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# Groundhog Day at 25: Conflict and Inspiration at the Tipping Point of Seasonal Genres

## **Abstract**

*Groundhog Day* has been recognized by leaders of many religions as an inspirational film. It tracks all the responses a person might have to the suspicion that the world has no God, design, or inherent purpose: first, transgressive self-indulgence; next, acedic depression; and finally, redemptive benevolence. During the filming, however, a conflict in vision between Harold Ramis and Bill Murray tore apart their friendship. Ramis wanted a romantic comedy founded on evolution from arrogance to selfless benevolence; Murray preferred a darker satire. Although the finished film reflects Ramis's vision of comedy--the genre of spring--Murray's satirical gestures leave traces of winter that subtly undermine the inspiring climax.

## **Author Notes**

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Over 25 years after the release of *Groundhog Day*, its legacy as an inspirational film remains unimpeachable. “The film has become a curious favorite of religious leaders of many faiths,” noted Alex Kuczynski in 2003, “who all see in *Groundhog Day* a reflection of their own spiritual messages.”<sup>1</sup> When the Museum of Modern Art curated a series about films with significant religious implications (“The Hidden God: Film and Faith”), *Groundhog Day* came up so many times as a nominee that “there was actually a squabble over who would write about it in the retrospective’s catalog.”<sup>2</sup> The film’s basic message—that even the most arrogant, cynical, egotistical person can earn redemption and spiritual rebirth into selfless love—has won praise from Buddhists, Jews, Catholics, Wiccans, and no doubt many other faith communities.

But a much gloomier interpretive circumstance haunts *Groundhog Day* as it celebrates a quarter century of critical success and religious approbation. During the filming in 1993, director-screenwriter Harold Ramis and lead actor Bill Murray, who had been best friends for years, disagreed so vehemently about the movie’s tone and implications that it tore them apart. Murray became increasingly rebellious on set, arriving late and making clear his unhappiness with Ramis’ direction. Co-screenwriter Danny Rubin found himself in the middle of their dispute. In Rubin’s broad-stroke summary, director and actor were “pretty far apart on what the movie was about—Bill wanted it to be more philosophical, and Harold kept reminding him it was a comedy.”<sup>3</sup> When filming came to a close, Ramis and Murray never spoke again, until Ramis lay on his deathbed over twenty years later. Ramis said that the break with his best friend had left “a huge hole in my life.”<sup>4</sup> When *New Yorker* writer Tad Friend reached Murray in 2004 and asked for comments to enrich his essay about Ramis’ achievements, Murray coldly declined. He said he had nothing to say.

This essay will explore *Groundhog Day* for symptoms of the conflict in vision that contributed substantially to the ruin of a close friendship. We do know a few details of what they quarreled over—and it will be, of course, worthwhile to review what has come to light about the circumstances of their dispute. It would impoverish the argument, however, simply to contrast what we know directly about the director’s “comic” perspective with what we know about the actor’s “philosophical” perspective. I find it productive to begin there, with the available relevant information, but then to analyze the underlying conflicts in a less personal way. We need not assume that the actual Harold Ramis and Bill Murray align perfectly with the two perspectives that compete within *Groundhog Day*. These contrary perspectives are grounded in philosophical and religious differences, as well as the different literary genres appropriate to them.

One perspective, which aligns with many versions of traditional religion, takes a fundamentally optimistic view of humanity and cosmic purpose. Whether in the form of religious beliefs in salvific design, or a comparably upbeat secular humanism, the perspective championed by Ramis finds redemption and closure in acts of selfless benevolence. In such a world, romantic love inspires authentically virtuous behavior. Romantic comedy naturally fits such a perspective on life. This genre traces the evolution of a character or characters into ethical and romantic worthiness, and always ends in marriage.

The contrary perspective, most obviously carried by Murray, tilts toward cynicism, misanthropy, and nihilistic existentialism. Humans inhabit a pointless, disappointing world. People are essentially selfish in their actions and opinions. They may be dominated by vice, or by a shallow sense of virtue; but either way, the romantic and existential closure promised by comedy cannot stand up to scrutiny. Romantic love is an illusion fostered by self-centered desire and the

influence of unrealistic narratives. The dominant literary genre here is satire, especially satire of the darker sort.

