

10th Annual Film and Psychoanalysis Program for 2010/2011

Presents the theme of

ENTRAPMENT

Film: Groundhog Day (1993)

Director: Harold Ramis

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When *Groundhog Day* was first released in 1993, it was simply considered a straightforward Hollywood romantic comedy. That it is, but it also became a top ranking film of the 1990s as well as a cult film reflecting the core beliefs of various religions. Harold Ramis, the film's director, said he had been contacted by adherents of Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity to say that he had perfectly depicted all their beliefs. These have been summarized by Alex Kuczynski in a New York Times article published in 2003.

For instance, in Buddhism, the central notion of samsara has to do with the endless cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. In Judaism, a person who lives according to the faith finds the greatest meaning in performing mitzvahs, or good deeds, and this is what our hero eventually learns to enjoy in his endlessly repeating day. From Christianity is taken the notion of Christ's death and rebirth applied to the main conceit of the film. One critic even went so far as to compare the groundhog to Christ in saying that it represents the renewal of life in the spring and thus the renewal of man in a state of redemption and hope.

It was only a question of time (pun intended) before psychoanalysts jumped on the bandwagon to take on this film. At first, there were only brief references by clients in cited clinical anecdotes appearing in the literature. One client referred to feeling like a character in *Groundhog Day* in terms of her uncontrollable and repetitive traumatic experiences. The term *Groundhog Day* came to represent the unconscious work of the repetition compulsion in maintaining neurosis.

Other clients present as narcissistic character disorders who repeat their experiences over and over in the analysis without being able to establish anything more than a superficial relationship. Here is a passage from a published psychoanalytic paper describing one such client:

Mr. G, a man in his mid-thirties....came to analysis regularly... [but] had such a haughty and dismissive manner that I often wondered what kept him coming. Over a period of several years, I was treated at best as a well-paid servant and at worst as a worthless and easily dispensable functionary. I learned not to take his attitude of marked superiority as unique to me, because almost all his "friends" at one time or another complained to him about his arrogance and his inability to view them as having a separate existence. He reminded me of the main character in the film Groundhog Day and, in fact, listening to daily, unchanging recitations replete with the unworthies who crossed his path, made me feel at times oppressed by the notion that we might never get out of day one. He came to treatment because, in fact, a woman he had been attracted to had commented on his self-involved style and refused his advances (Newman, 1999) .

It took thirteen years after the film's release for a psychoanalyst, Richard Almond, to analyze the film in conjunction with its director, Harold Ramis (Ramis and Almond, 2006). They discussed the film as a perfect metaphor for the process of change in analysis, with Rita acting as the foil – or the part of the psychoanalyst – to the subjective experience of Phil Connors, the narcissist.

When the opening credits roll, we see clouds filmed in time lapse photography, so that everything is speeded up. Of course, this is the opposite of the conceit in the film, because time will stop for Phil Connors.

As we meet our anti-hero, he has just received his next work assignment: "You're going to Punxatawney, Phil," he is told. The eponymous overlap between his own name and that of the film's groundhog suggests that Phil Connors stays in his own imaginary burrow and never comes out to connect with anyone because it's *never* springtime for him. He is always surly, grandiose, and empty.

The stage is set for Phil to try and learn his lesson. Repeating the same day over and over becomes the main conceit of the film. It easily represents the subjective experience of the narcissist for whom living is just a boring repetition of acts and events because he lives in his own head and people do not exist for him. The moment that Phil recognizes that he is repeating February 2nd, he has entered

another psychological sphere of awareness. While he *was* trapped before – from our perspective, now he *knows* he is trapped. Such knowledge corresponds with the beginning sense of self-awareness of the narcissist who is no longer comfortable with his state of mind which is what leads him to analysis.

Each day that Phil repeats begins with a close-up of his clock radio changing from 5:59 to 6:00am. We first hear Sonny and Cher singing “I got you babe” which we eventually come to realize is a contrast with Phil having no one because of his isolation in a time warp. First, he visits a neurologist, played by Harold Ramis, the film’s director, and then a psychiatrist. He continues to insult everyone with his arrogant put-downs. He first asks the question: “What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same and nothing you did mattered?” Then he asks: “What if there were no tomorrow?” and suddenly he realizes that there would be no consequences for his actions. He goes for a joy ride, destroying everything in his path, lands up in jail, but, of course, wakes up in his bed at the inn, at 5:59am – again – scot free.

