

Chapter 2

Agon in *Groundhog Day* and *Feds*

2.1 Theoretical Introduction

The first subcategory of play and games which Caillois mentions, and which was the fundamental play category for Huizinga is agon which is based on the notion of competition. The natural space for agon are sports in which victor is a major part of the motivation behind the game. The two discussed films, while not concerning sports competitions, revolve around situations which have many of the hallmarks Caillois ascribes to sport. For instance, he stresses that crucial conditions for agon are the sense of separation of the game from outside influences (help) and the delimitation of clear conditions which have to be met to achieve victory. Hence, games which fall into the agon category

would seem to be competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph. It is therefore always a question of a rivalry which hinges on a single quality (speed, endurance, strength, memory, skill, ingenuity, etc.), exercised, within defined limits and without outside assistance, in such a way that the winner appears to be better than the loser in a certain category of exploits (Caillois, 2001, p. 14).

What is stressed here is that much care is taken to guarantee the fairness of the competition—should it be neglected, the objective value of the victory would be called into question. In games such as chess or tennis players start with even chances and it is only through their own efforts that they can win over their opponent. To facilitate that only chosen factors are taken to have dominant meaning for the result of the game; the narrower the scope of the traits that are needed to achieve the victory, the greater the chance to achieve a fair and objective result. To Caillois this is the reason why sports and games which rely on the agon principle are so numerous and have so many variations (Caillois, 2001, p. 14). In the discussed comedies the qualities of agon as a competition based on fair chances and fair play are eagerly employed in the form of a duel, e.g. in *Rush Hour*, or the

¡Three Amigos!. It should be noted that these situations are partly deprived of their gravitas (and endowed with comic appeal) because they involve an element of mockery linked to the notion of the heroes' inferiority and the need for handicapping.

Yet equalizing of the chances is nothing unusual in agon. Evening the odds allows for participation of players who would otherwise have no chance of winning. According to Caillois,

[t]he search for equality is so obviously essential to the rivalry that it is re-established by a handicap for players of different classes; that is, within the equality of chances originally established, a secondary inequality, proportionate to the relative powers of the participants, is dealt with. It is significant that such a usage exists in the agon of a physical character (sports) just as in the more cerebral type (chess games for example, in which the weaker player is given the advantage of a pawn, knight, castle, etc.). (2001, p. 14)

The notion of equalizing the chances is perfectly reasonable and must be applied when two opponents of uneven skill or strength want to meet in an agonistic competition. However, in the discussed comedies it gives rise to comic situations, suggesting that the participants know beforehand who almost certainly will be the winner. The very fact of giving artificial advantage to one of the contestants bears with it the stigma of ridiculing the player who receives the aid. The result of the match is decided from the beginning, since both sides assume that one of the participants could not hold against the other in an equal competition. Hence, one can easily enter the realm of the stigma and humiliation of the contestant who has to resort to handicaps to put the opponent at a disadvantage. The principle of handicap is very much visible in comedies which come to grips with the most common trope of westerns, such as the duel scenes in *Back to the Future III*, or *¡Three Amigos!*.

The separation from possible outside help and the stress put on ideally even conditions in agon is very readily used in comedies. Both of these agonistic principles will be stressed in this chapter, as they are used in very different movies. In *Feds*, the female characters try to prove that they can be just as good as (or better than) male FBI agents. They consider everyone else at the FBI academy as their rivals and try to even the odds through reasserting their self-confidence and using their wits to confuse their opponents. The comic appeal of their playful actions is connected with the way they can achieve practical results in spite of surprising and unpredictable situations which they cause. As players, the two heroines are focused on the prospect of success and inclined towards pragma which brings it to stark contrast with the other discussed film, whose hero seems to lose himself in antics typical of *óneiros*. In the case of *Groundhog Day*, hero has no one to compete against, but has a very clear goal to strive for. Very important for his play is the isolation and repeatability which provide ideal conditions for agon. When his highly competitive nature finds no worthy opponent in his surroundings, the protagonist of the film is given ample ground for testing his own limits in complete isolation from the influences of the outside world. He is forced to seek reasons for his dissatisfaction within himself and begins to reform his own character. Hence, his agonistic play entails fighting his own weaknesses to achieve his life goals.

2.2 The Personal Triumph in *Groundhog Day*

Groundhog Day (1993) is a film directed by Harold Ramis, starring Bill Murray, Andie MacDowell, Stephen Tobolowsky, and Chris Elliott. It tells the story of Phil Connors (Murray), a cynical television meteorologist who becomes trapped in a time-loop, which forces him to repeat the same day in a small town of Punxsutawney. As the plot progresses, Phil falls in love with his producer, Rita Hanson (Andie MacDowell). Although it is never stated in the film how long the *Groundhog Day* time-loop lasts, it is assumed that the period is ten years.¹ The *Groundhog Day* finally ends in the moment when Rita reciprocates his love and Phil decides to stay with her in Punxsutawney.

