

From Bedford Falls to Punxsutawney: Refashioning A Christmas Carol

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What are you doing watching television on Christmas Eve?—Frank Cross, *Scrooged* (1988)

One of the best-known and best-loved stories of the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* has such a pervasive influence that it has become what John Jordan, echoing Paul Davis, describes as a “‘culture text’ for the world at large” (xix). For Davis Ebenezer Scrooge, the miser who is reformed through a sequence of nocturnal hauntings, is a “protean figure” who is “always in process of reformation” (5). Furthermore, according to Davis, Scrooge has attained such mythical status that he is a part of our collective consciousness, known to those who have never read a word of Dickens’s writing, and enjoying a rich extra-textual life. Since these afterlives shape our understanding of Dickens and frame our experiences of reading and re-reading *A Christmas Carol*, it is important to consider how Ebenezer Scrooge’s character alters with time and responds to his changing context. If there is a “universalism” to Scrooge, then I would argue that it is one that has mutated in response to shifts in our context as well as our understanding and ministering of charity. Not only does Scrooge endlessly reform, he is also endlessly re-fashioned as Dickens’s story has been reworked and updated over the years.

A Christmas Carol has been revised and adapted many times since the 1840s, and this chapter will examine how its message of redemption has mutated and ultimately been diluted in twentieth-century adaptations. Drawing on sources including Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Scrooged* (1988)

and *Groundhog Day* (1993), I will examine shifting perceptions of charity and will argue that Capra's film speaks directly back to the concerns of both Dickens's novel and its source text, Philip Van Doren Stern's *The Greatest Gift* (1943). Capra and Dickens share fears regarding the vulnerability of families and communities in the face of risk, bank fraud and finance capitalism. However, as I shall demonstrate, later adaptations focus their attention on the rehabilitation of the individual Scrooge-figure, rather than what this person might do for his community once he has been re-claimed. I shall therefore begin by examining Dickens's Scrooge, his origins and his relationship to Victorian models of philanthropy, before considering how he has developed and altered in response to societal changes.

In March 1843, having digested two early versions of the Children's Employment Commission's report into child labor, Charles Dickens promised the social reformer Dr. Thomas Southwood Smith that he would write an article or pamphlet on behalf of the poor man's child. Having made this offer, Dickens wrote to Smith a few days later to defer delivery until the end of the year, suggesting, at the same time, that he had changed his mind regarding the format the piece should take. With characteristic enthusiasm and energy, Dickens urged, "*rest assured* that when you know them [the reasons for the change], and see what I do, and where, and how, you will certainly feel that a Sledge hammer has come down with twenty times the force — twenty thousand times the force — I could exert by following out my first idea" (Dickens, *Letters*, 3: 462).

The reasons behind Dickens's change of heart may not be entirely straightforward, notwithstanding his dramatic, forceful language. Dickens famously experienced a brush with poverty as a boy, when his father's chaotic finances saw him imprisoned for debt. The twelve-year-old Charles was employed — albeit temporarily — at Warren's Blacking Factory, where he worked pasting labels onto jars of boot polish. Rosemarie Bodenheimer has suggested that the trauma associated with this period left Dickens unable to write in any detail about the working poor, which might explain his sudden retreat from the promises he had made to Southwood Smith. Bodenheimer argues that, so moved was Dickens by the reports of young children toiling in factories and coal mines that, in spite of his "solemn pledges" to expose their plight in the *Edinburgh Review*, he found himself unable to chronicle their sufferings (Bodenheimer, 62–4). Instead of producing a pamphlet exposing the exploitation of children, Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, a novella that has become virtually synonymous with the festive season and with the spirit of Christian charity, but a far cry from the hard-hitting exposé of his original pledge. From its very inception, then, *A Christmas Carol* was a mutating text that responded and changed according to the political climate.

Charity in Victorian Britain was not a simple matter.¹ While for Dickens reaching out to those in need was an instinctive part of human companionship, the climate in which his novels appeared was by no means so compassionate. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 sought to centralize the distribution of aid by forcing those in need to apply to workhouses for assistance. Whereas in the past those who had fallen on hard times were able to receive aid that would enable them to stay in their own homes, the reorganization of poor relief according to the Utilitarian principle of the “greatest happiness of the greatest number” effectively led to the criminalization of poverty. More akin to jails than places of sanctuary, the workhouses came to be known as “Bastilles” after the notorious French prison, and were places to be avoided at all costs. Dickens attacked this austere system in his early novel *Oliver Twist* (1837–1839), where he exposed its abuses and corruption through characters like the avaricious beadle Mr. Bumble and the equally unsympathetic Mrs. Corney. Norris Pope has argued that, in writing against the brutalities of utilitarianism, Dickens revealed his complicated relationship with established religion. Pope comments:

Dickens’s own religious outlook was shaped by the staunchly Protestant conviction that religion was a matter of individual conscience, not something that depended significantly upon ritual, ecclesiastical authority, or abstruse theology.... [D]espite his irritation with aspects of evangelical philanthropy, he believed no less firmly than evangelicals did that charity and benevolence were essential and highly appropriate products of Christian faith [248].

