

Donnie Darko

The opening shot of the movie is a track shot taken along the ridge of a mountain at dawn. The same shot continues and turns into a dolly one getting slowly closer to a person laying in the middle of the road and then circling him as he wakes up. The person's unusual location is (and reminds me of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* in which a human ear is found in a suburban garden) breaks the harmony that was building up in me by three corresponding elements: it is dawn, early morning, the piano music soundtrack is also 'morning-like' and Donnie is in the process of waking and getting up. These 3 aspects of the movie illusion strengthen each other. Then the movie goes on happily and more dynamically as Donnie bikes down to town and home and smiling all along. Again, the music, the action, the speed and the character's expression are in balance.

But the rest of the film is built on to play with the viewers' expectations. They are built up and then not met, just left hanging there. In other words we expect (sub)plots and don't get them. The most obvious sign of this how several characters are designed in a way that the audience thinks they will have a more important role in the plot later and then there is none. A few examples:

- Cherita Chen, the chubby girl, who says only "chut up" twice. She has a teenage love interest in Donnie, probably starting from the point when Donnie defends her from his mates who mocked her. She is also shown dancing a very poetic ballet, despite that her size is not typical.
- The English literature teacher, played by Drew Barrymore is also painted as someone who has a major role on Donnie's thinking and life. The way the scene is shot where she is sitting the new girl in non-conventional method next to Donnie make us think that she has some powers. I was happy to see Ms. Barrymore playing finally some grown-up role after seeing her in numerous playful ones. She is one of the executive producers of the movie and that might have some thing to do with casting this role to her.
- The character of Roberta Sparrow, the lady who wrote the book on time-travel, isn't expounded neither. We get a sense that she is a connecting force in the plot, but aren't told the details.
- Donnie's girlfriend's story is also unfinished. A side note: I've seen recently the young actress (Jena Malone) in Jodie Foster's "*The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys*". There she played a rather twisted character from a rather twisted family. I hope that she won't get typecast to innocent looking but dark characters, like Christina Ricci got early on.

Some of the cinematic solutions also reflect the intentions of the director and writer - who is the same person, Richard Kelly - of surprising us. When Donnie walks home the girl we, the camera accompanies them and switches back and forth between showing the couple from the girl's and the boy's side. For the former it is from the girl's eye level, but when from Donnie's we see them (or her) from a lower angle, from around Donnie's stomach. A more traditional, thus expected, way of following two people walking usually

uses eye level for both persons' so we could identify from their vantage point. Here we would need to do a conscious effort to put ourselves into Donnie's shoes.

Just a few more examples of how we are driven to feel uncertainty. The establishing shot of the scene where Donnie shoots at empty bottles - and talks about the smurfs' sex life - is slightly slanted. Nature photographers consider it mistake and say the image 'pours out of the frame'. (The expression comes from those pictures of the sea, where the horizon is not horizontal, like in the aforementioned picture of the film.)

When Donnie's psychiatrist asks him whether he feels alone we get hesitant, slow yes from him as an answer. This kind of monologues and display of inner struggles is usually shown with slowly zooming in from medium shot to close-up. Here there is a very slow zooming in process, but it never ends properly and meanwhile the camera pans tiny bit left and right. The overall feeling is insecurity, which at the same time relates to the question of 'loneliness' - the conversation topic - but doesn't match it exactly.

A social convention/expectation is also broken early on. At the family dinner table - that by the way comes right after the dawn shot of Donnie biking home, thus our sense of time is mixed up - Donnie's sister is more foul-mouth than he is. We would normally expect dirty talk from boys, but she is breaking our stereotypes.

It is ironic that at the Halloween party Donnie 'gets together' with his girlfriend for the music of Joy Division's goth anthem: 'Love will Tear Us Apart'. The title and the lyrics of the song nicely emphasizes that despite that they consume their love (if it can be called love) but it will not make them closer to each other. On the contrary, it is a step towards destruction.

