

# SUBVERTING THE CHRONOTOPE: THE *DONNIE DARKO* (2001) CASE

SUBVERTENDO O CRONOTOPO: O CASO *DONNIE DARKO* (2001)

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyzes the film *Donnie Darko* (2001) by director and screenwriter Richard Kelly through the theoretical perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) chronotope. The latter defines it as an intermingling between temporal and spatial relations, artistically assimilated in literature (BAKHTIN, 1981), but in this study it is applied to film studies. Gilles Deleuze's (1986, 1989) concepts of movement-image and time-image also contribute to the analysis. The film presents sequences of chronotope disruption, which are associated to the main's characters mental state. Film techniques as parallelism, superimposition and ellipsis contribute to this break in the time and space association. Lastly, the analysis discusses Garret Stewart's (2007) proposal that the digital cinema contributes to a disruptive cinematography, especially in relation to time-space constructions.

**KEYWORDS:** Film studies. Chronotope. Science fiction.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo analisa o filme *Donnie Darko* (2001) do diretor e roteirista Richard Kelly através da perspectiva teórica do cronotopo de Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Este último define-o como um entrelaçamento entre relações temporais e espaciais, artisticamente assimiladas na literatura (BAKHTIN, 1981), mas neste estudo é aplicado aos estudos de filmes. Os conceitos de imagem-movimento e imagem-tempo de Gilles Deleuze (1986, 1989) também contribuem para a análise. O filme apresenta seqüências de interrupção cronotópica, que estão associadas ao estado mental do personagem principal. Técnicas de cinema como paralelismo, superposição e elipses contribuem para essa ruptura na associação de tempo e espaço. Por fim, a análise discute a proposta de Garret Stewart (2007) de que o cinema digital contribui para uma cinematografia disruptiva, especialmente em relação às construções de espaço-tempo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Estudos cinematográficos. Cronotopo. Ficção científica.

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RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza la película *Donnie Darko* (2001) del director y guionista Richard Kelly a través de la perspectiva teórica del cronotopo de Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Quien lo define como una mezcla entre relaciones temporales y espaciales, asimiladas artísticamente en la literatura (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 84), pero, en este trabajo, se aplica a los estudios cinematográficos. Los conceptos de Gilles Deleuze de imagen-movimiento (1986) e imagen-tiempo (1989) también contribuyen al análisis. La película presenta secuencias de interrupción cronotópica, que están asociadas al estado mental del personaje principal. Las técnicas cinematográficas como paralelismo, superposición y elipsis contribuyen a esta ruptura en la asociación del tiempo y el espacio. Por último, el análisis discute la propuesta de Garret Stewart (2007) de que el cine digital contribuye a una cinematografía disruptiva, especialmente en relación con las construcciones espacio-temporales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Estudios cinematográficos. Cronotopo. Ciencia ficción.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Donnie Darko* (2001) is a science-fiction film that subverts the chronotope time-space. The subversion of the time through space is in the core of the science-fiction genre, in which time traveling, parallel realities, alternative realities are some of the results. In this sense, the time travel machine becomes the utmost symbol; it appears in numerous science-fiction movies, such as George Pal's *The Time Machine* (1960), Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* (1985), and J.J. Abrams's *Star Trek* (2009). Other films use different resources to time travel; Evan (Ashton Kutcher) in Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber's *The Butterfly Effect* (2004) has a diary in which just by reading it, he goes back to the past; Lola (Franka Potente) from Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1998) is somehow trapped in time and keeps returning to the same period; finally, Donnie (Jake Gyllenhaal) from Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* actually sees the future and through a time void is capable of going back in time.

Bakhtin (1981, p. 84) defines chronotope as the essential intermingling between temporal and spatial relations, which are artistically assimilated in literature. This definition is associated with literature because Bakhtin (1981) did not discuss films in particular, but his idea can be applied to film studies. This way, the term chronotope encompasses both time and space as inseparable aspects understood in dialogical relation. As he puts it: "time as the fourth dimension of space" (1981, p. 84). Einstein's Theory of Relativity inspired such ideas about the intrinsic relation between time-space. A simplified explanation is that time can only be measured concerning movement, and movement only exists in space; consequently, time and space cannot be dissociated.