While Dickens may have been deeply impatient with those who paraded their religion, charity was for him at the very core of a Christian life. The workhouses were, for Dickens, just one example of how basic humanitarian aid had become divorced from Christianity. Through *A Christmas Carol* he hoped to remind his readers of their duty to the poor, not just during the festive season, but throughout the year. Scrooge’s desperate promise to the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come demonstrates Dickens’s belief that charity should not simply be seasonal. Scrooge declares, “I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach” (111). Of course, not all readers are convinced by Scrooge’s softening of heart, which G.K. Chesterton rather witheringly dismissed as a “softening of the brain” (quoted in Washington 564). However, the miser’s radical change of character signals Dickens’s belief that his readers, like the miser, were able to reinvent themselves and to assimilate the spirit of Christmas into their daily interactions.

While Dickens hoped that his little book would make him a fortune (the

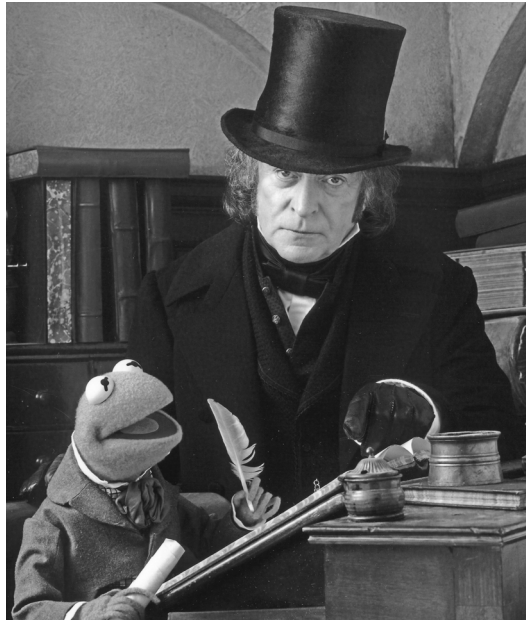
high costs of production soon dashed these aspirations), he also firmly believed that it could play an important role in bringing about social reform. Although the story ducked the representation of working children, it showed the extremes of poverty from the virtuous Cratchits to the horrifically wolfish children, Want and Ignorance. At this early stage in his career, Dickens still believed that by exposing social problems in his fiction he could bring about change. For him, it was a matter of faith that once his readers had seen the conditions in which the “residuum” was forced to live they would naturally intervene and offer aid. Indeed, such was his belief in humanity that it was not until the 1850s that Dickens began to doubt that graphic depictions of poverty and suffering alone could move his readers to pity for those less fortunate than themselves.² Although *A Christmas Carol* was not the politically directed piece of writing that Dickens had originally offered, he believed in its power to make a difference in society and, in particular, he trusted in what he came to describe in a letter to his friend John Forster as “*Carol* philosophy.” While Dickens doesn’t strictly define what he means here, it is safe to say that its values are partly connected to the “cheerful views, sharp anatomization of humbug, jolly good temper” that he outlines next to the phrase, and partly associated with the message of Christian salvation that underpins Scrooge’s story (Letters, 4: 328). Such was the appeal of the little book that Dickens seems to have believed that readers would imbibe its message, like a bowl of Christmas punch.

Contemporary readers were swept away by the story’s goodwill. The novelist William Makepeace Thackeray encapsulated the sense of community and togetherness fostered by *A Christmas Carol* when he commented,

As for Tiny Tim, there is a certain passage in the book regarding that young gentleman, about which a man should hardly venture to speak in print or in public, any more than he would any other affections of his private heart. There is not a reader in England but that little creature will be a bond of union between the author and him, and he will say of Charles Dickens ... “GOD BLESS HIM” [Thackeray, *Miscellanies*: 5, 214].

