

ISSUES OF TEMPORALITY IN EARLY MODERN THEOLOGY AND IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

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The last decade has witnessed a torrent of science fiction films based on the motif of time-travel. Changing the past, changing the future, and exploring parallel time-lines are common themes. Time travel has grown from a simple plot element to a major premise in television, film, and literature. Strangely, in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries theologians, mystics, and philosophers wrestled with very similar issues. Admittedly early modern discursive academic texts and twenty-first century cinematic images from popular culture are very different. One is systematic, while the other is impressionistic. One is cerebral while the other is visceral. One is based on reasoned argumentation while the other utilizes intuitive appeals. Nevertheless, the structural parallels between them are striking. We shall examine both genres, showing how a conversation between the two very different types of discourse can be used to illumine the depth dynamics of each one. The more theological discourse can help clarify the metaphysical visions implied by the films, and the cinematic stories can help reveal the primal human passions that motivate the theological/philosophical systems.

DONNIE DARKO: THE REDEMPTION OF GNOSTIC TIME

Donnie Darko is the story of a troubled teenager who unknowingly finds himself facing the daunting task of saving the universe. The drama revolves around the tension between the primary universe, which is a temporal sequence of events typified by paradise-like reconciliation and harmony, and the tangent universe, which exhibits fallen temporality characterized by alienation, anger, hatred, and violence. The tangent universe is the exact duplicate of the primary universe in every detail. At the formation of the tangent universe a vortex occurs bisecting the primary

universe. It is at this epicenter that we find Donnie and the events that lead to his experiences in the tangent timeline.

Donnie himself epitomizes the disconnectedness of the human condition. Donnie, like the majority of protagonists in films that deal with the metaphysics of time, is a social misfit struggling to overcome separation from the world around him. Donnie is in conflict with the primary universe in which he exists. It is not until the tangent universe is formed that we see Donnie fulfilling his intended purpose.

Artifacts from the primary universe are the first sign that a rift in time has occurred. For Donnie, the artifact is a jet engine from a commercial airline that crashes through his house and lands on his bed, where he had been sleeping only moments prior. Frank, a character who has died in the tangent universe and now exists in the 4th dimension, seeks to manipulate Donnie toward the task of closing the vortex. It is Frank who calls Donnie outside, pulling him through time, and prevents him from being crushed by the jet engine. Other characters in the tangent universe attempt to stop Donnie from completing his mission because their universe will cease to exist if he succeeds and they will be sent to Oblivion. Eventually Frank and Gretchen, Donnie's girlfriend, who also dies in the tangent universe, stage events so that Donnie will use his powers to return the Artifact to the primary universe. Donnie's relationship with Gretchen plays a pivotal role in that his love for her and her tragic death gives him the final incentive he needs to open the vortex and send the jet engine into the primary universe. With this task complete Donnie is returned to the primary universe at the moment that the initial vortex occurred, is crushed by the jet engine, while the tangent universe collapses. We find a restored primary universe devoid of Donnie but with living and thriving Frank, Gretchen, and other characters.

The basic plot of *Donnie Darko* parallels the cosmology of Jacob Boehme, the celebrated seventeenth century German mystic/theosophist. According to Boehme, reality is constituted by atemporal eternity and two different types of temporality. To explain this, it will be necessary to sketch the outlines of his idiosyncratic cosmology, which is an eclectic amalgam of themes from alchemy, medieval Rhineland mysticism, neo-platonism, heliocentric astronomy, Lutheran piety, and gnosticism.

According to Boehme, the primal divine reality is undifferentiated, chaotic, and utterly unknowable, without any determinate attributes. Nevertheless, this primal chaos contains a drive toward definition and manifestation; it desires to become particular entities and events. Therefore, the divine Wisdom, containing the abstract forms all things, projects itself into that which is not divine, non-being. Wisdom struggles to manifest itself in spite of the obstruction and resistance of the non-divine. Because of the resistance of non-being, events occur as Wisdom struggles to overcome non-being. As a result, a type of temporality is generated, in which Wisdom should, without too much resistance, create a harmonious order of particular beings. This is the “time” of “paradise,” typified by the voluntary giving of love of one particular existent to another, overcoming separation. Unfortunately, the real individuation that has been produced makes non-cooperation possible, a possibility that is actualized in the fall of Lucifer, which is the fall of the entire cosmos. As a consequence, another sort of time is produced, the sinful time of earthly reality. Christ must in earthly history appear to redeem sinful time by enacting a life of genuine harmony and reconciliation. This reversal of the trajectory unleashed by Lucifer and repeated by Adam creates a new dynamic in history that will eventuate in the restoration of paradise.

