

Anonymous

7-22-08

Venturini

Time Travel Narrative

Regret, Repentance, and Time Travel the Hollywood Way

Comment [J1]: Great title!

Time travel is a popular subject for escapist fantasies, often taking viewers on exotic exciting adventures. With the technology we possess today these adventures are all but impossible. Unless they are not due to an amazing outside force but are actually just a manifestation of madness. The topic of time travel is a lucrative one for filmmakers. With variations on plot lines and theories, time travel makes all things possible and therefore is very friendly to the imaginative director. Unlike most time travel movies Donnie Darko and Butterfly Effect do take the viewer into escapist adventures outside of the realm of possibility. They are another kind of escapism, these moves allow the viewer to escape into a world where they are able to repair and event in their lives they regret. They can, in essence escape the reality of consequence. In these movies Hollywood uses the effects of time travel to teach a moral lesson against these unrealistic desires. Through the films Donnie Darko and the Butterfly Effect Hollywood has delved into the confusing world of mental illness, portraying time travel as a manifestation of the human ego and mind gone wrong. Using the qualities of this unique type of escapism in film, the movies discuss humanities aspiration to change the outcome of events and the ultimate consequences of these attempts.

Donnie Darko is a dark film about a socially awkward teenager played by Jake Gyllenhaal. He suffers from paranoid schizophrenia (Donnie Darko), which he takes medication for. One night he is awoken by a voice that tells him to go to the golf course. While he is away, a

jet engine smashes into his room. Donnie becomes friends with a girl named Gretchen Ross, played by Jenna Malone, whom he eventually dates. His quiet neighborhood is rocked by some bizarre pranks. One morning the statue of the school mascot is discovered with an ax in its head and graffiti covering it. These are later revealed to be the doings of Donnie, who is instructed to do these things by Frank. Frank is a sort of alien/ghost/time traveler from the future in a large grey bunny suit. It was Frank who told Donnie to leave his bedroom for the golf course and who also tells Donnie that the world will end in 28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, and 12 seconds.

Wondering about his experiences, Donnie discusses time travel with his science teacher who then gives him a book on time travel written by Roberta Sparrow. Roberta is a creepy old lady known as grandma death who lives in Donnie's neighborhood. Donnie sees silvery slinky like protrusions coming out of people's chest, after reading about them in Roberta's book. These appear to be the path the people will follow in the near future. Later Donnie goes on a date to the movies with Gretchen where he sees Frank, who is missing an eye. When Donnie asks Frank about his eye Frank says he will find out. Later that week his sister gets into Harvard, so they throw a party while their parents are out of town. Donnie and Gretchen go to seek out grandma death when two bullies confront them. During the scuffle, Gretchen is thrown to the ground where she is run over. When the driver and passenger get out of the car its revealed that he driver is Frank, Donnie then shoots Frank in the same eye Frank was missing previously in the theater and tells the passenger to go home everything will be ok. Stricken with regret Donnie travels back through time and stays in his bed rather than getting up as instructed by Frank, he is then crushed by the jet engine and none of the previous events occur.

Donnie Darko begins with a freak accident that he narrowly avoids. At first the movie leads the viewer to believe this is a fortunate event for Donnie, he can now continue on with his

teenaged life. He returns to his high school routine but as the movie progresses Donnie suffers from more and more hallucinations involving a voice whose origin is unknown to the viewer. In retrospect, the voice is originating from Frank in the future. This raises the question of whether Donnie was actually mentally ill or whether he was psychologically connected with the future.

Comment [J2]: Good question to raise

The use of mental illness combined with the aspect of time travel creates a twisted and complex plotline. In this case, Hollywood has used time travel as a device to build an entire story around.

Donnie Darko's plot involves the theory of a self-healing timeline. This idea theorizes that time has a set path, and when events happen that deviate from this path, time itself will take action

Comment [J3]: spelling

to bring the world back on track (Venturini). For instance, a man named Joe is supposed to get on the 2:00 bus, that bus is supposed to crash at 2:10 and Joe is meant to die in the accident.