Thackeray’s generous response seems to have typified public enthusiasm for Scrooge’s tale. Certainly, critics were eager to praise the novella, with Theodore Martin commenting that it was “calculated to work much social good” (*Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 129), going on to say that “it is a noble book, finely felt.” The Victorians, with their appetite for the sentimental, were particularly drawn to Tiny Tim, although readers of today often voice discomfort at the child’s overwhelming goodness and remarkable faith. Sally Ledger has argued convincingly that the story is so enduringly popular because of its combination of a “hard-hitting” attack on the draconian poor laws and

the “Bacchanalian vision of plenty at Christmas time” (120), whereby the terror of Want and Ignorance is offset by the joyful domesticity of the Cratchits and festivities like Old Fezziwig’s ball. A *Christmas Carol* remains a popular festive story, yet in the twenty-first century readers are not always drawn to its Christian message, identifying instead with its celebration of family and the domestic hearth and the more “Bacchanalian” aspects of the story. It is therefore little wonder that the novella and its protagonists have been adapted over time. Furthermore, as Christmas has become increasingly entwined with the commercial, adaptations have responded, presenting a critique of consumer culture and the self-absorption that it can generate.³



Ebenezer Scrooge (Michael Caine) stands menacingly above Bob Cratchit (Kermit the Frog) in *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992, Buena Vista), one of numerous adaptations of the Charles Dickens’ novella, some of which are better than others at maintaining the progressive spirit of the original.

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One of the most famous twentieth-century engagements with *A Christmas Carol*, Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* is focused primarily around the character George Bailey. While this may seem inconsistent with Dickens’s story, it actually reflects the focus of attention for nineteenth-century readers, who regarded Scrooge’s beleaguered clerk, Bob Cratchit as the hero of the tale (76).⁴ Talented, restless, and eager to leave his hometown, Bedford Falls, George is repeatedly thwarted in his ambitions to travel and attend college. Although feistier than his Dickensian original, when the film begins George is on the brink of suicide, having been cheated by Henry Potter, the story’s villain, and believing that he is worth more dead than alive to those who depend on him. This gesture encapsulates just how far the story has moved away from Dickens’s original text; George is obviously thinking of others

even when in despair, yet he is also contemplating a mortal sin and placing his soul in jeopardy.⁵ At this early stage in the story it is difficult for the viewer to determine whether George is supremely selfless, or whether he has succumbed to selfish despondency.⁶

While *A Christmas Carol* is sometimes regarded as a time-travel story, with its combination of analepses and prolepses, *It's a Wonderful Life* offers a sequence of flashbacks, provided for the benefit of George's trainee guardian angel, Clarence. These glimpses of the past demonstrate how heroic and noble George has been throughout his life and show the many obstacles he has had to overcome. George's story is one of opportunities sacrificed for the good of others. In spite of the ambitions he voices when he declares, "I'm gonna see the world" and "I'm gonna build things," he is too closely enmeshed in both his family and his community to be able to follow his dreams. Each time he plans to leave, circumstances conspire and George's sense of duty compels him to remain behind. George might be considered to be something of a throwback, in that his decisions result from a sense of obligation that is at odds with the capitalist society he inhabits. Ebenezer Scrooge is, for much of *A Christmas Carol*, an upholder of the rigid boundaries between the public and private domains. Until he is visited by the three ghosts, his life revolves entirely around his money-lending business and he has no sense that his employee, Bob Cratchit, might have a life and a family beyond the world of the office. George, however, does not separate his business from his domestic life; he relinquishes his dream of a college education when, on his father's death, the shareholders of the Building and Loan society insist that George must remain behind to run the company. For George, the community is paramount and he feels a strong sense of duty towards the many friends and family members who have come to rely upon him. He is, in this respect, distinctly at odds with the modern professional.⁷

Part of George's emotional investment in the business is a result of its mission to provide affordable housing for the poor. In endeavoring to continue his father's investment in the community, George is pitted against the slum landlord, Henry Potter, who wishes to take control of the loan society and turn it into a ruthlessly profitable business. Throughout the movie, while George invests in people and their dreams, Potter shows himself to be a monopoly capitalist, interested only in money. Every misfortune is, for him, simply another opportunity to generate wealth, as he profits from the stock market crash and the Second World War. While the inhabitants of Bedford Falls are George's friends, Potter shows only contempt for them, refusing to allow them credit to buy houses and even at one stage declaring that George has been "trapped into frittering his life away, playing nursemaid to a lot of garlic-eaters." As this comment might suggest, Potter is intolerant of migrant

communities and fails to see that they are part of America's future. George, on the other hand, embraces the newcomers and helps them to escape from living "like pigs in ... Potter's Field."

Potter dismisses George's father's impractical vision of a world in which all the residents of Bedford Falls might own their own homes, describing Bailey senior as a "starry-eyed dreamer." Mid-way through his characteristically impassioned riposte, George asks Potter why people should be forced to scrimp and save before they are allowed a roof over their heads:

Wait for what? Until their children grow up and leave them? Until they're so old and broken-down that they.... Do you know how long it takes a working man to save five thousand dollars? Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this rabble you're talking about ... they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and play and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father didn't think so. People were human beings to him, but to you, a warped, frustrated old man, they're cattle. Well, in my book, he died a much richer man than you'll ever be.

