

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT: Movie Recommendation: ***Donnie Darko: The Director's Cut*** – April 2005

This month I've decided to once again take a look back at a film that many may have missed when it was first released. Like ***Very Bad Things*** (see my March 2005 TFTM column above), the 2001 movie ***Donnie Darko*** was a film which came and went very quickly at multiplexes across the country. However, after gaining a respectable cult following on home video, the movie was re-released briefly to theaters in late 2004 in a 20-minute longer version titled ***Donnie Darko: The Director's Cut***. Having become a big fan of the film after viewing it on the small screen, I was very excited to see a new, extended version in all its theatrical glory.

Donnie Darko is a difficult film to categorize or summarize. The title character (played by Jake Gyllenhaal) is a troubled teenager living in an upper-middle class suburban neighborhood in 1988. Like most young men his age, Donnie has to deal with the many challenges associated with this uncertain time of life, including peer pressure, girls, and parental-son relationships. While this may sound like familiar territory, perhaps calling to mind films from the 1980's about teen angst, isolation and awkward relationships, such as ***The Breakfast Club*** and ***Sixteen Candles***, the film also contains elements that fall squarely outside of the universe presented in those movies. You see, besides dealing with the aforementioned trials and tribulations of everyday life, Donnie experiences prophetic visions of the impending end of the world. And if this weren't enough, he also has dream-like conversations about this very subject with a 6-foot tall rabbit named Frank. For those not familiar with the movie, you read that correctly. He talks to a giant rabbit named Frank.

There are several reasons why I find this movie so compelling. First and foremost is because of the uniqueness and style present in the picture. While it may seem hard to imagine teen angst, giant rabbits, and an end of the world apocalypse fitting seamlessly

together in the same film, these disparate elements do just that in ***Donnie Darko***. For example, in one scene the viewer is treated to a wave of 80's nostalgia with an extended tracking shot that follows many different kids in their daily activities as they move through Donnie's high school. The camera rolls along smoothly with the Tears For Fears song *Head Over Heals*, but at certain points the film motion abruptly changes speeds in one of the many visual stylistic touches interspersed throughout the movie. In another moment we're watching Donnie standing outside on a dreamlike suburban landscape conversing with the very science fiction-looking Frank, who speaks in a deep and ominous voice. Donnie's world of bright, leafy suburban neighborhoods has a dark underside which we see through his eyes as he converses with Frank. The extended version of the film expands on this palpable sense of dread as we're shown shots of a clock counting down to what will supposedly be the end of the world. I was engaged by the familiar story of an adolescent trying to come to terms with the world around him, and I was at the same time intrigued by the unconventional apocalyptic and science-fiction elements present in the film.

A second reason why this film is so effective has to do with lead actor Jake Gyllenhaal, who is good here not only because of his acting abilities, but also due to his unique look, and, in particular, his distinctive eyes. In the more familiar territory, namely scenes of him in class or talking with his peers, his deep, expressive eyes convey the sense of isolation and confusion his character has. Conversely, when we see him sleepwalking and talking to Frank, his intense eyes give him an edge and sense of danger which adds to the already creepy atmosphere. It seems as if Donnie could snap at any moment, in any way. This is manifested towards the end of the film as Donnie commits some destructive acts under the motivation/guidance of Frank.

Another plus for ***Donnie Darko*** is the fact that it doesn't offer up any neat and tidy answers. In fact after seeing it twice now there are many things I still don't understand. For example the movie begins with a cataclysmic event, as a jet engine falls from a plane and crashes through the roof of Donnie's house. This opening definitely connects to the end of the film, but how it relates to the giant rabbit and his apocalyptic prediction is not entirely clear. While it's tempting to say that much of what we see could be manifested by Donnie's warped mind, this answer is questionable at best when one really begins to analyze the movie. And given that American movies often lean towards wrapping up loose ends neatly, this can be a little unsettling.

Additionally I'd like to briefly point out that this film also contains some very comedic scenes. For example Drew Barrymore, who served as an executive producer and played a supporting role as one of Donnie's teachers, provides a funny moment when she recommends that a new student pick a seat next to the cutest boy in class. And Patrick Swayze is also very funny as an over-the-top self-help guru. And finally, more humor is provided by Donnie's little sister when she performs at school with her dance group called Sparkle Motion, accompanied by the Duran Duran song *Notorious*. These are just some of the standout moments in the comedy department.

As noted earlier, this is a very hard movie to categorize or summarize. While my above observations may have spotlighted some (but definitely not all) of the unique elements in the film, they probably don't give an adequate or precise overall picture. That's because the movie is simply too difficult to put into words. In fact when someone asks what ***Donnie Darko*** is about, the best answer might be not to describe the film at all, but to just tell the person to go see it.