

DONNIE DARKO



A FILM BY RICHARD KELLY

**DONNIE DARKO**









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## CAST

**Jake Gyllenhaal** Donnie Darko

**Holmes Osborne** Eddie Darko

**Maggie Gyllenhaal** Elizabeth Darko

**Daveigh Chase** Samantha Darko

**Mary McDonnell** Rose Darko

**James Duval** Frank

**Arthur Taxier** Dr. Fisher

**Patrick Swayze** Jim Cunningham

**Mark Hoffman** Police Officer

**David St. James** Bob Garland

**Beth Grant** Kitty Farmer

**Seth Rogen** Ricky Danforth

**Drew Barrymore** Karen Pomeroy

**Kristina Malota** Susie Bates

## CREW

Written and Directed by **Richard Kelly**

Produced by **Sean McKittrick, Nancy Juvonen and Adam Fields**

Executive Producers **Drew Barrymore, Hunt Lowry, Casey La Scala,**

**William Tyler, Chris J. Ball and Aaron Ryder**

Line Producer **Thomas Hayslip**

Edited by **Sam Bauer and Eric Strand**

Director of Photography **Steven Poster, ASC**

Music by **Michael Andrews**

Production Designer **Alec Hammond**

Costume Designer **April Ferry**



# FOREWORD

By Jake Gyllenhaal

*This foreword was originally published in The Donnie Darko Book in 2003. Reprinted with permission.*

What is *Donnie Darko* about? I have no idea, at least not a conscious one. But somehow I've always understood it. The most amazing thing about making this movie, for me, was the fact that no one – including the man from whose mind it emerged – ever had a simple answer to this question. And that, ironically, is the very thing the film is actually about. There is no single answer to any question. Every person's explanation differs according to how they were brought up, where they were brought up, who brought them up. This seems like a very simple answer to a perplexingly complex movie, but when you think about it, it gets to the very crux of what we all seem to take for granted: our own minds, how they differ, and that we are entitled to our own interpretation.

The struggle begins when, at a certain age, a kid starts to experience the effects of his childhood and the possibility that his upbringing was flawed. It's hard to accept the idea that there is no ideal. Nothing is perfect. The hardest part, though, is when he or she begins the search for his or her own idea of what is right. It's scary to search. You never know what resistance you might meet.

America is a culture that prides itself on supporting this kind of inquiry but, in fact, it often inhibits self-expression. Too often we are encouraged to be passive, not to challenge our leadership, not to inquire too far. And popular culture reflects this passive relationship. Kids know when it's Britney Spears's birthday, but they probably couldn't tell you the name of America's Vice President. Not to diss Britney Spears: I think she's hot. I bought her last record. And not to diss Dick Cheney either: he's provided a lot more drama than some of our leading screenwriters. But who's to blame?

None of this is our fault. We are a product of our culture. But we can't be afraid to speak our minds. And it is this that makes *Donnie Darko* so cool. Richard Kelly used the backdrop of the '80s, a mainstream style of filmmaking (his hero is Spielberg – who rocks, by the way) against itself, to be subversive. To give us something different from what we're used to. In the words of Donnie himself, 'to change things'.

Call it cult. Call it genius. Call it what you will, but the fact that Richard has chosen not to spoonfeed his audience a simple conclusion to the film requires his audience to participate in the process of figuring it out with him.

There aren't a whole lot of people doing this.

When we were working, I would beg and plead with Richard to find one through-line and understandable conclusion. He never would. Some could argue this was detrimental to the film. And it might be to any other film. And there are those who would say that it was to this one. But I wish those people could spend a day with me sometime. So they could sit at a meal, or walk down the street when a total stranger walks up and starts a philosophical discussion about what *Donnie Darko* is about. It makes my day every time. Because every time, I answer, 'I have no idea, what does it mean to you?'





# DONNIE DARKO, ADOLESCENCE AND THE LOST ART OF REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

by Nathan Rabin

An often overlooked but secretly essential part of growing up involves forgetting. We forget the exquisite torture of being an adolescent in a culture that simultaneously worships and abuses youth because our brains stop remembering that information after a certain point. But we also forget because society simply could not function if we carried the pain of being a teenager with us throughout our lives, if we continually replayed every zit, every romantic rejection, every angry parental glare. We are all scarred by our childhoods, but if we're lucky those scars eventually heal.

We forget because we must. But we also revere those rare artists who remember what it felt like to be young and tortured and insane with hormones and ambitions and anger and angst, and are able to transform those messy emotions into art that helps us remember. We worship people like Kurt Cobain and James Dean whose art painfully and poetically articulates what it means to be young. It does not seem coincidental that these golden gods had the decency to die not long after their own adolescence had passed. They did not die children, necessarily, but they never quite got corrupted by adulthood either.

The cracked genius of *Donnie Darko* (2001) is that it was made by a man who, like Cobain and Dean and J.D. Salinger before him, truly remembers what it's like to be young. More importantly, it was made by a man able to transform the melodrama and madness of angelic, demonic teenhood into gloriously inclusive pop art.

So perhaps it should not be surprising that *Donnie Darko's* writer-director, Richard Kelly, was himself only in his mid-twenties when he made the film his directorial debut. Kelly was around the same age Cobain and Dean were when they did their best work and died instantly iconic deaths, deaths whose aftershocks can still be felt throughout our culture.

*Donnie Darko* is a quintessentially young film by a young filmmaker about young people that captures adolescence in all its feverish intensity and bewildering confusion. It's overflowing with ideas and energy and an offhanded purity in the way the best debuts are. Like a true pop-culture devotee, Kelly has synthesised influences from across the spectrum, from literary science-fiction to John Hughes teen dramas, into something that feels wholly new despite being deeply rooted in the art and trash Kelly loves. The safe distance that habitually characterises films about young people – that impossible gulf between how adolescence truly is and how an adult fuzzily, half-heartedly remembers it – is absent, replaced by the screaming urgency of youth as it is lived in the present tense.





Kelly is able to capture the emotional authenticity of youth by deviating constantly from anything resembling reality. The result is a pop-culture-damaged daydream, half-fantasy, half-nightmare, a movie equally informed by MTV and David Lynch, the weird, sad and wonderful suburbia of Steven Spielberg and the trippy mind-fucks of Philip K. Dick.

The film's triumphs begin with its protagonist, played with sour charisma in a star-making performance by Jake Gyllenhaal. Like just about everyone who stars in movies, Gyllenhaal is preposterously, impossibly beautiful but Gyllenhaal's simultaneously internal and physical performance continually undercuts his physical perfection.

As Donnie Darko, juvenile delinquent, seer of mystic visions and unlikely suburban martyr, Gyllenhaal slouches. He's hunched over. His androgynously gorgeous features are continually scrunched up into an expression that is both vaguely feral and oddly simian. Just by looking at him, we can tell that there's something deeply wrong with him that can probably never be fixed. He seems to lurch about in a Thorazine haze, taking the world in through a thick wall of depression and mental illness. He's unhinged, but he is not unkind, and he alternates between tenderness and revulsion, empathy and incoherent rage.

Donnie Darko is a goddamned mess, a shambling wreck of a teenager just barely holding himself together. He's all seething urges, a horny and deeply troubled outcast beset by apocalyptic visions pushing him in the direction of a destiny he does not begin to understand. He's haunted by images of Frank, a six-foot-tall figure in a grotesque, monstrous rabbit outfit who suggests Harvey, the lovable imaginary rabbit of cinema and literary fame, re-conceived as a monstrous omen, a demonic ghoul.

Donnie has to deal with typical teenager shit. He must put up with obnoxious bullies, including one played by a pre-stardom Seth Rogen. He must contend with a libido that angrily demands that he fuck, and fuck often, despite not really having an outlet for that raging, insatiable lust. He's cursed with having to attend a school in thrall to the creepy self-improvement teachings of a motivational speaker played by Patrick Swayze, and of course parents who are no less of a pain in the ass for being generally loving and supportive. Donnie's parents are kind, but they cannot understand him because he cannot be understood, internally or externally.

Oh, and one more thing: Donnie Darko must deal with the impending end of the world. His world has an expiration date that is rapidly approaching. Every day, every hour, every minute brings him closer and closer to his own personal armageddon. Donnie inhabits a world where even the most seemingly banal exchange is charged with disturbing undercurrents. Even if he weren't regularly visited by Frank, his world would still seem, to paraphrase one of Kelly's influences, wild at heart and weird on top.

Donnie is simultaneously driven by the need to create, to save, to connect, and an antithetical yet inextricably intertwined desire to destroy. Depending on the hour and the mood, he is either a Jesus of suburbia, who must sacrifice himself so that the world might live, or Shiva the Destroyer.

So Donnie pursues these strange paths with equal fury, destroying to create, to save, to protect. He's a vandal with his words and with his actions, a seething powder-keg of rage whose actions have a strange way of turning righteous. He's on a path he doesn't understand, one with no road map, only the cruel and unfathomable dictates of fate.

Kelly is a child of MTV, a pop-culture junkie who suckled eagerly at the glass teat of television. So it should not come as a surprise that *Donnie Darko's* most artful and enduring sequences would feel perfectly at home on MTV during its Reagan-era heyday. To say that some of *Donnie Darko* feels like a music video is less a criticism than a form of praise.

These sequences aren't quite as audacious or beguilingly berserk as the sequence in *Southland Tales* (2006), Kelly's famously troubled but often brilliant follow-up to *Donnie Darko*, where Justin Timberlake's shattered veteran leers into the camera and lip-syncs ghoulishly to the Killers' 'All These Things That I've Done'. But they are similarly liberated from the dreary demands of plot and dialogue, language and logic.

In these exquisite exercises in pure cinema, Kelly perfectly fuses sound and vision, his swooping, gliding camera capturing everything, as if assuming the viewpoint of a trickster God, the demented auteur of a world gone mad. In keeping with the pleasingly disorienting time travel/ time warp nature of the film, these dazzling sequences belong equally to the past and to the future. They're rooted in the pop music of the 1980s and Kelly's youth that reached an emotional register accessible only through music, that possesses a power not reachable through language alone.

But they also anticipate the short-attention-span, nothing-but-the-hits sensibility of YouTube, where the triumphs of the past are re-contextualised and de-contextualised for the breezy pleasure of the present. In an early sequence set to Tears for Fears' 'Head Over Heels', Kelly conveys a wealth of visual information without resorting to a single line of dialogue. The film's sweeping, swooping camera indelibly captures the curious, fraught and threatening ecosystem that is Darko's school/prison.

We're introduced to most of the film's characters in ways that succinctly capture their essence through nothing more than a gesture, body language or a single strong expression. We'll come to know these strange people in Donnie's orbit better over the course of the film but the brilliance of this introduction is that we already feel like we know these people before they utter a single word. Even more impressively, Kelly is able to impart a great deal of information without breaking the flow of the movie. On the contrary, the 'Head Over Heels' scene has a rhythm, a momentum and grace all its own. The only logic Kelly feels the need to conform to is dream logic.

This introduction to Donnie's world (Christ, that sounds like a terrible cartoon) is book-ended with an equally iconic and indelible closing sequence where the film's survivors tremble with emotion as Kelly's camera once again glides across this strange suburban universe while Gary Jules' achingly stripped-down cover of Tears for Fears' 'Mad World' pushes the movie into a beatific state of grace. It is an ending but it is also a beginning and the film ends as it begins, as a mystery, as a puzzle, as a riddle with no answer.



Kelly toys with time in other ways as well. The film is filled with actors strongly identified with long-ago eras, from Katharine Ross of *The Graduate* (1967) and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) fame as Donnie's overwhelmed shrink to Swayze, that titan of the 1980s and early 1990s, to E.T.'s pal Drew Barrymore, who both helped produce the film through her Flower Films imprint and co-stars as an idealistic teacher who ends up paying a steep price for her fiery passion and integrity.

In keeping with the film's time travel obsession, Kelly travelled back in time, psychologically, if not literally, and reconnected with his teenaged self long enough to gain entry back into that peculiar mind-frame, that strange sense of the world that dissipates once we wearily accept the full compromises of adulthood. Kelly was able to combine a first-hand, deeply empathetic understanding of the apocalyptic madness and confusion of adolescence with the experience and perspective that comes with surviving that particular gauntlet of horrors.

Kelly remembers what it's like to be horny and sad and angry and confused and filled with alternating currents of martyrdom and society-annihilating rage all at once. In other words, Kelly remembers what it's like to be young and because he is able to conjure up that state of mind so vividly and with such brash assurance, he created a cult touchstone that will be remembered long after its creator is dead and gone.

*Nathan Rabin is a freelance writer, the author of four books (most recently *You Don't Know Me But You Don't Like Me* and *Weird Al: The Book*) and a columnist for A.V. Club, Rotten Tomatoes and Splitsider. He lives in a basement in Marietta, Georgia with his wife, son and dog.*









# DISCOVERY: RICHARD KELLY

by Mark Olsen

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"Maybe *The Catcher in the Rye* as told by Philip K. Dick," is how 26-year-old writer/director Richard Kelly describes, when pressed, his extraordinarily unclassifiable debut feature, *Donnie Darko*. A mixture of adolescent angst, sci-fi fantasy, sexual repression, and mental illness, the film wants to be the last word, striving to be the totalizing, all-questions-answered masterstroke teenagers awkwardly yearn for, and, like all teenagers, it also wants to remain teasingly enigmatic and undefined. Just as it does for its eponymous protagonist – a high-schooler who may be seriously deranged, on the brink of saving the world, or perhaps both – every misstep eventually leads to an inviting and unexplored path and every mistake proves to be the only possible choice.