A Bill Murray vehicle, the film makes use of his typical comedian persona—a darkly humorous and sharp-tongued yet vulnerable man (Jarvis, 2015, 173). While Tom Hanks was also considered for the role, Ramis chose Bill Murray because it was less obvious whether he would become a positive character. Moreover, he was chosen because of his qualities as someone who was “lovable” yet “ornery”, with “everyman quality” (Ramis, Blu-ray commentary).

What attests to the film’s continued popularity is that the phrase “Groundhog Day,” apart from the name of the original holiday, has come to designate “a situation in which events are or appear to be continually repeated” (Dictionary.com). Comedies with similar plots have been created, for instance Adam Sandler’s vehicle *50 First Dates* (2004),² or teen comedy *Premature* (2014).³ A remake was created under the title *È già ieri* (2004), starring Antonio Albanese in the role of Filippo, Italian television star, who needs to make a documentary on a local stork.

In an interview, Harold Ramis stated that the film met with unusual popularity due to its didactic message. As a result it interested psychiatrists, as well as “spiritual, religious and psychological community,” to the point that Hassidic Jews were proselytizing in front of the theaters. (A different day—interview with Harold Ramis). It has also garnered great academic attention, with articles focusing on, among others, adherence to such disparate fields as Aristotelian moral philosophy (see Kowalski, 2012), Nietzsche’s concept of Eternal Return (see Spence, 2005), religion (e.g. Lindvall, Bounds and Lindvall, 2016, pp. 128–132) or psychology (frequently e.g. Kübler-Ross’s five stages of loss and grief). It is used in courses on, among others, psychology, ethics, religion, and film and literature. For a more thorough summary of the film’s continued significance, see Ender (pp. 315–317).

¹As it is disclosed in the Blu-ray feature, the original script assumed the period to be ten thousand years, which was more in keeping with Buddhist philosophy which the film can be deemed to espouse (Needle Nose Ned’s Picture in Picture Track).

²In the film Sandler’s character, Henry Roth, falls in love with a woman who keeps forgetting she has ever seen him due to a brain injury (Lucy Whitmore, played by Drew Barrymore), prompting him to try to woo her each new day.

³The film tells the story of Jack Roth (Alan Tudyk) who continuously relives the day on which he loses his virginity.

2.2.1 *Phil, the Homo Ludens*

Although the film begins in a way which is rather typical for setting the scene it also manages to put the whole film in perspective. The credits roll to the tune of an upbeat piece of music, while the shots establish the location or transition to the proper place of action. As Phil and his co-workers, Rita and Larry, leave the big city on their way to Punxsutawney, their vehicle is shown dwarfed by the towering building. This early impresses on the viewer that Phil as a character has little influence on the world—his swollen ego has no bearing on reality. This is clearly illustrated when he announces angrily “I make the weather!”, while standing helpless in the middle of a snowstorm, shaking with cold, or when he demands from a phone operator to be allowed to use a satellite connection or an emergency line, since he’s both “a celebrity” and in a state of “emergency”, after which he is casually hit over the head with a shovel carried by a passerby.

It is no coincidence that the first people in Punxsutawney he makes friends with are the two drunks whom he drives home. Inebriated and thus having an unrealistic and playful attitude, they do not want the pleasant evening to end. As they are about to be driven back home, one of them expresses the desire to go for some flapjacks. They are the ones who make Phil realize that “no tomorrow” meant “no consequences.” This relates to an earlier situation, when he asked a stranger over the phone to help him immediately, because tomorrow might not come on the following day: “What if there were no tomorrow? There wasn’t one today.” The weight of such a philosophical argument is lost on the operator, who hangs up. When Phil puts the same question to his drunk comrades, one of them explains readily: “No tomorrow? That means there’d be no consequences...no hangovers. We could do whatever we wanted!” Phil immediately accepts this answer and for the first time testing the use of the newly-found privilege. He proceeds to endanger his own life and that of his fellow travelers by running over mailboxes, escaping from the police and almost crashing into a train:

Phil: “It’s the same thing your whole life. ‘Clean up your room! Stand up straight! Pick up your feet! Take it like a man! Be nice to your sister! Don’t mix beer and wine, ever! Don’t drive on the railroad tracks!’”

Gus [suddenly alarmed]: “That’s one I happen to agree with.”

Phil: “I don’t know, Gus. Sometimes I think you just have to... take the big chances. (...) I’m not going to live by their rules anymore!”

As he expected, breaking the law and even putting other people’s lives in danger are of no consequence. When he wakes up the next morning and finds himself in his room instead of jail, he jumps for joy and starts to relish his situation for the first time. He goes as far as to kiss the stately, elderly hotel owner, Mrs. Lancaster, on the mouth and to knock out the obnoxious former school colleague, Ned. He already knows the danger spots, such as the deep puddle which made him wet his leg each time, and instead of walking right into it he enjoys watching someone else put his foot in. In the next scene we no longer see him going to the festivities to do

his job and report on the Groundhog Day. Instead, the film switches to a direct shot of a tableful of pastries. While Rita looks at it with bemused contempt, Phil treats himself to a strawberry with cream:

Rita: “I like to see a man of advancing years throw caution to the wind. It’s inspiring, in a way.”

