woodchuck a wise creature, the Germans replaced the badger with it.

<sup>3</sup> February 2<sup>nd</sup> is also Candlemas in the Wikin calendar, as well as the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary in the Christian Calendar.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the movie was filmed in Woodstock, Illinois because it has a pleasing town square. In Punxsutawney, the festivities take place in a nature reserve outside of town. The gazebo in the movie was a replica of the one in Punxsutawney.

tells Rita, "People are morons." Phil lives a pointless existence in which despises everyone, and in turn, is despised by everyone who meets him.

On the morning of the festivities, Phil encounters an aggressive insurance agent named Ned Ryerson. In a hurry to get away from this 'giant leech,' Phil steps into an ankle-deep icy puddle in the street. Ned calls out to him to "watch that first step, it's a doozy!", then gives Phil a little wave. Though this scene is repeated many times in the movie, it's only during the initial encounter that Ned waves to Phil. Is Ned launching Phil on a 'doozy' of a time-loop journey? We'll explore this in more detail later.

After finishing his weather report, Phil is in a rush to return to Pittsburg, but a blizzard that he failed to predict forces the team to spend another night in Punxsutawney. Turning back to Punxsutawney there is a scene in a gas station where Phil is on the phone being his obnoxious self, trying to convince the operator to get him a special phone line because, "I'm a celebrity, in an emergency". As he says this someone walks by and 'accidentally' smacks him on the side of the head with a snow shovel. Did this begin Phil's time-loop journey?



*Figure 1: Phil in snowstorm traffic jam, trying to leave Punxsutawney. Tells a police officer, "I make the weather!"*

When Phil wakes up the next morning, the radio plays the same music and the announcers are delivering the same overly-enthusiastic prattle about seeing the groundhog today. Phil has left regular time and entered 'magical' time where it's the same day – February 2<sup>nd</sup> – over and over again. While we never know the exact number of times Phil repeats groundhog day beyond the 39 times

shown in the movie, we do know that to develop his intimate understanding of the townspeople, it must be hundreds or even thousands of times.<sup>5</sup> Sonny and Cher's song "I got you babe," on the radio suddenly takes on a new meaning: someone does indeed 'have Phil.'

By the third morning, Phil realizes that there are no consequences to his actions; he will always wake up the next day – Groundhog Day – 'without a dent-in-the-fender', and he alone remembers what happens during each repetition. With this advantage, Phil proceeds to manipulate people and events in town to his advantage as he commits each of the Seven

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<sup>5</sup> In the original screenplay, Rubin had Phil repeat Groundhog Day for 10,000 years.

Deadly Sins. When bored with these acts he goes after his big prize – Rita.<sup>6</sup> During repetitions of buying her a drink<sup>7, 8</sup>, Phil learns enough about Rita to pretend to be her ‘perfect man’.

In this respect, Phil’s knowledge of past interactions is akin to possessing the Ring of Gyges. In the fable, Glaucon tells Socrates a story of a ring that allows the wearer to become invisible. Glaucon argues that even a just person, if possessing such a ring, would succumb to the temptation and use it exactly as an unjust person would. In Glaucon’s story, the just person, realizing the power of the ring, uses it for evil. He seduces the Queen and kills the King. Phil’s knowledge of the past is his cloak of invisibility.

As you might expect, this growing accumulation of knowledge that only Phil is privy to does little to help him rise out of the quagmire of his absurdity. To that end, the movie employs a number of not-so-subtle psycho-physical ‘wake up calls’ to become a better man. The now classic ‘step into the icy puddle’ ploy is perhaps the most memorable. Whether or not you grew up in a cold climate, just imagining the icy water filling your shoe will send shivers through you. The movie then leverages cold water again in the form of the hysterically funny ‘cold shower’ scene at the B & B. When Phil confronts the proprietress about no hot water she replies, “Oh that wouldn’t be today!” ‘Today’ being the first of many Ground Hog Days on which he will be treated to the same ‘wake-up’ shower.<sup>9</sup> A final physical prop is the ever popular face-slap. In one scene Phil asks Rita to give him a good slap in the face, which she eagerly delivers. Later in the movie the slap is used for a different reason: we are shown a montage of dozens of face slaps when Phil tries to convince Rita to sleep with him. These wake-up slaps

## Phil’s Seven Deadly Sins

### Pride

Phil is egocentric and Self-centered. He believes he is above everyone else.

