

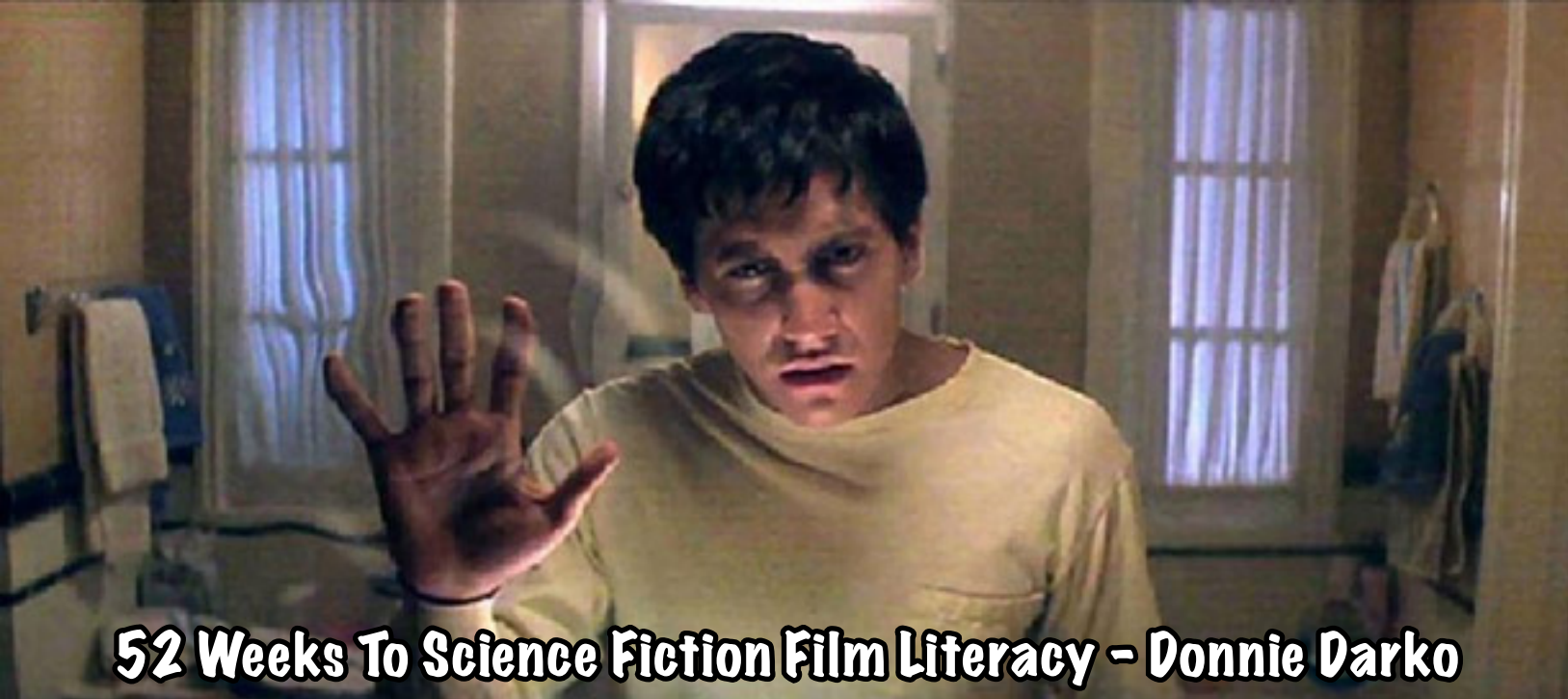
DONNIE DARKO



THE STUPID

DRINK TANK

SUIT



52 Weeks To Science Fiction Film Literacy - Donnie Darko

This is going to be one of those essays that claims to be a critique of a movie, but really, it's just me writing about my life and how it tangentially touches on the topic and concept of a movie.

In other words, this is just another example of my colossal ego at play in the pages of The Drink Tank!

I was a kid in the 1980s. I started out at 5 in 1980. In 1989, I was 15. That's a great spread, covering almost all of my actual growing up. I covered from Kindergarten through my first semester in High School. In 1988, I was in Junior High, had my first experiences with certain substances, my first actual girlfriend, new experiences of various types, and it was one of my happiest years, even if it was the year that my Dad was hit by a car, nearly died. It was a time of hope, in a way, and it was the year that George Bush was elected. That made me happy. Hell, if ANYONE ran against Dukakis, I'd be happy to see anyone win!

And so, the first words out of Elizabeth's mouth, "I'm voting for Dukakis." made me laugh hard the first time I saw it.