Classic and hegemonic treatments of time-space in fiction represent the chronotope within a logical order of events. Even when the plot is not chronologic – with flashbacks, flashforwards, stories *in media res* or *ultimas res* – its final organization can be arranged within a logical sequence of events. The interaction between time and space is relevant because, according to Bakhtin (1981), the meaning is only realized through the chronotope, through a temporal and spatial expression. Most important may be the notion that the chronotope in itself may be the generator of meaning in the plot (BAKHTIN, 1981). This paper looks at the relation time-space in this sense of meaning generator.

Deleuze's concepts of movement-time (1986) and time-image (1989) are also relevant to this discussion. Different from Bakhtin (1981), Deleuze (1989) directed much of his theory to the cinema, and especially to the relation between time and image. His theories (1988) dialogue with the philosopher Henry Bergson and how the latter applied Albert Einstein's ideas on relativity to the philosophy of time. A brief explanation of Bergson's (1911) notion is that time only exists in relation to movement, and movement only exists in space; consequently, time and space cannot be dissociated (VASCONCELLOS, 2006). The bound between time-space leads Deleuze to two notions in relation to the cinema: the movement-image (1986) and the time-image (1989). The first describes the classic cinema and does not constitute a direct image of time. The second is predominant in modern cinema, and time is no longer subordinated to movement; a direct image of time is possible (VASCONCELLOS, 2006). This break with movement, in my understanding, does not necessarily imply a detachment from space, which, in a way, would invalidate Bakhtin's (1981) argument. I instead propose that Deleuze's (1989) pure time unveils a new conscience in relation to time, and space, in film. The modern

cinema, to use his terminology, shades a new light to time, bringing it to the foreground; time becomes not only the channel through which the story will flow but also meaning in itself.

One of the reasons for this transition from movement-image to time-image is a crisis in the narrative cinema, which comes with a denial to used clichés, as Vasconcellos explains (2006). Susan Hayward (2000, p.10) writes that in art cinema<sup>2</sup> "Film-makers are seeking to question film-making practices and the standardization of genres," and when they question classic forms of film-making, "[...] codes of time and space are deconstructed through the use of jump cuts and asynchronism between image and sound, causing the spectator to feel disorientated".

This paper argues that *Donnie Darko* problematizes the issue of time-space in its plot and that this problem reflects in the film composition through filmic techniques such as parallelism, ellipses, and camera angles. In doing so, it challenges classic and hegemonic representations of time-space; at the same time, that it follows a tradition in the genre of science fiction. Moments of ambiguity and uncertainties, when the chronotope is disrupted, seem to prevail when the main character – Donnie Darko – is suffering from disorientation.

The plot in itself challenges the relation time-space, as it creates a loop in time. Donnie is saved from a jet engine that falls right into his bedroom by a giant bunny called Frank. The latter informs him that the world is going to end in 28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, and 12 seconds; the end of the world is the end of Donnie's world when he dies. During this almost month, the troubled boy goes through a series of events – he meets Gretchen, they time travel in a Halloween party, Frank is, in fact, his sister's friend, he is wearing a bunny costume, and ends up running over Gretchen, Donnie shoots Frank, and the former goes back in time so that neither Gretchen nor Frank die – all these events culminate with his death. Donnie dies when he goes back in time to the moment in which the engine fell in his room. At the same time, Donnie is a teenager who is going through psychiatric treatment and has to take medication. These pills cause delusions, which contribute to a plot that suggests a state of confusion and inconsistency.

In the time loop, Donnie acquires a kind of superpower; he can see the future. Literally, as a physical projection that indicates people's path. Therefore, the film implies that Donnie may choose his path, as he can see the future. Furthermore, his school teacher explains that "if we were able to see our destinies manifest themselves visually, then we would be given a choice to betray our chosen destinies. The mere fact that this choice exists would make all pre-formed destiny come to an end", but then as Donnie responds, "Not if you travel within God's channel" (01:00:06), and this is what he does. The boy sees his bleak future, but still, he travels within the path that he sees, which to him is the jet engine that falls on his bedroom.

The first sequence of Donnie's sleepwalking reveals his relation to Frank and a disruption in the chronotope. The sequence begins with Donnie in the bathroom in front of the mirror about to take his pills. The medicine's effect seems to be instantaneous. After he takes them, the sequence has a fade-out, an ellipse, and the shot moves to his father, turning a lamp on and waking up in the middle of the night. The fade-out and the ellipse imply that after taking his pills, Donnie loses track of time and space; his consciousness fades away, and the camera no longer follows his subjectivity, until Frank appears. While Donnie's father, Eddie (Holmes Osborne), is watching television, due to insomnia, the clock hits midnight. There is a cut to an explicit reference to the date "October 2, 1988," followed by Frank's gruff voice calling "Wake up." The shot moves to a lower angle focusing on Donnie's window from the outside; its lights are turned on. The angle indicates Frank's point of view of the boy's bedroom, as the former is calling him from the outside, but the viewer will only discover this later on when Donnie leaves the house. In the next shot, we see Donnie answering Frank's call and waking up. Then, he follows the giant bunny's call, and the camera follows Donnie's subjectivity again.