### Greed

Steals money from armored truck.

### Envy

Phil envies Rita’s exuberant outlook on life.

### Anger (Wrath)

Shoves B&B guest against wall; punches Ned.

### Lust

Beds Nancy, dresses movie theatre date in sexy maid outfit; tries to seduce Rita.

### Gluttony

The feast in the Café: guzzles coffee, shoves whole pastries in his mouth.

### Sloth

Refuses to do news report; watches gameshow while drinking liquor.

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<sup>6</sup> Rita is short for Margarita, which means pearl. This is the prize Phil tries to acquire that, in the end, acquires him.

<sup>7</sup> The drink Rita orders, ‘Sweet Vermouth with a twist,’ is Rami’s wife’s favorite drink. In an earlier version of the script it was Tequila with lime.

<sup>8</sup> Speaking of the bar scene: Who is the Bartender? His disapproving head-shake seems to indicate that he has seen Phil’s absurd actions innumerable times and remembers Phil’s pitiful seduction attempts. Is the Bartender another one of Phil’s guides, albeit a silent one, watching over him?

<sup>9</sup> Cold water, in the form of snow, begin and end Phil’s journey to redemption. A winter storm traps him in Punxsutawney, and when Phil expresses his true feelings for Rita, snowflakes slowly begin to drift around them.

show more than Rita's distaste for his advances: Phil can manipulate the locals in his 'magical time' but he is never able to manipulate Rita who sees right through his actions.



*Figure 2 Phil's gluttonous meal at the Cafe*

During a scene in the Tip Top Café<sup>10</sup> Phil and Rita are talking when a local patron, Gus, hears Rita say Phil's name and says, "Phil? Just like the groundhog Phil. Watch out for your shadow there pal." Gus's<sup>11,12</sup> comment is insightful. In a sense, Phil Connors and Punxsutawney Phil are similar creatures. Both are used by others to predict the weather and both lead ridiculous lives. The groundhog is dragged out of box, while Phil's cynicism creates a box around him, emotionally isolating from others who despise him. Both Phil's are wary of their shadows. For

Phil Connors his shadow is the summation of his bad habits and deeds, his disdain for his fellow man, and his self-hatred. Until he can lose this shadow, he will linger in this eternal winter where he is "unwept, unhonored, and unsung."<sup>13</sup>

## UNKNOWN FORCES AT WORK

The movie never identifies who trapped Phil in his time-loop, but it does offer a few hints. Throughout the story, one of the windows in Phil's room is frosted over in such a way to form a pattern resembling that of an eye. Is this the proverbial Eye of Providence, the all-seeing eye, the eye of God watching over Phil's progress in his time-loop journey? Just as with who is

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<sup>10</sup> The Café was built for the movie. It was going to be torn down after filming but locals wanted to keep it. It closed in 2012, only to find new life as several different establishments: a Coffee Shop, a Broiled Chicken place (closed 2016) and lastly as a Mexican restaurant.

<sup>11</sup> Gus is short of Augustine. For St. Augustine, shadows were a privation of light, and evil and vice were a privation of good.

<sup>12</sup> Though it's tempting to view Gus as just a local who likes to get drunk, in reality Gus is one of Phil's spiritual guides. Aside from his remark about the 'shadow', Gus answers Phil's question: "what if there were no tomorrow?", with, "then there would be no consequences," launching Phil on his hedonistic quest. In a scene at the bowling alley, Gus stares at a glass of beer and knowingly tells Phil "I see you as a 'glass-half-empty' kind of guy."

