

# Today Is Tomorrow

## *Ten Thousand Years in Punxsutawney*

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*Have 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 not spoken. Repeating a day may seem tempting, but as we're about to see, this may fall 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*

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

*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 and morality, the weaknesses and strengths of the human spirit, and the pivotal role others can play in our lives.*

<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 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 arrival to Pennsylvania, since the Indians considered the woodchuck a wise creature, the Germans replaced the badger with it.

Early in the movie, we come to understand that the main character is not a nice person. Pittsburgh 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 co-workers to the local townspeople of Punxsutawney. Traveling to the celebration with his camera man Larry (Chris Elliott), and producer Rita (Andy McDowell), Phil sums up his jaded view of reality when he tells Rita, "People are morons." Phil lives a pointless existence in which he 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 in the movie, it's only this first time that Ned waves to Phil. Is Ned launching Phil on his 'doozy' of a time-loop journey? We'll explore this more later.

After finishing his report, Phil is in a rush to return to Pittsburgh, but a blizzard he

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

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

failed to predict forces the team to spend another night in Punxsutawney. When he awakes the next morning, the radio is playing the same music and the announcers are delivering the same overly-enthusiastic prattle about seeing the groundhog. Somehow, Phil has left regular time and has entered a 'magical' time, where it's the same day over and over again. While we never know the exact number of times Phil repeats February 2<sup>nd</sup> beyond the 39 times shown in the movie, we do know that to develop his intimate understanding of the movements of the townspeople, it must be hundreds or even thousands of iterations.<sup>5</sup>

When the snowstorm forces them to turn back, there is a scene in a gas station where Phil is on the phone being his obnoxious self, trying to convince an 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 the time-loop? When he awakes that next morning, a Sonny and Cher song, "I got you babe," suddenly takes on a new meaning; someone does indeed 'have him.'

By the third repetition, Phil realizes that there are no consequences to his actions and he will always awake the next day — *Groundhog Day* — "without a dent in the fender," and he alone remembers what happens on each repetition. With this advantage, Phil proceeds to manipulate people and events in the town to his advantage as he commits each of the

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

Seven Deadly Sins. He steals money from an armored truck, seduces a local woman, and when bored with these acts, he goes after his big prize – Rita.<sup>6</sup> During repetitions of buying her a drink<sup>7</sup> and taking her to dinner, Phil learns enough about Rita to pretend to be her ‘perfect man.’

In this respect, Phil’s knowledge of past days is akin to the Ring of Gyges. 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 bad things: seduces the Queen and kills the King. Phil’s knowledge of the past Groundhog days is his cloak of invisibility.

Besides the ‘icy puddle’ scene, *Groundhog Day* includes several, “wake-up-asshole” scenes that dramatize the fact that Phil needs to ‘wake up’ and become a better person. A good example is the cold shower scene at the Bed & Breakfast. When he asks the proprietress if there will be any hot water she replies, “Oh that wouldn’t be today.” ‘Today’ being the first of many Groundhog days on which he will be treated to the same cold shower. Another example 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 we are shown a montage of dozens of face slaps when Phil tries to convince Rita to sleep with him.

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

<sup>7</sup> The drink Rita orders, “Sweet vermouth with a twist,” is Ramis wife’s favorite drink. In an earlier script it was Tequila with lime.

These wake-up-slaps show more than Rita’s distaste for his advances; Phil can manipulate the locals in this ‘magical time,’ but he is never able to manipulate Rita who sees right through his actions.

In a scene in the Tip Top Café<sup>8</sup> Phil and Rita are talking when a patron (Gus) overhears Rita say Phil’s name and says to Phil, “Phil? Just like the groundhog Phil. Watch out for your shadow there pal.” Gus’s<sup>9,10</sup> comment is insightful. In a sense, Phil Connors and Punxsutawney Phil are similar creatures. Both are used by others to predict the future (the weather) and both lead ridiculous lives. The groundhog is dragged out of a box, while Phil’s cynicism creates a box around him, emotionally isolating him from others. Both Phil’s are wary of their shadow. 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>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>The café was built for the movie. Locals tried to keep it open afterwards but it eventually closed.

<sup>9</sup> Gus is short for Augustine. For St. Augustine, shadows were a privation of light, and evil and vice, a privation of good.

<sup>10</sup> Some might see Gus as just another ‘hick’ 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 question: “what if there were no tomorrow,” with, “then there would be no consequences,” launching Phil on his hedonistic quest. In the earlier 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>11</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.

