Reading of a (film) text: Achievement standard 91491.

“Donnie Darko” directed by

From a post-modern reading: Flattening of Affect.

By Glen Clark.

Donnie Darko, the main character, in Richard Kellys’ 2001 film set in the mid nineteen eighties, on first impression seems a normal teenage boy. He wakes up in the middle of nowhere, in a scene that leads us from the rural outskirts of his typically middle American suburban town as he rides his push bike home and we are introduced to the typical ‘American dream’, in a compression of time scene that serves to give us a glimpse of a family doing suburban things like reading a book, watering the garden…nothing strange here? He is a typical ‘everyman’ appearing teenage boy, his first piece of dialogue, at the dinner table, is an argument with his elder sister, what could be more typical for most teenage siblings? Until it is revealed to us that perhaps all is not well, and Donnie is on medication, in therapy and has stopped taking the drugs…

**Donnie Darko:** *Whoa, Elizabeth! A little hostile there. Maybe you should be the one in therapy. Then Mom and Dad can pay someone $200 an hour to listen to your thoughts so we don’t have to.*

**Elizabeth Darko:** *OK, you want to tell Mom and Dad why you stopped taking your medication?*

This opening dialogue is crucial to the meaning of the film. Richard Kelly conveys the meaning of the film through the flattening of affect on Donnie by the medication he is taking. His moods, the hallucinations and the power of suggestion and his willingness to unremorsefully and unaffectly act upon suggested actions are linked to his mental state made pliable, emotionless, detached, lonely and hopelessness by the medication he is on. Hence he has stopped taking them, but, under pressure from his family, the medication resumes.

As the medication resumes as does the “daylight hallucination” of Frank, the demonic bunny rabbit, who suggests actions for Donnie to carry out.

The actions that Donnie performs, suggested to him via the apparition of Frank, have actually already been suggested to Donnie previously… (Donnie does nothing in the film that hasn’t already been suggested to him), showing Frank is a product of Donnies mind. For example Donnie floods the school after the idea is implanted by the teaching in class by of Grahame Greens “the destructors”. He torches ? house after a conversation with Gretchen on his ‘emotional issues’ about previously accidentally setting fire to an abandoned house (and tells he did time in jail for the action, was held back not being allowed to drive till he is 21), implying that this was when his schizophrenic state may have been diagnosed and thus the beginning of the meds and his ‘emotional issues’. If it was an accident, like he proclaimed, was he wrongly diagnosed as schizonprenic? “…perhaps then people will understand me” he tells Gretchen, telling us he was misunderstood, feels detached and perhaps also wrongly medicated.

The concept of the power of suggestion on an unaffected, medicated mind is seen throughout the film and is therefore crucial to its meaning. When his psychiatrist is performing hypnosis on him, and not achieving the desired result. Donnie, instead, goes on a typical teenage boy tangent of disgusing sex and directing the outcome of the session, portraying the notion that unlike most people who would succumb to the power of suggestion under hypnosis Donnie’s condition reverses the effect and he remains able to direct the conversation in this state. This suggesting he is perhaps in a hypnotised-like pliable state in his ‘normal’ medicated condition, leaving him open to suggestion and ideas from others. In this same scene Donnie reverts to a happy, child-like state… smiling and innocent as opposed to his usual ‘flat’ emotionless and unaffected persona… a persona especially present when interacting with the Frank character. At the beginning of the film Donnie has a passionate argument with his sister who tells us he has stopped taking his medication. He shows an argumentative passion and emotion that flattens and disappears when he goes back on the medication after his mother asks “Where do you go at night?” (implying the first time we see Donnie sleep walking is not the first time it has happened and Frank begins to appear, or perhaps re-appear, and that is why he decided to stop taking them and why he doesn’t seem surprised when we first see Donnie meet him). Rose Darko also asks Donnie in this crucial scene “What happened to my son? I don’t recognize this person today?” Showing that she recognises only the mild, flat, suggestable unaffected and medicated Donnie, not the passionate, angry, opinionated Donnie who argued with his sister on a point he made at dinner.

Donnie feels detached, dislocated, lost and alone… he voices this concern to his therapist in a discussion about God under hypnoses. He doesn’t want to lose Frank as he is a companion. A guide. Under Franks guidance he flooded the school, which in turn led to walking home with Gretchen and making a friend “Im really glad the school was flooded today… because you and I would never have had this conversation”. This suggests that the “fateful” outcome of his actions and perhaps in order for such meetings to occur, he must continue the anarchy suggested to him by Frank… ideas implanted in his maleable, medicated mind, like smurfette was implanted amoung the smurfs… “with the intention of destroying the smurf village”.

 They then have a conversation about a science project and the most important discovery to benefit mankind, which Donnie affirms is antiseptics, especially in medicine. Gretchen then says she was glad the school was flooded otherwise they would not have had the conversation, suggesting perhaps to Donnie the “fateful” outcome of his actions and perhaps in order for such meetings to occur he must continue the anarchy suggested to him by Frank… ideas implanted in his maleable, medicated mind, like smurfette was implanted amoung the smurfs “with the intention of destroying the smurf village”.

