

Groundhog Day

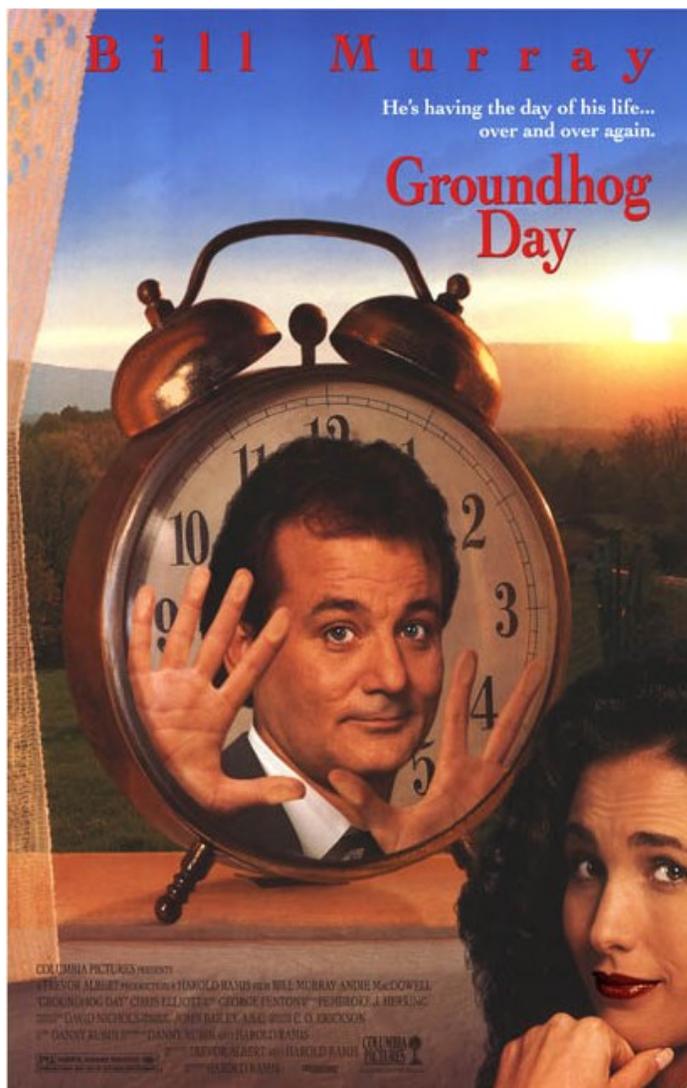
By Steve Ginsberg

What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same, and nothing you did mattered? That's the essential question asked by "Groundhog Day." It's also the exact line of dialogue uttered mid-way through the film by its lead character Phil Connors, the snide, superior local weatherman played by Bill Murray, once he realizes his young, urban professional dreams of upward mobility have been squashed because he will be reliving exactly the above fate for all of eternity in his most nightmarish location – the tiny *hick town* (his words, not ours) of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania.

Of course, "Groundhog Day" is about a lot more than that. It has been called "existential, surreal, loveable, sweet and sentimental, brilliantly imaginative" and, by one "Washington Post" critic at the time of its release, a movie that "will never be designated a national film treasure by the Library of Congress." The latter alone should quash just how seriously any of us should take the predictive or analytic powers of our popular media – which in itself is just one more issue the film quite masterfully addresses.

It is not insignificant to note that "Groundhog Day" ushered in a slightly more absurdist, philosophical view of the world in mainstream Hollywood studio films and is often cited as one the few contemporary comedies this current generation of writers and directors claim they aspired to create. While many comedies, and art in general, question the meaning and futility of life in their own particular ways, the journey of Mr. Murray's character from off-putting egotist to loveable yet still uniquely flawed average human being can be seen all over our 21st century popularity map, most particularly in the recent Oscar-winning screenplays for "The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" (Charlie Kaufman) and "Her" (Spike Jonze). However, it also shows up to varying degrees in the comedies of such directors as diverse as David O. Russell, Wes Anderson, Judd Apatow and the Coen Brothers.

In fact, its director and co-writer Harold Ramis noted that when he first read Danny Rubin's original screenplay the story actually reminded him most of Frank Capra's classic "It's A Wonderful Life" but with an attitude that spoke more to today's world. At that moment it was the world of the early nineties, prior to when Bill Clinton was elected president, and as it turned out "Groundhog Day"'s progressive attitude



Original release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

favoring man's search for love, kindness and do-gooding rather than espousing the more eighties mantra of "greed is good" was both prophetic and perfectly timed to its release in 1993. That it will now endure for many generations to come should give the rest of us softies a bit of hope – though there is no assurance those reading this and/or seeing the film 100 years from now won't view it's basic kind-hearted intentions as anything more than misguided and ironic from a 22nd century lens. This attitude, of course, would be perfectly in keeping with the purposefully vague yet infinity-like references to time and attitudinal changes of its main character throughout the narrative.

The essential plot is deceptively simple. Phil is sent for the third year in a row to Punxsutawney by his station with the less than plum assignment of informing his audience whether the groundhog Punxsutawney Phil – his implied namesake – will

emerge from his hole on Groundhog Day (Feb. 2) and see his shadow. If he sees it he will crawl back where he came from and this means six more weeks of bad winter weather. If he doesn't, then that is the sign of an early spring and he stays above ground.

This weatherman's total disinterest from the start of anything to do with weather – but most particularly his disdain for the other *Phil* and places like Gobbler's Knob where the groundhog festivities annually occur, immediately shows us everything we need to know about the world we're in. Or does it? For very quickly, the focus moves away from this homespun annual tradition to how far Phil Connors - our presumable stand-in – will go to avoid spending all of eternity at the Knob playing second fiddle to a rodent.

There are many strategies filmmakers can employ to tell this tale. One of the more tried and true, yet most difficult to pull off with any originality is to infuse the story with a central romance. *Groundhog Day* does that, and does it well, yet a great deal of the appeal here is not only the love story between Phil and his old-fashioned gal producer Rita (Andie MacDowell) but his varying evolving and devolving relationships with everyone else around him in town. What emerges is not so much a boy-meets-girl seduction but a man-meets-real life reduction. The humor most effectively plays out in just how much Mr. Murray's character can be reduced – in size, in status and in general self-esteem – by his environment and how or whether he will choose to be built back up again.

The slight southern drawl with which Rita relates her traditional values counters nicely with the fast-talking urban intellectualism Phil will never quite overcome. Yet it's not only about Phil seeing that the real Rita is a lot more complex than what he is first led to believe. It's also in seeing that the waitress in the diner, the annoying insurance salesman accosting him in

the street, the car full of twittering elderly ladies with the flat tire, the unstylish engaged couple at the next table at the restaurant and even his own slightly pathetic, balding cameramen he frequently travels with in the field yet really knows nothing about, are not the stereotypes he reduces them to. And for that matter, neither is he.

Out of context, these aspirations might seem as riveting as a reading of the Bible to a convention of atheists. And yet that is exactly the point. Mr. Ramis was in real life a self-avowed "existentialist" who truly believed "the essential task of life is to discover meaning" and saw "*Groundhog Day*" as the "positive" expression of that idea because it leads its hero to a kind of "enlightenment, release and redemption." Yet the success and endurance here is how it is done. With Mr. Murray's smug, holier-than-thou screen persona at its center and by employing simple camera moves, efficient editing and a straightforward design that never tries to be edgy or particularly original, a world often hailed for its originality and edginess was created. Like the narrative of "*Groundhog Day*" that's hard to imagine. But it doesn't make it any less effective or resonant to our times.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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