<sup>2</sup> Here I use them in a loose and broad way, understanding that much of what Deleuze (1989) refers to as the modern cinema can be associated with the idea used by Hayward for art cinema. Both terms denominate a cinematic construction that renders problematic classic and hegemonic views in relation not only to the chronotope but to the many aspects are involved in a film.

When Donnie is leaving his room, the angle is low (see Picture 1), and Donnie is walking towards the camera. At the end of this shot, Donnie passes by the camera, and the focus changes from him to his room ceiling, where the jet engine will fall. Within a cinematic technique, framing, the film foreshadows its plot; that the engine will fall right where Donnie should be sleeping. In continuation, he is going down the stairs, and the angle cuts from low (in the room) to high (in the stairs, see Picture 2); then, while he is walking in the kitchen, there is an eye-level angle (see Picture 3). These three different angles suggest Frank's ubiquitous presence as if his voice does not come from a specific source, but from everywhere, which closely analyzed may suggest that indeed this voice comes from Donnie's mind, and which exposes the relationship between the boy and the bunny.



**Picture 1:** Low angle camera



**Picture 2:** High angle camera



**Picture 3:** Eye angle camera



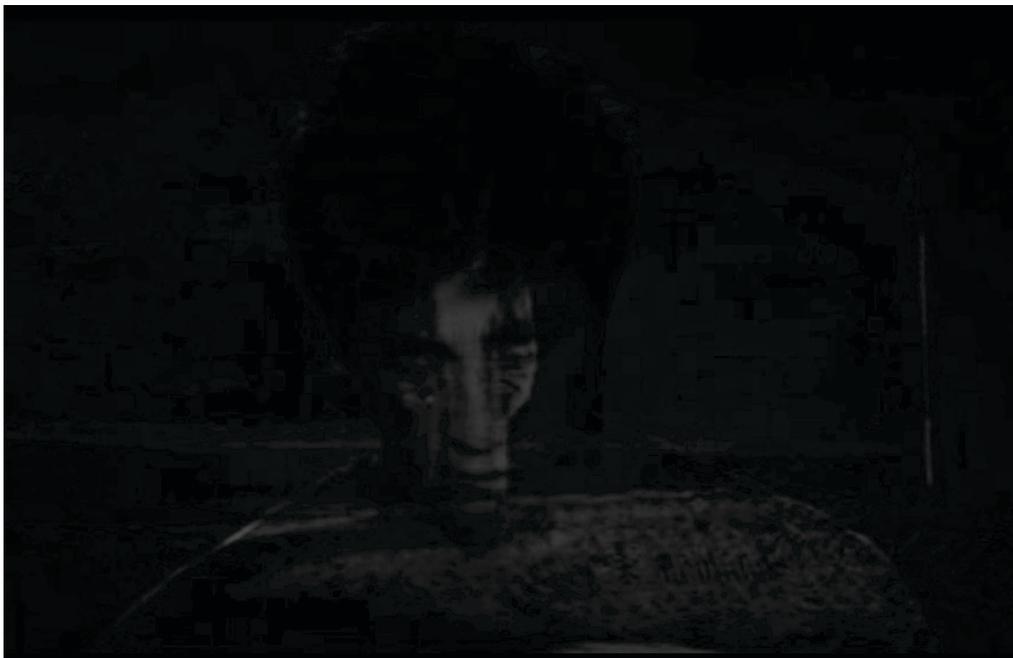
**Picture 4:** Out of frame

As Donnie walks towards the camera, he is framed in an extreme close-up (see Picture 4), which destabilizes the framing. In doing so, the film conveys Donnie's emotional instability through another cinematic technique. In other words, as he is sleepwalking, he is not conscious, and it is almost as he will bump into the camera. His movement takes him out of focus in an awkward framing. Such a technique also highlights the presence of the camera as an omniscient viewer, a character in itself, or maybe Frank. This correlation between the character's emotional state and the framing also humanizes the spectator's view in the sense that the viewer "feels" the character's feelings through the film composition.

