The film *Donnie Darko* was Richard Kelly’s debut as director and writer in 2001. *Donnie Darko* exhibits all elements needed for a *neo noir* film: nihilism, philosophical ideas and spiritual transcendence, moral corruption, problems with identity and memory, and finally the most distinctive *noir* trait, the use of time and space. To best describe the plotline of *Donnie Darko* one must look to one of the most prominent *noir* or *pulp* writers, Graham Greene and his short story “The Destructors,” published in 1954. Graham Greene portrays a world in transition, a society moving away from respect for culture toward a delight in chaos.¹ In contrast to *Donnie Darko*, which takes place in Middlesex, Virginia in 1988, Greene demonstrates the instability of postwar England in his presentation of opposing forces throughout “The Destructors.” The tension created by these forces reflects a society that has survived trauma but is deeply changed by it. Social dynamics are undergoing change, and the youth no longer feel connected to the past, as previous generations did.²

While, in *Donnie Darko*, the problems are not so pronounced as elements of war, there is turmoil and corruption in society that has ultimately created instability in all of America, as the made-up town of Middlesex is, anywhere, anyplace, USA. The modernist critique of society in classic *noir* usually takes

¹ [http://www.enotes.com/destructors](http://www.enotes.com/destructors)
² [http://www.enotes.com/destructors](http://www.enotes.com/destructors)
place in urban cities like, San Francisco, L.A., or New York. But in this film, the themes have taken on the role of attacking suburbia and small towns, thus, making the critique on modernity much more intense and less centralized. In *Donnie Darko*, the stability of suburban America is merely an illusion and therefore attacks the fabric of family and home life.

This film is very smart in the way it was able to tackle every element of *neo noir* themes. The first theme I would like to address is the title, as it focuses on more than just the main character. The name itself has the sound of a superhero, much like Superman or Spiderman. Even in the film, the name is critiqued by the character Gretchen, played by Jenna Malone, as such. But beyond the name itself, even though the story is told from Donnie’s perspective, however, it is not narrated by him. The narration is actually quite debatable. Once the true meaning of the film is revealed in a secondary presentation in “The Philosophy of Time Travel”, the viewer can see that all the scenarios are presented and manipulated by Frank, a demonic bunny sent from another dimension to guide Donnie in his task to set the universe right. But then Frank is also a product of analogy brought on by Roberta Sparrow, the writer of “The Philosophy of Time travel”. The character of Donnie is most important to the spiritual transcendence of not only himself, but also through his act of self sacrifice, is responsible for the spiritual transcendence of society. This scenario is reminiscent to the second coming of Christ, which is also symbolized in the film
when Donnie leaves Gretchen at the theater when watching *Evil Dead*, and the marquee reads, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

**Philosophy of Time Travel**

*Donnie Darko* is entirely based on the concept that both time and space are manipulating each other simultaneously. The film begins in the present time (Primary Universe) that is linked to things that have already happened (Fourth Dimension) and by the end, all things that happen in the newly created time (Tangent Universe) effect the past and the future. For Donnie and the people around him, the Primary Universe ended and the Tangent Universe began on October 2, 1988 at midnight, when a jet engine landed in his bedroom. Just before this happens, Donnie hears a voice calling him. He sleepwalks out of the house onto a golf course, where he sees Frank, the demonic bunny, for the first time. Frank tells him the world will end in 28 days, 6hrs, 42min; 8sec. In this section I will introduce the secondary presentation previously spoken about to better narrate key *neo noir* themes presented in this film.
The first thing I would like to point out is the date that this book was written by Roberta Sparrow, October, 1944. Much like Graham Greene’s story, her story is inspired by the insecurity and chaos of World War II. Roberta Sparrow’s character in Donnie Darko is a small part with big impact. During the war, Roberta was a Nun, and it is assumed that her experiences with God became disenchanted and disheartening through human destruction, as she left confinement to write this book and become a teacher at the very same school Donnie will attend in her future. Roberta is now 101 years old, and she spends her time walking from her front door to her mailbox, in hope to find a letter (from Donnie) as a form of affirmation. This eventually comes to pass in October 1988. Even though it is not told in the film, looking at the extras, the viewer comes to find that she dies only two months after the events unfold. This confirms her role as narrator of the story, in two ways. On one hand, because she does get the letter from Donnie, all that she has seen and known had come to pass as

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http://ruinedeye.com/cd/time1.htm
foretold. On the second hand, her dying shortly after, shows conformation of her purpose in life, and that God had a special role for her outside of the church.

The Tangent Universe

....The Primary Universe is fraught with great peril. War, plague, famine and natural disaster are common. Death comes to us all.