If last year's *Ginger Snaps* mapped the trials of female adolescence through the bloody bodyshock and revulsion of the horror film, then *Donnie Darko* applies the mind-warping possibilities of science-fiction to teenage male development, exploring alternate worlds hidden within the fabric of everyday adolescent reality. Set in a generically affluent suburb called Middlesex during October 1988, the film opens on Donnie (played with masterful opacity by Jake Gyllenhaal) curled up in the middle of a mountain road as dawn breaks, his bicycle lying nearby. He awakes from this sleepwalking (sleepcycling?) episode and rides home through a dreamily idyllic neighborhood, full of leaf blowers, power-walkers and double-sided refrigerators. However, there is a creeping sense that something is amiss, as if the skewed, off-kilter sensibility of David Lynch had moved in across the street from John Hughes' well-adjusted sensitivity. Over a playfully bickering family dinner it is revealed that young Donnie, much to the consternation of his parents, has stopped taking his medication, and deeply resents being the only one in therapy.

"What happened to my son?" his mother (Mary McDonnell) asks painfully. "I don't recognize this person." Not long after, he's sleepwalking again and this time he meets Frank, a skull-faced bunny-man creature who informs him that the world will end in 28 days. While he's out, a jet engine drops from the sky and crashes into his bedroom, where he should have been sleeping soundly. This begins a cycle that will find Donnie falling in love, traveling through time, battling bullies and hypocrites, and saving the space-time continuum from collapsing in on itself.

If this seems a tad confusing, it is. "When I wrote the script it was stream of consciousness," says Kelly. "It all just came out with its own logic and design. I've always loved time travel movies, where the hero gets caught up in a paradox. Here it's, 'How did this engine come back in time, how did it come off a plane in the future?'" The script, which Kelly wrote in 1997 following his graduation from USC film school, made the rounds in Hollywood and was received with interest by CAA. Then began



a long year and a half during which Kelly and producer Sean McKittrick struggled through meetings with people who wanted the project, but not the novice director and producer attached to it. After *Rushmore* star Jason Schwartzman signed on, interest revived. A meeting with Drew Barrymore on the set of *Charlie's Angels* in March 2000 led to her not only signing on in the supporting role of Donnie's sympathetic teacher Ms. Pomeroy but also agreeing to produce the picture with partner Nancy Juvonen through their company, Flower Films. By July 2000, they had begun shooting, with Jake Gyllenhaal replacing Schwartzman, who had to drop out due to other commitments.

Working on a tight 28-day shooting schedule (the ironic connection to the script's own apocalyptic countdown did not go unnoticed), with a modest \$4.5 million budget – “I think I am officially out of favors,” Kelly notes wryly – the finished film feels steady-handed even as it spins out of narrative control. Guided by veteran cinematographer Steven Poster, the imagery segues from the seemingly mundane to the fantastic, deploying effects normally unheard of in independent films. “Our challenge was to ease you into the special effects from Donnie's point of view,” explains Kelly, “so you don't see the visual effect, but the psychological effect. From there the floodgates open, you're with them and hopefully they don't stand out.”

Considering the fact that he plunders imagery from such Eighties-era blockbusters as *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* and *Poltergeist*, it is surprising to hear Kelly call the project an art film. “All the films I'd like to make are art films, but that doesn't mean they're not commercial. I think *Darko* is right on the border. It challenges you with provocative ideas, and doesn't spoon-feed you. But at the same time, it's about adolescence, there's comedy, there's suspense, there are emotions people can identify with.” Just as Donnie Darko struggles to balance the world as he would like it to be with the world he sees, Richard Kelly is a would-be wunderkind all too aware of the system already in place to keep people like him in check. As he tries to reconcile the esoteric with the accessible, Kelly's career arc could easily break either way; regardless, his debut leaves little doubt that the process will be well worth watching.









# ASKING COSMIC QUESTIONS

by Kevin Conroy Scott

*The following interview was originally published in The Donnie Darko Book in 2001. Reprinted with permission.*

**Kevin Conroy Scott:** *You described your upbringing in Richmond, Virginia, as being 'very normal'. What does 'normal' mean to you?*

**Richard Kelly:** It was normal in the sense that I came from a very functional family; my parents are still together, they're not divorced. Divorce is the first crisis most kids encounter, and luckily I never had to go through that. We had enough money to get by, we lived in a nice neighbourhood, we never feared for our lives. I think a lot of art comes out of anguish or pain, so a privileged upbringing can stifle artistic impulses, and indeed there was very little for me to rebel against where I grew up. When there isn't much to feel anguished about, you have to search in other places for your art. I don't know, I guess I found my art among the mundane.

**KCS:** *You have often been very complimentary of your parents, even going as far as giving them much of the credit for your success to this date. Why are they so important?*

**RK:** They saw something in me and they really encouraged me. They liked my drawings and put them up on the refrigerator. They saw that I might have the ability to draw and they put me in an art class when I was five years old. I think that is an unusual thing, particularly when you grow up in a conservative town like Richmond. My parents weren't artists but they were really aggressive in pushing me into that world. Ultimately, I think that was what gave me the confidence and motivation to be a filmmaker. Throughout my entire life they told me to use my art because they thought I had a talent there. They encouraged me to make a career out of my artistic abilities.

**KCS:** *What kind of artistic activities did they encourage you to get involved with?*

**RK:** My mother really pushed me into writing. She always told me that I had an ability to write and was very effective in her ability to make me a better writer. She was a teacher and a very good editor and critic of papers I would write. I think I got my writing sensibility from my mother and my mathematical sensibility from my father.

**KCS:** *Your father helped design the first camera to photograph Mars. Can you tell me something about his profession and his interests?*







**RK:** For a number of years, my dad worked for NASA down in Norfolk, Virginia. We were the first family on the block to get a computer; we had the Apple II, then the Apple II Plus; it was upgraded every year. There was always an appreciation of technology in our house. My dad was always rebuilding something or fixing my mom's car; he was always the handy craftsman or the engineer. It definitely gave me the confidence, or the ability, to be a kind of technician or craftsman. I think that's pretty much what a filmmaker is, and I definitely got that from my father. Seeing the work he did at NASA, I can't even understand some of the things he built. It's unheralded and forgotten work that a lot of guys did back then in the Viking lander days in 1976. They photographed Mars for the first time. They didn't know what they were going to see transmitted back in the photographs. There was apprehension about little green men; ultimately they found out it was just a red desert with a bunch of rocks.

**KCS:** *What kind of high school did you attend?*

**RK:** I went to a public school called Midlothian High School. It was a really good school. I am thankful that I did not have the privilege of a private education. I think that private school can sometimes create an elitist world view. I'm glad that I am not a by-product of that. In a way, public school prepared me for the evil in the world. Nothing prepares you for the evil of the world like high school.

**KCS:** *Your mother was a teacher of emotionally disturbed students. Can you tell me something about her job?*

**RK:** Mostly it was getting her students to do their homework. When I was in junior high she was the in-school suspension teacher, which means that when kids were suspended but still had to come to school, they had to go and sit with my mom, all day. So that means she was not a psychotherapist for kids who were trying to kill themselves or stab each other. She was the caretaker for the bad seeds.

**KCS:** *How was her reputation with the bad seeds?*

**RK:** She was very well liked. For someone in that position it was easy to get a negative reputation, but my mom is an extremely kind person. Actually, some of my closest friends ended up in suspension a lot. It was a little awkward, her knowing I was hanging out with the 'bad seeds'. I mean it was just junior high; junior high is altogether stupid. But still, you could start to see the roots of dysfunction in all of us.

**KCS:** *You were a big Stephen King fan as a teenager. Can you explain your attraction to his work?*

**RK:** I was just floored by his imagination. I think one of the first novels I ever read was *Carrie*. Everything that I read, other than Stephen King, I found to be far less imaginative. A lot of people are critical of King because he is considered to be a popular fiction writer. The critical community seems to be dismissive of popular fiction, but I challenge anyone to come up with a sciencefiction, fantasy or horror writer with a larger imagination than Stephen King.

**KCS:** *What do you think are some of the best feature film adaptations of his novels?*

**RK:** Clearly *The Shawshank Redemption*; Rob Reiner did a spectacular job with William Goldman's adaptation of *Misery*, and with *Stand by Me*... Rob Reiner has a great way of keying into the humanity of King's work. De Palma's *Carrie*. Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone*. I think *Dolores Claiborne* was a great adaptation. I would love to produce a remake of *It* or *The Tommyknockers* as an HBO mini-series. Those books were not served well by ABC. I hope one day to be able to convince King to let me adapt *The Long Walk*. I think that is one of his greatest accomplishments as a writer, although I hear he has tried to discontinue its publication. Some people have been critical of Kubrick's interpretation of *The Shining*, but I think it is one of the greatest horror films ever made.

**KCS:** *Why do you like The Shining so much?*

**RK:** I'm a Kubrick fanatic. No one has ever done a haunted house, let alone a hotel, as well as he did. He created a physical environment that truly is a character in the film. Every time I watch it, it gets more interesting. I think a lot of people fail to see the humanity in that film, the black comedy in that film. Ultimately I think Kubrick made a series of black comedies. I think that people were so disturbed or taken with the technical side of what he was doing they failed to see the humanity and the comedy. If you at something like *Barry Lyndon*, it is an absolutely breathtaking technical accomplishment with the zoom lenses and candle-lit interiors courtesy of NASA, but it is also an accomplished piece of social criticism.

**KCS:** *About social climbing?*

**RK:** Yes, about social climbing. Just the portrait of a jackass; a jackass who destroys everything and everyone around him.

**KCS:** *You were also interested in the time travel theorist Stephen Hawking. He's not as popular a choice with the teenage set as the other Stephen.*

**RK:** Right. In eighth grade I was asked to do a book report in science class and I picked *A Brief History of Time* because I thought it had a cool title. I couldn't understand a word of it. I only understood a few sentences, but I was so inspired by someone who clearly understood the world on a completely different level – and could express it in words. Even though I could not comprehend it, it inspired me to try and comprehend it and, as a result, that book has been in the back of my mind ever since. I think you are challenged by things that are slightly beyond your grasp.

**KCS:** *Were you reading literary fiction in high school? Graham Greene surfaces in Donnie Darko.*

**RK:** Most of my true literary education came in high school. Kafka, Dostoevsky, Faulkner, Camus, Graham Greene.

**KCS:** *Were you a voracious reader in high school?*

**RK:** I was in an accelerated English class and we had to read the writers I just mentioned. Thank God. I would never have read any of those books had I not been required to because I was a lazy student.



I did the bare minimum to get by. I actually started to enjoy reading something other than Stephen King. That really taught me how to tell a story: King and then all those other writers I mentioned.

**KCS:** *So King showed you how to write a thumping narrative?*

**RK:** In a way, yes. King taught me suspense and how to create a fantasy world. Also, how to terrify an audience, how to move them, how to do all the great things King can do. I think these writers like Dostoevsky, Camus and Greene taught me history and social criticism and also structure, more than anything. The math of storytelling came from those great writers. Joseph Campbell's mythology work is spot-on. Its influence is undeniable in Hollywood films, but it should be embraced in the sense that you learn the formula, then you learn how to corrupt that formula.

**KCS:** *What about comic books? I know you mentioned something in the DVD commentary about Donnie Darko's relationship to comic books.*

**RK:** I was never a gigantic comic book guy; I had a passing interest in comic books. But when I wrote the title, *Darko*, it sounded like a comic book. It was also meant to delve into archetypes that have become clichés – especially teen films and coming-of-age stories – you push into the comic book realm. It made sense for the way I was trying to tell a story about teenagers and suburbia – it was meant to have a sardonic element. I don't know how well I communicated that, but I think that was the intention.

**KCS:** *When you first saw the music video of Aerosmith's 'Janie's Got a Gun' you rang up MTV's office and asked who directed it. How old were you then and why did you do that?*

**RK:** That was 1989 and I was 14 years old. I saw the video and I thought, 'That person has a vision. That's a movie, I want to see that movie.' That was in the stage of my teens when all I was doing was watching MTV. I had never seen a video that told a story. It was better crafted than most movies I had seen and I was taken aback by it and I wanted to know who created it. At that point they did not have the director's names on music videos so I called up the MTV offices and got 10 different recordings and finally got someone who told me it was David Fincher and then they hung up on me. And then I found out he was doing the third *Alien* film, which freaked me out because the first two *Alien* films were my favourite films of all time. I thought, 'Well, I'm glad someone else saw something there.' And despite the troubles he endured, I think *Alien³* is a vastly underrated film. I hear Fox is going to release his original cut on DVD.

**KCS:** *When did being a director become a tangible idea for you to pursue as a career? Was it at that point?*

**RK:** That inspired me – in the sense that I thought I would love to be that good a filmmaker, to take my art to that level. In Fincher's work I saw an unparalleled level of craftsmanship that spoke to me and my hope and dream of expressing myself artistically. When I see something that is really good it makes me want to try and do something really good too. I don't know why it was that video, but it was. It inspired me to make movies.