<sup>13</sup> A line from the poem, "There Breathes The Man," by Sir Walter Scott, and recited to Phil by Rita in the Tip Top Café.

responsible for Phil's journey, how Phil became trapped is never addressed in the script. Aside from Phil's early anxiety, he shows no curiosity as to how it all started.<sup>14, 15</sup>

The WHY of Phil's entrapment becomes clear as the movie unfolds. Phil is a lonely self-centered 'putz' of a man. To end the absurdity of his existence, he's thrown into a situation not of his making, one that he can only escape (multiple suicide attempts all fail) by working through his demons to achieve a transformation. Egocentric by nature (Rita calls it his defining characteristic), Phil is slow to realize this, forcing him to experience countless Groundhog Days until he accepts his fate and reaches out to Rita with sincerity. After experiencing a moment of emotional intimacy with her (possibly for the first time in his life), Phil begins his transformation from selfish to selfless – from jerk to hero.

After spending thousands of days with Rita, he learns what she is looking for in her 'ideal man' and works to become that person. He learns to play the piano (surprising well as he plays Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on Theme by Paganini<sup>16</sup>), Quotes French poetry to Rita,<sup>17</sup> learns to ice sculpt<sup>18</sup>, and rescues locals over and over again. In this way Phil has embraced a Platonic ideal: 'above all, inner harmony is essential to achieving a good life.' Humans can achieve enlightenment only after confronting their ignorance and dealing with certain painful truths about themselves.



Figure 3: Phil playing piano at the evening celebration

## WHO IS NED RYERSON

Stephen Tobolowsky's portrayal of Ned (a.k.a. Ned the Head, Needlenose Ned) the aggressive insurance agent has made him a cult hero of sorts. Because Groundhog Day is a romantic comedy, it's easy to assume the encounter between Phil and Ned in the town square is for the sake of comic relief. After some consideration, however, we may wonder is there is more going

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<sup>14</sup> Ramis originally had Phil passing by a classroom during a discussion of time, prompting him to develop a theory about how the time loop began. Fortunately for the audience, Ramis wisely cut the scene.

<sup>15</sup> In the second revision of the script by Harold Ramis (January 7, 1992), Phil's disaffected ex-lover Stephanie, reading from a book of curses and incantations, takes Phil's business card, a Tarot card of the hanged man, some powder and oil and puts it on a small plate where it spontaneously combusts. To complete the spell she picks up a broken watch and tosses it into the fire. The watch crystal is cracked and the hands are frozen at 5:59.

<sup>16</sup> While Phil reads in the Café, Mozarts Sonata No. 16 is playing in the background. It inspires him to take piano lessons.

<sup>17</sup> His quote is not really French poetry but a lyric from a 1957 Belgian song, 'Labourre Du Celibataire'.

<sup>18</sup> Does it look like the angel ice sculpture that Phil is working on appears to be melting?

on here than meets the eye. Phil is able to manipulate everyone in Punxsutawney except Rita, but only Ned has the ability to manipulate Phil. Phil always takes the same route in the town square, even though he knows he'll encounter Ned over and over again. Is Ned also in a time-loop, someone who like Phil, is *in* this magical world but not *of* it.

As pointed out in an essay by Tom Armstrong titled, 'The Ned Ryerson Conundrum,' there is a curious similarity between the first meeting of Phil and Ned, and the Phil – Nancy pick-up scene. Ned offers three critical pieces of information to establish familiarity: Phil's name, the high school he went to, and the name of Phil's sister. In the Phil – Nancy scene, Phil draws information from Nancy (she doesn't offer any) by asking her name, the high school she went to, and her English teacher's name. Phil never saw Nancy before, and Nancy has no idea who Phil is; just as Phil doesn't recognize Ned, but Ned claims to know Phil. In each scene one person has the advantage when approaching the other.