....The Fourth Dimension of Time is a stable construct, though it is not impenetrable.

....Incidents when the fabric of the fourth dimension becomes corrupted are incredibly rare.

....If a Tangent Universe occurs, it will be highly unstable, sustaining itself for no longer than several weeks.

....Eventually it will collapse upon itself, forming a black hole within the Primary Universe capable of destroying all existence.\(^4\)

According to this philosophy, complete nihilism in the Primary Universe allows for the fabric of the Fourth Dimension to be broken, thus allowing the Tangent Universe (end of the world) to devour all elements of God's paradise, so to speak. In *Donnie Darko* the Primary Universe has been penetrated and has begun its decent into hell when the jet engine from the Fourth Dimension falls from the sky into Donnie's room. Contrary to the typical themes of home-life in *noir* films, Donnie's character is situated in a stable familiar unit. The parents are happily married, live in a nice home, are financially stable, and have their 2.5 kids. However, Donnie suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. The backdrop of the

\(^4\) http://ruinedeye.com/cd/time2.htm
film takes place in the middle of the 1988 Presidential Primary’s, and political themes provide a window into some instability. But, the primary undercurrent comes from the introduction of Jim Cunningham, played by Patrick Swayze, a motivational speaker that addresses the idea that all the corruption in the world comes from “fear”. Cunningham, being well respected within the religious community, will ultimately be the face of ignorance, hypocrisy, and nihilism that is responsible for the disequilibrium in the universe.

One of the first montage sequences in the film addresses the path of moral corruption within the school system, when some of the students partake in the use of cocaine in the wide open school hallway as the principal walks by completely oblivious. The scene takes us into Donnie’s English class with his teacher played by Drew Barrymore. She is discussing with the class, “The Destructors”, the short story by Graham Greene, and asks Donnie what he thinks about the plot given his recent brush with mass destruction. Donnie replies, “That when the gang floods the house and rip it to shreds, well that destruction is a form of creation, the fact that they burned the money they found is ironic, they just wanted to see what happens when they tear the world apart, they want to change things”. Ironic, because that night Donnie sees Frank again, and Frank tells him to flood the school. When Donnie does this, he also burns into the sidewalk next to the bronze mascot, “they made me do it”. This brings me back to the point that the narration is debatable between Frank and Roberta Sparrow. Frank actually tells Donnie to do it. However, “they” must mean that there is yet
another person manipulating events, i.e., Roberta Sparrow. Because of the flooding and vandalism that occurs, a PTA meeting is conducted. In the meeting, Kitty Farmer played by Beth Grant, is not only a teacher, but is also a parent of a student at the school. She stands up immediately and tries to blame the story by Graham Greene, read in the English class, for influencing the students that vandalized the school. She said that pornography was being taught in the curriculum and wanted to ban it. Donnie’s mother says, “Do you even know who Graham Greene is”? Kitty replies, “I think we have all seen Bonanza”. The character of Kitty Farmer is the major antagonist is this film. She is part of the religious right that supports Jim Cunningham and represents the hypocrisy and ignorance that is responsible for the imbalance of the Primary Universe.

The Artifact And
The Living

....When a Tangent Universe occurs, those living nearest to the Vortex will find themselves at the epicenter of a dangerous new world.

....Artifacts provide the first sign that a Tangent Universe has occurred.

....If an Artifact occurs, the Living will retrieve it with great interest and curiosity. Artifacts are formed from metal, such as an Arrowhead from an ancient Mayan civilization, or a Metal Sword from Medieval Europe.

....Artifacts returned to the Primary Universe are often linked to religious iconography; as their appearance on Earth seems to defy logical explanation.

....Divine Intervention is deemed the only logical conclusion for the appearance of the Artifact. 

\(^5\) http://ruinedeye.com/cd/time4.htm
When Donnie vandalizes the school, not only is the school flooded, but there is an axe wielded into the head of the bronze mascot. Everybody seems to be blind to the idea that this was divine intervention, including those who claim to be on the righteous path of God.

The Living Receiver

....The Living Receiver is chosen to guide the Artifact into position for it's journey back to the Primary Universe.

No one knows how or why a Receiver will be chosen.

....The Living Receiver is often (blessed) with a Fourth Dimensional Power(s). These include increased strength, telekinesis, mind control, and the ability to conjure fire and water.

....The Living Receiver is often tormented by terrifying dreams, visions and auditory hallucinations during his time within the Tangent Universe.