Theorist of archetypes Northrop Frye classified the major literary genres as four types, which he aligned with the four seasons. Frye correlated satire with winter and comedy with spring. February 2, Groundhog Day, sits halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. (This position accounts for the day's importance to Wiccans, who emphasize the seasonal midway points.) The movie *Groundhog Day* literally takes place at this tipping point between winter and spring; in the more figurative sense, it sits poised between satire, the genre of winter, and comedy, the genre of spring. Ultimately, spring and the hopeful perspective of its director took control of the movie's plot. But the dark satire of its star lead actor left indelible marks of winter on the finished narrative.

### **Ramis v. Murray**

Before analyzing *Groundhog Day* for signs of generic winter and spring, I want to focus on what we know about the conflict between Harold Ramis and Bill Murray. The friction that developed on set involved some combination of substantive issues about the film and personal emotions that were putting stress on their relationship. Some of Ramis's friends maintain that Murray was growing resentful that his friend had received so much credit for the success that had come his way. Tad Friend quotes one friend who claimed, "Bill owes everything to Harold, and he probably has a thimbleful of gratitude."<sup>5</sup> If Murray's pride contributed in some measure to his conflict with Ramis, so did Murray's unsettled emotions surrounding his marriage. He was in the process of breaking up with his first wife, at least in part because of his infidelity. As the friendship between Ramis and Murray also began to deteriorate, Ramis noticed his friend behaving

obnoxiously: “At times, Bill was just irrationally mean and unavailable; he was constantly late on set.”<sup>6</sup> Most of the testimony about the feud has come from Ramis and his friends (because Murray has not commented), and they emphasize mainly Murray’s emotional troubles. But Ramis, for his part, also showed signs of pride that aggravated the strains on the friendship and ultimately sealed its doom. “There are so many pride issues about reaching out,” he told Tad Friend about the ongoing freeze between the two men.<sup>7</sup>

On set, the growing discord between Ramis and Murray entangled with the movie they were making in interesting ways. Murray started calling Ramis in the middle of the night to discuss his misgivings about the script. (Ramis eventually sent Danny Rubin to New York City to work on script drafts with Murray.) Most concretely, Murray improvised adjustments to the dialogue which had the effect of slightly subverting the romantic comedy as shaped by his director. Ryan Gilbey notes that “many of Phil’s lines would be improved” by the actor, who “sharpens the script’s vague asides into poisonous zingers.”<sup>8</sup> The most conspicuous of Murray’s revisions comes in the film’s final lines of dialogue. Phil Connors, now in love and relishing the little town he once scorned, delivers the climax written by Ramis: “Let’s live here!” But Murray tacks on a skeptical coda: “We’ll rent to start.” People who have commented on *Groundhog Day* have a tendency to merge the actor Bill Murray with the character Phil Connors. Gilbey quotes Ramis about the connection between Bill and Phil: “There is a nasty side to Bill that he wasn’t afraid to reveal in the film.”<sup>9</sup> Pauline Kael admitted that she preferred the “nasty” Bill/Phil to the Capraesque good guy he finally becomes. Writing about the transformation of the character into an unambiguously benevolent figure, she called it “a terrible mistake” and a misuse of the actor: “We like [Murray] because of his oddity and because he seems so fundamentally untrustworthy. There’s something grungy to the soul that he knows how to work and it’s wonderful.”<sup>10</sup>

If we collect all the evidence about Murray, though, it becomes clear that he has two sides. There is surely the nasty figure that Kael appreciated, but something else as well—something his best friend once called the “better, higher, gentler Bill.” Ramis made that comment in reference to the convergence of actor and character in *Groundhog Day*. In the role of Phil, Harold reflected, his friend “actually got at the edge between the better, higher, gentler Bill and the bad, cranky, dark Bill.”<sup>11</sup> On a different occasion, Ramis spoke of the “bad” side of his friend with some hint of admiration. He recalled that Murray grew up Catholic and attended a Jesuit school. “He’d been strong enough to defy all the Jesuit priests teaching at the academy,” Ramis told an interviewer. “He was just the biggest rebel in the world.”<sup>12</sup> Although the rebellious Murray clearly annoyed people who worked with him and cared for him, here Ramis partly excused his friend’s difficulties as a noble resistance to religious orthodoxy.