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## Unknown Forces At Work

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The movie never identifies who trapped Phil in this 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 that it forms a pattern resembling that of an eye. Is this the proverbial Eye of Providence, the all-seeing eye, the eye of God, watching Phil's progress in the time-loop journey? The 'HOW' of how Phil became trapped is never addressed in the script, and aside from his early anxiety, he shows no curiosity as to how it all started.<sup>12,13</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 is thrown into a situation not of his making, and can only escape by working through his demons and achieving a transformation – a rebirth – since even multiple suicide attempts cannot free him from the time-loop. Egocentric by nature (Rita calls it his defining characteristic), Phil is slow to realize this, experiencing countless Groundhog Days until he finally accepts his fate, and reaches out to

<sup>12</sup> Ramis originally had Phil passing by a classroom during a discussion of time and develops a theory about how the time-loop began. Fortunately for the audience, Ramis wisely cut the scene.

<sup>13</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 into 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 frozen at 5:59.

Rita with sincerity. After experiencing a moment of emotional intimacy with her (possibly for the first time in his life), Phil begins a transformation from selfish to selfless, from jerk to hero. He learns to play the piano and ice sculpting, reads literature and rescues locals in trouble, 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.

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## Who Is Ned Ryerson?

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Stephen Tobolowsky's portrayal of 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 that the encounter between Phil and Ned in the town square is for the sake of comic relief. After consideration, however, we may wonder if there is more going on here than meets the eye. Phil is able to manipulate everyone except Rita. But only Ned has the ability to manipulate Phil. Phil never avoids the town square encounter, even though he knows it will happen over and over again. Is Ned also in a time-loop, someone who, like Phil, is *in* the world but not *of* the world in 'magical' time?

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 and Nancy pick-up scene. Ned provides three critical pieces of information: Phil's name, the high school he went to, and the name of Phil's sister. In the Phil and Nancy scene, Phil also provides three pieces of information: Nancy's name, the high school she went to, and her English teacher's name (all of which he collected on a previous Groundhog Day). Phil doesn't really recognize Ned; Nancy doesn't really recognize Phil. Even the delivery of the lines is similar:

#### **Phil & Ned Scene**

*Ned:* Phil? Hey, Phil. Phil. Phil Connors. Phil Connors I thought that was you.

*Phil:* How ya doing? Thanks for watching.

*Ned:* Now don't tell me you don't recognize me because I sure as heck-fire remember you.

*Phil:* Not a chance.

*Ned:* Ned! Ryerson! Needle-nose Ned. Ned the Head. Case Western high. Ned Ryerson. I dated your sister Mary Pat until you told me not to any more Well?

*Phil:* Ned Ryerson?

#### **Phil & Nancy Scene**

*Phil:* Nancy? Nancy Taylor?

*Nancy:* (laughs)

*Phil:* Lincoln High School? I sat next to you in Mrs. Walsh's English class.

*Nancy:* Oh, I'm sorry.

*Phil:* Phil Connors!

*Nancy:* Wow. That's amazing.

*Phil:* You don't remember me, do you?

*Nancy:* Um

*Phil:* I even asked you to the prom.

*Nancy:* Phil Connors?

It's possible these similarities are a coincidence, but in such a well-crafted movie, it's doubtful. In each scene, one person has the advantage when approaching the other in the town square. Information is provided in an enthusiastic, almost excited

style in order to get something from the other person. For Phil it's sex, but what does Ned want? If we follow the similarities, it's logical that Ned never went to high school with Phil and never dated his sister Mary Pat. If we posit that Ned is actually an emissary of the all-seeing 'eye', the information he gives to Phil was provided to him from a higher source. Ned is there to guide Phil on his time-loop journey, a shaman of sorts, placed in Punxsutawney to gently, and not-so-gently, prod Phil in the right direction. He is trying to sell a different kind of 'insurance' to Phil.

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## Fear of the Eschaton

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As important as the theme of time is to this movie, it remains in the background. The writers don't brow beat 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 'magical' time also hides the multiple time levels at work throughout the film. First there is Phil's (and possibly Ned's) nootemporality<sup>14</sup> – temporal reality of the human mind – created by his ability to remember what he's learned during each repetition. His mind is not 'reset' each morning as are the minds of the other characters. This lack of resetting is a clue to how many times

<sup>14</sup>Nootemporality, biotemporality and prototemporality are parts of a hierarchical time structure developed by physicist and philosopher J.T. Fraser. "Of Time, Passion, and Knowledge", George Brazziller, Inc, New York,

*Groundhog Day* repeats since Phil never ages during the course of the movie. The time loop could last for 100 days, even 1,000 days and have Phil look basically the same age. Therefore, unlike the pencil Phil breaks one night, that becomes whole again the morning after<sup>15</sup>, Phil keeps moving forward in time.