George's outburst here aligns him with the compassion that Dickens evoked through characters like Tiny Tim, yet it also points to a strategic, pragmatic relationship with community and aid that characterized Dickens's writing from *Bleak House* onwards. Dickens's point, like George's, is that if one cannot do good for the sake of doing so, then one should at least think strategically about appeasing the poor. The Scrooge-like Potter sees the inhabitants of Bedford Falls as so many cattle, whereas George's compassionate capitalism reconciles the need to make a living with his desire for positive change.

Unlike Ebenezer Scrooge, George does not need to be visited by three ghosts, but he does experience a vision that shows him how his town would look without him.⁸ Andrew Miller has described this phenomenon as the "life unled," and identifies it as a significant characteristic in nineteenth-century realist writing, whereby characters consider what their lives might have become had they made different choices. Miller suggests that, given his own precarious path to success, Dickens was acutely aware of the serendipity of his life and endowed a number of his protagonists with a similar self-reflexiveness.⁹ Miller is primarily concerned with *Dombey and Son* in his article (along with the fiction of Henry James), yet Scrooge engages with this process more dramatically than any other Dickens character, I would argue, because of the visions offered by each of the spirits and the intensity of his responses to them. Capra preserves this aspect of Dickens's writing, although instead of showing the saintly George his mistakes, he instead offers a bleak vision of what Bedford Falls and its inhabitants would be like without him.

Paul Davis has described *It's a Wonderful Life* as Capra's "quintessential American Carol," pointing to the director's use of the Victorian story to medi-



Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946, Paramount Pictures) contrasts the generosity of spirit of the Christmas season and the self-sacrificing life choices of its hero, George Bailey, with the miserly actions of the Scrooge-like Mr. Potter. In this scene, newlyweds George and Mary Bailey (James Stewart and Donna Reed) sacrifice their \$2,000 in honeymoon funds to end a bank run caused by the crashing of the stock market.

ate a tale of the Depression (165). In many ways, Capra and his team of writers were cavalier with their source text, Philip Van Doren Stern's short story "The Greatest Gift," but the changes they made to it were to make the story much more Dickensian.¹⁰ Like its parent-text, *It's a Wonderful Life* directly engages with the political climate of the present day and of the recent past. As Davis expresses it, "The struggle of the American economy to free itself from the failures of the international bankers becomes the melodrama of George's efforts to keep his building and loan [company] afloat" (166). The message of the film is clearly that an individual life — no matter how apparently insignificant — can make an enormous difference and that George's generosity of spirit is what his nation needs (and what the viewers need) in order to recover from the draining years of Depression and war. According to Davis,

George's story is never secondary to the historical panorama against which it plays, nor are his troubles ever suggested to be simply the result of historical

forces over which he has no control. The despair that George feels on the bridge may articulate such historical questions, but neither George nor the film makes the connection explicit [166].

I would argue, though, that George invites the viewer to draw these parallels when he is roused from his vision and, whilst apparently greeting the familiar surroundings of the town he has shaped, declares, “Merry Christmas, movie house!” thus breaking down the barriers between the imaginary and the real. In accepting George’s salutation, the movie-goer becomes part of the film’s community and therefore a part of its ethos of collective support.

George, of course, famously counts his blessings and learns to value his life once more and, while it may only be implied, the message to the viewer is clearly that hard work, perseverance, faith and neighborly values will always triumph in the end. Capra’s film also accentuates the intersections of lives and the co-dependency that come with belonging to a community through Clarence’s observation, “Each man’s life touches so many other lives and when he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?” When he sees the misery of life without him and his wife a lonely spinster, George repeatedly declares, “Let me live again! I want to live again,” even asking for God’s intervention when Clarence appears not to heed his cries. George, of course, does not need to be redeemed like Scrooge, he simply needs to have the value of his efforts and many sacrifices affirmed so that he can continue to appreciate his family and the love that surrounds him. The film closes with a celebration of the power of the community, the “miracle” that Mary tells George of when preparing him to hear the news of the collection on his behalf. That George is positioned by the Christmas tree as he hears of everyone’s contributions emphasizes that this is a seasonal “miracle” like Scrooge’s change of heart. Henry Potter disappears from the plot altogether since this celebration of festive spirits and communal values cannot tolerate an unrepentant miser. Although not actively outlined by the script, Potter’s misfortune, in addition to being thwarted in his plan to ruin George, is never to know the joys of mutual dependence and neighborliness.