If “bad, cranky, dark” Bill has roots in religious rebellion, “better, higher, gentler” Bill is actually something of a spiritual seeker. Once he described himself as “definitely a religious person, but it doesn’t have much to do with Catholicism anymore. I don’t think about Catholicism as much.”<sup>13</sup> His religious inclinations veered from Catholicism toward alternative philosophical and spiritual resources. A pivotal moment came in 1984. Murray had read Somerset Maugham’s novel *The Razor’s Edge*, which tells the story of a traumatized World War I veteran who seeks peace and enlightenment through the study of Eastern spirituality. Murray identified strongly with the protagonist; he badly wanted to make a film based on the novel and perform that role. After difficult negotiations, he finally got Columbia to make *The Razor’s Edge*—but only if he agreed to join Ramis in *Ghostbusters*. Murray had resisted the new comic project. *Caddyshack* and *Stripes* had been big hits, and the new script promised similar results, but he had tired of those roles. Making another popular comedy, in other words, was the price he paid to get his own film made.

The two films both came out in 1984. *Ghostbusters* was a huge success; *The Razor's Edge* flopped. Audiences much preferred the version of Murray that Ramis nurtured to the serious seeker he wanted to become. After the failure of *The Razor's Edge*, Murray gave up acting for four years, moved to Paris, and spent his time studying philosophy at the Sorbonne.

He took particular interest in the work of George Gurdjieff, the early twentieth-century philosopher and mystic. Paris is one of the centers of Gurdjieff study. Like the protagonist of *The Razor's Edge*, Gurdjieff saw World War I as the dreadful consequence of humans behaving more like machines than healthy souls. Gurdjieff called for people to recognize that they had lost touch with their essential humanity. His teachings guided individuals as they tried to shake off pernicious external influences and awaken into freer, better selves. One of Gurdjieff's most important disciples and expositors was Russian mathematician P. D. Ouspensky. Ouspensky's Gurdjieffian body of work includes a fascinating link to *Groundhog Day*: as David Pecotic has explained, Ouspensky's novel *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* amounts to a precursor to the film. Ivan Osokin, full of "pride and self-pity" and grown despondent, finds himself sent back to relive his crucial life decisions. He ends up making the same mistakes over and over. After countless instances of repetition and failure, the magician who had sent him back offers advice of a Gurdjieffian sort: "You know that everything repeats again and again. If you could change something in yourself, you would be able to use this knowledge to your own advantage."<sup>14</sup>

*The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* links both to Murray, who had studied Gurdjieff seriously, and to Ramis, who came to know the novel after he heard of its similarity to his film. In fact, Ramis wrote a blurb for a new edition of the novel. *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*, he wrote, "while not the original inspiration for our film *Groundhog Day*, was one of those confirming cosmic affirmations that we had indeed tapped into one of the great universal problems of being." Ramis



then offers an encouraging, optimistic interpretation of the novel's ending: "Ouspensky suggests the antidote to the existential dilemma at the core of *Groundhog Day*: that trapped as we are on the karmic wheel of cause and effect, our only means of escape is to assume responsibility for our own destiny and find the personal meaning that imparts a purposeful vitality to life and frees us from the limitations of our contempt."<sup>15</sup> Ramis's interpretation of *Osokin* thus aligns with the comic perspective that triumphed over satire to shape the happy ending of *Groundhog Day*. The ending of *Osokin* allows for this sort of cheerful interpretation, but the novel remains ambiguous. Although Ivan Osokin hears a message about self-transformation, he has not yet done anything but repeat the same mistakes again and again. It is not clear how Murray might have understood the ending of *Osokin*. As a spiritual seeker who looked to Gurdjieff for inspiration, he might have joined Ramis in embracing a spring-like redemption; but as someone with strong skeptical impulses, he might just as easily have embraced wintry satire and seen a gloomy forecast of empty repetition.

Ramis, for all his attachments to comic spring, shows signs of residual winter. He told Tad Friend about his connections to Buddhism (his second wife's religion), but he hedged his devotion with satirical impieties. He became "something of a Buddhist," but considers himself only "Buddhish."<sup>16</sup> (Alex Kuczynski reported that Ramis, "who was raised Jewish, said he feels like a Buddhist, but does not practice a religion."<sup>17</sup>) When he spoke with Friend, Ramis was wearing Buddhist meditation beads on his wrist, but he undermined their significance with a joke of the sort his friend Murray liked to make: the beads are meant to help him reflect on the proper way to eat, but they "actually just get in the way when I'm cutting my steak." He described himself to Friend as a decidedly imperfect Buddhist, "acknowledging that he has been unable to divest himself of

‘sarcasm, cruelty, self-indulgence, and torpor.’”<sup>18</sup> All of these qualities, of course, attach to the “bad” Bill and to the unredeemed character he plays in *Groundhog Day*.