....Those surrounding the Living Receiver, known as the Manipulated, will fear him and try to destroy him.⁶

The uniqueness of this film, being noir, is that it is most definitely a story based on good vs. evil. Although all the characters feel some sort of unease around them, they are completely oblivious to the signs and that there is something bigger than themselves. That is with the exception of the paranoid schizophrenic Donnie. We as the viewer, without knowing the Philosophy of Time Travel, will assume, just like those who are oblivious to the signs, that Donnie is just a paranoid schizophrenic and all of this is in his head. Because this is the Tangent Universe, God has no real powers to help guide the humans involved.

⁶ http://ruinedeye.com/cd/time5.htm
This is where the experience of Roberta Sparrow comes to play. Back in 1944, overnight something happened that made her leave her confinement as a Nun. She was able to see what happens in the Tangent Universe. Because, God has no control over the destiny of humans in this alternate universe, she had to sever her ties with church, and become the prophet and messenger that can act as Gods vessel in the great time of need.

**The Manipulated Living**

....The Manipulated Living are often the close friends and neighbors of the Living Receiver.

....They are prone to irrational, bizarre, and often violent behavior. This is the unfortunate result of their task, which is to assist the Living Receiver in returning the Artifact to the Primary Universe.

....The Manipulated Living will do anything to save themselves from Oblivion.  

The path of everyone involved has been neatly planned, based on Roberta Sparrows experience. In order to set things right, she had to have some sort of insight as to the nature of each individual involved. The moment Donnie vandalizes the school, everything was set into motion. Gretchen becomes Donnie’s girlfriend when school is cancelled from the flood. Gretchen’s character is crucial to guiding Donnie down the right path. She is able to give Donnie a glimpse of a beautiful world and what it can be. Because of the vandalizing of the school, Kitty Farmer is more motivated than ever to get Jim Cunningham to speak to the students about conquering their fear. His theory is that life is divided

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7 http://ruinedeye.com/cd/time6.htm
into two emotions, love and fear, and if we allow ourselves to be guided by love, we can conquer fear. However, we find that Jim Cunningham is a hypocrite when Frank appears at the movie theater when Donnie and Gretchen are watching *Halloween and Frightmare* double feature. Gretchen falls asleep and when Frank appears, he shows Donnie a portal to the Fourth Dimension. He sees Jim Cunningham’s house, and Frank tells him to burn it down. When Donnie leaves the theater, the marquee says *Evil Dead and The Last Temptation of Christ* double feature. Donnie does what he is told and returns to Gretchen before she wakes. The next day it is revealed that Jim Cunningham was involved in Kiddy Porn. The significance of the marquee changing titles shows the viewer that what Donnie is about to do is part of Gods plan, and that the revealing of Jim Cunningham as a false prophet is the main task that must be accomplished for the means to justify the end.

**The Manipulated Dead**

....The Manipulated Dead are more powerful than the Living Receiver. If a person dies within the Tangent Dimension, they are able to contact the Living Receiver through the Fourth Dimensional Construct.

The Fourth Dimensional Construct is made of Water.

....The Manipulated Dead will manipulate the Living Receiver using the Fourth Dimensional Construct (see Appendix A and B).

....The Manipulated Dead will often set an Ensurance Trap for the Living Receiver to ensure that the Artifact is returned safely to the Primary Universe.

....If the Ensurance Trap is successful, the Living
Receiver is left with no choice but to use his Fourth Dimensional Power to send the Artifact back in time into the Primary Universe before the Black Hole collapses upon itself.\(^8\)

Important dialogue between Frank and Donnie happens during the theater scene. When Frank appears, Donnie asks Frank, “Why do you wear that stupid bunny suit? Frank replies, “Why do you wear that stupid man suit? Donnie asks Frank to remove his head piece to see who or what is underneath. Frank as a person is revealed with a wounded right eye. Later we come to find that Frank was Donnie’s sister’s boyfriend, and that the wound is from when Donnie shot Frank and killed him just before the world was supposed to end. The costume is necessary because it's an essential part of Frank's character as a dead person - he was wearing the suit when he died - and also because it's so alien, Donnie will understand that he's dealing with things beyond normal ken. The symbolism represents human nature in contrast with materialism when dealing with the distinction between appearance and reality. The point is made that Donnie is also dead when, Donnie asks Frank, when will all of this end, and Frank replies, “you should already know”. It was necessary for Frank to die so that he could reappear in the Tangent Universe to help Donnie.

**Dreams**

....When the Manipulated awakens from their Journey into the Tangent Universe, they are often haunted by the experience in their dreams.

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\(^8\) [http://ruinedeye.com/cd/time7.htm](http://ruinedeye.com/cd/time7.htm)
Many of them will not remember.