Instead, Joe decides to walk to work, this deviates from time's original plan. Time would then take action In order to heal its self. Joe, instead of dieing inside the bus, may then get hit by a car instead of in the bus crash. The original timeline for Joe's death would then be completed and time would have healed itself.

Donnie was supposed to be crushed to death by the jet engine in his room, but left the scene because of Frank's instruction. Here is the great Hollywood plot twist, time travel allows for chaotic plot lines which is cinematic gold because no holds are barred, anything is possible. Is Frank leading Donnie astray from the correct timeline, which forces time to attempt to heal its self? Or is Frank's instruction part of a complex series of events that time had already put in place. Consider that the movie ultimately ends with Donnie Traveling back through time and dieing in his room, making all the previous events in the movie void. This would lead one to believe that Frank's instruction was deviant from the world's timeline. Yet it is Frank's same instruction that leads Donnie the very act of sacrificing himself. This is where Hollywood steps

in to exploit time travel, as a device to make a moral story about regret and self-sacrifice seem more interesting.

Many analysis of the movie Donnie Darko admit that the plotline is not true to time travel theory (Temporal Anomalies). Franks role is not clear, he seems to lead Donnie astray but then places him right back into the correct path to heal time. It is regret, and later his self sacrifice that is the focus of the movie's plotline. When Donnie realized that everyone's pain and suffering was due to his actions, he traveled back to his room and allowed himself to die, adhering to destiny. This would make all previous acts unnecessary because those events would then have never happened to his family in the movie. Time travel is just used as an escapist tool, it allows Donnie to achieve something many people wish they could; escape reality and change their acts in the past. Donnie Darko is an escapist fantasy that actualizes many peoples desires and allows them to live vicariously through Donnie. Donnie makes a selfless act of sacrifice. He spares a whole community pain and suffering by giving up his own life; something many spectators are to self-centered and cowardly to do. Unlike most selfish cinematic attempts to change the future, it is because of the selflessness of his act that Donnie succeeds in changing the future for the better. Hollywood used time travel to unravel a moral story, In Donnie Darko; the only way to change the past is to do so without self-interest. The mirror to Donnie's selflessness is the subject of another film featuring time travel and mental illness; Hollywood severely punishes Evan Treborn for his self-interest in the movie The Butterfly Effect.

The Butterfly Effect (directors cut) is a story revolving around a boy named Evan Treborn who is played by Aston Kutcher. Evan has unexplainable blackouts during times of stress. His best friend is a well-meaning chubby boy named Lenny Kagan (Elden Henson); Evans girl friend is Kayleigh Miller (Amy Smart). Kayleigh and her brother Tommy Miller

(William Lee Scott) have an abusive father who mental torments and molests the two. The troop of kids get themselves into many bad situations together in which Evan consistently blacks out. In one monumental event Tommy brews a plan to put a piece of dynamite into a neighbors mail box, Lenny is hesitant to go through with the task but does anyways. The neighbor comes home and the dynamite kills her and her baby, traumatizing Lenny for life. After these events Evan seeks medical advice for his blackouts and is instructed to keep a journal. He does this for many years. Later in life he becomes a psychology major in college and has not had black outs for several years. After acing his exams he and his roommate, a large gothic guy named Thumper, go out to celebrate. That night Evan brings a girl back to his room, there he reads a passage from his journal and experiences a blackout. During this blackout he is whisked back and experiences fleeting moments of his past. He later uses these black outs to go back to past events and right wrongs, in an effort to escape the atrocities of their childhood and make Kayleigh and his life better. In one attempt he goes back to the moment when they placed the dynamite in the mailbox, in an effort to save the neighbor and Lenny, Evan runs out to push the neighbor out of the way. As a result of this attempt he loses his arms.