His omnipotent defences make him feel triumphant about avoiding the consequences of his behaviour and he reacts by treating everyone he meets in an uninhibited and unconscionable manner. This omnipotence is a reaction to his helpless rage about being trapped in time and includes his overindulgence in food and in sexual conquests. He uses his foreknowledge of events for his own selfish gain. Rita tries to interpret his narcissism to him by quoting Sir Walter Scott:

*‘The wretch, concentered all in self,
Living, shall forfeit fair renown,
And, doubly dying, shall go down
To the vile dust, from whence he sprung,
Unwept, unhonor’d, and unsung.’*
—Sir Walter Scott.

However, he does not yet recognize the extent of his egocentricity.

When he begins to focus his romantic attentions on Rita, he uses his opportunity to repeat time combined with her forgetting each previous version of this day to learn about her so that he might be

more likely to be able to seduce her by manipulating her feelings toward him. The repeated scenes of them having a drink at a bar show us how memory and repetition become for him the substitute for the empathy and capacity for learning which he lacks. However, he still cannot control blurting out his first disparaging thoughts to her. When she says to him: "It's a perfect day. You couldn't plan a day like this," he responds, "Well, you can. It just takes an awful lot of work." For Phil, an encounter is planned work and acting – but not truly connecting out of love and concern.

However, Rita's constant willingness to listen to him grows on him and he becomes interested in her as a person, but he does not know what to do with this interest. All he *can* do is to keep trying to seduce her. She slaps him, saying "That's for making me care about you." Of course, this is what he *has* done – *force* her to care about him, thereby revealing his controlling omnipotence. Then there are a blinding series of repeated slaps because of his inability to be empathic and human with her, and we know that he just cannot learn how to do this. Of course, we hear the empathic strains of Ray Charles singing "And you don't know me".

Because he finally realizes that getting close to Rita is outside his control, Phil falls into a deep depression. After some more surly attacks on his crew and the people of Puxtatawney, he turns his omnipotent attempts at control against himself. After stealing the groundhog in an unconscious and envious act of trying to appropriate the goodness that he so glaringly lacks, he attempts to kill himself by driving a truck into a quarry. There follows a blinding series of suicidal attempts which echo the earlier succession of slaps – both series denoting his impotence and despair. The unending repetitions illustrate in a concrete way how the inward focus of the narcissist prevents him from learning and moving forward in his life. In contrast with his suicide attempts, his continued survival allows him to deny his impotence to conclude he is a God. At the same time, he is no longer attacking Rita or anyone else, because he has progressed to the stage of masochism instead of uncontrolled rage and omnipotence. He is beginning to *need* Rita, and thus, to be able to experience a real relationship.

Ultimately, he tells Rita: “I am a jerk. I’ve killed myself so many times that I don’t even exist anymore.” Of course, beyond literally killing himself within the repetitive conceit of the film, Phil is finally recognizing the extent of his lifelong withdrawal from the world, from the company of other human beings, from being a real, live person. This corresponds with that point in analysis where the narcissistic shell disintegrates through the recognition that his defences no longer function to keep the individual superficially happy with his life.

With her generous spirit, Rita tries to get Phil to change his *perspective* – instead of trying to change his *fate* – by suggesting that he try to appreciate his repeating day by adapting to it and accepting it. “It depends on how you look at it,” she says, as if she were a seasoned analyst. At the end of this version of the day, he promises he won’t touch her and she stays the night, with him reading her poetry. In other words, he is beginning to be able to give to another person without the defensive interference of his own needs. And he openly recognizes how her kindness is beginning to kindle love within him for the first time in his life.