There is, however, the problem of the suicides; Phil's body is always intact the next morning, yet he retains a continuous conscious awareness of his experiences. How is it possible for Phil to keep his memory intact while having his body 'reset'? Over the course of the suicide attempts, he must, in fact, be successful in killing himself at least some of the time, only to be reborn the next day.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps it's simply a dramatic tool used by the writers to emphasize Phil's level of despair. Or, on a deeper level, these suicides are used, not to kill the man, but the demons within him. It's also possible that these suicide attempts don't really happen, existing only in Phil's dream state as his mind struggles with the absurdity of being trapped in this 'magical' time.

A second temporality is the biotemporal<sup>17</sup> 'duration without progression' experienced by the people of Punxsutawney. Apparently recruited by a higher power to assist Phil

<sup>15</sup> As originally filmed, Phil destroys the hotel room, spray-painting the walls and taking a chain saw to the furniture. Afterwards, Ramis cut the scene and replaced it with the simple, but effective act of breaking the pencil.

<sup>16</sup> More curious is why Phil keeps trying to kill himself after the first few attempts are unsuccessful. We know he remembers each attempt as he tells Rita in the Café, "I just didn't die yesterday. I've been stabbed, shot, poisoned, hung, frozen, electrocuted, and burned." Several of these attempts we don't see in the movie.

<sup>17</sup> Biotemporality is the time of living organisms

on his journey of 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>18</sup> though blissfully unaware of their circumstances.

Finally, there is the implicit prototemporality: the time of elementary particles characterized by the continuous, now-less flow of time. There is nothing in the movie to suggest that the world beyond the tiny town of Punxsutawney suffers the same fate. A higher power capable of plunging a town into a time-loop is surely powerful enough to spare the rest of the Universe, or at the very least, the planet. Of course, Phil could be experiencing his time-loop in a parallel-universe Punxsutawney, while the folks of the real Punxsutawney go merrily on with their lives.

As Phil moves from shock to despair and finally acceptance of his fate, the very thing that entraps him – the time loop – helps to save him from himself. After enumerable repetitions, Phil finally "gets it" and realizes how many years he has wasted being a jerk. Phil needs one final nudge to complete his journey and that comes via the presence of the old beggar in the town square. At first, Phil brushes by the old man barely recognizing his existence. Then as Phil begins his transformation, he increasingly interacts with the old man; he gives him money, buys him dinner, and repeatedly tries to keep him from dying.

<sup>18</sup> In Albert Camus' "Legend of Sisyphus", Sisyphus is condemned by a god to roll a huge boulder up to the top of a mountain, only to see it roll down again. He is cursed to repeat this task throughout eternity.

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." Witnessing that death forces Phil to face an eschaton<sup>19</sup> – or end time – not just for the beggar, but also his own. In a pivotal and poignant scene when the old beggar dies in the alley despite Phil's rescue efforts, Phil looks up to the heavens without saying a word, as if to acknowledge that a only a higher power has true control over life and death.

At this point Phil is able to turn an ending into a beginning. Now we understand why Phil finally buys all that insurance from Ned. All along, the 'insurance' was an avatar, a token of proof of Phil's final transformation. Ned knew that only after Phil became a better person could he even consider buying that 'insurance'. Phil's journey is complete. After being bought by Rita at an auction, Phil carves a snow sculpture of Rita, and tells her he loves her (and really means it this time) as snowflakes fall around them.<sup>20</sup> They fall asleep at his B&B and he awakes the next morning from 'magical' time 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 the town is covered in a gleaming white blanket of snow; a nod to Plato's view of sunlight representing the enlightenment of knowing.

<sup>19</sup> From *Eschatos*, the last, or farthest.

<sup>20</sup> In the movie, snow begins and ends Phil's journey in magical time. It starts with the snowstorm, and ends with snow falling around them on what will be the final repetition of *Groundhog Day*.

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, Jesuits, psychoanalysts – all claiming the movie, all saying you must be one of us because this movie so perfectly expresses our 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 that they use *Groundhog Day* as a motivational film for their team."

Most of us go semi-automatically through our days, living lives of "quiet desperation", but Phil is forced to treat each day as a life unto itself. By exploring a variety of heavy subjects (being kind to others, death, importance of art in society) in a light-hearted, funny way, *Groundhog Day* appeals to people from all walks of life. 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 find that, "long and lustrous winter."