

Donnie Darko

FILM SYNOPSIS

First time writer and director Richard Kelly has produced a funny, moving and distinctly mind-bending journey through suburban America. Set in 1988 the movie is a psychological science fiction film about a boy named Donnie Darko who, after narrowly escaping death, has visions of a giant rabbit named Frank who says he's from outer space and the future. The demonic looking bunny predicts that the world will end in 28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes and 12 seconds and sends Donnie on a rampage.

The movie explores time travel, the concept of parallel universes, mental health issues, relationships and mortality. However, at the centre of Donnie Darko is the simple story of a boy trying to make a stand in a lonely, chaotic world – and discovering that every little thing he does counts on a cosmic scale.

PERFECT INGREDIENTS FOR A HOLLYWOOD TEEN MOVIE

Donnie Darko has many characteristics of a classic Hollywood teen movie popular in the 1980s. Put the darker elements of the film aside for a moment, and there are many similarities with films like Ferris Bueller's Day Off and the Back to the Future series. Another link to this style of 1980s film can also be seen with the use of period icons such as Drew Barrymore and Patrick Swayze in peripheral roles.

Key elements of a teen movie:

- Handsome young male protagonist
- Attractive female protagonist
- Key location suburban American high school
- White affluent middle-class family, who live in a large house
- Teenage angst, conflict with family, heartbreak
- Sex, drugs and romance

ACTIVITIES

- Can you add anything else to the list of what makes a teen movie?
- Do you think teen movies be classed as a film genre?
- Identify other Hollywood teenage movies that use the above elements as a backdrop for a larger narrative.
- Besides Donnie Darko and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, are there any other teenage movies that also blend science fiction into their narrative?
- Donnie Darko is set in suburban middle-class America in October 1988. Would there be many changes to the film if it was to be remade in 2006? Look at the clothing, attitude of characters, topics discussed, film sets? Is there anything else that you might add/remove from the film to make it more up-to-date?
- How would the movie be different if it was made by a UK director?

Richard Kelly was particularly brave and creative when he chose to make Donnie Darko see a six-foot demonic-looking rabbit called Frank. Critics have suggested that the director chose the rabbit, because in other films rabbits have had paranormal qualities including the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland* who leads Alice into a parallel universe through a rabbit hole. Perhaps the wormhole/portal that Donnie sees is a nod of recognition to the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*?

- What were your first thoughts when you first found out that Donnie sees a six-foot rabbit called Frank: amusement, intrigue? How did it make you feel towards the film?

CREATIVE INSPIRATION

Since its release in 2001, *Donnie Darko* has developed cult status and has been described as *Back to the Future* meets *Rebel Without a Cause*. Critics have applauded Kelly's debut movie and have linked his style with the likes of David Lynch.

During the opening scenes when the audience is first introduced to Donnie Darko, we see a character that is similar to something out of a Stephen King novel.

During an interview with the BBC's programme *Film 2002*, Richard Kelly admitted who inspires him, 'Artistically, Salvador Dali and M.C. Escher are real inspirations. As for filmmakers, Terry Gilliam and Peter Weir are both heroes of mine. They both look at the metaphysics of life, making films that ask cosmic questions. They're at either end of the spectrum, but their ideas are similar.'

ACTIVITIES

- Do you agree with these comparisons?
- Is there anyone else that you think Kelly might have been inspired by?
- How much do you know about any of these people and their work?

Split into groups. Each group should choose one of the following people and carry out detailed research into their style of work:

Artists

Salvador Dali
M.C. Escher

Directors

David Lynch
Terry Gilliam
Peter Weir

Author

Stephen King

Record your research in a table like the one below. The research on David Lynch has been started for you.