Figure 4: Phil encounters Ned Ryerson



Figure 5: Nancy in the town square

The exchange of information in each meeting is provided in an enthusiastic, almost excited style in order to get something from the other person. For Phil it's obviously sex, but what does Ned want from Phil? Comparing the two conversations, it seems logical that Ned never went to high school with Phil and never dated his sister Mary Pat. If we posit that Ned is an emissary of the all-seeing 'eye', the information Ned shared with Phil was coming to him from a mysterious 'higher' source. Thus, Ned is one of Phil's spirit guides on his time-loop journey, placed in the town square to gently (and sometimes not so gently) prod Phil in the right direction. Ned is selling Phil a different kind of 'insurance'.

## FEAR OF THE ESCHATON

It is a credit to both Rubin and Ramis that as important as time is to the plot of the movie, it remains subtly locked in the background instead of brow-beating the audience with it. Only the clock radio is our visual time cue to guide us through the seemingly endless repetitions of the day. This minimalist treatment of the film's magical time also hides the multiple levels of time behind the scenes. First is Phil's (and possibly Ned's) nootemporality<sup>19</sup> -- time of the human

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<sup>19</sup> Nootemporality, biotemporality, and prototemporality are parts of a hierarchical time structure developed by physicist/philosopher J.T. Fraser. "Of Time, Passion, and Knowledge," George Brazillere, Inc., New York.

mind – created by Phil’s ability to remember what he’s learned during each repetition of Groundhog Day. His mind (unlike most around him) is not reset each morning. This lack of his temporal reset gives him an enormous advantage in his ability to manipulate people, but for the audience it offers no clue to how many times the day repeats. Nor does the fact that no one in the movie seems to age. The time loop could last for 100 days or even 1,000 days. Unlike the pencil that Phil breaks one night before going to sleep that becomes whole the next morning,<sup>20</sup> Phil keeps moving forward. This is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal return – to live life as an endless repetition of the same events over and over.<sup>21</sup> Yet does the movie want us to believe that Phil commits suicide daily? Or are these attempts sporadic as he deals with the desperation of his absurd life. We know some of his attempts are unsuccessful as he tells Rita in the Tip Top Café, “I just didn’t die yesterday. I’ve been stabbed, shot, poisoned, hung, frozen, electrocuted, and burned.” We also know that at least one of Phil’s suicide attempts does lead to his demise. A scene in the movie shows Rita and Larry (the cameraman) identifying Phil’s body in the morgue. On a deeper level, perhaps these suicides are used not to kill the man, but the demons within him.

A second temporality is biotemporality<sup>22</sup> ‘duration without progression’ experienced by the people of Punxsutawney. Apparently recruited by a higher power to assist Phil on his journey of the self-realization, the entire town is trapped in a Kafkaesque world, forced to re-live the same day experiencing a fate as absurd as Sisyphus,<sup>23</sup> though blissfully unaware of their circumstances.

Implicit in the movie is prototemporality, or the now-less flow of time for elementary particles. Nothing in the movie suggests that the world beyond this tiny town suffers the same fate. Otherwise planetary positioning to keep Earth’s northern hemisphere in ‘winter alignment’ would have to remain stuck for the course of Phil’s journey (10,000 years?). Of course, Phil could be experiencing his time-loop in some multiuniverse-Punxsutawney, while the folks in the real Punxsutawney go merrily on with their lives.



Figure 6 "Don't drive angry!"

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<sup>20</sup> As originally filmed, Phil destroys the hotel room, spray painting the walls and taking a chainsaw to the furniture. Afterwards, Ramis cut the scene and replaced it with the simple but effective act of breaking the pencil.

<sup>21</sup> Technically, Phil isn’t living the exact same day over and over if we assume that various events we are allowed to see are not repeated daily.

<sup>22</sup> Biotemporality is the time of living organisms.

<sup>23</sup> In Albert Camus “Legend of Sisyphus”, Sisyphus is condemned by a god to roll a huge boulder to the top of a mountain, only to watch it roll down again. He is cursed to repeat this task throughout eternity. There is no escape, not even death.