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The like of Henry Potter could not be banished for long, though. As its title suggests, Richard Donner’s *Scrooged* owes a significant debt to *A Christmas Carol*. Tapping into the climate of corporate greed that characterized the 1980s, Ebenezer Scrooge is transformed into Frank Cross, the ruthless and demanding executive of a television network. While not a miser, Cross is, as his name implies, deeply misanthropic and amoral. Frank demonstrates his distance from the spirit of Christmas in an early scene, which rivals Scrooge’s famous “Are there no prisons?” (38) speech in its nastiness. Overseeing an

ambitious, live, multi-national production of *A Christmas Carol*, Frank rejects an advertisement prepared by his team as insufficiently sensational. He then screens an alternative advert of his own, encompassing war, crime and natural disaster, but without any references to Dickens's classic story. When an employee, Eliot Loudermilk protests "that looked like the Manson Family Christmas Special," Frank agrees that it has nothing to do with *A Christmas Carol*, insists on screening it anyway and has Eliot ejected from the building. Frank's assertion, "We'll *own* Christmas," demonstrates both his lack of interest in seasonal goodwill and his overwhelming ambition; it also shows the extent to which Christmas itself has been commodified since the nineteenth century. Christmas is, in the late twentieth century, no longer about togetherness and compassion; it has become about buying and selling, whether that is through merchandise or through the selling of network airtime to those selling their wares. While Capra's adaptation sought to harness some of the magic of Dickens's original, adaptations from later in the twentieth century, like *Scrooged*, are considerably less cheerful in their outlook and increasingly critical of late capitalism.

Like *A Christmas Carol*, *Scrooged* attempts to identify Christian charity with the festive season. Frank Cross has little patience with philanthropy, yet while Scrooge is open about his frustrations with those who are unable to help themselves, Frank disguises his shortcomings through hypocritical performances of benevolence. Although he gushingly accepts his Humanitarian of the Year award, assuring the audience that he sometimes has to stop himself from giving too much, it is clear that Frank attaches no meaning to the honor. Having sworn that he will cherish it always, he absently leaves his statuette in the back of a cab, never pausing to think about it again. Thus, while the Victorian miser shows potential for redemption from the early stages in Dickens's novella, it is clear that the obsessive workaholic Cross will require a deeper shock to jolt him out of his selfishness. Like the viewers he imagines taking in his Christmas apocalypse advertisement, Frank has become desensitized to ordinary feelings and social interactions.

When Frank is visited by the story's Jacob Marley figure, his deceased former boss Lew Hayward, Frank again signals his complete isolation from humanity. He is spectacularly unafraid of the spirit and unmoved by his foreboding tone. Lew tells him, with great emotion:

Mankind should have been my business.

Charity, mercy, kindness—that should've been my business. Don't wait. Get yourself involved. It's too late for me, but not for you.

Observing that Frank is unmoved by his entreaty, Lew asks, "Frank, you don't like Christmas, do you?" Frank responds effusively, "I love it! It's cold and

people stay home and watch TV. These idiots are gonna be at home watching TV for me tonight. I'm a big fan of Christmas." Frank's cynical interpretation of Christmas is closely tied to commodity culture and even the apparently repentant Lew cannot completely abandon the rhetoric of his workplace as he wails to Frank, "My *business* should have been charity" (my emphasis). It would seem that repentance, 1980s style, is not as all-consuming as it was for Jacob Marley in the 1840s.

As with Scrooge, memory holds the key to Frank's personality, and flashbacks to his childhood and early adulthood reveal the underlying reasons for his ruthless determination. So emotionally detached is Frank, that he can only understand the experience when it is mediated through television. The Ghost of Christmas Past tells him of the vision from 1955, "This is not live, it's like a re-run." Nevertheless, as someone with a sophisticated understanding of how narratives work, Frank is able to recognize the conventions within which he is expected to operate. He tells the ghost, resignedly, "You've taken me back to show me my parents, and I'm meant to go all blubbery. Forget it. You got the wrong guy." Frank does, though, respond to the vision of himself as a lonely child, watching television as an escape from the uncaring father who gives him a pound of veal as a Christmas gift, rather than the toy train he covets. Although Ebenezer Scrooge is moved to pity through visions of himself as an abandoned boy, Frank has great difficulty in distinguishing events in his life from episodes of TV shows. The memories of his childhood turn out, for the most part, not to be *his* memories but are, instead, the recollections of the more interesting lives of a sequence of imaginary characters.