In this same sequence, the focus varies from Frank's omniscient presence to Donnie's point of view and subjectivity. After the extreme close-up, the shot is no longer on Donnie, but on his subjectivity. The spectator sees through his point of view. Therefore, the focus is on the house front door and the living room's arch, while the camera, which was fixed in the previous shots, moves slowly forward. It tilts upward and focuses on the ceiling chandelier in an entirely subjective angle from Donnie's perspective. Then, the camera tilts down to the door again, and we see somebody, most probably Donnie, leaving, and the door is already closing. There is

a temporal mismatch between the camera's apparent subjectivity and the appearance of Donnie, which indicates his unstable state of insomnia. The mismatch disorients the spectators by showing the character's own disorientation.

This sequence continues with Donnie outside the house, the superimposition between him and Frank again suggests a relation between them. The film shows a medium close-up on Donnie's face; he is looking in the camera's direction with a shifty look and a sarcastic smile as if he knows something that the spectator does not yet. His image is gradually superimposed with Frank's, and another superimposition brings the focus back to Donnie (see Picture 5). These superimpositions point that Frank and Donnie might be the same character. This correlation between them would also be explained by how Frank incentivizes the boy to destroy his school, pluming and to burn Cunningham's house. Furthermore, the giant bunny may also be a future projection of Donnie, which would be explained by the theme of time traveling and by how Frank predicts the end of the world in the exact time in which Donnie shall die.



**Picture 5:** Superimposition

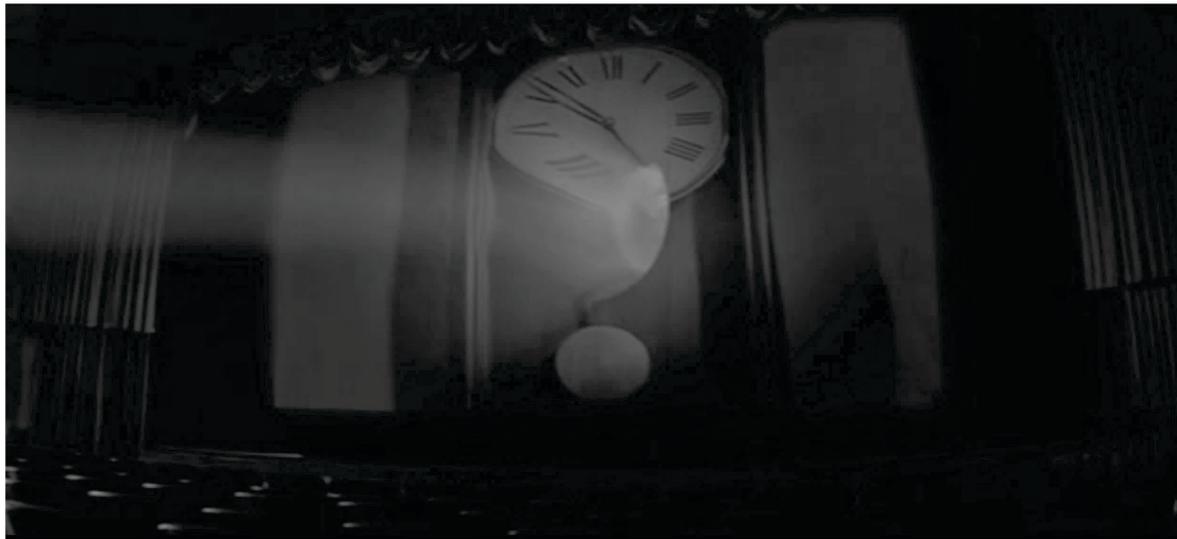
In order to emphasize Donnie's sleep-walking, a comparison between Donnie's and his father's waking up shots is provided and evinces their different states of mind. Both shots are part of the same sequence. Eddie wakes up first, but he has insomnia; he looks at a watch and sighs as if he is frustrated for having lost his sleep. Then, the troubled boy awakes, but he does not really look awake; it seems like he is a somnambulist. His facial features are changed, he moves slowly, his eyes are partially open, he acts dumbly, his head is low, he is not actually looking to where he is walking. This state of somnambulist is repeated in other scenes in which he sees Frank, as when he goes to the movies with Gretchen (01:05:55) or when he is hypnotized by his psychiatrist (01:21:10).

