

Overcoming the Suburban Nightmare in *Donnie Darko*

In an upper-middle class suburban home, watching football with his dad and some family friends, Donnie Darko's eyelids fall, and then open again, as Donnie fights off his sleepiness and boredom. He sees his younger sister skip through the room, past the TV, and he closes his eyes again. The game keeps playing and Donnie forces himself to look over to his father. His father's chest begins to protrude, as a viscous clear liquid pushes out of him. Donnie watches as this liquid extends into an undulating tube, moving out, then up, then out again. Donnie's father stands up and begins walking, the center of his chest perfectly tracing the path created by this new substance. No one else reacts, as their family friends continue to discuss the game, oblivious to the strange phenomenon happening before Donnie.

His father walks to the fridge, grabs a beer, and makes his way back to his seat, the strange, anonymous fluid outlining his path the entire time. After he sits back down, Donnie's sister skips through the room again, this time a path similar to their father's guiding her as well. Not long after, the very same form begins to push out of Donnie's chest, and Donnie looks down, but lets out nothing more than a giggle. He stares at the form, smiling, while it leaves his body, moving out towards the TV. Seeing that Donnie hasn't risen from his chair yet, the form morphs into a hand at the end and turns to Donnie, the index finger curling, beckoning Donnie to it. It then continues on its way out of the room.

Donnie follows the path past the TV and up the stairs in the entryway, while an ominous piano and strings score his silent descent upwards. The path goes up into Donnie's parent's bedroom, and towards their closet. Still smiling, Donnie opens the closet door and bends down, in time with the path before him. He opens a shoe box and unwraps a blanket inside, revealing a handgun hidden inside. While inspecting the new gun, Donnie's smile fades.

This scene sits in the middle of *Donnie Darko*, a film by Richard Kelly, released in 2001. *Donnie Darko*, set in a wealthy suburb in October of 1988, follows the title character, Donnie, through the weeks leading up to Halloween, a day which Donnie's imaginary friend, Frank, claims the world will end on. Donnie commits several acts of vandalism over the course of the film, including flooding his school, and burning down the house of a local celebrity, all guided by Frank, Donnie's aforementioned imaginary friend, but he also makes other strange decisions, including following the strange path that sometimes leads him without questioning it. Ultimately, why Donnie does what he does leads the whole film. While the literal events of the film do make sense, the audience often struggles to find the reasoning behind them. Frank's direction pushes Donnie towards very clear actions, despite unclear motivations, but the path paves the way for more confusing actions, often guiding Donnie to places with no clear significance, such as when it showed Donnie his parents' handgun. In order to find the purpose behind Donnie, one needs to take a careful look at both the film's predecessors and the film itself, a process that reveals a deeply wound meta-analysis of the film's own genre.

As with many complicated works of art, beginning by looking at the work's contemporaries can help to reveal the themes of the film, and *Donnie Darko*'s roots in slasher horror films can do just that. The term "slasher" generally refers to a subgenre of horror from the 1980s with very distinct elements, including high violence, a suburban or rural setting, and, in later films, supernatural elements. Glennis Byron, in his article "Slasher Movies," writes about the history of slasher films, giving an overview of the genre, describing the conventions and development of the style. He begins by mentioning some of the early precursors to the slasher film from the 1960s and '70s, and then moving into the early slasher movies, beginning with John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) (Byron). One can easily see the homage to *Halloween* in

Donnie Darko, because the film takes place in an '80s suburban setting in the weeks leading up to halloween, so the film clearly points to John Carpenter's classic as an inspiration. Towards the end of the article though, Byron begins to describe the "postmodern" development of slasher films: "The postmodern slasher also moved away from the world of fantasy or the supernatural, and the focus is less on the killer than on the group of young teenagers who, working together, to a great degree take over the functions of the 'final girl'," (Byron). If, as Byron claims, postmodern slasher films in the 1990s and 2000s returned to a more grounded world and characters, it would logically make sense that other movies chose to explore the supernatural elements further, leaving a grounded world behind. While Byron focuses on the abandonment of supernatural elements, *Donnie Darko*, released during this shift, can represent this alternate offshoot of the subgenre, leaving almost all the violence off-screen in favor of a time-travelling epic with slasher elements. While creating clear connections between *Donnie Darko* and earlier slasher films might prove difficult, the idea of a suburban horror clearly connects the film to its contemporaries, and the suburban world in the film can help clarify the motivations behind Donnie's actions.