**KCS:** *You have said that the holy trinity that crystallised your love for movies was, 'E.T., Back to the Future, Aliens, Spielberg, Zemeckis, Cameron: they were the ones who made me want to sneak out of the house and into R-rated films.' Looking back at that period of your life, can you try to remember why you found those films so captivating?*

**RK:** When you grow up in Richmond and there is no such thing as DVD and no one you know owns a LaserDisc player, all you have are the films that are available at your local Blockbuster; and even then Blockbuster was in its infancy. So I certainly wasn't aware of *The Bicycle Thief* or *Kurosawa's Dreams*. I didn't have access to Truffaut, so I couldn't go rent *Day for Night*; it wasn't available at Odyssey Video on Midlothian Turnpike. All I had access to were the big blockbuster films. There was nothing better, in my eyes, than what Cameron, Spielberg and Zemeckis were doing.

**KCS:** *The East Coast is home to some fine universities. Why did you decide to go so far away from home for university?*

**RK:** I thought it was my chance to get away from home and go somewhere far away. I thought, 'Why not go to Los Angeles?' It sounded like an adventure and I wanted to have an adventure. In the back of my mind I thought maybe I'd try and get into the movie business one day. If I didn't, I thought I would always have that regret, so I just went there.

**KCS:** *What were some of your first impressions of the place?*

**RK:** I literally showed up alone with two suitcases. I never visited before that. I got to see the 'hood right away. The University of Southern California is like an oasis of spoiled children right in the middle of the ghetto. That, to me, was really interesting – the disparity of a college girl in a BMW parking in front of a crack house. You saw that every day. There is no way to relive that moment when you first walk into a new city and it is really fresh; your take on the geography, your take on the environment is completely new – there is something very exciting about that.

**KCS:** *What was your original major at USC?*

**RK:** It was Fine Arts; I got an art scholarship, which I held on to. I dropped the art major after two days, became undeclared, started taking film classes, applied to film school, then got in.

**KCS:** *Was film school part of your undergraduate work?*

**RK:** Yes, I didn't go to grad school.

**KCS:** *When did you start making short films?*

**RK:** My true coursework began my junior years of college. The curriculum required us to make five Super-8 shorts. The first film was called *The Vomiteer*, starring my friend Marty Michael. It was about a guy who can't stop vomiting; it destroys his life, he can't hold down a job, can't keep a girlfriend after he barfs on her boobs; he eventually tries to kill himself by swallowing his vomit, but then



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decided to live. One of my professors had to get up and leave the room because the film actually made her vomit. So it's very clear from the beginning what my aspirations were. That professor did give me an A- though.

**KCS:** *Do you know why you chose that subject?*

**RK:** I think it was probably a reaction to the pretension I saw within the film school and my desire to learn the craft, the technique, but not be pretentious. I think self-importance is a problem for a lot of film students: to solve the world's problems or the desire to make people weep. Comedy is so undervalued and looked down upon, but it is so needed. If you can tell a simple comedic story you can then do anything. If you look at Spike Jonze's shorts, they're simple and funny and now he can do anything. The hardest thing to do is to get a good laugh out of someone.

**KCS:** *Do you remember anything you learned from making those student films?*

**RK:** More than anything I learned to try and tell a story in an unconventional way, because so much of what I saw at USC appeared conventional to me. I try to make it my mandate to be original and unconventional in the process of delivering a story to someone. Another thing I learned was that when you are conceiving a film the first person you have please is yourself. If you are trying to please other people, you are never going to have a voice of your own. It's never going to be a film that comes from an honest place. Since the beginning I've always tried to create things that I wanted to see but I haven't seen before.

**KCS:** *You've said that when you came out of film school you were broke, so you started writing because you needed to money. However, Donnie Darko does not feel like a screenplay that was written to make money.*

**RK:** I didn't write *Donnie Darko* to make money. I basically wrote what I thought was going to be my first film. Luckily, I got an agent off of it. I didn't start writing for purely mercenary reasons until after I got an agent and I needed to pay the bills while I was struggling to get my movie made. I adapted a novel for a company and then I sold a pilot to the Fox network and I did some of that kind of stuff. It was a good experience in the art of negotiation and the art of confrontation with studio executives and people like that.

**KCS:** *Did you learn about screenwriting at USC?*

**RK:** I took one screenwriting class, but I really knew nothing about screenwriting when I started writing *Darko*. At that point I'd probably read three scripts in my life. I'm glad I didn't take a lot of screenwriting courses. I wouldn't have even bothered writing *Donnie Darko* if I'd had a bunch of screenwriting rhetoric pushed on me because I would have thought, 'I'm not allowed to do this, I'm not allowed to do that.' Screenwriting courses can be beneficial to some people; I just know it wouldn't have been beneficial to me. My high school English class informed my screenwriting ability more than anything I learned at film school.

**KCS:** *Terry Gilliam and Peter Weir are both heroes of yours. You have said, 'They both look at the metaphysics of life, making films that ask cosmic questions.' What did you mean by that?*

**RK:** To me both of those guys, in completely different ways, are delving into a metaphysical place. Look at something like *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Where did those girls go? Look at *Fearless*. Weir's trying to grasp a piece of the unknown through human experience. Look at *Brazil*, look at *Twelve Monkeys*, look at *The Fisher King*. In a sense Gilliam is, ironically, making these Don Quixote fables. In a way he has already made his Don Quixote film. This searching and trying to grasp for something that is unobtainable – these guys are doing it in completely different ways but I think there is a link there and that is my inspiration.

**KCS:** *You met your producer Sean McKittrick in college. Can you tell me something about how you met and how your working relationship evolved?*

**RK:** I was friends with an actress named Sasha Alexander who I asked to be in my grad film; I asked her to produce it. She accepted the acting invitation, but told me she did not have time to produce it. She was working on the Sony lot and Sean was an intern there, so she recommended him and it turned out we had a bunch of mutual friends. We had the same sensibility, we liked the same movies. I am only successful working with people I would hang out with in a social situation and it worked out that Sean and I got along very well. He is a very detail-orientated, organised, responsible person whereas I am messy, irresponsible and a scatterbrain. It's just nice to have a producing partner who can pick up the slack and do things that you are not able to do yourself.

**KCS:** *What was the experience like, directing your grad film?*

**RK:** I had written this ridiculous script about a mad scientist and a teleportation chamber. It was called *Visceral Matter*. The intention was to do a *Mystery Science Theater* kind of thing – only with really good cinematography, set design, visual effects, computer animation, digital matte paintings... the whole works. Sean read it and said: 'This is stupid, I love it. Let's go make it.' It was essentially us testing ourselves to see if we could pull together a really elaborate, professional-looking 35mm project with visual effects for very little money. The summer of 1997 we went out to the desert with a bunch of struggling actors – some of whom we pulled off of Venice Beach when we saw their headshots hanging in a bar. We were desperate to find anyone who could be our renegade team of mad scientists. So we go out to Barstow to shoot the desert footage... because the teleportation chamber is buried beneath this gigantic compound and a corporation called Norcom wanted to find it, right? Poor Sasha Alexander – who had agreed to play Karen Chambers, the sexy babe scientist with a secret agenda – got lost on the way to the set because we didn't print up directions properly. She was stranded in the middle of the desert for about an hour. Then – when she was in the Winnebago changing into costume – one of the actors we pulled off Venice Beach to play one of the Norcom goons kept pulling down his pants and exposing himself to her. It was really creepy. Thankfully, she still speaks to me. I am happy that she has done well for herself.

The next day we shot at Edwards Airforce Base without permits. Military jets were flying overhead and they saw us out in the desert and called the military police. They threatened to arrest us and take







our footage. My cameraman Jason Presant had to hide the footage from them. Somehow we talked ourselves out of it.

So then we head back to LA to shoot the teleportation chamber – which my production designer Leslie Keel and I had spent an entire summer building in my garage in Hermosa Beach. We then assembled the large pieces on a stage in North Hollywood. It was insane. I slept in this teleportation chamber for about four days... maybe two hours of sleep each night.

So we wrap production and I have all this footage, a lot of it green screen footage – and I have no money! – no way to finish the film. Sean goes off and gets a job in development at New Line Cinema. I got off and get a job as a client assistant at a post-production house called 525. A ‘client assistant’ is really a waiter, runner and a janitor for all of the staff and music video directors, ad execs and rock stars who come through.

I desperately needed to find an editor. They let the client assistants ‘train’ at night on the Avids once you’ve worked there for three months. That was my plan – find one of the CAs who knew the Avid to edit the film for me... for no money. Because I had no money left. I conned a few of the CAs into looking at the footage – and none of the dialogue was in synch. Hours and hours of work. It was going to be an enormous undertaking. Two or three people came and went within the span of two weeks. I figured... this film is never going to be completed. This is a disaster.

So then I get a call from Sam Bauer, one of the CAs who worked the night shift. He said, ‘I hear you have this trippy science-fiction film and you need an editor. I’m training on the Avid and I’m interested in the job.’ I warned him there was no money, that it was going to take months to finish. He didn’t care. He wanted to do it. It was like that scene in *Private Parts* when Howard Stern is still struggling and he drops all his records on the floor and he starts freaking out and Fred very calmly helps him pick them up and reorganise them.

So during the day Sam and I are fetching food and making cappuccinos, cheese-cracker plates for Puff Daddy, Jennifer Lopez, ‘Weird Al’ Yankovic, Madonna, Mark Romanek, Jonas Åkerlund, Missy Elliott. All these celebrities. I remember Puff Daddy’s bodyguards were inspecting his food. We didn’t understand why they thought we would want to poison him or Jennifer Lopez. It was pretty bizarre. I made a cheese-cracker plate for Mark Romanek and now I am friends with him and we share an agent.

For months Sam and I burned the midnight oil editing this ridiculous, intentionally awful film that looked gorgeous. Sean was slaving away at New Line for an executive named Lynn Harris... learning the business, checking in now and then on our progress. We promised Sam that if I ever got a feature he would edit it. Two years later, Pandora was refusing to let me have him edit *Darko* and Sean and I had to fight like hell to get him the job. Eventually they caved in. Sam Bauer got the job.

**KCS:** *You wrote Donnie Darko during this time period shortly after graduating from film school in 1997. Where did the idea start? I think I remember reading somewhere about a piece of ice falling off a jet engine...*

**RK:** I think that was the seed of the whole idea. It came back to my high school English class where we were told that every story was built around a single conceit. If you read *The Metamorphosis*, the conceit is in the first sentence. For me the jet engine was the conceit and then the quest was for me to solve the mystery of the jet engine. Then I just tried to find the most interesting voyage to solve that mystery. That was the process for me. I didn’t know how I would get there, but I knew that engine would come off his mother’s plane, in another dimension. I tried to establish some ground rules and then I tried to find the most entertaining way of getting that jet engine to fall from that plane.

**KCS:** *Donnie Darko combines some very strong elements: an idealised suburban setting, the 1980s period and a unique protagonist. Can you take me through your discovery process? In which order did the components come into play?*

**RK:** There was the requirement for me of getting his mother on that plane and there was always a messenger figure – a guide, a mentor – who would help his mother get on that plane. Then there was a car accident, and these things were going to build into a cataclysm that would put Donnie into a situation where he had no choice but to realign things by putting this engine back in place. Honestly, it was written so quickly, I can never really explain how I put it all together.

**KCS:** *You didn’t get stuck at all during that writing period?*

**RK:** No, I just kept writing. I never stopped to change anything, it just came out. It was really long, 150 pages, but it was very close to what you see in the finished film. It would never be what it is if I had stopped and second-guessed myself because I probably would have gotten scared. Everyone has that post-college meltdown where they are second-guessing every decision they make as they are taking their first uncertain steps towards adulthood. It was written in that moment.

**KCS:** *You’ve done a lot of writing since. When a screenplay is not working the way you want it to, how do you handle the moments of self-doubt during the writing process?*

**RK:** I do one of two things: I go to a bar or I got to a gym. The only way I can deal with anxiety is to be a normal person and to go out and be social or to exercise. Being by myself only perpetuates that feeling of anxiety. Writing can be a very lonely profession, so when I am not writing I need to be around people.

**KCS:** *You said, ‘I wanted to communicate the idea that this is a fantasy, a fable, right up front. But it’s an intense one – a comic book archetype of a kid who loses it.’ If it is a fantasy, why did you make the depiction of Donnie’s life so realistic?*

**RK:** That’s the thing with fantasy, why it is so difficult to do. For me, for fantasy to truly work, there has to be an undercurrent of absolute realism. If you are going to have time portals, a bunny rabbit and liquid spears growing out of people’s chests, if you are pushing in such a fantastic direction, you have to ground it in a realistic portrayal. Otherwise, these fantastic elements are going to collapse. That became the rule in my head. The way we shot certain things, we tried to have a high degree of naturalism so that the fantastic elements were not off-balance.



**KCS:** *Donnie Darko is diagnosed as borderline schizophrenic. Did exposure to your mother's work with the 'bad seeds' have any influence on constructing his character?*

**RK:** I would always overhear my mom talking about it, but she would never talk about it in front of me. I actually remember this guy, when I was 13 or 14 years old, who was in my class even though he was 18 years old. We were in Home Economics class and we could see white powder in his nostrils. He would be sniffing and coughing and rubbing his nose and was totally coked up and we would stare at him in morbid fascination and ask each other, 'Whoa, what's that like?' Our teacher thought he had a cold. She had no idea he was really coked up. We were frightened by this guy but at the same time completely fascinated by him and his otherness.