Fear and love. Chance/fate. Cherita/sparkle motion. Truth/lies Kitty Farmer/Karen Pomeroy. Rabbit/demon. Alternate universe/primary universe. Innocent/guilty. Alive/dead. Science/religion. Create/destroy Passionate/unaffected. Past/future. Alone/connected. Real/unreal. …. These dualities and other are presented to us throughout the film, the films ambiguous meaning and questions raised are made clearer when considering the affect upon the main character of Medicated/unmedicated. Donnie said it himself, things just are not that simple, they cannot just be lumped into 2 catergories… Perhaps its normal for teens to display feelings of detachment, unaffectness etc… that the true meaning of Donnie Darko is the failure of the system on teenagers… overdiagnosing and relying on quick fixes such as medication to placate otherwise normal teen emotions. An issue that became more and more prevalent in the eighties and reaching ‘epidemic’ proportions as teenagers with ‘issues’ were prescribed medication such as Valium for depression, Ritalin for ADHD etc. to make them compliant and ‘suggestable’ to their parents and teachers and society in general… and thus not your typical teens!

We learn that Frank, the demonic looking bunny, is product of his misdiagnosed medicated mind. Donnie does nothing without it first being suggested to him ie. The power of suggestion on a mind made fragile by drugs is what causes Donnie to have the apparitions of Frank and take the actions he did. We see the power of suggestion most deliberately in the film when his psychiatrist is performing hypnosis on him, and not achieving the desired result. Donnie, instead, goes on a typical teenage boy tangent of disgusing sex and directing the outcome of the session, portraying the notion that unlike most people who would succumb to the power of suggestion under hypnosis Donnie’s condition reverses the effect and he remains able to direct the converstaion in this state. This suggesting he is perhaps in a hypnotised like state in everyday conditions(through medication), leaving him open to suggestion and ideas from others. In this same scene Donnie expresses a happy, child-like state… smiling and innocent as apposed to his usual ‘flat’ emotionless and unaffected persona, a persona especially present when interacting with the Frank character. Note also that I mentioned at the beginning of the film Donnie has a passionate argument with his sister who tells us he has stopped taking his medication. He shows an argumentative passion and emotion that flattens and disappears when he goes back on the medication after an argument with his mother who asks “Where do you go at night?” (implying the first time we see Donnie sleep walking is not the first time it has happened), and Frank begins to appear, or perhaps re-appear, and that is why he decided to stop taking them and why he doesn’t seem surprised when we first see Donnie meet him. Rose Darko also asks Donnie in this crucial introductory scene “What happened to my son? I don’t recognize this person today?” Showing that she knows only the mild, flat, suggestable unaffected and medicated Donnie, not the passionate, angry, opinionated Donnie who argued with his sister on a point he made at dinner in a healt

In a later hypnosis scene Donnie has a philosophical conversation regarding the pros and cons of God, and his debate over his existence and being alone, suggesting Frank is a construct of this debate and a companion created so he is never alone in the dislocating and isolating affects the medication has upon him. The Dr, after a meeting with Donnies parent suggests more hypnotherapy and “upping his medication”.

The allusions to drugs is even included in the politic debates between Bush and Dukakis on the TV in the background.

The actions that Donnie performs are suggested to him via the apparition or “daylight hallucination” of Frank, but are actions already suggested to Donnie previously, Donnie does nothing in the film that hasn’t already been suggested to him, showing Frank is a product of Donnies mind. For example Donnie floods the school after the idea is implanted by the teaching in class of Graheme Greens “the destructors”. He torches ? house after a conversation with Gretchen on his ‘emotional issues’ about accidentally setting fire to an abandoned house and tells he did time in jail for the action, was held back not being allowed to drive till he is 21, perhaps this is when he was wrongly diagnosed as schizonprenic “perhaps then people will understand me”, telling us he was misunderstood, perhaps mis-diagnosed? They then have a conversation about a science project and the most important discovery to benefit mankind, which Donnie affirms is antiseptics, especially in medicine. Gretchen then says she was glad the school was flooded otherwise they would not have had the conversation, suggesting perhaps to Donnie the “fateful” outcome of his actions and perhaps in order for such meetings to occur he must continue the anarchy suggested to him by Frank… ideas implanted in his maleable, medicated mind, like smurfette was implanted amoung the smurfs “with the intention of destroying the smurf village”.

Before we see Frank again Donnie is in the bathroom taking his pills and Samantha overhears him talking, the concept of time travel is implanted in Donnies Mind, put there by the previous ‘fateful’ conversation with Gretchen.

Donnie only begins to see the astral projections, which suggest a path he willingly follows, from his chest and the significance of time travel and “grandma death” AFTER a discussion with? His science teacher.

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This is a typically post-modern film characteristic (as seen in other films such as David inchers “fight club’), where a the meaning of the film is greatly effected by the psychological issues of the main character, the outcomes of drug taking and in turn an emotionly flattened, umremorseful and disassociated character who seems …. About their actions.

Meantion the dangers of overmedicating students and the failing school system..