Phil: “My years are not advancing as fast as you think.”

Waitress: “More coffee?”

Phil: “Keep it coming. (...)”

Rita: “Don’t you worry about cholesterol, lung cancer, love handles?”

Phil: “I don’t worry anymore.”

Rita: “What makes you special? Everybody worries.”

Phil: “That’s exactly what makes me so special. I don’t even have to floss. What?”

Rita: “The wretch, concentrated all in self/Living, shall forfeit fair renown/And doubly dying, shall go down/To the vile dust from whence he sprung/Unwept... unhonored and unsung. Sir Walter Scott.”

Rita’s analysis is correct—Phil is wholly concentrated on himself. In his goals, he chooses to forget his long-term commitments, instead focusing on his hedonistic pursuits. The conversation at the restaurant marks the point at which he starts his debauchery, as he starts a dialog with Nancy Taylor whom he would subsequently seduce and promise marriage.

His playfulness tends towards *paidia*, while at the same time switching between *pragma* and *óneiros*. He learns everything he can about Nancy Taylor (and later about Rita) in order to seduce her—in this he gravitates heavily towards *pragma*, pragmatic playfulness. Yet on another evening, he is shown wearing a cowboy suit known from Clint Eastwood’s most famous roles, accompanied by a different, young and attractive woman.

Girl in a maid uniform: “I thought we were going to a costume party.”

Phil: [talking in a low voice reminiscent of Clint Eastwood]: “It’s like I said, I love this film. I’ve seen it over 100 times.”

Girl: “Phil!”

Phil: “Told you... call me “Bronco.”

Girl: “Sorry, Bronco.”

[Nancy walks by, not knowing who he is, despite their earlier one-night stand]

Phil: “Hi, Nancy. My own fiancée... doesn’t remember me.”

[Phil, talking to the usherette]: “That’ll be one adult and...”

Girl: “Two adults.”

Phil: “Two adults, I guess.”

Cowboy suit represents not just mimicry, and thus an attempt to embody an admired fictional hero, but also a way to fulfilling his ambitions. In this respect, his playfulness gravitates towards *óneiros*, since the cowboy costume does not yield any profits, but is an expression of his long-dreamt fantasies which he is finally able to realize. Despite his witty remark about the girl's age it is he who fails to behave like an adult. He is roleplaying as a generic Clint Eastwood character,⁴ not only calling himself Bronco (an allusion to Eastwood's *Bronco Billy* [1980]), but also wearing a poncho resembling Eastwood's iconic attire in Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* [*Per un pugno di dollari*] (1964)—see Fig. 2.1.

In the next scene Phil returns to his duties, but still treats them casually since in his report for television he repeats the same line he used during the first day. This is significant, because it not only stresses his lack of seriousness but also his status of a true fan of Eastwood. The words he uses are a distant allusion to one of the actors' most iconic roles: “[Punxsutawney Phil], as legend has it, can predict an early spring. The question we have to ask ourselves is: ‘Does Phil feel lucky?’”, which is a paraphrase of Clint Eastwood's famous line spoken by Harry Callahan to criminals on two separate occasions in *Dirty Harry* (1971): “You've got to ask yourself one question. Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?”⁵ Since Eastwood's star persona came to epitomize “tough masculine independence” (McDonald, 2006, p. 159).

Perhaps the most pronounced aspect of the film is the manner in which the homo ludens in Phil wants to trick Rita into a relationship. All his attempts to find a way to her heart have a playful character. Similarly to his rushed wooing of Nancy Tailor, he starts by building a database about his “opponent.” In a casual conversation he enquires about her goals in life, interests, and her ideal partner while at the same time jokingly negotiating his own value:

Phil: Who's your perfect guy?

Rita: First of all, he's too humble to know he's perfect.

Phil: That's me!

Rita: He's intelligent, supportive, funny...

Phil: Intelligent, supportive, funny. Me, me, me.

Rita: He's romantic and courageous.

Phil: Me also.

⁴Shades of the same attitude of mimicking stars of Western films are found, among others, in comedies such as *Back to the Future Part III* (where Marty McFly assumes the name Clint Eastwood once he time-travels to the Wild West) or in Jackie Chan's vehicle *Shanghai Noon* (Chan et al. 2000) in which the main character, Chon Wang, has his name anglicized to John Wayne, which is next disparaged as “a terrible cowboy name”.

⁵This stands in stark contrast to his later erudition. For instance, in his later report instead of quoting popular fiction, he refers to Chekhov. At that point he is admired by the entire town not only due to its poetic quality and education, but also because he expresses his appreciation for the warm and heartening attitude of the people of Punxsutawney.