**KCS:** *For me, the ambiguity is a big reason why your film was so successful. Were you ever tempted to give the audience more information when you were writing so they could connect the dots more easily? For example, my first viewing of the film I was not aware that Donnie had saved his community from an apocalyptic destruction.*

**RK:** When I was writing the script I was so afraid that if I clarified the ending any more than I did, the film would collapse under its own pretension. I was terrified of the whole thing becoming a completely pretentious enterprise. Who knows if I succeeded in avoiding that, but when you are delving into 'Big Ideas' you run the risk of having the whole thing explode in your face. Out of respect for the audience and not wanting to alienate any number of them, I chose to only go so far in answering the questions that the film raises. To come out and say, 'It was a dream' or, 'It was all about God' – those are codas that always bother me in films. Life isn't all about one thing. I also have to give a lot of credit to Sean McKittrick, Nancy Juvonen and Jake Gyllenhaal. They were very aggressive and vocal in not letting there be one simple answer or one simple solution. I'm so thankful they were supportive in that, because the film would have collapsed and become unwatchable and pretentious had we tagged it with a simple solution. But it bothers other people that there is not a single, simple solution. There are certain people in the audience that come to the cinema and want to know exactly what it all meant. Unfortunately for them, this isn't ever going to be one of those movies.

**KCS:** *In a similar way, you never show Donnie's superhero powers in action during the first two-thirds of the film. How big a decision was it for you to make a sci-fi movie with a superhero without showing any of his superpowers in action?*

**RK:** It would have been cheesy to see Donnie levitating and swinging an axe into a statue. It would have been over the top. We tried to retain the mystery of it with the old adage of 'less is more'. We were just very careful about what we chose to show and what we chose to hide. A lot of times it does come down to budget. I fear what I might do when I get too much money. I'll probably make something awful.

**KCS:** *Restriction of budget also worked effectively for the makers of The Blair Witch Project.*

**RK:** Yes, and *Jaws* too. Well, with *Jaws* it was not really restrictions of the budget; the shark wouldn't work. They could barely show the shark, which made it even better.

**KCS:** *Where did the idea of the Cuning Visions infomercials come from?*

**RK:** That was all recreated from stuff we were exposed to in eighth and ninth grade. We were taught a very similar curriculum to that and I was mocking that. We shot the infomercials at Patrick Swayze's ranch in Calabasas. It was so much fun directing those infomercials. There was our DP, Steven Poster, who has lit a Ridley Scott film, trying to light an infomercial so it looks cheesy but still kind of beautiful in its cheesiness. Trying to do something with that disparity was a thrill for him. I love making infomercials; I want to make the greatest infomercial ever.

**KCS:** *The period music you use in the film – The Church, Echo and the Bunnymen, Tears for Fears – was very effective and evocative of that era. At what point during the writing process did music become integral to the narrative?*

**RK:** There was an INXS song written into the script, in the opening, and a Tears for Fears song written in somewhere else. Those two were planned as musical sequences. When a song is used in a film – I'm thinking of *Pulp Fiction* or *Goodfellas* or *Boogie Nights* – you can see the film come to life in a new way. The images and the music work together like a great tango and it is really magical. I figured there were opportunities in this story to put a musical code on the character's experience within this era. Picking those songs was, on our part, not to do with making it campy and mocking of the 1980s. The film was mocking that period, so we did not want the music to mock it as well. We wanted to music to be sincere.

**KCS:** *Do you listen to music when you are writing?*

**RK:** Yes, all the time. I listen to tons of music. What I've started to do now is, I make a CD to accompany the script. I put songs in the script and I ask people to listen to the CD when they read it.

**KCS:** *Does it help establish the tone?*

**RK:** Definitely. You can see the movie; you can hear it while you are reading it. It also helps you communicate the vision if you can do it with music. I use classical music; sometimes I use a temp score from another picture, and sometimes I'll listen to a score from another film on my Walkman when I am writing. That is very effective.

**KCS:** *I thought the first dinner table scene, where the family sits down for pizza and discusses politics, sets the tone for the film. I was wondering where the dialogue came from, particularly the banter about 'fuck-ass' and 'suck a fuck'.*

**RK:** This interview is becoming so academic! Two of my fraternity brothers, Bill Endemann and Justyn Wilson, used to get into these vicious insult wars and it would always devolve into creative combinations of curse words – and 'fuck-ass' was one that stuck with me. I must give credit to them for that. There is something inane about bizarre combinations of cuss words. For a family, what began as a political discussion devolved into a discourse of 'What's a fuck-ass?' It just seemed to cover the spectrum of conversation at a family meal.





**KCS:** *I also thought it was interesting because it says something about the parents. They are more insulted by the political comments about voting for Michael Dukakis than by the word 'fuck-ass' being used in front of their nine-year-old daughter.*

**RK:** That's not the family I grew up in, but to me there is something interesting about a family that is so liberal in their lack of inhibition yet politically very conservative. There is something interesting about that dichotomy because I do think it exists: an environment where a family is completely open with language and sexuality, where the children would have the confidence to completely disagree with their parents about politics. Unknowingly, the parents have created an open-minded, liberal environment in a politically conservative household; they have created their own liberal monsters. It is an unusual disparity, but it was intentional. The traditional way of doing conservative Republican parents is that they don't let their children cuss. A lot of people in Hollywood are very liberal and it is very easy to bash conservative people. I come from a family of conservatives. I come from the land of Republicans. These are people that I love and care about. You have to respect both sides of the political system. You have to respect both parties and even though you may disagree with many of the things a party stands for, you have to try and come to an understanding of why someone thinks that way, otherwise you are never going to come to a solution. I did not want to demonise a character because they are conservative or they are Republican. That would be condescending and as a storyteller it is not my responsibility to push a political ideology on someone by demonising the other side. I wanted to make sure the audience loved these two parents.

**KCS:** *Did you have any problems writing the role of psychiatrist? It's a limited role, emotionally, due to the restrictive nature of the doctor-patient relationship.*

**RK:** The role of Dr Thurman builds to a final scene which, for me, is the most emotional scene in the film. When Donnie is hypnotised you see the terror in her eyes, you see her trying to grapple with what this kid is going through. Their last scene together has the most emotional dialogue in the film. Katharine Ross delivered the dialogue with great restraint, which I have to commend her for. She brought a gravity and a dignity to the role. It's always a brave choice for an actor to underplay something instead of overdoing it. The film was juggling so many balls in the air that any performance that was over the top would have made the film collapse. Any time I sensed we were running the risk of being too cartoonish, I made sure we pulled back and restrained ourselves. The only thing I regret about the therapist scenes is that there is a sub-plot about her giving Donnie placebos instead of medication. I wished that was still in the film because it would have helped resolve her intentions.

**KCS:** *Which would say what about her character?*

**RK:** That she does not think Donnie is crazy. She's been trying to get to the root of his problems through psychology, not medication, to get him to expose things under the assumption that the medication is making him better when really he is making himself better, naturally, without the drugs.

**KCS:** *You have said in many interviews that you are not Donnie Darko. However, Donnie tells his new girlfriend that he wants to be a writer or a painter, two skills of yours that are on display in this film. So surely the character of Donnie Darko is at least partly autobiographical?*

**RK:** I'll concede that there are many parts of me that are in that character. But I have never been diagnosed as being mentally ill. However, there are a lot parts of Donnie that are a part of me. That's inevitable. Art is personal. For me, all artists I admire expose themselves. It's a dangerous thing to expose yourself because you always run the risk of everyone seeing what a big jerk you are. It's a dangerous and frightening thing, but if you are going to do this for a living and be good at it, you have to be willing to expose yourself.

**KCS:** *The conversation about the Smurfs lightens the tone of the picture and brings some comic relief at a crucial juncture of the narrative, just before the climactic events of Halloween. Where did the idea for the scene come from?*

**RK:** I think I actually had that conversation with some friends at one point. Growing up, everyone was obsessed with the Smurfs at a certain age. There has been a Smurf backlash. There are a lot of websites that claim that the Smurfs are communists or Satanists. There is a cultural fascination with that cartoon. For whatever reason it became an inane conversation about the teenage obsession with sex, referencing a controversial cartoon that is also a cultural touchstone. There is more going on there than just a flippant Tarantino-wannabe dialogue scene. There is intended to be a social subtext to that scene; I don't know if anyone picked up on that, but that's what I was trying to do.

**KCS:** *Can you tell me about how you approached the scene where Donnie taps the knife on the mirror and looks at Frank across the bathroom mirror?*

**RK:** The idea behind the bathroom scene was to create an environment that houses Frank. I always wondered as a kid watching a movie: what happens when you try and touch a ghost or an apparition? If you kept seeing one, wouldn't you eventually try and touch it? In my mind it sounded logical for there to be some sort of construct that is housing that apparition. For me that construct was a barrier of water. I tried to address the metaphysics behind the water-barrier idea in the time travel book. To try and articulate that logic in the movie would have been way too much. It would be a 12-hour film!

**KCS:** *How did you design the digital shots, such as when the spear leads Donnie into the kitchen?*

**RK:** The actors wore these little lights attached to their chests. The liquid spears were then tracked to the actors' movements. This became much more complicated when the camera needed to pan or track with an actor. There was a specific design to the spears with respect to each character. Each one was meant to have its own personality. Donnie's spear becomes more alarmed when it realises that its host can see it. It begins to taunt him up the stairs. For me the whole effect is either really funny or very disturbing. I go crazy thinking about what it could imply.

**KCS:** *Was it difficult incorporating those digital shots into the film during post-production?*

**RK:** There were always naysayers who kept telling me it wasn't going to work, that it would look stupid. I replied to their argument by showing them footage from Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures*. There you saw digital effects that came from a character's dementia. The effects were scary because Kate Winslet and Melanie Lynskey reacted to them so well. Thankfully, Jake made the effects work.







The digital effects in *Donnie Darko* are specific to the story. We knew that we were trying to do a Salvador Dalí comic book. Some people say that it's just a film school homage to *The Abyss*. To be honest, I just couldn't think of a better way to illustrate the metaphysical idea of predestination and I wanted to link it with the water barrier in the bathroom scenes. I'm not sure that I will use digital effects again unless a character is confronting some sort of dementia. My rule with digital is: only use it when it's absolutely necessary.

**KCS:** *You have mentioned that when you were conceiving this film you were influenced by a video football game.*

**RK:** American football commentator John Madden has this tool that lets him draw on the television screen when they replay the last down during a game. He draws lines on the screen showing exactly what is going to happen, where the players are going to move. I believe that it is called CBS Chalkboard. That inspired the scene where the spears grow out of Donnie's chest. I thought, 'What if there is some John Madden up there in the cosmos who hits the pause button and draws lines telling us where to go?' I thought about that and what kind of Pandora's Box it opens up in terms of ideas. You can think about it for hours, and I did think about it for hours and the only way to stop thinking about it was to write it into the film as a metaphysical element.

**KCS:** *Can you tell me something about The Philosophy of Time Travel?*

**RK:** We were getting ready to put the film out in the theatres and there was a lot of anxiety: the anxiety of September 11th, the anxiety of the film not having any marketing budget, not being ready for release, of it disappearing in a couple of weeks and me just wanting to be done with it. I felt like I needed to solve the riddle in my own way as a form of release. It was a way for me to answer all the questions outside of the film. I did not want to do it inside the film for reasons I have already discussed. But at the same time it felt like it was a way for me to come to terms with the mystery I had created. Writing those pages was a way for me to say, 'Here's my theory, I may be wrong, but here it is.' I considered myself to be just a viewer when I wrote it, not the filmmaker. It was meant to be an argument that people could agree or disagree with. Ultimately, I think those pages probably caused people to ask more questions about what it all means.

**KCS:** *How many drafts of the screenplay did you go through before you showed it to Sean McKittrick?*

**RK:** Probably two before I showed it to Sean, then we went through two more when we got the length down to 128 pages. When I showed it to Sean it was about 140. My scripts tend to run long, but as I have become more experienced I have found a rhythm to the way I write. I have found a way to be editorial as I write instead of doing it when I finish a draft. So now when I am finished with a first draft, it feels more like a third draft.

**KCS:** *Were you surprised that CAA wanted to sign you as a client after reading the screenplay?*

**RK:** My jaw was on the floor. I got a call from two agents called John Campisi and Rob Paris. It came out of nowhere. I thought maybe I would find an attorney somewhere who might want to hip-pocket

me. I had no idea I would be signed by the biggest, most powerful talent agency in Hollywood. That came out of nowhere. That was probably my most life-changing moment because people wouldn't have read the script if it did not have this agency stamp on the cover. It's easier to win the lottery than to have someone read your screenplay in Hollywood.

**KCS:** *Do you think it helps having an agent in your corner, building your persona?*

**RK:** This town is built on hype, and on people's fear of missing out on something. Ultimately, it's about the work, it's the screenplay that matters. But to get them to read it, you need someone who can create a sense of urgency around your screenplay. That is invaluable in getting a film made. The puppeteers positioning your material in such a way that people will throw some cash down on the table and let you do it.