### **Romantic Comedy and its Discontents**

Ryan Gilbey quotes the only review suggesting that something like winter-spring fault lines run through the film: *New Statesman* noted that *Groundhog Day* “appeals at once to absolute idealism and absolute cynicism.” Gilbey adds, “It’s a kind of miracle that neither interpretation ever fully negates the other.”<sup>19</sup> I agree with this hypothesis, and in the rest of this essay I will attempt to confirm and enrich it. It is important to keep in mind, of course, that Ramis, not Murray, ultimately came to govern the film, steering it in a direction that ensured its popularity—and endeared it both to fans of romantic comedy and to religious leaders looking for narratives of exemplary behavior. My analysis of the contrary perspectives implicit in *Groundhog Day* will focus on two principal topics: first, the film’s relationship to the genre of romantic comedy; and second, the religious and philosophical implications of Phil Connors’ long day.

As he makes clear in *How to Write Groundhog Day*, Danny Rubin did not originally conceive of *Groundhog Day* as a romantic comedy. Ramis took an interest in the project when no one else did, and he praised the original draft, with its indie-film sort of quirkiness. But he always had it in mind to revise the screenplay to bring it into conformity with the conventions of romantic comedy. Rubin eventually came around to appreciate the film’s new mainstream look and appeal, despite the fact that *Groundhog Day* “was not built as a romantic comedy with Phil’s central conflict having to do specifically with Rita.” Although Rubin envisioned “a comedy with a romance in it,” his version of the film had too much inherent dark satire to align with romantic comedy. Most strikingly, Rubin’s original screenplay offered a surprise ending that completely

undermined any romantic closure. Rita wakes up on February 3<sup>rd</sup> next to Phil—the climactic moment, that is to say, of the romantic comedy as governed by Ramis—and bitterly reports that *she* has been repeating the same miserable day over and over. “Phil,” she says across the bed, “it’s bad enough having to wake up next to you, day after day, after day, but then I have to face this— one-horse, no-class, ice-covered groundhogsville. Dammit, Phil, if I see another groundhog I’m going to puke.”<sup>20</sup> The screenplay ends with a shift to Rita’s voiceover monologue as she expresses a hopeless malaise. The romantic closure, in other words, is swallowed by a much more powerful force of disillusion.

Ramis told Rubin that the ending was clever, and to some degree he did appreciate the wintry satire that informed it. Still, the spring influence in him remained strong, and he clearly wanted this movie to be a popular success. A better route lay through romantic comedy. The kind of structure he preferred was the classic comic narrative that ends in at least one (and often more than one) marriage. As Rubin recalls, Ramis at one point planned to end the film with a literal wedding: the transformed Phil would manifest his new virtues at the wedding of a young couple. The celebration would bring the whole community together in happy closure. The wedding idea was later scrapped in favor of the traditional Groundhog Day dinner and bachelor auction. Nevertheless, the *Groundhog Day* shaped by Ramis did end with two marriages. One was the now offstage marriage of the young couple, which Phil blesses with a thoughtful gift (two tickets to Wrestlemania). The other marriage, clearly implied if not actual, is the one between Phil and Rita. Phil’s commitment takes the form of his proposal to Rita, “Let’s live here!”

Traditional comedy closes with marriage and emanates from certain assumptions and conventions surrounding romantic love. The spring influence guides *Groundhog Day* to embrace many of these assumptions and conventions. Both Ramis and Murray make contributions to the

ideal presentation of romantic love. At the climax of Phil's courtship of Rita, and just before February 2<sup>nd</sup> turns into February 3<sup>rd</sup>, he tells her, "I'm happy now—because I love you." The film marks Phil's evolution with a genuine-sounding expression of love as distinct from lust. His lust had shown itself conspicuously earlier in the film, especially in his seduction of Nancy. With Nancy, Phil simply singled out the most attractive townswoman and connived to have sex with her. His early efforts to attract Rita look enough like lust to discourage any notion of transcendent love. But the spring trajectory of the script carefully separates Phil's Rita experience from his Nancy experience. For one thing, Phil accidentally calls Nancy "Rita" (twice) as they wrestle in foreplay. His slip of the tongue effectively distinguishes his attraction to Nancy, entirely a matter of lust, from his attraction to Rita, who remains pure and potentially an ideal soulmate. To compensate for his mistake, Phil actually proposes to Nancy; but this proposal is clearly just a tool for seduction, not anything significant in the higher romantic plot.