Within the first 7 minutes of the movie we see 3 people reading books. First the mother reads on a lawn chair Stephen King's IT. That's a clear mood setting element for those who are familiar with that horror story. A bit later Donnie is reading a book when his mother enters. We don't know see what he is reading, but it seems to me from the attention he devotes to it that it might be some serious philosophy. When he kicks her mother out she goes to her husband, who is reading a plain hard bound book. It might be a manual or a history book. These people represent different kind of literacy. The mother is enigmatic - and based on her watery eyes and behavior pattern might be an alcoholic - showing interest for the popular culture, Donnie is into thinking, while the father is a pragmatic.

I never really understood why in most movies time travel is shown visually with a going into a tube like tunnel that changes directions and often colors as well. Like we see the trajectories of people here that only Donnie can see. But I just learned for my cultural anthropology final that the state of trance is described very similarly in all human cultures. The reason for this is that we all have the same neurological system that creates the images in this condition. These 'entoptic forms' are getting integrated into 'iconic images' and that's what the director wanted us to see.

The movie also has a religious theme. Donnie is like a Christ/God figure, he

- tells the truth,
- brings back the dead,
- chases the "money-lenders" (the Cunningham character, played Patrick Swayze) out of the "temple" (which the catholic school is in a way)
- plays with the elements - flooding the school with water, burning down houses,

- and gives his life that others may live.

We get an insight into Donnie's quest through his conversation with his therapist. In one of them he says that the "search for God is absurd if everyone dies alone". Then he probes his physics teacher with his inquiry that has an honest, but unexpected answer: "I won't be able to continue this conversation... I could lose my job. "The synthesis comes when Donnie proclaims: "I am God, I can travel in time."

Asynchronous sound is dominant in the movie. For one we rarely see and hear "Frank, the rabbit" at the same time. Another prime example is when we see Donnie walking on street in Cherita's headgear and hear the conversation in psychotherapy session. The most spectacular intercut is accompanied with a slowed down music that has nothing to do with either of the two locations. I am talking about the sequence where the "Sparkle Motion" girls perform a dynamic dance, while Donnie is burning down Cunningham's house. (Spark is a connection between them.) The music sounds like a 45 RPM vinyl playing on 33 speed and we see slow motions on the screen. In the same scene it is a nice visual solution that Cunningham's secret room, where he commits his crimes is behind his self portrait painting. It tells us that the real man is behind the façade.

Here are some connections to movies we've seen during the semester, apologies for not integrating them into properly my essay:

- When Donnie's school is first shown it is a few minutes long long take, similar to Welles' Touch of Evil in the sense that it moves from on location to another smoothly. It must have required just as coordination as Welles' opening sequence.
- The clock on the wall has similar shape and function to the one in Run Lola Run. The spiral staircase is also common element in them. (I've seen Donnie Darko last week then I had to fly to the East Coast. I checked out on purpose the part of my plane's engine/propeller that fall onto Donnie and indeed there was a spiral painted on it. It's not made up!)
- The promotional video of the Cunningham scam is using 4-way split screen similar to Timecode. It also has for a brief time the microphone hanging in from the top which reminded me of Mel Brook's spoofs.
- When Donnie is in the movie theater watching the Halloween special the screen comes alive and part of his life. This is not unlike in Woody Allen's The Purple Rose of Cairo.
- When Donnie talks to the physics teacher about time travel we see Stephen Hawking's book, A Brief History of Time, which is the title of Errol Morris' documentary.
- There are explicit title cards (with dates on them) that were extensively used in silent movies, such as the Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. I also consider the message on the fridge door a kind of title cards, as we get motifs of the story from them.

I am aware that I didn't talk much about issues of time in this movie. I am sure that most of my classmates will do so, thus I didn't want to bore you or myself with it. It is of course fascinating and exciting to decipher the exact logic of what happens when. I am not sure I got all the pieces right, but plan to view the DVD again with the director's comments and that might help.