The photograph of these somnambulism shots also reveals Donnie's state of mind. As the images above show, when Donnie is sleepwalking, what predominates in the shot is hard lighting with a little fill light. It suggests a noir science-fiction film, as Janet Staiger's explanation on future noir science-fiction. This lighting creates a strong contrast between the dark and bright parts, and defined shadows, such as the bars from the curtains (picture 1) and stairs (picture 2). In addition, these bars imply an entrapment, as if Donnie could not escape his sleepwalking or even his tragic destiny. The shadows highlight a feeling of unstableness since they are distorted images of objects. In this sense, the shadows correlate to a state of dreaming in which reality is twisted in an uncanny, or non-natural, way. This supernatural aspect is emphasized by the dark parts, which point to the hidden, dangerous, forbidden.

The sequence in which Donnie and Gretchen go to the movies problematizes time and positions time as a generator of meaning, as Deleuze conceptualized in the time-image (1989). During the film exhibition, Frank appears to Donnie while Gretchen is sleeping. The camera focuses on the movie screen that exhibits a piece of wood beating an entrance; the pacing of this sound reminds the strikes of a clock. There is a cut to a close-up on Donnie's left profile, he slowly turns his face to this side, smiles, and the camera opens to a medium shot in which he and Frank are facing each other. He asks why Frank is wearing a bunny suit, and Frank repeats his question. This repetition again indicates that Frank may be Donnie's double, his conscience, or even his future conscience.

In the sequence, Frank asks Donnie to look at the movie screen. The camera opens to an extreme long shot. A clock with a pendulum is on the screen, a light hits the screen, which gradually opens a hole on it (see Picture 6). Then the movie on the screen shows a woman sitting, and the pendulum superimposed to her, which foregrounds how the subject of time and time measurers are always present along with the film. Frank informs that this light distorting the movie screen is a portal. The hole on the screen dissipates, and Cunningham's house appears. Donnie leaves the movie theater to burn this house down.

The portal appears on the screen, similar to a film projection. It comes from behind the spectators, which are only Donnie and Frank, and is projected into the screen. It actually superimposes over the screened film. This projection of a time portal on the screen implies that films might be a way to travel through time. A film becomes a time portal. The metanarrativeness of this scene shows that a film spectator might go to different periods within a film and that, in a way, the spectator's time-space is also disrupted when watching a film. In other words, he is not only sitting at the movies, but he is also going to different places and at different times.



**Picture 6:** Screenshot

After Donnie leaves the cinema, the sequence uses parallelism between his sister's presentation with the group Sparkle Motion and Donnie burning Cunningham's house. The girls are wearing silver tights, heavy make-up, and their dance is eroticized. Their presentation begins at an average speed, but then it is shown in slow-motion. It is ironic how Sparkle Motion is shown in slow-motion. More ironic is the association between Donnie's sparkle motion, the fire, and the girls' dancing. Furthermore, the girls reduced speed contrasts with how fast the fire spreads. Even more ironic might be how the public praises the girls, and, in a way by correlation and parallelism, they praise the fire in Cunningham's house. As a result of the combination of these two events, space is compressed into one time; two happenings are occurring during one instance since the spectator watches two spaces together.

This parallel sequence also suggests the contrast between what is praised and what is condemned by society. In burning the house, Donnie exposes that Cunningham is a pedophile. The latter has a child pornography "dungeon," but ironically, he is the host in the girls' presentation. Hence, Donnie's "spectacle" – burning the house – has to be hidden, as he covers himself with his hood, while the sexualization of 10-year-old girls is publicly praised, which shows hypocrisy in the way Cunningham will later be condemned by his

pedophilia. Then, Donnie goes back to the movie, Gretchen is awakening. She asks how long she slept; he answers the "whole movie" (01:11:49), which normalizes the plot's temporality again. The parallelism ends when the characters are watching the movie's credits. This temporal construction exemplifies, again, time as a generator of meaning, as Bakhtin proposed.

The sequence in which Donnie invades the school highlights a meaningful ellipse. He is sleeping on the couch, and it is night. The shot cuts to a surrealistic image of a wall and lockers in the middle of an ocean as if this is Donnie's dream. Then, Frank calls him and incentivizes him to flood the school by breaking a water pipe. A dissolve transits the shots between Frank in his living room and Donnie walking with an axe through the school's corridor, which also suggests the dream-like state of this sequence. At the school corridor, Frank is in the back but out of focus, while Donnie is in the foreground, which indicates that the former's influence over the latter. After Donnie's first blow on the pipe, the sequence cuts to a close-up of himself sitting on the couch in the same position he was before the school shot. This ellipse implies that he was actually delusional or daydreaming, but the actual inundation of the school will show differently. The ellipse also communicates Donnie's disorientation and confusion. Since the film follows his subjectivity, this sudden transitions and wipes are reflections of his unstable state of mind. Furthermore, the disruption of time-space is evident; his apparently "dream" causes a jump into space, from the school to the couch.