The pivotal moment in Phil and Rita's romance comes as she tries to stay awake in his room and find out if he disappears at midnight. As she gets drowsy and drops off to sleep, Phil whispers a heartfelt romantic monologue. Both Ramis and Murray engineered this scene. It was Ramis's idea to make Phil's love for Rita the catalyst for his transformation toward selfless benevolence; and it was Ramis who punctuated Phil's speech with sentimental orchestral music—a cinematic convention to indicate genuine romantic emotion. But it was Murray who mainly improvised the speech itself. Rubin recalls how it worked: "When the final script started to take shape, the declaration of love moved to the end of the second act, to the night when Rita tries to stay awake with Phil. I think much of that speech ended up being improvised by Bill. . . . By making it personal to him, I think he was better able to connect to the scene and make it feel real to the rest of us."<sup>21</sup> It can be difficult to make romantic love feel "real," in other words, and at this

key moment for the romantic comedy, it was Murray who took charge to give it at least some semblance of plausibility.

The wintry threat manifests itself in the lead-up to Phil's love speech. Phil wants to reassure Rita that she will be safe if she nods off while on his bed. "I promise I won't touch you," he says, and then after a beat, ". . . *much*." Murray reasserts its influence with just a hint of the old lustful Phil. The ensuing speech that Murray improvised affirms a vision of love liberated from lust: "I think you're the kindest, sweetest, prettiest person I've ever met in my life. I've never seen anyone that's nicer to people than you are. The first time I saw you, something happened to me. I never told you, but—I knew that I wanted to hold you as hard as I could. I don't deserve someone like you. But if I ever could, I swear I would love you for the rest of my life." Murray deploys the useful if well-worn convention of love at first sight. Phil says he felt an inexplicable rush of emotion the first time he saw Rita. The myth of love at first sight deflects the influence of reason and realism and invites belief in a higher, transcendent power. Phil invests Rita with qualities of sweetness and generosity that make her a kind of counter-self to the unredeemed Phil. In combination with Ramis's swelling music, Murray's speech gives voice to idealized romance.

Phil's evolution from lust to love persuades most, but not all, viewers. Mario Sesti, the film critic who wrote about the movie for the Museum of Modern Art catalog, offers the most cynical debunking: "*Groundhog Day* is the story of a man whose problem is not coming to himself again in a crisis but changing himself enough to get a woman into bed."<sup>22</sup> Terry Lindvall (with his co-authors) accepts that Phil undergoes some sort of redemptive transformation, but he attributes the change to Rita's generous sacrifice rather than Phil's initiative. Borrowing an idea first articulated by Michael P. Foley,<sup>23</sup> he notes that Rita "sacrifices her all for his bliss" when she spends all her money to buy him at the bachelor auction. For Lindvall, as for Sesti, Phil's egotism is fundamental

and essential. “This fool,” as he calls Phil, is “released from his purgatory into the arms of comedy,” but only because a godlike figure bails him out.<sup>24</sup> Lindvall points out that Rita as Phil’s “producer” has appropriate allegorical credentials for such a role. Interestingly, Lindvall classifies *Groundhog Day* not as a romantic comedy but as *reduction ad absurdum*, more akin to farce.

As much as the film invests in romantic idealism, close inspection of Phil’s “love” speech shows the satirical influence pushing back a little. Phil had an urge to hold Rita “as hard as I could,” which slightly renews the threat of lust. When he confesses that “I don’t deserve someone like you,” he seems to be acknowledging a home truth about who he is, realistically. His inner cynic cannot fully buy into the romantic myth. Even at the end of the speech, with his declaration of love, he phrases it conditionally. “If I could” transform myself, I would be the sort of person who can plausibly promise eternal love. If we bear in mind that Murray was in the process of seeing his marriage unravel, the speech he wrote for Phil becomes all the more poignant in its romantic aspirations, and at the same time entirely understandable in its hints of weary realism.