**KCS:** *You made the rounds with the script at the Hollywood studios. Can you tell me something about what the reactions were to the script?*

**RK:** Some people were genuinely fascinated by it and genuinely wanted to see the film get made. There were other people who were told that they should be interested in it because other people were interested in it, that they should meet with me because other people were meeting with me. These people didn't understand it, thought it was unproducible, thought I was smoking crack because I was demanding that I direct it. So there was legitimate, sincere interest and there were those who just met me to say they had met me.

**KCS:** *You spent a year pitching this project. Did you find a lot of that time wasted in meetings like that?*

**RK:** Oh yeah. There are a lot of meetings where you have a development executive just nodding their head and blowing smoke up your ass. They've forgotten about you 30 seconds before you walk out the door.

**KCS:** *Did you find that frustrating?*

**RK:** When you have no evidence, when you have not made a film yet, they have no reason to take you seriously. People can be very condescending towards first-time directors or aspiring directors. It's a tough town and you have to position yourself and articulate yourself very clearly with a sense of confidence, otherwise they are never going to give you that chance. People's condescension and rejection made me more angry and frustrated but the anger and frustration made me more determined. This determination ended up giving me confidence because I wanted to prove them all wrong.

**KCS:** *As a defence mechanism, you said you developed a sense of arrogance. Was this posture useful?*

**RK:** You have to be careful about being too arrogant because you can turn into an asshole very quickly. It is more about being confident. But confidence can become arrogance very quickly and you have to be very careful about that. You can't direct a film unless you have a commanding presence on set; otherwise people are going to take advantage of you. There are a lot of backseat-drivers who are





ready to come in and tell you how to do your job. That happens a lot with first-time directors – they start to drown and it becomes a runaway train. So from Day One you have to position yourself as the person in charge. When you are 25 years old and you have never made a film before, you have to be very careful about that because you can come off as a prima donna, a real asshole.

**KCS:** *It sounds like there was quite a bit showmanship involved in selling your vision of the film. How did you and Sean prepare yourself for these pitching sessions?*

**RK:** Pitching to me is just really obnoxious. I hate the word ‘pitch’. It has nothing to do with being an artist. You don’t need to know how to sell yourself to be a good artist, but it is a necessary evil. You have to go in there and articulate your ideas clearly and answer every question they throw at you. A lot of people realise when someone is just a good salesman and that is it, it doesn’t go any further than that. I think that if you razzle-dazzle them in the room too much it can become a smokescreen hiding the fact that there is nothing there. If you are a little awkward, a little disorganised, a little meandering in your ‘pitch’ of how you are going to direct a film, I wouldn’t worry too much, as long as you are being honest. I think that people place far too much emphasis on wow-ing people in the room. It’s become like an episode of *American Idol*.

**KCS:** *So how did you ‘razzle-dazzle’ the studio execs?*

**RK:** I would explain to them the style, the tone of the film, how I’d like to cast it, how it’s going to be photographed. You become very schooled in it and it becomes easier to do the more meetings you take. Sometimes I would walk in the room with Sean and immediately the meeting would end right there because they were expecting Tim Burton and instead they got this *Dawson’s Creek* reject. They would just say, ‘Forget it. It’s not going to happen. You’re too young. You don’t look like a director.’ You just deal with it. You move on and go to the next meeting.

**KCS:** *Knowing that the studios rarely give money to a first-time director, were you worried about alienating yourself with this kind of confident posture?*

**RK:** No, because it was the only card I had. The only card I had was this script that people really liked and I owned it and I wouldn’t sell it. They wanted to take it away from me and I wouldn’t let them. After a while they started to think, ‘Maybe he really can do it. He’s holding out this long. Maybe he really does know what to do with it.’ Eventually, Drew Barrymore signed on and that was the endorsement that they needed.

**KCS:** *After a year of pitching Donnie Darko, it was considered dead around town. But then Jason Schwartzman, the star of Rushmore, became attached. How did this happen?*

**RK:** The script has been copied hundreds of times and had been passed around. It was a script that everyone was reading as a writing sample and it was of interest to a lot of people. Actors were now starting to read it out of curiosity. We heard through the grapevine that Jason liked it and asked about it through his agent. But around town agents were already told the project was dead. Development

executives love to declare a project dead. But really it was still there, waiting to be made; I still wanted to make it. So we got a meeting with Jason and he told us he wanted to do it and he became attached to it, and all of sudden people came out of the woodwork, it was alive again. The excitement started to build, and all of a sudden we had an offer from Pandora to make the film for \$2.5 million. During this time, Jason’s agent Sharon Sheinwold, who was incredibly supportive, sent it to Nancy Juvonen at Flower Films. Nancy read it on the plane going to Las Vegas, flipped out, gave it to Drew, and they both accosted by agent at ShoWest, telling him that they wanted to be involved and help get it made. My agent then called me and told me the news and I asked for a meeting with them. Two days later Sean and I drove down to the set of *Charlie’s Angels* and we were there in the trailer with Drew, her dogs and Nancy.

I asked her to play the English teacher who gets fired and she said she would love to if we would let her production company help produce the film. We shook hands and then, before we knew it, the budget was up to \$4.5 million, which was what we really needed to make the film. It was fantasyland.

**KCS:** *Can you tell me something about that meeting with Drew Barrymore, what your expectations were?*

**RK:** I never get nervous when I meet celebrities, but with Drew it was a different story. We’re the same age but really we’re not. She’s lived a lot more life than I have. In person, she is the most approachable and endearing woman you could ever meet. To think that she would be a mentor and a godmother to this project seemed like a poetic fit. It seemed like the stars were aligned.

**KCS:** *Because of your fondness for E.T.?*

**RK:** There was just something about her and what she had been through in her life that just made her the right mentor for this project. I think she and Nancy had had those meetings where they walked into a meeting and said, ‘We’re producers,’ and people just rolled their eyes. They were willing to roll the dice on me and on Sean. Other more established producers were unwilling to do that; they were very sceptical and unwilling to stick their necks out.

**KCS:** *How did your director of photography, Steven Poster, get involved?*

**RK:** We were looking through a stack of résumés and I noticed he had shot a Ridley Scott film, *Someone to Watch Over Me*. I was stupefied to learn that we could afford someone who had shot a Ridley Scott film. Once you shoot a Ridley Scott film, you can retire, you’ve made it. Steven hadn’t shot a film in two years; he’d been doing commercials and music videos. I met with Steven and the first thing he said to me was, ‘I want you to know two things. First, I want you to forget about the age difference between us. Second, I don’t ever want to be a director so don’t worry, I won’t try and take this film away from you.’ Which put my mind at ease, so I begged him to take the job, cut his price and work on the film. It was an amazing collaborative experience. He got us anamorphic lenses. Very few filmmakers get to use anamorphic lenses on their first film because they are so expensive and difficult to use in terms of the amount of time it takes to light for them. We were granted luxuries





because of Steven Poster: because of his reputation, his crew and his relationship with Panavision. He got us an unprecedented amount of equipment for very little money and got Panavision to cut us an amazing deal. He's the reason the film looks the way it does.

**KCS:** *Was CAA helpful in securing your talented and well-known cast?*

**RK:** When Drew signed on it became something that everyone wanted to be a part of. She agreed to do the movie for scale. That set a precedent for all the other actors who wanted to be a part of it.

**KCS:** *Once Jake Gyllenhaal signed on to do the movie, you met for a month of script meetings. What did you two work on at those meetings?*

**RK:** Jake comes from a family of filmmakers. I love it when an actor comes to me with very specific notes on a character. That means they are invested in it, they are making it their own by digesting it. He'd come over to my house and he would have written a bunch of notes on his script and we would debate and negotiate how we wanted to adjust every line. Maybe other directors look at that as being a nightmarish experience, having an actor come in and do a polish on the script, but I was fine with it. It helped his performance and I'll probably do that again on my next film with the lead actor.

**KCS:** *Can you tell me something about your strategy in pre-production for the design of the film? It has a very specific look with its formal compositions and intricate set pieces.*

**RK:** I showed my crew several films. As a lighting reference I showed them Francis Ford Coppola's *Peggy Sue Got Married*, which was shot by the late Jordan Cronenweth. His work in the prom sequence had an idealised nostalgia, a polished, burnished nostalgia, which I wanted to emulate for a lot of the night sequences, both interior and exterior. Also, Kathleen Turner's prom dress – I wanted to use a similar costuming for the dancers in Sparkle Motion. I wanted there to be a Norman Rockwell feeling to Middlesex and I felt Cronenweth captured a Norman Rockwell feeling in that film. As a tonal reference we looked at Kubrick's *Lolita*. The absurdism of that film. We lifted a few things: recreating Vivian Darkbloom's outfit for Maggie Gyllenhaal at the Halloween party; the footlights in the Sparkle Motion performance were taken from *Lolita*'s play. The tone of that film was similar to what I was trying to establish in *Donnie Darko* – its absurdist humour and pathos.

**KCS:** *You didn't storyboard until after you saw the locations?*

**RK:** You can do a certain amount of storyboarding but you can't accurately storyboard the film until you lock every location. When we got our locations we went on an early tech scout and I took hundreds of photographs from every angle. Then I picked up photographs from the angles we wanted to use and I gave them to the storyboard artist. It made them more accurate.

**KCS:** *It's interesting that you used a professional when you are such an experienced illustrator yourself.*

**RK:** I couldn't draw them because I would spend an hour on each one. It would have been a waste of time. I would start shading in everything, adding shadow, and it would have become really tedious.

**KCS:** *Can you tell me something about the first day of shooting?*

**RK:** It was the first shot of the movie on the cliff. The sun had just come up and it was amazing. It was a pre-production photography day so we only had to get that shot and the mist where Donnie stands up and a couple of background plate shots. So it was literally a two-hour shoot then we went home. It was heaven. It was so wonderful. On top of the world at dawn and I had just directed the first shot of my first film. Jake and I had two bikes and we were riding around like kids. Then we were off on the adventure of principal photography.

**KCS:** *Filming lasted exactly 28 days. Did you feel you were getting everything you needed or was the shoot moving too fast?*

**RK:** It was a train that took off and wouldn't stop. We were just trying to keep up. We were staying on schedule by the skin of our teeth every single day. It was relentless. We were constantly juggling things, working with Tom Hayslip, our line producer, who pulled off miracles for us: locations, schedules, budgets.

**KCS:** *Having not had much experience with professional actors, were you worried that they would not respond to your direction?*

**RK:** I think I put them at ease, up front, by saying, 'I have no idea of what I am doing. I don't know how I am supposed to talk to you, so I am just going to talk to you like you are my friends.' I knew exactly what I wanted the characters to be like, I knew who they were, developing a pretty interesting backstory for each one. For example, I said to Noah Wyle, 'This is who I think Professor Monnitoff is: he went to MIT, he worked for the government for a little while, he decided he wanted to be a science teacher, he smokes pot, he's diabetic, he loves to play video games, he's screwing Ms Pomeroy and they have this thing going on.' And Noah said, 'I get it.' It was all I knew how to do. I think a lot of first-time directors make the mistake of overdoing it and trying to come up with some flowery method dialogue. If you just keep it as simple as you can, the actors will respond to it. It helps if you are the writer too.

**KCS:** *Why? Because it's in your bones?*

**RK:** Yes. Having written the screenplay yourself is half the battle of communicating with your actors because you have had to make decisions about the details of those characters' lives in the writing process. The characters come from you.

**KCS:** *During production you gave Drew Barrymore a few notes that helped with her performance, such as telling her only to smile once during her performance. Can you tell me something about that story and why it helped her re-think her character?*

**RK:** Drew came to the set straight off *Charlie's Angels* and we really had no time to rehearse with her. My thing with Drew was to try and get her to play her character as someone who is irrational and somewhat immature. A teacher who has yet to have her spirit destroyed, but is on her way out. She







doesn't realise the repercussions of what she's doing, an example of this is in the way she taunts the kids. It's a conscious decision for Drew not to play the cutie-pie in this movie. Her character is feeling these bizarre impulses: she's manipulating the kids right off the bat, she's humiliating the kids, trying to put Donnie and Gretchen together. Some people don't want Drew to play anything else but the cutie-pie. It's this monkey on her back from her days as a child actor and it's not fair to pigeonhole her that way because she is capable of so much more.

**KCS:** *Can you describe, technically speaking, how you designed the sequence where Donnie arrives at the school and we are introduced to all the major characters in the story? The camerawork, the choreographed movement of the actors, the music chosen... it is a very effective sequence.*

**RK:** The sequence was originally intended to be a single tracking shot, but the location was so big that it became logistically impossible; as a result, we divided it into four segments. It was choreographed to introduce all of the major characters from the school part of the movie, just as we introduced the family earlier in the film with the Echo and the Bunnymen song, and was to be our second 'musical number'. It foreshadows the chain of events, the microcosm of the entire story that is about to unfold.

To efficiently introduce the characters, I wanted each actor to be doing something emblematic of their character. The goal was for the audience to understand exactly who these people are without a single line of dialogue. I asked myself, how could we capture the essence of a character in a single moment? Steven Poster pre-rigged the school so that we could have a 360-degree shooting environment. I was hiding with him in one of the classrooms, calling out the camera speed changes to the first AC who, along with the Steadicam operator, was the only crew member in the school hallway. It was a live set; the actors could go anywhere and do anything I wanted them to do. All of the slow-motion pieces were created in camera because I really don't care for optical slow motion. It would have been inappropriate for the rhythm of the Tears for Fears song. The fast-motion sequences were all done optically except for when we fly through the window into Drew's classroom. That one was in-camera. I knew it would end with the lyric 'time flies'. My editor Sam Bauer had to cut the song very carefully so that you don't realise that there is about two minutes of it missing.