One should also examine how the themes of slasher films evolved along with elements, to see how the genre thematically built up to *Donne Darko*. James Kendrick's "Razors in the Dreamscape: Revisiting 'A Nightmare on Elm Street' and the Slasher Film" explores the concept of a slasher horror film by analyzing its individual components using specific films for reference. Among the many components explored, he mentions topics, such as gender in slasher films, location, the role of the slasher monster, and, especially, the ultimate morals and themes of slasher films. Kendrick makes the claim that, at their most basic level, slasher films warn against the danger of the unknown, especially towards young women, usually by having characters

literally leave their home and into unknown territory, but more complex films, like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), show that “respectable member of the upper class . . . are just as capable of the most vicious and depraved sorts of violence” (Kendrick).

A Nightmare on Elm Street can represent the later evolutions of the genre, as filmmakers grew more complex and aware of the effects of the genre. Because of the primarily suburban setting, slasher films often feature predominantly white characters in mostly affluent areas. In simplicity, this can often create the feeling that white people live at risk in the suburbs, a very intentional move to engross a suburban audience that would pay to see the films. As the genre grew more popular, the effect lacked a certain tact, often ignoring the ultimate reality that suburbs initially came about as safe communities almost exclusively for white people, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* tackles this idea by reminding its audience that, in society, white people often act as the aggressors who create violence and terror.

Before we can fully apply this idea to *Donnie Darko* however, we lastly must understand the suburban setting *Donnie Darko* chose. Jessica Mayhew, in her essay “Pantomimes of Death within Suburbia: Abject Boredom in Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*, Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, and Bowen’s ‘Attractive Modern Homes,’” explores the concept of suburbia and why media seems to obsess over the abject, depraved underbelly of the concept. She particularly looks at a handful of examples, ultimately focusing on the boredom that comes from suburbia and how people react to it. She writes that “in these texts and film, boredom becomes radicalized resulting in abjection. But for this to happen, the stasis of civilized monotony must first be broken” (Mayhew), demonstrating that the boredom people feel in suburbia leads to the strong depravity seen in the media she explores. She first points to how these texts establish suburbia as a sterilized, clean state; a world without issue, where, as she writes, “The floorboards are straight, the doors close

without scraping, and their imagined future children would be able to run about without getting splinters” (Mayhew), but this simplicity also creates a sense of emptiness, which reminds some of the inevitability of death, resulting in the abjectness she explores in her essay, because the characters in the texts feel the need to find problems to, in effect, remain busy (Mayhew). This relates heavily to *Donnie Darko*, where Donnie grows up in the exact sterile environment Mayhew describes, and ultimately turns to the same abjectness.

Mayhew’s idea relies heavily on abstract ideas such as emptiness and boredom, so looking at season 11, episode 5 of *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, “Mac & Dennis Move to the Suburbs,” can help to tangibly show how the suburbs can impact people in the ways Mayhew describes. In the episode, Mac and Dennis, two of the main characters, do exactly as the title suggests, and the episode explores the gradual destruction of the characters’ psyches, caused by living in American suburbia. The two characters begin loving their life in their home on the cul de sac, but over time they both begin to grow more and more violently angry, as Dennis cannot stand his commute into the city and small talk with his neighbor, and Mac, stuck at home, has to face an intense feeling of stir craziness. The innocuous suburbs nearly drive Dennis to an explosive episode against their neighbor and Mac winds up starving the dog they get out of pure disinterest. The episode culminates in a screaming match between the two caused by the recipe for “Mac’s famous Mac and Cheese”. The ultimate violence the two characters fall into mirrors Donnie’s experience in *Donnie Darko*, where a bland suburban life gives the teenager no real outlet to express himself, as the suburban adults around him fail to understand his struggles. Looking at Mac and Dennis from *It’s Always Sunny* helps to explain Donnie, but allowing suburban life to excuse Donnie’s behavior does a great disservice to the many people in the suburbs who do not resort to Donnie’s level of destruction, so we need to think about suburbia as

a factor in Donnie's character but also explore how we can critique both Donnie's actions and how the mindset behind them.

Having looked at the elements influencing the film, we can finally look at the film itself and understand Donnie's motivations and how the film reckons with Donnie's actions. The above analysis mostly looks at Donnie's actions directed by Frank, but forgetting to look at the other source of direction, the strange paths, would ignore a key element to understanding the film. Donnie commits several acts of vandalism against people that range from questionable to terrible, and the film at first seems supportive of Donnie, highlighting his targets' depravity to justify Donnie's actions, but, at the end, Donnie begins following a strange path that shows his future. The strange paths fascinate Donnie just as much as they do the audience, and Donnie spends a great deal of time trying to find out their purpose. At one point, in a conversation with his science teacher, Donnie posits that if you could see your future in the way these paths show you, the knowledge of your future would count as a form of time travel. His teacher counters him by pointing out that if you could see your future, you could choose to disobey it, thereby eliminating any predetermination the paths would suggest, but works around this paradox by telling his teacher, "not if you travel within God's channel" (*Donnie Darko*). While the film never attempts to apply this logic in its world, Donnie's argument can help us identify what the paths represent: God's plan.