The demystification of romance never entirely disappears from *Groundhog Day*, despite the narrative triumph of spring and comedy. The most striking against-the-grain improvisation has already been noted: Bill improvises Phil’s skeptical last line, “We’ll rent to start.” Two events within the climactic scene—the town party to celebrate the day—also undermine the upbeat closure of marriage. We see the young couple who have just married, which boosts the Ramis comic credentials. But a few hints of satirical subversion slightly diminish the effect. The woman had earlier confessed to Phil that she was having second thoughts about the marriage. And while Phil managed to persuade her back on course, the last we see of the newlyweds hints at trouble ahead. The new wife jealously grabs her husband away as he celebrates with a hug from Rita. Whoever wrote this part (most likely Ramis), it aligns better with winter than spring.

Another wintry feature also comes during the climactic party. This one involves Larry, the cameraman. Through much of the film, Phil treats Larry with disdain and takes every opportunity to make fun of him. Once Phil sets out on his virtuous path, he reverses course: he greets Larry warmly, offers favors, and suggests that they ought to get to know each other better. But at the town party, the film resumes its ridicule of Larry. Instead of letting him benefit from the gravitational pull of romantic comedy, *Groundhog Day* humiliates Larry with two moments of romantic rejection. Nancy scorns him when he does his awkward best to flirt with her. And even more emphatically, at the bachelor auction, poor Larry gets no bids, until an elderly woman finally buys him for 25 cents. The film sharpens his embarrassment as the band plays a little stripper music to accompany his posing.

*Groundhog Day* still relishes ridicule even as its protagonists unite in generosity and benevolence. Another such moment satirizes Ned, the insurance salesman. Phil, now carrying out virtuous missions, prolongs his morning hug with Ned and whispers in his ear: “I have missed you *so* much. I don’t know where you’re headed, but—can you call in sick?” Ned runs off in homophobic panic. This satirical moment is especially effective because it takes a gesture of redemptive benevolence—Phil’s new friendliness—and transforms it through a kind of reverse alchemy. What looked at first like a warm embrace turns into a mean joke.

### **Redemptive Spring and Residual Winter**

The humiliation of Larry and Ned does not fit well with the religious enthusiasm for *Groundhog Day*. Religious leaders have nevertheless appreciated the inspiring redemptive narrative and managed to overlook or underestimate the wintry counterplot. The film offers plenty of material to support upbeat interpretations connected with mainstream religious doctrines.

Robert Jewett, the first to take the film's religious implications seriously, connects the message of *Groundhog Day* with Pauline doctrine. Citing the letter to the Galatians (6: 7-10), Jewett emphasizes Paul's distinction between *chronos* and *kairos* as an interpretive key. Phil's repetitive day keeps him stuck in linear, mundane *chronos* until *kairos* emerges with his redemptive inspiration. "To live in the flesh is to be stuck in *chronos*, to repeat the same mistakes day after day," explains Jewett. Living "in the flesh" is what Phil has been doing, in his sinful, self-centered behavior. "To live according to the spirit, in response to the love of Christ, is to enter the realm of *kairos*, to find fulfillment in the midst of daily routines."<sup>25</sup> Christopher Deacy builds on Jewett's reading and focuses on Phil's descent into despair as a necessary prelude to redemption. The movie thereby "bears witness to one of the central insights of Christianity." He quotes Kierkegaard from *Either-Or*—"Every man who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the significance of life"—and continues, "the only way in which one can overcome despair is by first acknowledging and then coming to terms with that despair."<sup>26</sup>

The *New York Times* reporter Kuczynski consulted with Buddhist, Jewish, and Catholic authorities to hear their interpretations. An academic expert in Buddhism emphasized Phil's gradual karmic improvement through countless rebirths. Phil's reawakenings do not match up perfectly with conventional Buddhist reincarnation—he always returns in the same body, for one thing—but the parallels are clear enough. Each morning he wakes to a new life, and often with a *literal* rebirth (after he has killed himself the night before). A rabbi noted that Phil does not rest with perfecting himself and achieving some sort of eternal reward: he returns again and again to this world, in the service of *mitzvot*. The Catholic source, a Jesuit priest, was more restrained in his theological speculations. He downplayed a suggestion about resurrection and simply praised Phil's progress toward authentic humanity.