**KCS:** *Can you remember one moment in the editing of the film that really pleased and surprised you? How cutting two bits together made a big impact on you?*

**RK:** I remember we actually shot footage of Donnie telling Kitty Farmer to shove the Lifeline exercise card up her ass. She gave him this look of terror and outrage, turns to the class and says, 'Excuse me!' and walks out. It was hilarious. However, in the editing room I realised that the laugh was going to be so much bigger if we cut out early, straight to the Principal's office. You're left wondering what he said, milking the joke for a little longer. When Kitty repeats it back to in front of the parents and the dad laughs, it became three times funnier than it would have been if you saw Donnie tell it to her face. In the end everything comes back to creating suspense. Even comedy is about creating suspense for the punch line.

**KCS:** *What was the major conflict with the financiers during post-production? Can you tell me why you fought so hard for it?*

**RK:** I don't want to dwell so much on the conflict during post-production. It happens on every film. I think that when you have a first-time director – and everyone realises that the film could be something really special – everyone wants to throw in his or her two cents. This was the kind of film where everyone had a specific and very passionate opinion about something within the story that they thought was necessary or unnecessary.

But the story was so fragile that I had to fight like hell to keep it from falling apart. Editing was like playing a game of Jenga only with porcelain blocks and no beer. That's not a lot of fun. If you pulled out this therapist scene, or that school scene, the plot would have fallen to pieces. Sometimes I had to scream and yell and sometimes I was right and sometimes I was wrong. Sometimes people were making horrible suggestions, other times I was being a stubborn, self-indulgent director on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

**KCS:** *Judging from the jovial nature of the DVD cast and crew commentary, it sounded like everyone had a good time making this film. Did you do anything, as a director, to engender a certain spirit of togetherness among the cast and crew while working?*

**RK:** I think when everyone is there for no money, you are there because you love the material; you're not there for the paycheck. So right away there is a democracy, an idea that everyone is on equal terms. That engenders a community spirit. I think actors have a really good time on independent films. I think studio films can be slow and tedious. It's about getting paid, a lot of people are not so happy with the script. It's about paying the mortgage on their house; it's about positioning themselves for their career. When you are doing an independent film you are there because you love a script. You can see the fire in the performer's eye, I don't know if you see that in a big studio film.

**KCS:** *The budget came in at \$4.5 million. You said you owe a lot of people favours for helping you on the film. Who were these people and what roles did they have in helping the film stay under control, financially?*

**RK:** Steven Poster got us every discount in the book: lighting, grip, electric, and camera. Everything came at a tremendous discount: he even got his crew to cut his price. Tom Hayslip, the line producer, worked miracles with the budget. Sean McKittrick was incredibly organised, so on-the-game as a producer. He helped me get what I needed and what I wanted, which was essential because I am so disorganised. Alexander Hammond, our production designer, built his own sets for very little money and found a jet engine in Arizona. April Ferry, the costume designer, worked miracles for us. My friend Kelly Carlton did the water barrier effects for \$5,000. The whole crew was incredibly generous.

**KCS:** *Was the film profitable?*

**RK:** Domestically it only made half-a-million dollars, but worldwide it turned a profit, thanks to a good theatrical run in the UK. The Region 1 DVD sold very well, although that process was something of a nightmare. When a movie fails at the box-office, the home video people come out of the woodwork. The company that was in charge of the DVD, a bottom-feeder house called Silver Nitrate Home Video, they were insistent of re-packaging it as teen slasher film. I had quite a war with them. I remember





at the first meeting sitting across from this marketing woman at a restaurant, and she was explaining to me that we needed to remove Mary McDonnell and Katharine Ross from the above-the-title block, because teenagers didn't care about them. These are two women who have been nominated for multiple Academy Awards; they did this movie for scale! This idiot wants to remove their names because she thinks it will help sales. It was such an idiotic and insulting display of ageism against Mary and Katharine. I wanted to take my beer and dump it over her head.

**KCS:** *I was walking down the road in London before the film was released and there was this restaurant that jutted out towards the road, exposing a broad, cream-coloured wall. It was an empty canvas for a graffiti artist. On the wall was spray-painted, in tall block letters, the words DONNIE DARKO.*

**RK:** Yeah, there was graffiti art all over London. Tom Grievson at Metrodome showed it to a bunch of the top graffiti artists in London and I guess they all flipped out for it. It became a renegade campaign; the graffiti artists took it upon themselves to promote our movie. It was very flattering. They did an amazing art exhibit too. I never thought I'd see a Smurf orgy on canvas, but now I have.

**KCS:** *The score by Michael Andrews was very effective. How did your collaboration come about?*

**RK:** For some reason a lot of directors keep going back to the same five guys to compose their films. I was never going to be able to afford one of those five superstars so I decided to find a genius that had not had the opportunity to show his stuff. Jim Juvonen, Nancy's younger brother, called me up and told me about this guy living down San Diego. We met and hit it off. When we were close to locking the picture, I was in there almost every day with Michael, working out the score. The score was recorded over the period of about a month. He was influenced by Jerry Goldsmith and his scores from the seventies. Mike has stacks and stacks of obscure records that also helped, a lot of stuff I had never heard of. I mean, he'll go on eBay and buy a flute from 18th century Russia. He's all about finding unusual ways to create music. He created that score from scratch, for no money.

**KCS:** *You have said there is a lot of armchair quarterbacking that goes on with first-time directors, especially in the editing room. How did this manifest itself in post-production and how did you handle it?*

**RK:** It got frustrating because when there is a film that is open-ended and it's lacking a certain amount of closure, by design, there is always going to be an inspired debate about the length of the film and what you don't cut. As a first-time director I found it a little frustrating sometimes. Sometimes it becomes very confrontational and upsetting but you know that this is your one shot to make your film. In 10 years no one is going to remember you yelled at your financier because they wanted you to cut something, they're going to remember what's in the film. So if I have to yell at someone I will. And I won almost every battle. I probably let it get to me too much and I lost sleep, lost weight and became this insane maniac for several months. It was an unpleasant time, but I got through it.

**KCS:** *You have said that if you could change anything about your experience on the film you would have 'stressed less and not taken it so seriously. I wish I'd just calmed the fuck down a little bit.' Was it the financial responsibilities making you so stressed?*

**RK:** It was two things: getting the final cut of the film the way I wanted it and then, even more so, selling the film to a distributor and having them not re-cut it against my wishes. That is the nightmare of any filmmaker who brings a film to the Sundance Film Festival. You have to get in there and fight. You run the risk of alienating the distributor or getting a bad reputation around town, but you know what? No one is going to remember that if your movie is good and it gets good reviews or makes money. It's personal, it's your art and they are going to take it away from you. I'm speaking in general terms, because Newmarket was very good to me; they were the only ones who wanted to distribute the film. However, most distributors have a complete lack of respect for the director and his or her vision.

**KCS:** *There was a lot of buzz at Sundance surrounding Donnie Darko. How did that affect the sale of your film to potential distributors?*

**RK:** Buzz is the most obnoxious thing; it is truly horrible for your film, especially at Sundance. If you come into Sundance with buzz – and I hate that word, with a passion – immediately people are going to be sharpening their knives.

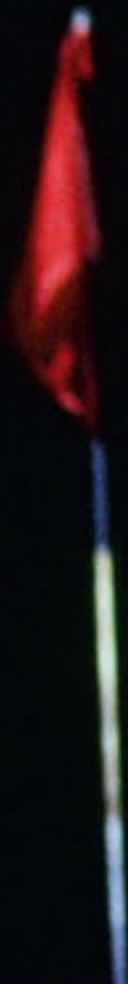
**KCS:** *Why do you think that is?*

**RK:** That's just the way it is. People are looking for a reason to shoot something down. Also, I think if you show up at Sundance with a movie with visual effects, Drew Barrymore and a big cast, there will be a lot of people who will be sceptical and derisive of it because they don't think it's really an independent film. That's one part of the Sundance reaction. Others were overwhelmingly excited that it was there and acknowledged it as being an independent film. But almost because of the fact that it looked like it cost more than it did – and because of its visual effects – there were a lot of people who immediately thought it was a disingenuous commercial enterprise invading the sacred independent scene. Sundance is great, but it has been getting a little more corporate every year and perhaps there is a backlash against anything that is seen as being corporate or commercial. For some reason people thought of *Donnie Darko* as being something that didn't belong in competition at Sundance. It was touted as the first film in competition at Sundance with significant digital effects. I think that bothered a certain old-school way of thinking. They want to see the movie about lesbians making fudge. I love lesbians... and I love fudge... but I don't necessarily want to see that film... shot digitally, of course. Programming director Geoffrey Gilmore was really supportive of the film. He knew that it belonged there.

**KCS:** *How did the first screening with an audience go?*

**RK:** We had never shown it to a theatre full of people. I was pretty relaxed before the screening and I was very content with the film we made. I knew there was still some work to do, I knew it was still running a little long here or there, but I felt really content. I just wanted someone to buy it so we could get it out there in theatres. It was great seeing it with an audience. I was just relieved that they were laughing... in the right places.

**KCS:** *How did you feel when the festival ended and there was no deal in place?*





**RK:** It was frustrating because of the hype around the film. Immediately the distributors wanted to dismiss it as something that didn't work. A lot of the distributors badmouthed the film as soon as they walked out of the screening. They do that to discourage competition from other buyers. The acquisition executives will talk shit about films – even ones that they like – to keep someone else from getting something they might be interested in. There's a lot of jockeying and hearsay that goes into selling your film at Sundance and it is just nauseating. It makes you want to puke. *Entertainment Weekly* does this thing called the Buzz-o-Meter. They actually put the buzz for your film on a chart. Of course we started off-the-charts high... then bottomed out when no deal was in place. There was nowhere to go but down. People read something like that and almost immediately the film is considered to be a failure around town. No one wants to touch it. I cut the Buzz-o-Meter out of the magazine and put it on my bulletin board so I could chart the buzz throughout the remainder of my life on earth.

I never, ever, want to make a film again that doesn't have a domestic distributor before we start shooting. You lose sleep and you're at the mercy of acquisition executives. They have an opinion, then they go back on that opinion, they kiss your ass one day then talk shit about your film the next day. It's all too much.

Ironically... Lisa Schwarzbaum at *Entertainment Weekly* gave the film an A- when it was released. The same grade I got for *The Vomiteer* in college. Perhaps I will remake *The Vomiteer* and bring it to Sundance. I can hand out barf bags.

**KCS:** *How did you feel about the way the movie was received on its theatrical release in the States and abroad?*

**RK:** I was just thrilled that it got released, period. There were about four months when it was going to get dumped onto pay cable or home video. It was very close to not getting a theatrical release because distributors felt it was not marketable. Newmarket was the only distributor who was still interested. But at that point there was an offer from a cable company where the financiers could have made more money, up front, dumping it onto cable. I was in there begging, telling them that I would write a free script if they gave my movie a theatrical release. I was willing to chop off my arm to get it in theatres. I think I actually did offer to chop off my arm.

**KCS:** *They probably would have preferred the free script.*

**RK:** Actually, they probably would have preferred to see me chop off my arm. I knew that if it did not get a theatrical release it would be the end of my career. I would have to go find something else to do for a living, especially after the hype of Sundance. If it goes straight-to-video after that much attention, then the film and the filmmaker are considered a failure. When they finally said they were going to put it out on Halloween, I was so thankful. As long as they put it on one screen, for one weekend, I could avoid the curse of the straight-to-video tag. A lot of good films get dumped onto video and a lot of film that don't deserve a theatrical release get one. It's not really a fair assessment of quality, by any means. So when September 11th happened we lost a month and a half of publicity, theatre booking time; everything got thrown out of whack and literally there was no publicity. I think they made a bad decision in putting it in eight cities. It played very well in LA and New York, but the

theatres were empty in Washington DC, Chicago, and Seattle. It died the opening weekend as a result. So they pulled all the newspaper ads, all the marketing and it was left to linger in LA and New York for a few months, then it just disappeared. You can't recover from an opening weekend like that. If they had just put it in two theatres in LA and two theatres in New York and let it build, it would have played much better. But it's OK; it got released.

**KCS:** *And you still have your arm.*

**RK:** Yes, I still have my arm and I have a career. I would have been so upset for all the people who worked on this film for no money had it not been given a theatrical release.

**KCS:** *Philip French, writing in the London Sunday paper, The Observer, noted that Graham Greene's 'The Destructors' argued that destruction is a form of creation. In the light of your film being released so soon after 9/11, were you worried about the parallels?*

**RK:** I think any time your art takes on new meaning after a cataclysmic event there is nothing you can do because perception has changed. You can only hope that it is not going to offend people or upset them any more than they already are. You hope it is not going to pour gasoline on a fire that already exists in people's lives. We thought about it for a few days and decided that if there was a resonance about the film then we hoped it would somehow be cathartic for people instead of upsetting them. I think the film was received favourably in light of 9/11. It did not offend people.