For our purposes the critical feature of this cosmology is the tension between two different temporalities: the time of paradise (typified by harmony and reconciliation) and the time of the fallen world (typified by alienation, anger, hatred, and violence). Because the ultimate root of this drama is in atemporal eternity, the dramatic tension between these two temporalities is not really sequential, but is an eternal dynamic. Paradisal time is always falling into earthly time and is always being redeemed by Christ.

Structural parallels link Boehme's cosmology to the plot of *Donnie Darko*. The "tangent universe" is analogous to the fallen universe, while the "primary universe" parallels Boehme's paradise. In both instances, the plot revolves around the need to return to the temporality of the primary universe/paradise. In both instances, the restoration requires the death of the hero, signifying the redemptive power of self-giving. Donnie's death, like Christ's, results in the resetting of the universe back to the moment before the Fall.

Both the cosmology and the film express a sense of the tension between "fallen time" and ideal time. Time as we actually experience it is not always the way time is supposed to be. Often our time is a distorted shadow of ideal time, composed of a meaningless succession of painful events. We have a dim, haunting sense that we are intended for a different sort of temporality, for a teleological movement toward increasing harmonization.

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT: THE ACCEPTANCE OF ENLIGHTENMENT TIME

The *Butterfly Effect* presents us with a different problem in our experience of time: the problem of tragic time. In the film, the existence of one particular human being creates an imbalance in the pre-established harmony of the universe. The relationship of this anomalous individual to others creates a debilitating effect that threatens the goodness of the entire network.

The protagonist, Evan Treborn, has the innate ability to travel backwards in time, a power that is triggered by reading journal entries pertaining to traumatic events. In the initial timeline Evan's Life, as well as those of his closest friends, is inundated with tragedy that Evan takes upon himself to fix. Evan's well-meaning attempts to repair horrendous events in the past only serve to generate an even worse series of tragedies in the present. No matter how much he tries to everyone's life perfect somebody ends up suffering, himself included. Eventually Evan realizes that his existence is the anomaly that is disrupting the balance of the pre-established harmony. With this realization Evan time-travels to the moment when he is still in his mother's womb and strangles himself, thus restoring the intricate balance of the cosmos. The best possible past is the one in which Evan Treborn is stillborn and thus never existed.

Gottlieb Leibnitz, the celebrated philosopher of the German Enlightenment, dealt with temporality in the same manner as *The Butterfly Effect*. Rather than regarding historical time as a symptom of cosmic fallenness, as did Boehme, Leibnitz regarded it as an aspect of the perfection of the universe. In response to the problem of the presence of apparent evil in a universe allegedly created by an all-loving and all-powerful God, Leibnitz sought to demonstrate that this cosmos is the best of possible worlds. No other options available to God would have produced a more functional universe. All events are integrated according to a divinely pre-established harmony. Each entity (monad) is what it is by virtue of its relations to other entities. Our own identities are constituted by our network of relationships; relationality is internal to and constitutive of the identity of the self. The change of any single aspect of any entity would unbalance the pre-established harmony of all entities, destabilizing the goodness of the whole network. Every event is necessary for the good of the whole. Unfortunately, some of these necessary events produce experienced discomfort and even anguish for particular beings, given

their excessive attachment to their own particular perspectives and their own narrowly-defined well-being. Nevertheless, this suffering of individuals is the price that must be paid for the goodness of the whole. Consequently, the past, including all its tragedies, must be embraced as the best possible past. The temporal sequence that has in fact occurred should be affirmed.

The *Butterfly Effect* illustrates the deleterious consequences of imagining or longing for a different past. Changing any event has hurtful repercussions for all events, including the most positive and desirable ones. Wisdom is the recognition that everything must have happened the way it did happen; resignation and the acceptance of all events are the keys to spiritual maturity.