As Phil moves from shock to despair and finally acceptance of his fate, the very thing that entraps him, the time loop, helps – in part -- to save him from himself. After enumerable repetitions, Phil finally ‘gets it’ realizing how many years and moments of joy he has wasted by being such a jerk to people. But still, Phil needs one final nudge to complete his journey and that comes via the old beggar in the town square. At first, Phil brushes by the old man, barely acknowledging his existence. As Phil begins his transformation, however, his interaction with the old man changes: he engages him often, gives him cash, buys him dinner and sits with him, and even repeatedly tries to keep him from dying by taking to the hospital or performing CPR in an alley.



*Figure 7 Phil interacts with the old beggar in an alleyway*

In trying to save the old beggar, Phil is trying to save himself. He understands that if he doesn't change his ways, one day he will be that old beggar, dying alone in an alley, ‘unwept, unhonored, and unsung.’ When the old beggar does die despite Phil's rescue attempt, witnessing that death forces Phil to face an eschaton<sup>24</sup> -- or end time – not just for the beggar, but also his own. In that pivotal and poignant scene, Phil looks up to the heavens without saying a word, as if to acknowledge that only a higher power has true control over life and death. Phil suddenly realizes that life is meant to be cherished, not taken for granted.

At this point, Phil is able to turn an ending into a beginning. Now we understand why Phil finally buys that insurance from Ned. All along that insurance was symbolic, a token of proof of Phil's final transformation. Ned knew that Phil had to become a better person before he could consider buying that ‘insurance’. Phil's journey is complete. After being bought by Rita at an auction,<sup>25,26</sup> Phil carves a snow



*Figure 8: Phil performing CPR on the old beggar*

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<sup>24</sup> From Eschatos, the last, or farthest.

<sup>25</sup> Not highlighted in the movie is the fact that Rita has only one day to meet, get to know, and fall in love with Phil Connors. Phil conversely has had perhaps thousands of days to understand and fall in love with Rita.

<sup>26</sup> While Phil has more than one ‘guide’ to help him on his journey, it is Rita who is responsible for the transformed Phil. By trying to become the man Rita saw as ‘ideal’, Phil became someone who everyone enjoys being around.

sculpture of Rita and tells her that he loves her (and really means it this time), as snowflakes begin to fall around them. They fall asleep at his B&B and when they awake the next morning 'magical' time has reverted to real time on February 3<sup>rd</sup>. The 'eye of Providence' on his room window has frosted over, and as he looks outside, the sun is shining and the town is covered in a blanket of snow; a nod to Plato's view of sunlight representing the enlightenment of knowing.

In an interview, director Harold Ramis told Michael Sragov: "...the response from the spiritual community to Groundhog Day was unbelievable. I literally got letters from every known religious organization and discipline: from yogis, Hasidic Jews, and Jesuits – all claiming the movie, all saying I must be one of them because this movie so perfectly expresses their philosophy."

In a separate interview, Stephen Tobolowski (Ned Ryerson) tells Brian Gallagher: "I was in Texas not long ago and a man came up to me who taught comparative religion. He said he uses Groundhog Day to speak to Buddhism. I also got an email from the Oakland Raiders telling me that they use Groundhog Day as a motivational film for their team."

Most of us go through our days living lives of "quiet desperation" but Phil is forced to treat each day as a life unto itself. By exploring moral, civil, and philosophical concepts in a light-hearted way, Groundhog Day appeals to people from all walks of life.

Despite self-centered-Phil's opinion early on in the movie that 'people are morons,' most people are concerned with the same issues. We want to be healthy and safe, we strive to be free from want of shelter and food, and we prefer a happy, peaceful life over a brutish, harsh existence. Ultimately we all share an unspoken kernel-of-truth: the need to be loved. Phil's internal struggle to overcome his demons and finally find enlightenment resonates with all of us who struggle with our own demons or weaknesses, while yearning to be free from Chekov's bleak and dark winter and enjoy instead a 'long, lustrous one'.



*Figure 9: When Phil takes the old beggar to the hospital, he doesn't catch the boy falling from the tree. Luckily he didn't die in the fall; that's him on the right with a cast on his leg.*