The 80s were a time that glows in my memory, like I imagine Yankee Stadium does to those heathens who worship the pinstriped bastards. It was amazing, it the the Golden Time. I felt a number of things for the first time: romantic love, true anger, self-assurance, real fear. It was all in the 1980s. It was the era of Reagan, which meant something to me and it very much influenced the way I saw the world politically. It was the decade that science fiction broke big in the mainstream movies, that we became a fast food nation, that we still had the Russians to kick around, when music was finally perfected.

And so, Donnie Darko, a film that drips 1980s, had a great sway over me from the get-go.

Let's talk about the opening. Donnie Darko is sleeping, then he starts sleep-walking, heading out to the golf course where he meets a Giant Rabbit. He tells him that the world's going to end at the end of the month. He ends up waking up on the gold course, and Jim Cunningham and his golf partner come across him and send him on his way. Cunningham, by the way, is played by the greatest living actor, at the time, His Lordship Patrick Swayze. That leads to Donnie riding his bike home to the dulcet tones of Echo & The Bunnymen's The Killing Moon. It sets the tone for the entire film so brilliantly. It tells you everything: Donnie has problems, Donnie sleepwalks, Donnie rides a bike, and most importantly, it's the 80s. And it's not the Michael Jackson, Madonna 1980s, it's the 120 Minutes 1980s. The music of Donnie's ride basically tells us everything we need to know about Donnie Darko the kid. He's not one of the popular kids, he's one of the kids who would be smoking out by the tennis courts, scrawling various band logos on their notebooks. This also features the science fiction element. I mean, you know it's not going to be mainstream family drama.

Which is funny, because in a way, that's exactly what it is.

This is the best example of what SF can do when it takes place within a realistic world. There's some SF content, all of it through actions taken by Donnie. That is part of what's so interesting about Donnie Darko; it's divided into a real world and a world that is not. That is what is so great about this film: it was exactly like the



1980s.

There were two sides to the decade, like most. The first side was the prosperous era of excess and joy. The other side was the fact that we found ourselves faced with serious public science for the first time. The ozone hole, space shuttle, serious discussion of ocean science and on and on and on. These things we're popping up, along with *A Brief History of Time*, which is a part of *Donnie Darko*, which is awesome.

The story of *Donnie Darko* goes like this: when Donnie gets home from the golf course, his room has been crushed by a jet engine. Donnie keeps seeing the Rabbit, and he meets a girl who is nearly as troubled as he is, though in far different ways. The Rabbit starts to tell Donnie to do things, like vandalize his school and burn down Jim Cunningham's house down. Each of these has a specific effect. He also discovers a book about time travel by Roberta Sparrow, a former teacher at his school. This leads Donnie to begin to investigate Frank, the name of the Rabbit, and the theory of Time Travel. As things happen around him, it becomes apparent that there's something happening that Donnie has a role in and he can fix everything himself.

That's barely anything about the movie though, and weirdly, everything is connected, everything is a clue to a mystery that isn't really there, everything points to Donnie having to make a sacrifice. Ultimately, the question isn't what's going on, it's what will Donnie realise.

Let's discuss the world that writer/director Richard Kelly created in *Donnie Darko*. Donnie's family features Elizabeth, his older sister, who is played by star Jake Gyllenhaal's older sister Maggie. She's basically there as a little bit of a foil for Donnie, and they have a fight at the kitchen table that is so wonderful. It shows that they have the typical relationship that a pair of siblings who have issues will have. It's a great scene, draws you into the family deeply and solidly. Donnie's also got a younger sister who is a part of a dance troop called Sparkle Motion. They're a Top-notch troop who has managed to score a spot on *Star Search*. There's Donnie's dad, who is the most typical American Dad you could imagine. His Mom is played by the brilliant Mary McDonnell. She's so great in the role, especially when she's trying to feel out Donnie for what he's been up to on his sleep-walking. She shows that she doesn't believe that he doesn't know what he's doing, and she also way out of touch.

Donnie's girlfriend, Gretchen, is played by Jena Malone. I love her, she's wonderful, and here she plays damaged so very well. She plays hard to get at first, and then when things get real, she lets loose beautifully. Her role is really impressive, and I think as far as acting goes, she's right up there with McDonnell for having a perfect take on her character. Her father stabbed her mother, and thus they moved on, though her identity and past is widely known. She plays the role without the obvious surface damage that so many other actresses would have approached it with.