....Those who do remember the Journey are often overcome with profound remorse for the regretful actions buried within their Dreams, the only physical evidence buried within the Artifact itself, all that remains from the lost world.

....Ancient myth tells us of the Mayan Warrior killed by an Arrowhead that had fallen from a cliff, where there was no Army, no enemy to be found.

....We are told of the Medieval Knight mysteriously impaled by the sword he had not yet built.

We are told that these things occur for a reason.⁹

**The beginning of the end**

Ms. Farmer was directing some girls at the school in a dance group called “Sparkle Motion” that included Donnie’s little sister. Ironically, when the girls performed for the school talent show, they danced to Duran Duran’s *Notorious*. Their performance got them a chance to go to California and perform on “star search”. At the same time that Ms. Farmer finds out the great news, she finds out about Jim Cunningham and decides not to chaperone the trip for the girls. She instead puts Jim the pedophile in front of her daughter and the rest of the community. She asks Donnie’s mother to go in her stead. It was important for the events to unravel this way. With Donnie’s mother out of town with the younger sister and dad already out of town, it allowed Donnie and his sister Elizabeth to throw a Halloween party on the 28th day of the countdown.

Just a few days prior, Donnie’s English teacher is fired. Her final words left on the chalk board read *Cellar Door*. She said that, Tolkien believed these to be the most beautiful words in the English language. At the party Donnie convinces Gretchen to go with him to Roberta Sparrows house as he hears the words *cellar door* in the back of his mind. He and Gretchen enter Roberta Sparrows cellar as if to look for a clue as to what was next. Some school bullies were already inside looking for valuables to steal. A fight breaks out into the yard. Gretchen is thrown out into the street as a car comes barreling down the road and runs over her killing her. Frank in his Halloween costume as a demonic bunny gets out of his car to see what happened. Donnie looks at him and pulls out a gun and shoots Frank in the right eye. He yells at the passenger of the car to go and tell their parents “everything will be ok”. He takes Gretchen to the top of the mountain and watches as the world begins to open up over his house. He remembers that his mother and sister were flying home on a plane and that in order to go back into time there must be a vessel, and his mother’s plane was that vessel. He looks up and says, “I’m going home, I hope that when the world ends, that I can breath a sigh of relief”. All begins to rewind back to when Donnie was in bed before the engine dropped in his room. He is laughing. Then the final montage sequence shows us that somehow everyone involved can remember all the destruction all the chaos, and that they were given a second chance. Donnie allows himself to die, even though it was not necessary for him to do so.
Music plays a very important part in the plot of the movie from the very beginning. The opening song is by Echo and the Bunnymen, “The Killing Moon” which starts with, under blue moon I saw you, soon you will take me, fate up against your will, through the thick and thin. The song is significant to the plot of the film, as Donnie has to battle with coming of age, and his identity as a schizophrenic, and that of a savior. *Head Over Heels* by Tears for Fears is the song that describes the corruption and hypocrisy that Donnie experiences. “I made a fire and watching it burn, I thought of your future, with one foot in the past, now just how long will it last”. When Gretchen comes to Donnie’s house for the Halloween party and they start kissing, the song, *Under the Milkyway Tonight*, by the Church, transcends what the viewer sees and takes you into Donnie’s own thoughts. The words resonate the passion of Donnie’s conviction…wish I knew what you were looking for, might I know what you might find, and something’s quite peculiar, something that is shimmering and white, leads you here despite your destination, under the milkyway tonight. In the final montage once all has been done and the world has been saved, Donnie laughs in bed just as the engine falls. Some of the lyrics again allow the viewer to feel as though they were on the path of spiritual transcendence along with Donnie. The song in the background as I wrap up this paper, written by Michael Andrews and Gary Jules, is able to summarize Donnie Darko, the superhero.

All around me I see familiar faces
Worn out places, worn out faces,
Bright and early for their daily races,
Going nowhere, going nowhere,
Their tears are filling up our glasses,
No expression, no expression,
Hide my head I want to drown my sorrow
No tomorrow, no tomorrow
And I find it kind of funny
I find it kind of sad
The dreams in which I'm dying
Are the best I've ever had
I find it hard to tell you
I find it hard to take
When people run in circles
It's a very, very
Mad World
Mad world
Children waiting for the day they feel good
Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday
And I feel the way that every child should
Sit and listen, sit and listen
Went to school and I was very nervous
No one knew me, no one knew me
Hello teacher tell me what's my lesson
Look right through me, look right through me
And I find it kind of funny
I find it kind of sad
The dreams in which I'm dying
Are the best I've ever had
I find it hard to tell you
I find it hard to take
When people run in circles
It's a very, very
Mad World
Mad World
Enlarging your world
Mad World