Fig. 2.1 Phil playacting as Clint Eastwood's character discloses not only his penchant for mimicry, but also his desire to become someone who he considers to be a superior man. Hence, he walks and talks in a manner resembling the actor, but he is also accompanied by a scantily clad, young and attractive woman. His melodramatic remark about Nancy Taylor who fails to recognize him further stresses his isolation despite being in the company of the two women for the fleeting, passing moment. Hence, he is presented here alone, although the two other women (as well as the smiling usherette) are also in the frame

Rita: He's got a good body but doesn't have to look in the mirror often.

Phil: I have a great body, and sometimes I go months without looking.

Rita: He's kind, sensitive and gentle. He's not afraid to cry.

Phil: This is a man we're talking about, right?

Rita: He likes animals, children, and he'll change poopy diapers.

Phil: Does he have to use the word "poopy"?

Rita: He plays an instrument, and he loves his mother.

Phil: I am really close on this one. Really, really close.

Phil does not mean anything he says, but decides to attempt to seduce Rita by following the line of least resistance: he mimics her behavior and tries to appeal to her sympathies. He starts by ordering her favorite drink and proposing her usual toast. Finally, he even learns to recite French poetry although earlier he considered her studies in 19th century French poetry to be laughable.

Despite his efforts, Phil is finally rejected by Rita after having told her that he loves her, which she finds suspicious because she has only known him for a day. What follows is a series of Phil's failed attempts at courting her, which all end with an abrupt slap in the face. The impossibility of wining at his favorite game depresses Phil. His subsequent visit to the fair initiates a third series of behaviors: boredom with the game.

At this stage, Phil refuses to continue playing. The game has proven to be too long, dreary, and impossible to win. As a result, he lapses into a state of inactivity, staying at home and watching *Jeopardy* quiz show in his pajamas while eating popcorn and drinking liquor. Having failed at the game called love, he no longer cares about the events of the day. Although still engaged in watching and answering the television quiz show, he does so wearily. As Caillois asserted, the game ends when it loses its indeterminacy because it loses all tension. The quiz game, like living in Punxsutawney, is no longer interesting because he seems to have learned all its secrets. While knowing all the answers impresses other guests of the hotel, it is meaningless to him. Triumph in a game the result of which has already been decided holds no value to him at all.

Phil displays the same attitude in the following scene, when he first aggressively rants in front of the camera. His annoyance at the fact that the game does not end finds its expression in his spouting slurs at fair participants: "This is pitiful. 1000 people freezing their butts off waiting to worship a rat. What a hype! Groundhog Day used to mean something in this town! They used to pull the hog out and eat it. You're hypocrites, all of you!" He does not spare Rita either. He is no longer disposed to continue playing, but the game does not end. Still not wanting to accept reality of the game for what it is, he wishes to impose his own rules if only through destruction of the game itself. As a result Phil concentrates all his efforts on trying to bring it to an end. What follows is a comic series of aggressive behaviors, mainly directed towards himself. On waking, he destroys radio alarm-clock which

marks the notion of rhythm of the game, symbolizing the monotonous repetition of each day with the familiar song.

After the destruction of the clock comes the attempt to destroy the holiday itself, which Phil announces in front of the camera. He says his goodbye to Rita and kidnaps Punxsutawney Phil, driving the truck to his and groundhog's spectacular death at the bottom of a pit. During the chase Phil remains indifferent and playful—all the while his attitude remains casual as he instructs the groundhog on the principles of driving: to check the mirrors with the side of its eyes and not to drive while angered. Yet the situation is clearly dangerous as the police are instructed to aim high while shooting at the weatherman, so that he could be killed without hurting the animal. Finally, Phil tries to end the game by a series of attempts at his life: from electrocution in the bathtub to jumping off a bell tower.

It is after those events that Phil tells Rita in the café that he is a “god,” which marks the penultimate stage in his game—the conviction of his omnipotence within the game. The way he demonstrates his “power” reveals the structure of his actions in the remainder of the film: he uses his seemingly boundless knowledge of the town and its inhabitants in the newly found agonistic desire to prove his superiority. It seems that this goal remains to win over Rita since he confesses to her and seeks her company. However, he has no hope of actually keeping her, and is resigned to his fate of repeating the day over and over again. He no longer attempts to seduce her. Instead, he becomes a boon to the local community while never ceasing to self-improve. He helps Rita and Larry set up the camera, starts to learn to play the piano and ice-sculpt. He enthusiastically greets a fellow hotel patron in Italian, kissing him and quoting Coleridge's “Work without Hope”: “Winter slumbering in the open air, wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!” His optimism is only checked by the unavoidable death of the old beggar whom he is helpless to save. The acceptance of his demise, just like the acceptance that the day will continue forever and that he will not conquer Rita, are important limitations to his “playground”—they become the rules which he no longer wants to violate. This marks his final stage within the game of Groundhog Day. Instead, of trying to win at all costs, he acknowledges his inadequacies. He “plays along” with the tools he does have at his disposal and simply enjoys his time in Punxsutawney, while being a service to community. He clearly does not like saving the ungrateful boy falling from a tree, but does it nonetheless. Similarly, he patiently accepts it as his duty to help old ladies with their car trouble or save a man from choking. This does not mean that he forgets about himself—quite on the contrary, he learns to link his ambitions with what is available to him instead of dreaming about unattainable goals. He is thoroughly enjoying himself while playing like a virtuoso during the evening party, to the great satisfaction of his proud piano teacher. He remains sincerely humble when thankful people approach him during the dance. Whalley argues that as a typical SNL film, *Groundhog Day* operates according to the “assumption that what is best for the comedian is best for everybody; the fictional world is remade in the stars' image.” (Whalley, 2010, p. 193). However, it is clearly