And then there's Swayze. This is spoiler-ish, so if you haven't seen it, you're wasting your life! OK, he's the kind of character the 1980s were full of. He's influenced by a few decades of pseudo-psychology publishing and has come up with a concept that everything falls in between the two extremes: Fear and Love. He's a motivational speaker who has a HUGE sway over the town. It also turns out that he has a kiddie porn dungeon under his house that



gets revealed when Donnie burns it down. This is important, this means something with the ending.

Drew Barrymore was important in getting the movie made, and Noah Wyle is in it as her boyfriend, and the both of them are teachers at Donnie's school. They're both just kinda there, but they both move the plot forward by exposing Donnie to facts that end up playing in the choices that Donnie

makes.

And finally, there's Frank. He's the bunny rabbit and he speaks strangely, as if he's old-timey. He is the speaker of the truth from beyond Death. He's dead, we know that, and we discover the reasons behind it as the film goes on. There's a great scene where Donnie and Gretchen are at the movies, Gretchen falls asleep, and Frank appears. There's this transformation that Donnie goes through when he goes from regular Donnie to the Donnie who talks with Frank. It's AMAZING how thoroughly he does it. His entire body changes, his face, his eyes, MY GHOD HIS EYES!, all become distant and weird. He's a helluva actor, and here he's at his best.

Looking at the music, there's brilliant use of music to set the tone and themes of the film. Perhaps the best combination of music and cinematography happens kinda early in the film, when Donnie goes off to school in the school bus. The shot starts off on its side, looking at the back of the bus, then the camera turns as the guys, including Donnie, jump out. This is all done to the song "Time Flies" by Tears for Fears. It's the perfect song to set it up, and we get a great, semi-tracking montage through the school. We even see Sparkle Motion dancing to the song. This two minute segment by itself would be enough to set the entire scene. It's this sort of attention that makes the film work so well. You're never far away from being dropped deeper into the world of 1988 via music or an image or a phrase. There's a Halloween party, and at this party one of the kids is dressed like Hulk Hogan. This was THE costume of 1987 and 1988. I can remember a dozen kids dressing as him while I was at Buchser Middle School. I never did, I was always more of a Ric Flair guy, but it was the perfect nod.

What Donnie Darko does is so thoroughly brilliant that it brings so much of my childhood. It has the feeling of 1980 not only in look and music and attitude, but in every character's eyes. Look at films from the 1910s, then look at the eyes of people in the 1980s. They're different. It's nothing you can quantify, there's no measurement, nothing that you can point to, other than the fact that they look different, variant. I can never explain it, I've tried, but when I watch movies made today that are supposed to be from older times, I can always tell because of the eyes.

Every character in Donnie Darko has 1980s eyes. Everyone except for alternate Donnie. He's so totally in a time that is just so foreign to our world.

The thing that got me so heavily was the relationship between Donnie and Gretchen. I've been in relationships like that, where you're both broken, you're both so deeply wounded and you're looking for someone who isn't broken, but you know that the only people you're really ready for, or attracted to, are also broken.

Or maybe, just maybe, we're all broken. Gretchen is broken, in her way, which is the result of the environ-

ment she was brought up in. Donnie is unbalanced, on meds, in therapy. They weren't made for each other, but they are perfect for each other. There's a moment, when the two of them are at a party, where it was exactly like a moment I shared with my High School girlfriend. It was sweet, but it was also dark, heavy. I remember the first time I saw it and I started thinking about those moments of my life where I was Donnie and she, whoever she might have been at the moment, was Gretchen. We both had needs, and we didn't fulfill them, we merely put ourselves in a space where it didn't matter than we had them. That sort of moment is the most magical. When the pain of everything else is gone, not because anything is solved, but because you've found the thing that makes you forget. Sometimes, forgetting is way more important than actually dealing with it.

Dealing with anything.

Donnie Darko has a great score, an amazing soundtrack, a wonderful sense of cinema and perhaps the finest acting of any of the 52 films I'm looking at. That's a tall order, but it is a testament to the ways that science fiction films have changed. There have always been intelligent, well-written SF films, but few, if any, have gone the distances that Donnie Darko has gone. The acting here is so impressive. The way that Mary McDonnell and Jake interact is amazing, and so real. There were dozens of tense, unnatural and just plain angry conversations between me and my Mom like that. Jena Malone plays her role so wisely, reminding me of the work of Bette Davis in that she seems she could go either way, into despair (or fear) or over-whelming joy (or love). Jake has to play at poles, and does it well.

And then there's The Swayz.