The discovery of the capacity to love another person opens a new world for Phil. He begins to spend his repeating day being good and considerate of others. He gives all his cash to the astounded beggar and then brings coffee and pastry to his crew. He is learning how to listen and how to let other people into his previously foreclosed world. He then decides to take Rita’s advice and take advantage of the time he has in order to learn to improve himself, by learning to play the piano and do chainsaw ice sculpting. But when he tries to save the sick old beggar’s life, Phil discovers the limits of his omnipotent powers: *He* might be able to infinitely repeat a day, but for others, it may simply be the time to die. He is learning the lesson that, to be attached to life, he has to learn to accept the eventual loss of his attachments.

This whole segment of the film contrasts Phil’s infinite repetitions with the limits of real life. Yet even the yearly repetition of winter – which Phil has always hated – becomes for him “just another step

in the cycle of life” which he can now appreciate within the context of time’s moving forward. In his narcissistic past experience, winter was endless because time had stopped for him. Indeed, we often hear narcissistic clients complain of this kind of disturbance in their sense of time perception, due to their endless embeddedness in their internal world of depression.

In the next series of repetitions, we see Phil in the process of doing things for other people – catching a boy who falls out of a tree, changing a tire for three old women, saving a choking man by doing the Heimlich manoeuvre. He is attempting to make reparations for his earlier selfishness. When he is recognized by many at the town party for his heroic actions, and he entertains everyone by playing the piano, Rita is intrigued by this new image of him, and she buys him in a charity auction. He is able to carve an ice sculpture of her face out of his love for her. And when he says “No matter what happens tomorrow, or for the rest of my life, I’m happy now, because I love you,” we know he is finally, happily, living in the moment, truly engaged with life and especially, with other people.

Of course, he finally gets his reward for living “in real time” by finally waking up to find Rita still sleeping beside him. Real time has allowed him to progress to the following day. Instead of hating the passage of time and the changes within it, as he did in the past, he says, “Something is different... anything different is good... but this could be real good.” When he asks her why she is there, she replies, “I bought you. I own you.” The irony here is that this is the reverse of what he had previously tried to do with everyone: buy, own, and control them. Now that he has been able to set her free, she has been able to fall in love with him. And he is able to love her too, and asks what he can do for her today. He has learned to give – an impossible feat for the confirmed narcissist he first was.

His final line to Rita is: “Let’s live here...We’ll rent to start.” It perfectly shows his reformed life perspective as he now wants to live among people he knows and cares for, and he can accept a modest rather than a grandiose lifestyle.

As the credits roll, we hear the familiar strains of Nat King Cole, singing: “What a day this has been, what a rare mood I’m in, why it’s almost like being in love.” And this time, we see a normal cloudy sky, with no time lapse photography. It really is reassuring!

In an interview with Harold Ramis, he discussed the many repetitive replays of the slap that Rita gives Phil. He points out how it represents the repetitions of the same argument we all have or the same mistake we all keep repeating. What he says about change is: “The key to *Groundhog Day* is having the insight, the courage and the energy to make those changes, when you come to those moments when you could make the same mistake again... *to change one little thing* [my italics].”

People come to psychoanalysis usually because they have made the same mistake or have responded in the same dysfunctional way so many times that they no longer believe they have the capacity to change on their own. And, of course, once they are in treatment, the repetition compulsion makes them repeat with the analyst their style of personal interaction and their defensive patterns. Even when the analyst interprets these things, an individual may not be able to go the extra distance to change his pattern of interaction. He may seem so trapped that we truly feel that time has stopped for him, and we may despair of ever being able to help him change.

Then something happens. The client announces that something the analyst said made a huge difference and gave him the courage to do something different. We might think, “Oh, it’s that interpretation I made the last time”, but no. The client refers to some small comment we made that sometimes *we don’t even remember*. But somehow that comment acted as a spur to allow the client to make a small change in his habitual way of being. The point is, the catalyst for change may be a seemingly inconsequential comment – by the analyst or by someone else, or some other input into the client’s thoughts... from a book, or a film, or anything at all. It is almost as if this catalyst appears out of nowhere to deeply impress the client that *change is not only necessary but required immediately* – for the first time.

Of course, the client is also acting on the built up understanding that he has already gained in the analysis, but it is that little catalyst that pushes him to actually make that change. It's a bit like discovering you're at the end of a dead end street and you have to do something different – or, that you're stuck in time.

References

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