The most striking of Frank's recollections, though, are of his time as a young man, with his girlfriend Claire. Initially, we see a happy and idealistic couple and Frank responds to the young woman's generosity and warmth. Gradually, though, as his ambition takes over, Frank drifts away from his love. The flashback shows them separating on Christmas Eve in 1971 when Frank refuses to pass over a career opportunity (to play Frisbee the dog) to honor a longstanding commitment to spend the evening with Claire and their friends. Frank responds to the Ghost of Christmas Past's incredulous question, "You left Claire for Frisbee the dog?" with the defensive assertion, "I know who I am. I know what I want." This self-belief is increasingly shaken, however, as Frank is forced to contemplate his life in the present. Claire has become director of Operation Reach-out, a shelter for those in need, and she is clearly fulfilled by her work with the most desperate members of the community. Frank finds the shelter and its inmates offensive, abusing both the volunteers and those in need. He rants, "You wanna save somebody, save yourself!" and this bitter outburst encapsulates the difference between *Scrooged* and the earlier texts I have discussed.¹¹ Both *A Christmas Carol* and

It's a Wonderful Life show the importance of connecting with a community and demonstrate the joys of human fellowship. Scrooge achieves social and spiritual redemption and George is pulled back from the brink of despair by learning the value of the opportunities he sacrificed for those around him. Frank's reform is a much more individualistic affair, however, and the movie's closing scenes are primarily focused upon him, rather than any broader sense of what he might do for his large constituency of employees and viewers. We are left with little sense of how "mercy" and "charity" might become Frank's business, although it is very clear that he has embraced the celebratory aspect of Christmas.

The Tiny Tim plot is, to a small degree, retained in *Scrooged*, but it is, tellingly in my opinion, much less central to Frank's change in personality than it is to Scrooge's reform. Calvin, the son of Frank's long-suffering assistant Grace, has been silent for five years since witnessing his father's death. As with Scrooge, when the ghost of Christmas Present shows Grace's family at home, Frank has almost no knowledge of them and is shocked to learn that Grace has been widowed. While Dickens and Capra celebrate the family and the sanctuary it offers from the wider world of commerce, *Scrooged* shows it to be much more vulnerable — Grace is a single mother, struggling to balance her domestic and professional responsibilities and Frank has no respect for her personal time, keeping her late when she should be taking Calvin to see a specialist.

Since Calvin cannot speak, he is unable to play on the viewers' sympathies in quite the same way as Tiny Tim, but it is clear that Grace adores him and never loses her faith that he will one day talk to her again. Frank's vision of the future does not involve Calvin's death, but it does see him confined to a particularly austere looking institution. Frank's response to this scene somewhat cynically draws on his network of connections, as he yells, "I know the head of pediatrics at NYU. We'll get this kid out of here." Thus, while Scrooge understands that Tim needs staples that he can supply and is engaged by the little boy's faith and goodness, Frank's sense of what he might do for Calvin extends only so far as his high-flying contacts. Scrooge's change is driven by engagement and empathy, but Frank's is depicted as much more pragmatic — he wants to "fix" Calvin, rather than be a second father to him.

The Frank who emerges from the hauntings bears more than a passing resemblance to a televangelist. In a state of near-hysteria that leads some to question his sanity, Frank tells viewers that they'll "get greedy" for Christmas and the goodwill it inspires. This phrasing is curious in that it suggests that rather than being cured of his selfishness, Frank is instead preparing his audiences for a euphoric "rush" that they will experience — doing good becomes a type of self-gratification as Frank articulates it, suggesting that his redemp-

tion is far from complete — a critique that was leveled at the original Scrooge by critics including Chesterton and Edmund Wilson.¹² The responses to Frank as he hijacks the live broadcast to tell viewers to abandon their TV sets and spend time with their families range from discomfort to elation. At the same time, though, the movie undergoes a generic shift as Frank's embracing of yuletide allows him to be reunited with Claire. The plot gives way to romance and becomes entirely focused on Frank. His vision of Christmas is somewhat secular and although his predecessors look to Christ for guidance in their future, Frank is more caught up with the idea of families enjoying togetherness. His image of the festive season is perhaps, like his childhood memories, mediated by the television and the images it disseminates of people snuggled up by the fire, or romping in the snow.

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If, as Paul Davis argues, "the *Carol* is the sum of all its versions, or all its revisions, parodies and piracies" (5), we must ask what is happening to this multi-layered text as it moves further and further away from Dickens's original and its religious message. While Frank Cross may laughingly tell Eliot Loudermilk that he's "scaring the Dickens out of people," the Harold Ramis movie *Groundhog Day* (1993) takes the Dickens out of the *Christmas Carol* story and even moves the plot away from the festive season, perhaps in a nod to the so-called "War on Christmas," which continues to seek the removal of religious festivals from public life. I would argue that a dialogue is established between *Groundhog Day* and *Scrooged* through the casting of Bill Murray (who played Frank Cross) as Phil Connors, a misanthropic television weatherman. Like Frank, Phil is hugely egotistical, declaring in an early scene, "I *make* the weather," and when he is introduced to the viewer, he is entirely focused on his career.