THE JACKET: THE EMBRACE OF EXISTENTIAL TIME

In the discourse of science fiction, the theme of multiple parallel temporal sequences is utilized time and time again (pun intended). From comic books to blockbuster films to novels, the main character gets to pick and choose which hypothetical universe from among various options to explore and actualize. Unlike Donnie Darko who sought to restore non-fallen time, or Evan who came to accept (at the cost of his own life) the necessity of a particular temporal sequence, the protagonist in *The Jacket* chooses the timeline he wishes to exist in and makes certain that it is actualized. Jack Starks, a Desert Storm veteran recovering from a gunshot wound and suffering from amnesia, helps an alcoholic mother and her little daughter Jackie repair their stranded vehicle. After continuing on his way, Jack is falsely accused of killing a police officer and is confined in a mental institution. While in the institution Jack is subjected to an unorthodox therapy that involves being injected with experimental drugs and confinement in a straightjacket while being locked in a morgue drawer. During the stress of these traumatic sessions Jack discovers that he can recall not only the past but also the future. Jack visits a particular moment fifteen years in the future when he is reunited with Jackie, who is now a

young woman. Jack eventually convinces her that he is indeed the same person who fixed her mother's car in 1992, but learns from Jackie that he had died that same year. Jack tries to discover the circumstances of his death and also attempts to make changes in Jackie's future from one of alcoholism, poverty, and loneliness to one of family, education, and success. When Jack does discover the cause of his own death and, back in 1992, realizes that he is dying, he asks to be put back in straight jacket and the morgue drawer so that he can permanently travel to the desired happy future with Jackie before he dies in the present.

Jack refusal to accept his situation in the present and his decision to insert himself in one particular future timeline allocates to himself the traditional role of God. Jack gets to choose which possible timeline will be actualized. He changes one situation in the present that will have an inevitably positive effect on his and Jackie's life in the future. Jack's future-creating decisions and rejections of alternative time-lines clearly demonstrates that a human character had taken on the function traditionally reserved for God.

Jack's choice of one option from among different possible futures is reminiscent of the speculations about time, necessity, and freedom by the late-sixteenth century Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina. Molina proposed that God enjoys a "middle knowledge" (*scientia media*) of hypothetical universes, each one with a different temporal sequence of events, with the particular events related to one another in a cause-and-effect nexus. This can also be described as God's knowledge of what would have necessarily happened if different choices had been made and different events had occurred. In other words, God has hypothetical knowledge of a plurality of time-lines with different plots. God has knowledge not only of what will in fact occur in this temporal sequence, but also of what would have happened in other universes with other temporal sequences. Among the causes in each of the possible sequences are the free decisions of human

beings. God has chosen to make this particular temporal sequence actual, and thereby has created a universe in which human beings make this particular set of free decisions. Molina's system was an attempt to integrate God's sovereign providence with human freedom and responsibility. God chose to create the universe in which Adam and Eve would freely disobey, Solomon would freely build the temple, Judas would freely betray Jesus, etc. God could have created the different universe in which Adam and Eve would freely obey God, Solomon would freely chose to not build the temple, etc. This view combines a strong sense of the inter-connectedness of events in a temporal sequence with a high valuation of responsible choice. A sense of inevitability is integrated with a sense of freedom.

The same sense of alternative temporal sequences is evident in *The Jacket*, along with the focus on the need to choose one of them. In a way, the protagonist exercises the function that Molina had reserved for God. This heightens the sense of human responsibility for future events; our current decisions are made in the face of alternative futures and will actualize one particular future. Present time is characterized by future-creating decisions, in full awareness that alternative time-lines are thereby being rejected.

CONCLUSION

These three pairings of early modern speculations about time with contemporary time-travel films shows that remarkably similar issues and themes about human temporality can find expression in technical theological discourse and in the idiom of popular culture. According to one pairing, time can be experienced as chaotic and deranged, in need of restoration and healing. According to another pairing, time can be experienced as integrated and meaningful, in fact, as good as is possible. According to the final pairing, time can be experienced as the present moment of decision, freely creating a specific future. The first pairing fosters a yearning for

redeemed time in another, purer dimension; the second pairing encourages acceptance of the historicity that we actually experience; the third pairing promotes an acute sense of responsibility for the future.

The passionate pursuit of humanity was once the exploration of space, the final frontier. Based on the focus of time travel found in the films, television, and literature of the 21st century the passion to understand time has surpassed that of exploring the infinite cosmos. Whereas the exploration of space was for the benefit of humanity, each of the films discussed demonstrates a concern solely for the individual and those closest to them. This is also in opposition to the theologies that have been compared which focused on understanding time and God versus current films that focus on the use of time to benefit self.