We lost Our Greatest Living Actor when Patrick Swayze passed away. He had charisma, and even if he wasn't an emoter, he was amazingly real. Watch Roadhouse. It's the kind of movie that you should watch at least once. It's sexy, it's kinda dumb, but it's so real. Swayze is alive and he shows it. Here, in the role of Jim Cunningham, he can play himself, a charismatic man of middle years, whose job it is to make people think things. His videos, which we see clips of, is so totally 1980s self-help. He's perfect, and when it's all over, when Donnie has fixed the world, we get to see Jim crying, realising exactly what he is. His Kiddie Porn Dungeon, in the post-Donnie timeline, has never been discovered.

Now, let's talk about the ending, and this is such a significant part of the film. Frank swerves to avoid hitting Roberta Sparrow, and runs over Gretchen. The driver of the car was Frank. Donnie shoots him in the eye, kills him. Donnie carries Gretchen with him and realises that this is the moment that Frank has been warning him about, and he sees a time paradox open up, allowing the engine of the plane that his Mom and sister are on to fall onto the house. Donnie realises that the only way to solve everything is to get back into his bed and allow himself to die by being there when the engine falls through the roof.

He sacrifices himself for Gretchen, for Frank, and for himself. He's ended his life...

Or has he?



The concept of time in Donnie Darko is strange, wild, untamed. The smooth warp in space-time is shown and it makes sense. It's so strange that as they talk about time travel and deep science thinking, the entire time what I was feeling was them talking about life, and especially, about death. Space-Time is the only eternal thing. It was created with the Big Bang, and it will likely go on until either the Big Crunch or The Big Rip or Heat Death, or whatever. They're talking about the simple vagueries of time travel, but I couldn't help thinking, the entire time, 'What Donnie wants to know is What Else is There?' That's the entire basis for all religion, all philosophy. Donnie wants answers, and he's looking for them in the writings of Roberta Sparrow and Stephen Hawking, and in his discussions with his English teacher. What's funny is that he discovers that everything that happens around him, from simple quotes scrawled on the blackboard to the statues at his school, everything ties together. It gives him the greatest answer he could ever ask for: there is a direction, and the messages all point you to what you should do, who you should be.

And sadly, in Donnie's world, it all leads him towards death.

Donnie Darko is a beautiful film. It's the kind of debut feature film you'd expect from a genius. Richard Kelly has never come close to recapturing that magic. Southland Tales, starring the Rock among others, was good, but not at all what he accomplished with Donnie Darko. The Box was OK, too. There's hope still that he'll revive and give us something awesome!

I have an emotional attachment to Donnie Darko that I feel that I haven't explained yet. It's the kind of attachment that you seldom admit. I watched it the first time on DVD. I watched it and I thought about it. I didn't quite follow it, it was like 2 am when it was done, but I knew that it made me feel something. Jealousy. I had never had a thought this original, and combined it with anything so traditional. This was both universal and wildly strange, weird. It was the kind of thing that Urban Fantasy tries to capture at times.