Name	Personal/Career Details	Style/Trade Mark
David Lynch	<p>Film Director 20 January 1946 Missoula, Montana, USA</p> <p>Brief Filmography</p> <p>Inland Empire (2006) Rabbits (2002) Mullholland Drive (2001) Twin Peaks (1990-1992)</p>	<p>Finds small-town USA fascinating</p> <p>Use of slow-motion during key scenes of violence</p> <p>Often uses low/middle frequency noise, dark and rotting environments, distorted characters, a polarised world and debilitating damage to the skull or brain Red Curtains / Strobe Lights</p>

The following film websites may help with your research:

www.bbc.co.uk
www.imdb.co.uk

Remember to keep a note of all the sources you use when compiling your notes.

Each group should report back on their research. Compile one large table with all the information. You should be able to look at the table and easily identify each individual's style.

Now, re-watch *Donnie Darko*, this time in 10-15 minute sections, see if you can identify where Kelly has drawn inspiration from these people.

Add this information to your large table.

Who inspires you? Think about which artists, directors, musicians, authors or politicians inspire you. Do some research into their careers and individual style; what is it you like about them? Draw up a table of research for your own icons.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Running parallel with the teenage movie plot is the issue of main protagonist's mental health problems. Donnie is receiving medication and therapy for his violent behaviour and hallucinations. His illness is shown at various stages throughout the film and includes aggression, sleepwalking, and vandalising properties.

Donnie struggles as he tries to get through each anguished day, with the aid of an attentive therapist and with ever-increasing medication.

Mental health is a serious problem for young people; 1 in 4 people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year. Six per cent of boys and 16 per cent of girls aged 16-19 are thought to have some form of mental health problem. (mentalhealth.org.uk)

ACTIVITIES

How do you think the movie deals with mental health issues? Some critics have said it brushes over the subject.

- What do you learn about mental illness from the film?
- How does the audience first learn about Donnie's problems?
- Did your feelings change towards Donnie when you found out about his problems?
- What is at the root of Donnie's problems?

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Defn: A mental illness is defined by the medical profession as a disorder of the brain that results in a disruption in a person's thinking, feeling, moods, and ability to relate to others and to work.

- Hold a group brainstorm; what does mental health mean to you?

Do some research into mental health organisations; some are listed on the next page. Visit the organisations' websites and maybe ask them to send you some of their literature aimed at young people.

Split into small groups: each take an organisation and review the information they use to inform teenagers about mental health. Is it clear, informative, out-of-date, patronising? How would you improve it?

Report back to the rest of the group on your findings. Now choose the organisation that you think needs the most work to develop their literature.

Imagine you are part of a research group employed by the chosen organisation to help redesign their literature. Put together a campaign to help them improve it. Include comments not only on their literature, but also their corporate identity, e.g. their logo and website. Put together mood boards of ideas about what they should use, and how they can engage more young people in their services. Now produce a leaflet or templates for a simple website for teenagers. Think about the design, tone and content.

- How might the organisation be able to use the film *Donnie Darko* in their marketing or public relations campaigns to draw attention to mental health issues for young people?
- Are there any other films for young people that cover mental health issues?

- Are there any young celebrities or film stars that have suffered from mental illness that the organisation could use to lead a new campaign targeting young people?

MENTAL HEALTH ORGANISATIONS

www.youngminds.org.uk

Young Minds is the national charity committed to improving the mental health of all babies, children and young people.

www.minds.org.uk

Mind is the leading mental health charity in England and Wales. The organisation works to create a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress.

www.fortysecondstreet.org.uk

42nd Street was founded in 1980 to provide a dedicated support service to young people experiencing stress and mental health problems.

POLITICAL CONTENT

Director Richard Kelly set the film during the 1988 general election in the USA, between Michael Dukakis and George Bush. Sixteen-year-old Donnie lives at home in the middle-class town of Middlesex with his Republican parents and his two sisters. Mr and Mrs Darko are strict Bush supporters, while Elizabeth, Donnie's older sister, who is about to head to Harvard, swears by Dukakis.

- How and when does politics appear in the film?
- Why do you think the director included the political storyline? Why is it relevant?
- When Donnie's sister says she is going to vote 'Dukakis' how does her father react?
- What were the main differences between the policies of Michael Dukakis and George Bush?
- Why are the younger generation more likely to vote for Dukakis?
- Who would you vote for?

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