Although this priest did not raise the subject, there is an interesting theological problem that might enrich the Catholic connection to *Groundhog Day*. The problem has to do with the relationship between Catholic doctrine and reincarnation. Although Catholics reject reincarnation as a violation of the special sacredness of each human person, an intriguing comparison can be made between Buddhist reincarnation and Catholic ideas about purgatory. Prominent twentieth-century theologian Karl Rahner tentatively suggested (but never fully developed) such a comparison.<sup>27</sup> In a recent essay, Bradley Malkovsky offers a careful analysis of theological issues surrounding the Church's relationship to reincarnation. Malkovsky argues that a reincarnation model has certain advantages over purgatory. "In both the satisfaction [penal] and the sanctification [purifying] models of purgatory," he writes, "the human person is entirely passive, not actively contributing to its own completion. Such an approach would seem to devalue free human participation in the process of perfection."<sup>28</sup> The Buddhist model, by contrast, posits that each human soul freely loses or finds its way to spiritual refinement. Phil Connor's long process might find resonance in Catholic thinking as a version of purgatorial purification endowed with self-determination.

Jewish ideas about the afterlife are so many and so varied that it is difficult to elevate one model as representative. In Simcha Paull Raphael's comprehensive survey, he notes a version of kabbalistic belief that converges with Buddhism. Some authors "taught that not just evildoers but also the middling folk and righteous ones were subject to transmigration. Why the righteous? Because through reincarnation, the perfected righteous person, in a manner similar to Buddhist *bodhisattva*, can assist other aspiring beings to attain greater and greater spiritual perfection."<sup>29</sup> It was evidently this kabbalistic concept that Kuczynski's rabbi had in mind when he connected

*Groundhog Day* with Judaism. And as Raphael elsewhere mentions, in the 1970s, “New Age Judaism” revived the old traditions by blending them with Zen and Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>30</sup>

The film as steered by Ramis certainly encourages these religious interpretations of Phil’s experience. But the optimistic narrative of self-perfection applies just as well to the non-religious body of thinking usually referred to as secular humanism. It is not necessary, in other words, to hold some sort of religious faith to find inspiration in *Groundhog Day*. Phil’s transformation does not depend on belief in God or transcendent design and purpose. God comes up briefly at a transitional moment for Phil, but not in a way that insists on the validity of theism. As he astonishes Rita with his prescience and knowledge of townspeople’s lives, he says, “I’m a god. Not *the* God—I don’t think.” Phil does not seem too sure whether *the* God exists; in any event, he is not religious enough to worry about the blasphemous tenor of his remarks. Secular humanists can embrace Phil as a philosophical hero: facing a godless world that seems empty and pointless, he takes responsibility for shaping his own sense of purpose, and finds fulfillment in the secular good of improving life in this world.

Phil’s secular redemption comes only after he reacts in two other ways to the realization that his world has no God, design, or inherent purpose. At first he indulges in every sort of transgressive, self-indulgent behavior, including instances of all seven deadly sins. There are no consequences, he concludes, so why not? “I’m not going to play by *their* rules anymore.” Eventually he sickens of all these things he thought he wanted, and becomes depressed; lacking anything to give him joy or purpose, he tries to commit suicide. Secular humanists can find inspiration in Phil’s evolving existential consciousness, which moves through three stages: first, immature, transgressive selfishness; next, acedic despair that leads to suicide; and finally, a benevolent sense of responsibility to help all who live in this godless world.

If the spring narrative fits nicely with secular humanism, Murray brings hints of a wintry philosophical perspective—nihilistic existentialism, with shadings of misanthropy. Phil’s nihilistic tendencies manifest themselves first as malaise. He mopes over beer in a bowling alley: “What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?” To which his companion replies, “That about sums it up for me.” Ned the insurance agent adds his own spin to an empty, random universe. Reflecting on the tenuousness of life, he says to Phil, “It’s all one big crapshoot anyways.” Once Phil becomes accustomed to a world where nothing matters, he amuses himself for a time with episodes of joyful misrule. But inevitably the malaise returns as suicidal despair. The secular humanism that underlies Ramis’s comedy redeems Phil from his nihilistic gloom through the inspiration of Rita. As was the case with the sentimental romance orchestrated by the director, however, hints of satire survive Phil’s transformation and slightly undermine his new saintliness.