not the case here. It is Bill Murray's character, Phil, who despite his flair and initial defiance needs to change to accommodate to reality. By learning to adapt his own life and expectations to the lives of others, he becomes a virtuoso, truly mastering the game of the one day of his life, and presumably its rest as well.

2.2.2 *Analyzing Groundhog Day as a Game*

The essence of *Groundhog Day* is isolation, repetition and adaptation. Phil Connors learns that he is miserable on his own, living according to his self-centered whims and ambitions. Only when he becomes adept at attuning to the rhythm of life of the other inhabitants of Punxsutawney does he find satisfaction. The inexorability of the consistent repetition itself is what makes him realize that he is not in charge of his life, he neither makes the weather nor can cheat his way into his loved woman's good graces.

All the lessons Phil learns are the result of repetition, which is one of play's essential traits.⁶ As Huizinga noted, "[i]t holds good not only of play as a whole but also of its inner structure. In nearly all the higher forms of play the repetition and alternation (as in the *refrain*), are like the warp and woof of a fabric." (Huizinga, p. 10). This characterization of game can be applied to the discussed film. *Groundhog Day* is also essentially a kind of game, observed and enjoyed by the viewer. Phil consistently tries to reassert himself and regain control of his life. It is out of his initial boredom with the lack of attractions that he starts to explore the world and as a result it leads him to reinvention of the charm of small things in life: playing at a dance party, throwing snowballs at children, sculpting in ice, or giving sports fans tickets to a match. The Phil Connors from the beginning of the film would never have done those things merely because he would be too focused on achieving his great ambition in life—becoming the star of a major television network. Through isolation from the world outside of Punxsutawney Phil loses interest in the unattainable goals and becomes fixated on his immediate surroundings. The isolating "magic circle" of *Groundhog Day* not only forces him to focus on the rhythm of life of the common folk, the inhabitants of Punxsutawney (whom he first disparages as "hicks" or "morons") but does that in the context of a sacred day. Even though *Groundhog Day* is not treated very seriously by the locals, culturally it is a holiday and a cause for celebration. Being locked in the time of 24 h, consistently repeated from the starting point, as well as in the space of the isolated town of Punxsutawney constitutes the establishment of a playing space, a "magic circle" discussed by Huizinga. Within the circle Phil is by no means untouchable—in fact,

⁶According to Wolf, the "cycles of repeated time" are typical of video games, although uncommon in film or television, *Groundhog Day* being one of the few examples (2001, p. 80).

he is the only one who can get hurt. The other inhabitants are blissfully oblivious of the situation.⁷

The situation in which Phil finds himself is readily recognizable to modern gamers, who know that the essence of a game lies in constant repetition, regardless of the genre. For instance, the types of enemies (if they appear, e.g. the enemy models in shooting or fighting games) or methods with dealing with them are recycled and reappear. The notion of “reloading” or repeating “a level” in a game is just as obvious as the essential immortality which it entails—failed attempts which lead to the death of the player’s in-game avatar do not carry much weight in terms of mechanics, since the sequence can be repeated from a “save point.” They do influence the players, since success or failure affects their mood and adds to their personal experiences, which is another quality games share with the situation of Phil in *Groundhog Day*. The film’s message is built upon the notion that by living through certain fixed events time and again can lead to reflection on the nature and mechanics of these events, and as a result cause the evolution of one’s character. In *Groundhog Day* the repetitiveness of the situation is certainly conducive to habit formation.

In keeping with the principle of agon, and contrary to alea, Phil is consistently trying to influence his fate if not gain total and utter control of whatever is happening in his life. First, he follows the methods for happiness that are suggested to him by popular opinion stemming from the contemporary zeitgeist, designating what is desirable, essentially gorging on the forbidden fruit: drunken driving and standing up to the police, seducing beautiful women without consequences, eating tasty but unwholesome food, robbing a bank. Finding no satisfaction despite having fully embraced the pleasure in life, he undergoes a crisis and starts to develop goals of his own, effectively shaping himself in the process. Thus, he adheres to the agonistic principle of hard work, despite the lack of rivals. As a result, he gradually influences the life of others and although he does not have control of his own life, he finds himself shaping in a way which reflect his own ambitions. As Kowalski argues, Phil achieves excellence in Aristotelian sense, by performing virtuous acts habitually and regularly: being honest, generous, temperate, and loyal (pp. 278–280).