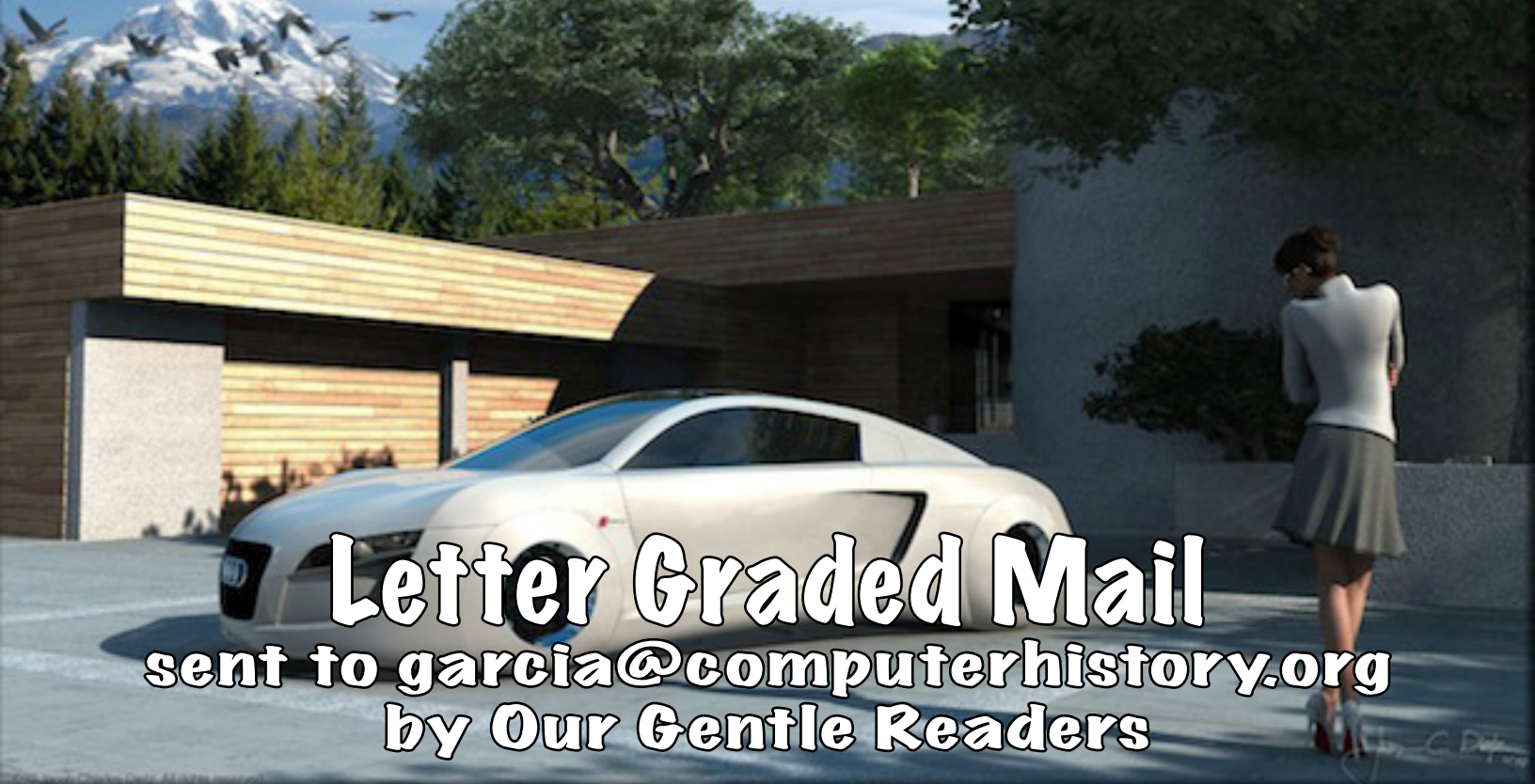
So I started writing.

You have to understand that I had completely given up on writing at that time. I was 5 years out of school, had yet to start writing stories (I did briefly try to write serious SF, and I am SO glad I stopped) so I started writing a script. Immediately after the movie finished. I went up-stairs and I started typing on my machine. It was a script about a guy who wanted, more than anything, to discover God, and he knew that there was only one way to do it: physics. It was sorta Pi meets The Last Action Hero. It was weird.

And it was terrible.

The best art makes you want to become an artist. And Donnie Darko made me want to write a script. That says something.





Letter Graded Mail sent to garcia@computerhistory.org by Our Gentle Readers

For starters... ERIC MAYER!

Chris,

Just a quick note. Time grows short. As you may have heard, possibly, if you really follow the news very, very closely Frankenstorm will arrive soon and we are all going to die. However I did read the latest Drink Tank, so that's one more goal I accomplished even if never did manage to take a commercial space flight or write a bestseller.

Hope y'all pulled through the storm! COmmercial Spaceflight's still an option!

Fascinating essay on the Matrix. I don't know enough about films to have the perspective you do. I am older than you, though so I recall growing up in the fifties and dreaming about sf and horror movies that actually looked real. As far as I was concerned, as a kid, even the movies with the best effects available in that era were disappointingly fake looking. To us real looking monsters and such were the Holy Grail of movies. In fact, I recall the Ray Harryhausen films like The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad to be the most satisfying so far as allowing us to pretend what we were seeing was real.

I remember laughing at the Harryhausen skeletons when I was a kid. I guess I was jsut jaded at a young age!

I'm not sure exactly where movie effects were when you first encountered them. But I expect you grew up taking for granted much better effects than I did. I often wish my friends and I could have gone into a theater back around 1959 and been hot over our heads by Star Wars or the Matrix. Would we have survived?

As it was realistic effects kind of crept up gradually, although I did find Star Wars spectacular when I first saw it. Why Star Wars more than 2001 A Space Odyssey I can't say since in some ways the effects are more realistic in the latter.

2001 basically changed everything by being so realistic, but if he had made it today, how many things would he have done differently? My guess, he'd have used Space-X!

Regarding your Matrix essay though, I wished you'd given your thoughts on Hugo Weaving's Agent Smith. I found that character extremely creepy, although I'm not sure why.

Best,

Eric

You are right, Hugo Weavign was awesome! He's a great actor. He delivered lines like "How can you make a phone with no mouth" with awesome spite. Physically, he's a genius of an actor (see V for Vendetta!).