Ebenezer Scrooge and Frank Cross both reflect on their misdemeanors in response to ghostly hauntings, while George Bailey sees a vision of Bedford Falls, without him. Phil, however, undergoes a much more protracted lesson as he relives the same day over and over, implicitly at the whim of the groundhog whose name he shares.¹³ Phil's interaction with his *Groundhog Day* shifts as he moves through a sequence of emotions; initially incredulous, he then experiments with robbing armored trucks, cynically extracting details from Rita about her perfect day, kidnapping the groundhog, and hedonistically indulging in any behavior that suits him. In short, he treats the recurring day as a license to do as he pleases and to act out his selfish impulses, rather than an opportunity to make amends for the many mistakes he made when he first experienced the day. Over time, though, he becomes overwhelmed by the experience and seeks escape through suicide, perhaps nodding back to *It's a*

Wonderful Life. Unlike George Bailey, though, Phil has not touched lives and seems only to have caused distress. Trapped in an endlessly repetitive existence, Phil experiences both mania and ennui as he tries to vary the events of his recurring day. Gradually, though, Phil begins to enjoy life in the little town of Punxsutawney and he undertakes an absurdly large number of good deeds, using his knowledge of the day's events to prevent tragedies. He repeatedly attempts to save an old man from dying in the snow, although the man continues to die regardless of how the day plays out.

It is only when Phil begins to value life and other people that his reenactment of the day's events can end. Towards the end of the film, still mistaking the groundhog's lesson as a blessing, Phil declares:

I'm a god. I'm not *the* God, I don't think.... I didn't just survive a wreck. I wasn't just blown up yesterday. I have been stabbed, shot, poisoned ... frozen, hung, electrocuted, and burned.... Every morning I wake up fine, not a dent in the fender. I am an immortal.

He then proceeds to display his knowledge about the town and its inhabitants, but without any thought of how he might use what he knows for the good of the community. Rita, the producer with whom he has fallen in love, initially doubts him when he reels off a list of facts about the people surrounding them, but she then offers to spend the day with Phil as an "objective witness" and he diverts her with the many accomplishments he has gathered during his repeated day and ends by declaring his love for her. The scene then cuts to another repetition of the day, but this time Phil is "the most popular person in town" and Rita "buys" him in a bachelor auction so that she can spend the evening with him.

At the end of the evening, having produced an ice sculpture of Rita, Phil announces, "I'm happy now, because I love you," choosing to live for the moment, rather than anticipating the next iteration of February 2 with dread. When Phil wakes the next morning, it is finally February 3 and with an inarticulacy to rival Ebenezer Scrooge's whoops of joy, he stutters, "Today is tomorrow. It happened." The movie ends with Phil planning to settle in Punxsutawney. Although Phil has learned to help others, the movie ends by focusing on his personal fulfillment and, as with *Scrooged*, it provides resolution through the romance plot. Since the Groundhog has no voice, the purpose of his lesson is never fully apparent, but the story's closure seems to suggest that Phil has suffered in this purgatory in order to become worthy of Rita. Through separating Scrooge's story from Christmas, the writers Harold Ramis and Danny Rubin have also made its moral message much more nebulous. Certainly, Phil immerses himself in a community and finds himself unwilling to leave it, but the movie is ultimately concerned with him as an individual.

Furthermore, there is something a little unsettling in the idea that Phil cannot take his newfound goodness out into the wider world, instead choosing to confine himself to the quaint Pennsylvania town. The disappointing truth is, perhaps, that the new “good” Phil would be unable to function in the competitive world that he wants to leave behind, thus suggesting that charity and compassion are vulnerable indeed in the broader public sphere.¹⁴

* * *

In the closing scenes of *Scrooged*, Frank Cross declares to the studio and the viewers at home, “I believe in it now.” Yet it isn’t clear quite *what* it is that he has come to believe in. I would argue that the same is true of these late adaptations of Dickens’s story. *A Christmas Carol* continues to mutate to reflect changing times and values, but it has become divorced from Dickens’s social reform agenda. As the ongoing Global Financial Crisis demonstrates, families are just as vulnerable as they were in the 1840s and business values continue to threaten the community. Adaptations, however, no longer celebrate the misanthrope’s re-entry into a world of neighborliness, but instead focus upon him as an isolated figure. It may be that society no longer has the patience for what Valentine Cunningham has termed “sermonic fictions” (272), or that in an age obsessed with self-improvement, readers and movie-goers are not able to look beyond themselves. Self-help books are, after all, among the top-selling titles reported by booksellers today.