If we look at these paths the same way Donnie does and treat them as God's Will, or as Donnie says, "God's channel", we can look at the path's guidance as what God wants for Donnie. So, what do the paths make him do, then? Well, the paths begin fairly mundane, but by the end, they guide Donnie to a string of events that wind up reverting Donnie back in time, killing him before Frank can influence him, undoing all of the actions Frank made Donnie do.

This detail recontextualizes the end of the film as a story about God condemning both Frank and Donnie's actions, and if we treat the divine word as the most important voice in the film (as Donnie does), then we see how the film claims that Donnie's acts of violence as an upper-middle class child are equally unacceptable and incorrect responses to the societal issues that Donnie tries to confront. Mayhew's analysis can help to explain why Donnie acts as he does, but alongside Mayhew's analysis, one also needs to consider whether or not to actually justify Donnie's actions.

Returning to Mayhew's essay can help us break down Donnie's decisions. Mayhew explores the idea that the sterility of the suburbs acts as a constant reminder of the inevitability of death, but she also looks at how rebelling against the suburbs can fight off the boredom and, thus, death as well: "This suggests a knowingness of the artificiality of suburbia, which appears to keep reality, and thus the abjection-inducing nausea of death, at bay" (Mayhew), suggesting that Donnie acted as he did in an effort to fight off his fear of death. For reference, the first thing Frank makes Donnie do in the film is leave his home in the middle of the night to avoid getting crushed by a jet engine that falls off a plane onto his room (*Donnie Darko*), showing us Frank's initial motivation: preventing Donnie from dying. By the end, though, God guides Donnie back in time and allows him to get killed by the engine, and Donnie appears content with his decision as he lays in his bed smiling in his final moments (*Donnie Darko*). If Frank embodies Donnie's fear of death, his actions make perfect sense in the context of Mayhew's analysis, and Donnie's death shows his acceptance of death and his evolution past the kid that lashed out at society around him in order to cope with his fears.

God and, in turn, the film criticize Donnie's violence, creating a clear parallel to what Kendrick described earlier with *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. That connection can help to put

Donnie Darko in a broader context because it moves the film from a critique of Donnie to a critique of other similar films. When *Elm Street* criticized its main characters for resorting to violence, it also criticized other slasher films for justifying violence perpetrated by their wealthy white protagonists as “self-defense”, even though, as we already explored, such a demographic rarely faces this kind of violence in reality. Donnie, as a “respectable member of the upper class”, as Kendrick describes, perfectly fits the mold of a slasher protagonist. Only Donnie doesn’t fight against a villain out to harm him, he lashes out against society, a more literal interpretation of the slasher format. If you look at slasher villains similar to other monsters, they could personify societal issues and fears, so *Donnie Darko* simply makes them abstract again, showing, in a similar way to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, how we cannot justify such violence on the basis of “self-defense”.

Looking at Kendrick’s analysis helps to bring *Donnie Darko* into a broader context, but expanding the critique of Donnie’s actions to other films can make its message against Donnie’s mindset even more clear. This essay has not yet discussed this, but *Donnie Darko* bears the most similarities to a small, yet very prevalent sub-section of films, that include movies like *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Joker* (2019). These films, among others, all feature white men with mental health problems who see problems in society and resort to violence in order to “solve” these issues. Many people feel that these movies often fail to adequately criticize their main characters’ actions, tacitly justifying violence against others as a valid form of expression. *Donnie Darko*’s criticism of Donnie’s actions do an excellent job of critiquing not just Donnie, but all film characters similar to Donnie, in the same way *A Nightmare on Elm Street* criticized other slashers. By making Donnie a high schooler in a suburban setting, the film can simultaneously evoke the connotations of the suburbs and slasher films, but also highlight the

ridiculousness of Donnie's actions. In a film like *Taxi Driver*, the clear depravity the main character encounters can, to some people, justify his actions, portraying the main character as a kind of protector or anti-hero, like how Donnie sees himself, but by boiling down his actions to their most bare components in *Donnie Darko*, nuance gets removed and the film can properly demonstrate the absurdity of the events.

The criticism *Donnie Darko* levels against its character applies well even in the modern day. As discussed, the film's criticism can easily apply to *Joker*, which features a similar situation, and *Joker* came out almost twenty years after *Donnie Darko*. Not only did *Joker* come out recently, but it also took the spot as the highest grossing R-rated film of all time, and holds that title at the time of writing this essay. *Joker* demonstrates how people, even today, often rally behind this white-man-rebels-against-society genre, even though it often attempts to justify the violence featured in the films. Because of this, looking at how *Donnie Darko* criticizes Donnie can help to keep us grounded and avoid engaging in the cathartic violence other similar films offer.

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