Each successive attempt to change the past messes up his own and some one else's life and eventually turns Kayleigh to prostitution and puts him into an insane asylum. Initially Evan regretted the events of his childhood that separated him from Kayleigh but in the end he realizes everyone's problems were do to his actions and he regrets his attempts to mend the past. While institutionalized, his journals were taken away, keeping him from using them to time travel. He escapes to the institutional directors office where he finds a box of his belongings and uses a home video to travel to his mothers womb and strangle himself with his umbilical chord. A dialog is played of his mother telling him she had two stillborn babies before him, confirming his

thought that his very existence wreaked havoc on others lives and there was no way to fix things.

Comment [J4]: interesting

Time in these two movies is used to create a story about regrets. Evans circumstances are similar to Donnie's in the fact that they both suffer from some type of mental illness. While Donnie is subject to time travel Evan creates it, but the real difference comes in the circumstances they are placed in and the way they deal with them. Donnie is an awkward teenager; his condition only becomes more unfavorable with the onset of voices from Frank. Although afflicted with these circumstances, Donnie acts selflessly to repent his actions. Unlike Donnie, Evan has become a well adjusted, college student. His life could defiantly be said to be quite good, when he discovers he can time travel; he greedily attempts to alter time to his own advantage. The same moral story of regret and selflessness is told but using a reversed example. Instead of being satisfied and thankful for what he has, Evan wants even more. Although his attempts to save Kayleigh from her mediocre existence seem philanthropic, on deeper inspection his only motivation is to make Kayleigh his own. Evan acts retroactively to alter the path of time; in his case, time does not heal its self to place him back into his comfortable spot in college. In Evans case time is Mutable and it branches off into alternate but similar situations; each attempt to change the events of the past leaves Evan in a recognizable but more and more horrific future (Venturini). Any attempt he makes to heal time himself and return to his original destiny is futile. Evan unlike Donnie has acted selfishly and is severely punished for his efforts.

Here again time travel is used to set up a moral plotline. While the escapist qualities Donnie Darko lie in the film's ability to let the spectator vicariously become a selfless hero, The Butterfly Effect promises the viewer escape into a realm of ultimate power. The ability to change events in the past that one may regret at will, but in The Butterfly Effect the viewer is vicariously punished for their desire to escape into this self-centered and greedy character. Time travel is the

perfect tool for this lesson; it is the ultimate ability to transcend humanity. All living things are subject to time, Evans attempts to use time travel to alter his destiny completely disassociate him from his humanity. When Evan becomes inhuman he becomes the ultimate Hollywood villain, like The Predator, Godzilla or Alien, Evan is used as an example. His greediness exposed, Evan is guilted into sacrificing himself in a most controversial and barbaric way. We all want to be superhuman, we want to see the future, know everything and transcend time and consequence. In The Butterfly Effect Hollywood uses time travel to let us escape into a world where these things are possible, then shows us the futility of these desires and the dire effects these selfish abilities may have. Donnie Darko And The Butterfly Effect are both moral stories, one warning us about regret and the other teaching us about self-sacrifice. They both use time travel to enable the characters supernatural powers to escape mortal restraints and actualize a fantasy many people have. It is this escapist quality that make movie so entertaining and it is a quality that saturates the idea of time travel, making time travel a particularly popular subject for Hollywood films.

Works Cited

"Donnie Darko." IMDB. 2008. Internet Movie Database. 17 Jul 2008

Comment [J5]: indent the second line

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0246578>>

"Unravels Donnie Darko." Temporal Anomalies in Time Travel Movies. Mj Young.net.

20 Jul 2008 <http://www.mjyoung.net/time/darko.html>

Venturini, Jean-Marie. "Narratives." Otis College. PDF, 02 June 2008.

Venturini, Jean-Marie. "Introduction to Time Travel Theory." Otis College. PDF, 05 May 2008.

Venturini, Jean-Marie. Time Travel Narrative, Final Lecture 2. July 17 2008. Otis College. 21 Jul 2008