**KCS:** *Why do you think Donnie Darko polarised so many film critics?*

**RK:** I think it might be a generational thing. There are people who remember the eighties in the way it was in the film. There are other people remember the eighties as something out of a Bret Easton Ellis novel, hanging out in clubs in New York City. I remember the John Hughes version of the eighties. I think some critics just didn't know what to do with it. They weren't open to experiencing the film with their guard down, letting it be what it was. They wanted to tag it as something and because they couldn't tag it as something they said it was muddled, pretentious – or they'd say something like, 'He's just young. He's trying to do too much.' We got some really good reviews but we got some people who also said it was adolescent nonsense. You are going to get that from people who are not willing to engage in the film, look at it more than once. Although the people who were supportive of it were very passionate about it.

**KCS:** *The film ignited a lot of interpretation chatter on the Internet. What did you make of some of these readings, such as Donnie being the messiah?*

**RK:** Whoa. It's comic book story in a way and he is a kind of superhero. I think there is a messiah undercurrent to a lot of superhero stories. Any time you are dealing with a hero who has to save the world there is going to be a link to Christ mythology. You know we made a sight gag as a reference to Scorsese's film: when Donnie comes out of the cinema the marquee shows *The Last Temptation of Christ*.





**KCS:** *What about some of the other stuff on the Internet? Do you follow any of it?*

**RK:** I've seen some of the fan sites. It's pretty amazing. I had no idea that a couple of years later people would be talking about it. It's rewarding and flattering and it just makes me more determined not to sell out and to keep doing stuff like this.

**KCS:** *You have said that, 'No matter how successful or unsuccessful I am in my career I think I'll always have that underdog mentality.' Now that you've made your first film, with Drew Barrymore, when you were 25, do you really think of yourself as an underdog?*

**RK:** What I was trying to say was I would try my hardest not to sell out, not to make a film for purely mercenary purposes, especially if the studio thinks it is a safe bet. In that sense, you're an underdog in getting the studio to take a risk. The material might not work, might not be palatable to an audience, it might not sell, so who knows, maybe in five years' time I'll be directing some really horrible romantic comedy.

**KCS:** *Have you felt any notions of resentment from others in the filmmaking community who resent that your first feature was produced so successfully?*

**RK:** There's always going to be a resentment and I probably deserve it. I think I definitely got very lucky, getting a lot of opportunities afforded to me at a very young age. I'm just trying to do good work and not screw it up. They probably would have resented me more had I got all those opportunities and made something that sucked. The only way I can say thank you for all these opportunities is to make a good film and to help out, to help other filmmakers make good films. That is the way you give back.









# THE CULT OF PATRICK SWAYZE

by Jamie Graham

Step back to the 1980s, if you will – a time when the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, was overseeing a hitherto unseen rate of economic expansion at home while the primary objective of his foreign policy was to escalate the Cold War with the Soviet Union. This flexing of power was mirrored in Hollywood cinema, with the invincible Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone dominating the box office, and even the lunk-headed likes of Jean Claude Van Damme, Steven Seagal and Chuck Norris muscling their way into the mainstream action.

In 1985, Stallone tackled Communism head on, not once but twice. In *Rocky IV*, his big-hearted Italian-American pugilist stepped into the ring to defeat the evil, emotionless Ivan Drago from the USSR – Rocky even opted for Stars and Stripes shorts, while Drago modelled the Hammer and Sickle, in case you missed the symbolism. And then, in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, Stallone's Vietnam veteran launched a bloodthirsty rescue mission in Southeast Asia for US servicemen missing in action since the war. It was an action movie widely condemned for its blunt politics and staggering body count, and yet, bizarrely, in a case of life imitating blockbusters imitating life, Reagan 'joked': "Boy, after seeing *Rambo* last night, I know what to do next time this happens."

Into this climate of unabashed machismo arrived Patrick Wayne Swayze, an actor whose strong jaw came with a tender heart, whose rugged masculinity was part of a greater sensuality, and whose surface swagger never sought to camouflage a core of melancholy.

Joining the ranks of Schwarzenegger, Stallone *et al* when he became a star with *Dirty Dancing* in 1987, Swayze, too, had no shortage of muscles, and just three years earlier had starred in John Milius's *Red Dawn* (1984), in which a mid-western town is attacked by Commies at the onset of World War III. But Swayze was different, and not just because his frame was graceful and lithe rather than comically swollen.

With his nimble strength (*that lift!*), brooding intensity, arrogance, courage, vulnerability and assertiveness ("No one puts Baby in the corner") – to say nothing of looking quite the dream in soaking wet clothing – Swayze instantly became a star and sex symbol. An entire generation fantasised that Johnny, or someone just like him, would be their first love, and *Dirty Dancing* became a staple of teenage sleepovers and ice-cream-and-tissues post-breakup nights. Even the maudlin power ballad he co-wrote with Stacy Wideltz and crooned himself, 'She's Like the Wind', hit number three in the American pop charts.

If Johnny Castle had of been all that Swayze gave to the world, it would be enough to ensure a shrine in the corner of Hollywood history – not least because it paved the way for a new kind of action hero, less brawn and bullets, more brain and benevolence (think Keanu in *Speed* [1994], Leonardo





in *Titanic* [1997]). And yet three years later, Swayze would do it again, this time eschewing alpha-male posturing altogether and going to poignant places that Schwarzenegger and the rest would not dare attempt.

The film, of course, was romantic fantasy *Ghost* (1990), with Swayze reinventing himself as yuppie banker Sam Wheat, whose love for his girlfriend Molly (Demi Moore) is so fierce and true that even death cannot keep him from her. Like *Dirty Dancing*, *Ghost* is a film that entered the public consciousness, its \$505m box office making it the number one hit of 1990 – and, at the time, the fourth biggest movie of all time – while its centrepiece pottery sequence has since been spoofed in *The Naked Gun 2½: The Smell of Fear* (1991), *Family Guy* (the 2008 episode ‘Baby Not on Board’), *Community* (the 2010 episode ‘Beginner Pottery’), *Two and a Half Men* (the 2014 episode ‘Cab Fare and a Bottle of Penicillin’), and by Justin Timberlake and Jimmy Fallon on talk show *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*.

A third iconic role arrived just a year later when Swayze’s Zen-surfer/bank robber Bodhi rubbed up against Keanu Reeves’ undercover FBI agent Johnny Utah in *Point Break* (1991) – almost literally, as director Kathryn Bigelow teased out the homoerotic subtext that informs so many buddy action movies. Like Swayze’s spiritual bouncer Dalton in 1989 B-movie *Road House*, Bodhi is attuned a higher power, in this case Mother Earth. The bank heists are not so much crimes as adrenalin-fuelled assaults on capitalist society, a system that Bodhi has long since opted out of as he seeks to plug into Nature and live life to the max.

Bodhi’s infectious passion and quest for meaning is not dissimilar to how Swayze conducted his own life. Raised a Catholic, he later studied Buddhism, Erhard Seminars Training (EST), Scientology and Transcendental Meditation, and embraced therapy also. “I believe in a higher power,” he said. “I’ve studied Eastern philosophies, and I’ve studied the Koran... I have a great deal of faith in faith... I would like to believe that my father [who died in 1982, aged 57] is right here in this room with me and that he’s my guardian angel; that there’s life after death. Because if there isn’t, why are we here?” Faith, optimism, philosophy, ideology, inquisitiveness... all shone through in Swayze’s public and private personae, adding to the radioactive charisma that drew people in.

He certainly wasn’t afraid to take chances. Arguably at the height of his fame in the early 1990s – in 1991, he received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and was voted Sexiest Man Alive by *People* magazine, while his name started popping up in hip-hop tracks as the lyric “I’m Swayze” became synonymous to ‘ghost’, meaning ‘gone’ or ‘outta here’ – he opted to star in Roland Joffé’s Calcutta-set drama, *City of Joy* (1992). In 1995, he would appear as a drag queen in *To Wong Foo Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar*. And in 2001, he again reinvented himself in *Donnie Darko*, courageously and charismatically playing a motivational speaker who is revealed to be a paedophile.

“I decided to get out of this blockbuster mentality and go with my heart, to play messed-up doctors and drag queens and paedophiles,” he told me in an interview for *Total Film* magazine in 2005. “I think I’m on my fifth refocusing of my career now.”

Of course, a part of the reason for these shifts can be put down to personal upheavals and career stalls. Beginning to drink heavily after his father’s death, Swayze withdrew from the industry in 1994,

spending time in rehab to fight his alcoholism and to seek support after his older sister Vickie died from a drug overdose. Time was then spent at his ranches in California, New Mexico and Las Vegas, where he bred Arabian horses. But Swayze was also, unquestionably, an adventurer and a fighter, keen to avoid being pigeonholed and to forever take risks. In 2003, he returned to Broadway to play Billy Flynn in *Chicago*; in 2006, he made his West End debut in *Guys and Dolls*, playing Nathan Detroit; and in 2009, he impressed mightily as a veteran FBI agent under investigation in TV show *The Beast*. (It is perhaps best to overlook his cameo as a dance instructor in 2004’s *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights*; he agreed to it as a favour and on the promise, by Miramax, that he could develop future projects.)

What made his turn in *The Beast* all the more remarkable is that he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in January 2008, and filmed the 13 episodes, each 43 minutes in length, without recourse to painkillers for fear that they would take the edge off his performance. “How do you nurture a positive attitude when all the statistics say you’re a dead man?” he asked. “You go to work.” It is this courage and passion – he refused experimental treatments for fear that he’d be so busy chasing life, he’d miss the portion he had left – that is as much a part of his legacy as the lift in *Dirty Dancing* or the pottery scene in *Ghost*. Admitting, as his disease took its toll, that he often thought of Sam’s passing in the final scenes of *Ghost* (“It’s amazing, Molly, the love inside, you take it with you”), he said, in his last TV interview, a *Barbara Walters Special* on ABC Television, “I keep my heart and my soul open to miracles.” If it is endurance and heroism you’re after, look not to 1980s action movies but to the mettle and dignity that Swayze exhibited as he fought his illness for 20 months: “I’ve had more lifetimes than any 10 people put together, so this [dying] is OK,” he said.

Patrick Swayze finally lost his battle with pancreatic cancer on September 14, 2009, leaving behind his writer/director/actress/dancer wife Lisa Niemi, whom he met at his mother’s dance studio and married in June 1975. He was 57 years old when he died, the same age as his father. Among the outpouring of public grief were tributes from the co-leads in his two most famous films: “Patrick was a rare and beautiful combination of raw masculinity and amazing grace,” noted Jennifer Grey, while Demi Moore said, “Your light will forever shine in all of our lives.”

My own contact with him was limited to just that one interview in 2005. It was sadly conducted over a transatlantic phone line rather than in person, but Swayze’s vitality made itself felt, and our scheduled 20-minute appointment came ran to an hour-and-a-half. During that time, he told me that his friends call him ‘Crazy Swayze’ because he’s a “beast of passion and purpose”, and confessed that he’d dearly like to make a *Point Break* mini-series (“Bodhi’s too smart to be dead... he probably had a one-man sub tied to a rock on the bottom of the sea”) and a *Ghost* sequel (“It could be called *Sam Comes Back*”). He also spoke, rapidly, for more than two minutes when I asked him to sum up *Donnie Darko* in 20 words or less, finishing with a dramatic pause before asking, “Was that under 20?”

But it was when I asked him about his martial arts training that he best summed up his life and career: “I don’t believe in violence,” he said. “I believe in being highly trained and prepared to stop harm coming to any other human being. I’m a peaceful warrior, you know?”

*Jamie Graham is a freelance film journalist who writes for Sunday Times Culture. He is Editor-at-Large of Total Film magazine and has contributed to numerous books, including Movies: From the Silent Classics of the Silver Screen to the Digital and 3-D Era.*







# AFTER DARKO: HOW RICHARD KELLY ADAPTED TO THE APOCALYPSE

by Anton Bitel

*"I'm voting for Dukakis."*

It is October 1988, and this is the first spoken line from Donnie Darko's older sister Elizabeth (played by Jake Gyllenhaal's actual sister Maggie). Her optimistic desire for an alternative, brighter future is, at least from our retrospective viewpoint, doomed from the start. On November 8th 1988, a few days after the events of *Donnie Darko* have completed their strange loop, Republican George H.W. Bush would beat Michael Dukakis to the White House, extending eight years of harsh Reaganomics for another presidential term. The future has already happened, and Elizabeth's hopes come with a paradoxical belatedness.

In January 2001, Richard Kelly's feature debut *Donnie Darko* premieres at Sundance to considerable acclaim, literally the day before another, junior Bush assumes the presidency. A late October theatrical release that same year will fall unhappily on the other side of the Twin Tower attacks, making the film, entirely contingently, a post-9/11 artefact. It was the Bush era again, in truly dark(o) times, and it would take the film, lost down a wormhole of American history-in-the-making, many long months to build a word-of-mouth following and secure, from the ruins, its own future cult status. *Donnie Darko* is both concerned with, and as it happens a product of, being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So where do you go from a film so doom-laden and apocalyptic? Kelly's first project would be to rework his original materials into a director's cut some 20 minutes longer, with newly restored scenes, an altered soundtrack, and chapter headings 'borrowed' from the intradiegetic book, *The Philosophy of Time Travel*, by character Roberta Sparrow (Patience Cleveland). In this way, *Donnie Darko* was reconfigured as an adaptation from its own fictions – an idea that would recur in Kelly's later films. He would, though, have no involvement in the eventual, inevitable sequel *S. Darko* (2009), directed by Chris Fisher.