Ultimately, the lesson he learns is that by engaging in life of others and not really caring about his own, he adds the elements which were missing from his own life. Before that his life was metaphorically closed in his little hotel room, a room without meaning, payed for with money from strangers, interchangeable with many others, which to boot could be of much better quality. For instance, he does not like it because the water in the shower is cold and the hotel owner might not even know how to spell the word espresso, much less to serve it. He has the constant desire for a better life, which he feels he deserves, ridiculing himself in the eyes of his

⁷According to Gaut, the only people who are aware of the “epistemic situation” of Phil is the character himself and the members of the audience. As a result, it is “increasingly difficult to look at the world from any other point of view than his because we know that all the other characters do not appreciate what is going on” (p. 267).

coworkers who regard him as a “prima donna” rather than “the talent,” as he likes to call himself.

In the context of the game the isolation and repetition of time without consequences frees Phil from concerns which have previously kept him very defensive. Initially, Phil is very protective of himself, locked in his own shell formed from the protective layer of sarcastic remarks. When he finally admits that he hates himself, it is the result of introspection and shame for not living up to his own expectations and ambitions, the spirit of agonistic rivalry, if not with others, then with his own image of what he ought to become. Later, he starts to hurt himself in an attempt to commit suicide, failing to see other values in life than self-gratification and pleasure seeking. In the end, he finds focusing on others to be a full-time job which makes him feel needed, so that he becomes the most popular person in town. This is achieved only because he decides to leave his room, not just for the thrill and attractions, but to meet and assist other people. He finds his employment outside, having plenty of work despite his initial depreciation shown towards the small town and its problems, miniscule in the grand scheme of his personal ambitions. Phil starts with showing illusions of reality to others in front of the blue screen—his predictions, while incisive, are not fulfilled in the course of the narrative; he ends by learning the good and bad sides of life in the small town, learning about its inhabitants and endearing himself to them through his disinterested actions.⁸ The isolated and safe “magic circle” of the endlessly repeating *Groundhog Day* allows Phil to freely explore all possibilities that he has in life without the need to worry about what the society would think about it.⁹ In such conditions he can forget about the behaviors that the society has forced upon him (which he lists in the drunk-driving scene) and explore what he wants to do. Initially, his desires are purely self-focused, but later he finds his life’s purpose in learning how to be of use to others. Although still engaged in play, he gradually moves from *óneiros* to *pragma*, until the game ends and he is reintroduced to society of non-players. This time, however, he is perfectly aware of how much he can be of service and wants to offer it to others. Hence, when he finally wakes up next to Rita, he asks what else he could do for her, showing that in his agonistic contest he has defeated his own, selfish desires and has found fulfilment in cooperation with others.

Although his ambitions are not forgotten, he shows them in his constant desire to self-improve through arts: developing interest in literature (he quotes Chekhov and French poems), fine arts (he learns to masterfully sculpt in ice), and music (he

⁸In “The Weight of Time” documentary, the film’s director stresses the importance of the town and the presence of its inhabitants in the middle of the action. He states that the “town was a character in the film” and this is why they shot it not in the original Punxsutawney, but in Woodstock, Illinois, because the park was in the middle of the town and allowed to put the inhabitants to be visible.

⁹It is this quality of Rita that he admires in the beginning of the film. He is shown smiling when he sees her carefree behavior in front of the cameras, not caring about what other people might think. On the other hand, his earlier playful banter is sarcastic and meant to protect him from possible criticisms of the audience watching the program.

becomes a skilled pianist). Yet they are superseded by his ultimately passive acceptance of his station and situation in life. His eventual triumph is paradoxical, because it reveals that he succeeds by relying on two seemingly opposite patterns of play: *agon* and *alea*. It occurs during the auction sequence at the end of the film, when Rita shows in no uncertain terms that she will symbolically sacrifice all her possessions to spend the evening with him herself, rather than to let another woman take him. He is shown ultimate respect of the entire town and his loved one, but to allow for it he had to allow himself to become a passive recipient of their praise, gratitude and affection. He resubmits himself to the opinion of the society, but does not fear it since all his actions are selfless and directed at helping others. This resolution of *agon* will find its contrast in the next discussed film, where the characters remain adamantly competitive, from beginning to end focused on triumphing over their rivals.

2.2.3 *Triumphing Over the Man in Feds*

Feds (1988) is a an action-comedy film directed and written Daniel Goldberg, starring Rebecca de Mornay, Janis Zuckermann, Ken Marshall, and Fred Dalton Thompson. The film's plot is based on a buddy-movie concept, with two young hopeful candidates at the FBI Training Academy, Elisabeth DeWitt (De Mornay) and Janis Zuckerman (Gross) trying as hard to graduate as to fight with prejudice against women.