Religious leaders note that the new Phil has made an exemplary transition to selflessness and benevolence. Ramis certainly steers the script in that direction. But how selfless, really, is the new Phil? And does the influence of wintry satire offer any resistance to benevolence? The new Phil still relishes the limelight and wants to be the center of attention. At the town party, for example, it is Phil who plays the star and shows off with his piano jamming. The audience and other musicians all look at him with admiration; he has not simply blended selflessly into the community. It becomes all too easy to speculate that the new Phil has all the vanity of the old Phil in his craving for personal success. His residual selfishness pokes through even as he performs a benevolent act. After he catches a little boy falling out of a tree, he bristles as the boy runs away: “You little brat! You have never thanked me!” Phil still wants *some* sort of reward for his good deeds, for one thing, and as he judges the boy a “brat,” Murray infuses just a hint of misanthropy.

Misanthropic reflections were abundant in the early Phil (e. g., “People are morons!”), but even after his turn toward benevolence, some misanthropic shadings linger. Perhaps most telling is a line spoken by Phil to Rita. On the night Rita tries to stay awake with him—the night that ends in Bill’s love speech that anchors the Ramis romantic plot—Rita encourages him to think more positively about his situation: “Well sometimes I *wish* I had a 1000 lifetimes. I don’t know, Phil—maybe it’s not a curse. It just depends on how you look at it.” Phil shoots her a glance, and in an unmistakably mocking tone, says, “Gosh! You’re an upbeat lady.” For just a moment the sarcastic Phil rules the scene, scornful of human shallowness and resigned to the cosmic void. Soon enough, of course, he will resume the role grounded in romantic comedy. Satire and skepticism only re-enter with the last line Murray improvised for Phil: “We’ll rent to start.”

It is not quite appropriate to refer to *Groundhog Day* as an example of a textual rabbit-duck (where contrary interpretations alternate with equal plausibility). Inspiration pretty decisively trumps disenchantment in the movie Ramis shepherded. No doubt most viewers join the religious leaders in embracing its upbeat messages. Not everyone, though: recall Pauline Kael, who preferred the naughty Murray, or Mario Sesti, who saw no transformation for Phil. It is also tempting to conclude that Murray, despite some moments of confluence with Ramis, joins Kael in the party of disenchantment. He split away from his friend and sought, for the most part, darker roles, such as the jaded protagonist of *Lost in Translation*, which earned him an Oscar nomination.

One recent event in Murray’s life, however, suggests an enduring affiliation with the redemptive plot. In 2017, Murray attended the Broadway musical based on *Groundhog Day*. Others in the audience watched him carefully. By the end, according to a *New York Times* account, he “was visibly sobbing.” Interviewed later, he indicated that “the message behind the story” had caused the tears. ““The idea that’ . . . [Murray] trailed off as he paused to collect his thoughts. ‘The

idea that we just have to try again. We just have to try again. It's such a beautiful, powerful idea.”<sup>31</sup>  
Had he lived longer, Ramis would certainly have appreciated the sentiment. And he probably would have noticed the hint of winter still evident in Bill's tearful epiphany: he is moved not so much by fulfillment and closure, but by the persistence of human will in the face of discouragement.

### Notes

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4. Ibid., 172.
5. Ibid., 172.
6. Ibid., 171.
7. Ibid., 172.
8. Ryan Gilbey, *Groundhog Day* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 22.
9. Ibid., 28.
10. Ibid., 53.
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15. P. D. Ouspensky, *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin: A Novel* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2002), back cover.
16. Friend, 167.
17. Kuczynski.
18. Friend, 171.

19. Gilbey, 11.
20. Danny Rubin, *How to Write Groundhog Day* (Kindle edition, 2014).
21. Ibid.
22. Mario Sesti, "Groundhog Day," in *The Hidden God: Film and Faith* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 210.
23. Michael P. Foley, "Phil's Shadow: Lessons of Groundhog Day" (April, 2004), [www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=17-03-012](http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=17-03-012)
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26. Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema* (London: Ashgate, 2005), 67.
27. Karl Rahner, "Fegfeuer," in *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. XIV (Zurich: Benziger, 1959), 447-449.
28. Bradley Malkovsky, "Belief in Reincarnation and Some Unresolved Questions in Catholic Eschatology," *Religions* (2017), 8: 090176.
29. Simcha Paul Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2009), 318.
30. Ibid., 32.
31. Sapan Deb, "Bill Murray Relives a Role, Seeing Broadway's *Groundhog Day*," *New York Times*, August 8, 2017.

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