Deleuze's (1989) idea about a pure time can broadly dialogue with *Donnie Darko*. More than pure, actually, time is physical. Donnie sees time, or at least sees the path through which people will go; he sees the future. The path is a liquid looking spiral that anticipates people's movements. Thus, time becomes a physical material. Donnie actually enters in one of these spirals. The frames give his face a close-up, and his eyes are distorted with an animation resource to show that he sees into the future. Then, the camera travels forward inside the spiral and reaches a blue sky, accompanied by his teacher Karen's (Drew Barrymore) voice saying "cellar door" (01:27:40). The portal is the cellar door. Her line anticipates that once he enters the portal, he will die.

Garret Stewart (2007) presents a revealing perspective on time and digital cinema. He analysis American science fiction films and European humanistic ones, focusing on the treatment of time. His argument is that both genres provide similar views on time, in which time is not spatialized, and exemplify Giles Deleuze's (1989) idea of pure time, of duration. According to this scholar, the digital cinema would be able to do so because it no longer depends on the materiality of the filmstrip. Therefore, they detach the literal movement of the frames from time and space. He names this "framed time." In Stewart (2007, p.2) words:

Increasingly, the temporal transit (mechanical) of the image, frame by frame, gives way to its temporal transformation (electronic) within the frame. This is obvious enough. What is not, or not without some further reflection, is the frequency with which the latter phenomenon is not only facilitated but inscribed by specific film plots of great time travel. [...] Framed time is a narrative inflection as well as a psychic topography operating across various genres. Its effect draws on the new cultural dispensation of virtual space and time as much as on any specific digital instrumentation.

Donnie Darko's psychological breaks exemplify Stewart's (2007) idea of *temptation*,<sup>3</sup> When a character time travels, the time tunnel from the movie also exposes Stewart's (2007) cartography<sup>4</sup>, which he prefers to narratology. The former happens when the influence of the special effects in the film's narrative, its plot: the story and the technology merge.

Lastly, the plot also constructs a time disruptions. Although Donnie is able to see the future, his path is already marked, and he will not change it. The jet engine that falls in his room, and posteriorly kills him, illustrates this doomed and inescapable path. The first time Donnie sees Frank is also the night in which the jet engine will fall in his room. Frank prevents Donnie from dying by calling him outside. Nevertheless, by the end of the film, the spectator discovers that this mysterious engine falls from a plane in which Donnie's mother and little sister are, but this plane is in the future; 28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, and 12 seconds after its engine falls in Donnie's bedroom. In this future, the plane enters into a space wormhole, and the engine goes back in time. Thus, an event from

<sup>3</sup> Garrett Stewart's (2007, p.205) term to time travel.

<sup>4</sup> Stewart (2007, p.22) explains that "[i]n this book, then, it is the writing on narrative's graphic effects, either lexical or filmic or now electronic, their category of study (rather than the writing in and by them of screen effects), that the term narratology is meant to help focus". Narratology maps as in 2D, narratography charts as in 3D, which means that the latter is more sociological and culturally driven, considering technological and formals aspects as well.

the future – the plane dismemberment – is essential to trigger his course – dying – into the future. He travels through time with the vessel that will kill him, the jet engine. When the future hits the past, it destabilizes the present and provides Donnie with the superpower to see the future, as Gretchen observes his name is that of a superhero (00:28:02). Despite this power, Donnie has to follow his path so that Gretchen or Frank may not die; his future is in returning to the past.

In sum, *Donnie Darko*'s plot challenges classic and hegemonic time-space representations by portraying a subject view of a disturbed teenager through disruptive events. The expected effect of this arrangement is to expose Donnie's state of mind. Many science fiction movies use the theme of time in their plots. Since to problematize, time is already a way to disturb the chronotope, many science fictions detach it from space and subvert a fixed relation between time and space. A more precise definition might be that the sub-genre of time traveling science fiction movies explores the chronotopical subversion, like *Donnie Darko*.

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