While the film as a comedy involving *homines ludentes* (Elisabeth and Janis) can be analyzed in terms of mimicry, it seems more valid to analyze it in terms of *agon*. While mimicry is used by the protagonists to some extent, they soon learn that they have to develop their own method of dealing with problems. It will be argued that only when the two characters decide to join forces in working towards their goals do they achieve success. Their cooperative effort has the hallmarks of play marked by great effort on their part, as is the case in competitive sports. Although never explicitly stated, their playfulness finds its expression in their presentation (e.g. through the music accompanying their endeavors) and in the creative solutions they find to their problems.

In the film both agents-to-be undergo a change which allows them to graduate with flying colors. During the ceremony of awarding them the titles of special agents, only the two of them win an award voted for by the instructors. As Elisabeth receives the award she takes to the microphone, and ends on a feminist note: "I hope the people of the United States of America will be able to sleep better knowing that women like us have guns." The problem of women's empowerment is central to the narrative and is one of the main goals of the two protagonists.

The film starts with sequences of Elisabeth in her gala uniform, dressing in front of a mirror. From the beginning she is aware of the image she projects. When in the waiting hall of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, she arouses great interest of

men, who stare at her, causing her to quip “you guys in a gang or something?”. The men indeed form a wall of passive resistance which has to be conquered if the young woman is to become an agent (see Fig. 2.2).



Fig. 2.2 *Top* Elisabeth donning her Navy uniform in front of a mirror. *Bottom* Men stare at Elisabeth, who is the only woman in the room. Despite wearing a uniform, Elisabeth De Witt does not seem to fit in with the rest of the candidates. As a single woman in the waiting hall she considers herself facing opponents who seem to belong to one team or, as she calls them, a “gang”

The question of women operating in armed forces is constantly raised throughout the picture. As Hardy notes, Rebecca de Mornay acts as an agent of change of the image of the federal institution, whereby the “traditionally macho FBI image is subtly transformed by the casting of an ambiguously womanly woman as the federal investigator” (1997, p. 129). Indeed, apart from Elisabeth and Janice all the other notable characters are men. All of them are rather negatively predisposed towards the two young women, apart from Brent Shepard (Marshall), an intelligent but fumbling and clumsy friend of Janis who is introduced in a slapstick scene in which he hits himself with his own baggage while entering through the door. Some of the other male participants of the training are hostile, as are the instructors who point out the shortcomings of the two candidates. Yet before the film ends, all the other candidates are revealed to be much less efficient than the trio of Elisabeth, Janis and Brent. Even one of their imposing instructors is rescued in an inversion of the “damsel in distress” scenario.

As a former Marine, Elisabeth has no problems with keeping up with the best in physical exercises, yet underperforms academically. It is the reverse with Janis, who constantly studies yet allows herself to be dominated and intimidated in arrest exercises. Only when they decide to help each other do they get a chance to pass the training. Elisabeth helps Janis to “form a relationship” with a weapon. In the beginning Ellie shows her great knowledge of the field work as well as a gun expert, while Jenny uses a revolver to pose with it in front of a mirror, mimicking a cowboy walk with the gun behind her belt. Once Ellie advises Jenny which weapon to buy (a pistol sold only to members of SWAT), they fetishize the gun, peering at it and stroking it in a café. The weapon is visibly both a symbol of power and sexuality. This is further stressed when, while sitting in a café, Jenny states sensually while eating ice cream that “next thing you know, you’ll be lying in bed at night, dreaming about target practice”. Later Jenny is shown once more posing with a gun, this time in much more intimate conditions (bathroom), directly using the empowering lines from *Taxi Driver* (1976): “you talkin’ to me? I don’t think so.” The gun symbolizes both power and (due to its shape and the way it is handled by the heroines) a symbol of masculinity—in gaining firepower and confidence in addition to the intelligence that they already possessed, they dominate the males in the film. This is the consistent theme of the film—the female recruits’ desire not just to prove their worth as FBI agents, but to show their superiority and to demonstrate that they are completely self-sufficient. The way they achieve it is through what can be characterized as playful behavior, a mixture of agon and mimicry. At the same time, their play belongs clearly to the area of pragma, since the games they play have real-life consequences and are used to progress their careers.

In the film the moments of pleasure and relaxation are followed by events of intense action during which the two women reassert their worth. As they are about to leave the café, they notice that the bread truck in front of the bank must belong to the robbers. After a daring chase and a fusillade, they stop the robbers by causing their car to topple. Despite their hopes of becoming the “new untouchables”, their instructor, Bill Bilecki (Thompson), reprimands them for going too far: “I’m not gonna have this macho cop competition thing (...). I’ve seen this happen before,

nobody wins.” Severely criticized for not having followed the FBI regulations they are put on probation. Instead of being lauded, they are told to use their intelligence and not brute force. In their attempts to mimic what they saw as behavior typical of FBI agents (popularized in fiction as manly use of force). They follow the advice, and from this moment use cunning as much as muscle.