Dickens regarded Christmas as a time for reflection and self-scrutiny, during which readers might take stock of the year that had passed, while thinking about how they might do better in the future. He outlines this process in a piece he wrote for his journal, *Household Words*, in 1851, “What Christmas is as we Grow Older”:



In *Groundhog Day* (1993, Columbia Pictures), Phil Connors (Bill Murray) is a Scrooge-like television weatherman who is cured of his misanthropy through the magical intervention of a groundhog named Punxsutawney Phil.

Nearer and closer to our hearts be the Christmas spirit, which is the spirit of active usefulness, perseverance, cheerful discharge of duty, kindness and forbearance! It is in the last virtues especially, that we are, or should be, strengthened by the unaccomplished visions of our youth; for, who shall say that they are not our teachers to deal gently even with the impalpable nothings of the earth! [2].

Scrooge's story has become detached from Dickens's version of Christmas spirit and has instead become one of the accoutrements of the festive season. If *A Christmas Carol* is, as Davis says, a culture text, then recent re-workings like *Scrooged* and *Groundhog Day* should make us ask what they have to say about our culture, which seems, by comparison, so much poorer than the Victorian hearths celebrated by Dickens. Almost devoid of charity, lacking social and political commitment, these modern-day adaptations show the commodification of Dickens and of Christmas taken to an extreme. The characters offer diversion and entertainment, but compared to their originals they are pale specters indeed, and their emptiness should scare the Dickens out of us as readers and viewers.

Notes

1. See, for instance, John Waller, *The Real Oliver Twist: Robert Blincoe: A Life that Illuminates an Age* (London: Icon, 2005) and Ruth Richardson, *Dickens and the Workhouse: Oliver Twist and the London Poor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) for details of the poor laws and their devastating effects on the underclass.

2. In *Bleak House* (1852–3) Dickens adopted a much sterner, more sinister tone and his narrative openly attacked those readers who refused to look beyond their own homes to engage with those who were, as his omniscient narrator chillingly proclaimed, “dying thus around us everyday” (734).

3. As Juliet John notes in *Dickens and Mass Culture*, there have been more than sixty-four screen adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* (212).

4. See Catherine Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* for a contextualization of the Victorian response to Bob Cratchit.

5. In many ways, this opening refers to Dickens's later Christmas story, *The Chimes* (1844), in which the central character, Trotty Veck, sees an horrific vision of the future, which stems from his lack of faith in the working classes. Believing himself to be dead, Trotty sees his friends and family fall into vice, culminating with a vision of his daughter Meg on the brink of drowning herself and Trotty's grandchild. Trotty learns to trust in the poor and recognizes that his faith in both God and humankind must be stronger.

6. This ambivalence is reflected in the film's reception history. While its combination of family values, patriotism and religion made it a favorite of Republicans (including the late Ronald Reagan, who was a close friend of Jimmy Stewart, the actor who played George Bailey), the movie's plot presents an overt critique of monopoly capitalism, and its New Deal politics continue to appeal to those of a more left-wing persuasion.

7. Dickens was extremely interested in how industrialism was changing human interactions and consciousness and he explored the fractured identities of professionals in a number of his later novels. Examples include the banker, Jarvis Lorry, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, English literature's first commuter, Mr. Wemmick in *Great Expectations*, and the unhappy schizoid schoolmaster, Bradley Headstone, in *Our Mutual Friend*.

8. See Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012) for an extended discussion of how we live with the memories of the paths we chose not to take and the idea of the self who might have been

9. See Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* for a detailed

analysis of the directions that Dickens's life and career might have taken and the extraordinary set of circumstances that combined to make Dickens the most popular novelist of his day.

10. *The Greatest Gift* is rather a surreal story that owes more to *The Chimes* than *A Christmas Carol*. It begins with a character named George on the brink of suicide, who then sees a vision of how the world would have been without him and learns that his friends and family would have been much less happy.

11. This phrase is echoed by Claire later in the movie when the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Frank what will happen if he doesn't change. We see a Claire who is mean and self-obsessed declare to a companion, "A friend said to me, 'Scrape 'em off, Claire. If you want to save somebody, save yourself'" and this scene recalls the vision Clarence offers to George in *It's a Wonderful Life*, when he shows him how the town would have been without him. The repetition of "save yourself" emphasizes its centrality to the plot of *Scrooged* and draws attention to the importance of individual agency and "self-help" in 1980s American society.

12. See G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* and Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: The Two Scrooges."

13. The device of the endless repetition of a day until it is lived out "correctly" was also used in a recent adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* (2000, dir. Peter Bowker) starring the British actor Ross Kemp.

14. In many ways this is an appropriately Dickensian conclusion. This retreat from the evils of the public world mirrors Esther Summerson's cloistering in the second Bleak House at the end of the novel of the same name. See Chris Brooks, *Signs for the Times: Symbolic Realism in the mid-Victorian World* for a discussion of Dickens's treatment of private world-building.

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