When they join forces and as a result make quick advances in training, the series of events are depicted as partially playful in character—the music stresses the fact that they are seriously engaged in training and studies, but at the same time remember to have fun. This follows from the exchange between Janice and Elisabeth during which the latter makes her conscientious friend realize that it is normal to flunk. At the same time, they do show tenaciousness when following up on seemingly irrelevant details, ignored by all the men in the group of trainees. Since they are outvoted, the situation visibly takes shape of the conflict of the sexes, since even Brent takes the side of the majority despite being attracted to Jenny.

Ellie and Jenny interrogate a group of loud and drug smoking boys, intimidating them by resorting to the “good cop-bad cop routine.” Yet before they leave Jenny cannot help herself to resort to threatening behavior as well and when they leave all four boys start to smoke nervously. The two trainees follow the trail looking for “Louie” in a very seedy bar. When Jenny states that she is from the FBI she is immediately assaulted and knocked to the ground. This is when Jenny shows for the first time how much she has changed through “her relationship” with the gun—she shoots a couple of rounds in the air and intimidates everyone by her calm and threatening attitude, previously practiced in front of her bathroom mirror. Towards the end of the film, both Janis and Elisabeth have become so proficient in the art of striking fear in the hearts of men that despite being inebriated they manage to scare off a mugger by kicking his friends in the groins.

Another situation in which the two heroines show their proficiency in taking control of men occurs when they go to a bar to relax before the final examination. Janice gets drunk and seduces a sailor. She tells him to show her his tattoo, compliments him on his firm chest, puts her hand under the shirt looking for chest hair, and later removes his shirt and undershirt, despite being on the dancing floor. The following exchange:

Janis: “Do you have a college degree?”

Sailor: “No”

Janice: “Good”

shows that she does not look for a romance with someone who would be her peer, but rather wants to “have fun” with someone who is less intelligent than she. Her attitude of a concisions student has changed to one of someone eager to play and engage more in oneiric fantasies. Still drunk, she associates the sailor with her fantasies rather than a real person by calling him names of fictional seamen: Captain Ahab, Popeye, and finally Gilligan. The man is not offended but rather flattered that a woman found him sexually attractive.

The final proof of their changed character, which at the same time is a sign of superiority over men occurs during the final examination exercise. It entails a kidnapping conducted by “terrorists” (led by Bilecki himself) and the trainees have 18 h to gather clues and free one of the instructors. The men start by voting on the leaders. Janis and Elisabeth disagree with the choice and embark on the search followed only by Brent. They go to the armory, forging the instructor’s signature and breaking into the telephone room to discover the location of the “hostage” and terrorists. To ensure that no one gets in their way they use their radio to redirect the other agents to a secluded, swampy area. Meanwhile, the two girls don climbing equipment, while Brent wears a doctor’s uniform. As they are about to enter the room with the hostage, Janis asks Elisabeth: “you don’t think we’re going overboard on this, do you?” The question epitomizes the film’s finale—the heroines completely engage in their roleplay. While Brent uses gas and sounds the fire alarm to rush in screaming through the door, the two women burst into the room through the windows, with shotguns in hands, shouting: “FBI freeze!”. The agents acting as terrorists are completely surprised. Brent puts on his glasses with wide movements, reloads his shotgun and drags out a shout menacingly “Get your hands up!” All three of them behave in a very authoritative manner, in keeping with the instruction they heard at the beginning concerning the need for confident attitude during arrests. While it is clear that they are roleplaying, they behave as if they were really handling a hostage situation. They get into character entirely, engaging in mimicry coupled with an agonistic desire to win. Their triumph is all the more visible when compared to the other nine trainees who look miserable, freezing, coughing and sneezing, walking down a desolate dirt road, running for cover when they see a jeep. Their miserable fate is a result of their focus on hard facts and reality. Having been unwilling to join the game of Janis and Elisabeth (unlike Brent) they were deceived by them and sent on a wild-goose chase. Although themselves engaged in pragma, the three triumphant players, Elisabeth, Janis, and Brent, acted as oneiric public for the other players and successfully separated them from reality.

As it was demonstrated in my analysis of both films, agon can serve to highlight the comic appeal of the characters. In both cases agonistic character of the play in which the heroes engaged leads to their triumph. In the case of *Feds* the success of the female characters amounts to proving their superiority over their male competitors. From the beginning Elisabeth and Janis are afraid of being considered inferior and ridiculous, hence, their objective is to transfer this stigma to men whom they see as belonging to a “gang” or enemy team. On the other hand, in *Groundhog Day* Phil’s agonistic endeavors lead to his acceptance of his station in life. Having achieved what he had earlier considered to be worthwhile goals he finds no satisfaction in them. In his case oneiric agon leads to changing his attitude towards other people and himself. His play does not cease, but becomes more geared towards pragma and keeping harmonious relations with other people. In Phil’s case play leads to reassertion of his priorities in life.

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