*"I recommend speaking in short sentences because he has the attention span of a ferret on crystal meth."*



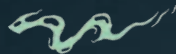


This is the advice given to Domino Harvey (Keira Knightley) and her bounty hunter crew by Kimmie (Mena Suvari) as they go in to see Kimmie's boss, television executive Mark Heiss (Christopher Walken). Heiss wants to turn Domino's life into a reality TV show – a film-within-a-film reflex for *Domino* (2005) itself – but in the ensuing chaos, in part managed and manipulated by Domino, quickly loses control of his subject.

*Domino* is perhaps the odd one out among Kelly's screenplays given that it is directed by someone else, the inimitable Tony Scott at his amped-up, hyperreal best. As though we too have the concentration of an intoxicated rodent, Scott throws everything at us: impossibly rapid cuts and multiple angles, in a hyperactive mash-up of different film stocks and styles that constantly serve to destabilise the viewer's grip on the narrative. Kelly's screenplay, however, is no less dizzying, as he presents Domino (real-life daughter of actor Laurence Harvey) as an elusive figure whose identity is always a calculated construct fashioned to appeal to its specific audience.

In this case that audience is FBI Agent Taryn Mills (Lucy Liu), questioning the captive Domino about the small matter of \$10 million gone missing, and a Vegas penthouse blown to smithereens along with everyone inside. Knowing that what she says next will “determine whether I spend the rest of my life in prison”, Domino spins her interrogator a convoluted yarn involving crossed paths, misunderstood lines, mixed motivations and colliding subplots, all designed to present Ms Harvey in the very best of lights. Here bail bondsmen, mobsters, agents, students, Afghan freedom fighters and DMV workers are brought improbably together in a carnivalesque story that takes Beverly Hills' privileged classes down to street level and reduces real life to bombastic film gestures. As Domino quests for authenticity in the mediated male world of entertainment that she has inherited from her father, the film keeps interrogating its own veridical status. For Domino proves a most unreliable narrator, telling tales tall and true to save her skin – and much as, at one point within her story, she defuses a dangerous situation with a seductive lap dance (“sometimes a girl has to be naughty to get out of a jam”), Domino gives to Taryn an account of her life (and of the last few weeks' events) that is a kind of narrative striptease, covering up as much as it reveals.

All of which is to say that Kelly has written this biopic also as a meta-biopic that constantly comments on its own adaptation and presentation. Domino Harvey is real enough – and to prove it, Scott shows the real Domino at his film's end, even if the car seen exploding in the background binds her to a world of pure genre. Of course the story that Kelly, along with his heroine, unfolds is a careful concoction of a real life story and a flagrant fiction – and if it lacks the brain-bending SF elements that characterise all the films that Kelly has himself directed, Domino's habit of rewinding, revising and retelling scenes in her narrative represents its own kind of time travel through alternative story universes. Sadly, in another case of bad timing, the real Domino would die of a drug overdose before the film that so imaginatively reinvented her life could hit the streets.



Kelly's second feature as writer/director, *Southland Tales* (2006), practically defines ‘sophomoric’. An overwrought, tonally mercurial merger of high ideas and low satire, it returns – with a bang – to the apocalyptic themes of *Donnie Darko* by opening with nuclear mushrooms over Texas, and ending with no less than the end of the world. In between is a summary-defying ensemble caper that exposes

the insanity of the post-9/11 War on Terror in a manner all at once sophisticated and stupid-assed. Notoriously, the unfinished cut that showed at Cannes in 2005 was booed, and the later theatrical cut had a decidedly mixed critical reception – but this is perhaps because people were not quite ready for its darkly distorted reflection of Bush's dumbed-down, over-surveilled America, or for its sheer narrative intemperance.

*Southland Tales* presents itself as a triptych, confusingly divided into Parts Four, Five and Six (Parts One to Three were published separately as graphic novels). Opening with Part Four is of course reminiscent of the (retrofitted) *Star Wars* saga (1977-), in what is perhaps a nod to the hard science-fiction buried beneath Kelly's lampooning of the political and entertainment industries. Yet most of the influences here comprise a bewilderingly eclectic host of films, all unified by the Californian setting that they share with Kelly's mind-melter. Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) – seen twice playing on television sets in the background – is similarly a self-conscious (neo-)noir with intimations of apocalypse. Alex Cox's *Repo Man* (1984) provides the template for darkly comic narrative criss-crossing that culminates in the ascent of a glowing vehicle into the air. David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.* (2001) prompts the amnesia-driven plotting, the paranoid surrealism, the film-world setting, and even a performance, near the end, by singer Rebekah del Rio. Another key reference for *Southland Tales* is Philip K. Dick's 1974 novel *Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said*. The line “Flow my tears” is actually spoken in the film by a policeman, the corrupt Bart Bookman (Jon Lovitz), whose surname sounds like that of Dick's policeman Felix Buckman, while the novel's main character Jason Taverner, who gets caught in a parallel universe, shares his surname with Ronald/Roland Taverner (Seann William Scott), himself divided by a car ride through a space-time rift.

Our flummoxed cicerone through this near-future dystopian LA microcosm is Boxer Santaros (Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson), an actor who, following a mysterious incident in the desert, is afflicted with amnesia, so that he has forgotten his former life, his Republican connections, even his wife. Boxer's constant confoundment – matched by that of Johnson, who has, along with several other cast members, claimed never to have understood Kelly's script – modulates the viewer's. For Kelly's labyrinthine plot – involving Republican authoritarianism, neo-Marxist resistance, a manipulative ‘wizard’ prankster, damaged war veterans, renegade cops, timeserving porn stars, lip-synched song-and-dance numbers, suicidal conscripts, alternative power sources, time travel and mind-altering hallucinogens – unfolds before our eyes without ever quite making sense.

Meanwhile, even as Boxer wanders from here to there as the malleable puppet of forces beyond his comprehension, he works on a screenplay for a Hollywood sci-fi action thriller (called *The Power*) that is in fact an accurate – if fictionalised – prediction of his role as helpless witness to the end of the world. The script to *The Power* serves as *mise en abyme* and meta-text, modulating and commenting on the film's events, while reminding viewers that behind all the surface craziness is a carefully formulated scheme holding everything together. Kelly has figured his own screenplay within *Southland Tales*, and chronicled its realisation on screen.



*The Box* (2009), Kelly's last feature to date, is also the first that he has adapted from someone else's writing. Richard Matheson's short story *Button, Button* (first published in the June 1970 edition of





*Playboy*) concerns the unforeseen moral consequences that arise after a married couple, Norma and Arthur Lewis, are visited by a stranger, Mr Steward, who gives them a device with a button, and informs them: "If you push the button [...] somewhere in the world someone you don't know will die. In return for which you will receive a payment."

The story had already been adapted, with an altered ending, into an episode of TV's *The Twilight Zone* (co-scripted by Matheson under the pseudonym Logan Swanson, and aired 7 March, 1986). For his own feature-length take on Matheson's story, Kelly incorporates elements from both pre-existing versions – and yet in and around these borrowed materials Kelly weaves both autobiographical gestures and recurrent themes from his own oeuvre. The result is an out-there adaptation that is also, arguably, Kelly's most personal film. The setting has been transposed to the state of Virginia (Kelly's birthplace), during the Christmas period of 1976 – and this time the Lewises, rather than being a childless couple, are parents to a young son (Sam Oz Stone) who is just a little older than Kelly (b. 28 March, 1975) would have been at the time. Now Arthur (James Marsden), like Kelly's own father, works as an engineer for the Mars Viking lander programme at NASA Langley, while Norma (Cameron Diaz, channelling Farrah Fawcett) has, just like Kelly's own mother, been left permanently crippled by medical malpractice. In this peculiar place where fact (Kelly's own autobiography) and fiction (Matheson's source story) meet, Kelly has also crafted a strange merger of science, religion and magic, as Arlington Steward (Frank Langella), with his unearthly courtesy, horrific scars and odd miracles, is all at once a vessel for a conspiratorial science project conducted by alien observers, and a resurrected Christ on Earth, preparing ordinary American families for their personal Judgement Day.

Many of the motifs that have become Kelly's stock in trade are present and correct here. The moral conundrums triggered by the button reset the spiritual choices that Donnie Darko, Boxer Santaros and Roland Taverner must make. Steward's creation of plasma-like portals from pools of water recalls the liquid 'spears' in *Donnie Darko* that map out characters' future trajectories, the swimming pool pod from which a mobster makes untraceable phone calls in *Domino*, and the 'Fluid Karma' energy source (and shifting oceans) in *Southland Tales*. Holmes Osborne, the actor who played Donnie Darko's father and Boxer Santaros' father-in-law, returns once more as a father (to Norma) – with the hilariously improbable character name Dick Burns.

Once again there is, like Roberta Sparrow's *The Philosophy of Time Travel*, Mark Heiss's reality TV show and Boxer Santaros's movie screenplay, an embedded meta-text here, in the form of the mysterious *Human Resources Exploitation Manual* that employees of NASA and the NSA use as their Biblical guide in expediting Steward's (and the film's) plotting. Meanwhile, Jean-Paul Sartre's 1944 play *No Exit* – which Norma both teaches in class and watches being performed in a theatre – restages the principal events from Matheson's story as infernal dramas of entrapment, existentialism and eschatology. As always with Kelly, the end is nigh, and the question of whether God is watching and waiting on the other side remains a matter for pure speculation and (possibly vain) hope – or, as one might put it, thinking outside of the box.

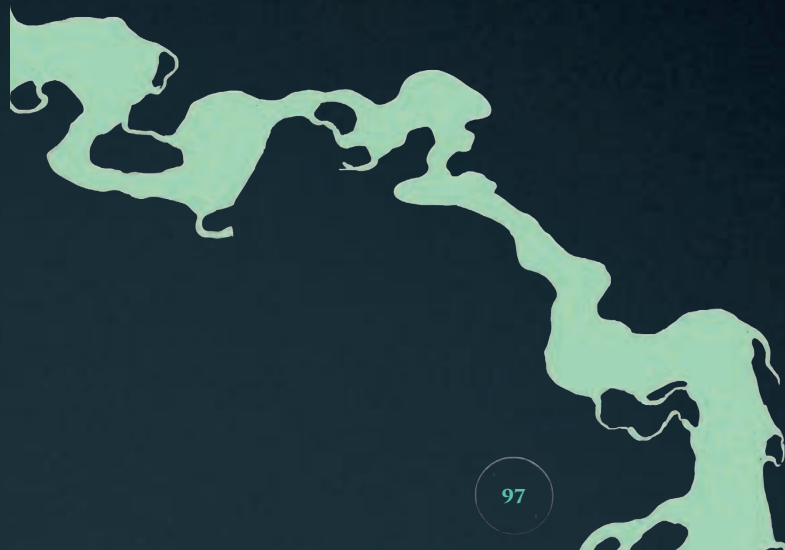
Juggling very big ideas and engaging with the thorniest of ethical questions, *The Box* takes one couple's seemingly straightforward dilemma and transforms it into a crux of apocalyptic dimensions and universal implications. Kelly delivers all at once an engrossing genre piece, an exceptional

exercise in expansive adaptation, and a complex moral allegory, so that this is a box that requires a lot of unpacking – which of course makes it the gift that will, over multiple views, keep on giving.



There have been other projects that Kelly has failed to get off the ground, from his adapted screenplay for Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and Louis Sachar's *Holes* (1998), to his original thrillers *Corpus Christi* and *Amicus* – with preproduction on the last halted when its would-be star, James Gandolfini, died in 2013. Kelly's relatively small filmography comes in spite, or perhaps because, of the idiosyncrasy, sophistication and big ideas that he brings to all his work. His films remain a difficult sell because they fail to be easily categorised, pigeon-holed or explained – but it is that very quality which also makes them so singularly recognisable and memorable. To watch a Kelly joint is to enter a parallel universe, rich, strange and very much his own, in which life is always playing itself out in the shadow of a prescribed doom.

*Anton Bitel is a freelance critic based in Oxford (where he also teaches Classics). He writes regularly for Sight & Sound, Little White Lies and TwitchFilm.*



# ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*Donnie Darko* has been exclusively restored for this release by Arrow Films. Both the theatrical and director's cut versions of the film are presented in their original 2.35:1 aspect ratio with 5.1 audio.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution on a pin-registered 4K Lasergraphics Director Scanner at Deluxe Media, Burbank. Although the original 35mm camera negative served as the primary restoration source for both the theatrical and director's cut versions, a 35mm digital intermediate element was scanned for some sections of the film which were unique to the Director's Cut.

The film was restored in 4K and graded in 4K HDR/Dolby Vision and SDR at Silver Salt Restoration, London.

The original 5.1 audio mix was transferred and supplied by Lakeshore Entertainment.

This restoration of *Donnie Darko* has been approved by Director Richard Kelly and Director of Photography Steven Poster.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

Materials were made available by Lakeshore Entertainment, Technicolor Production Services, and UCLA Film & Television Archive.

Deluxe Burbank film scanning services:  
Cheryl Frohlich, Jeff Gaetano, Larry McQuaide

Silver Salt Restoration:  
Anthony Badger, Steve Bearman, Mark Bonnici, Lisa Copson, Simon Edwards, Lucie Hancock, Ray King, Rob Langridge

The primary reverse time-lapse sequence effect that takes place during the Director's Cut version has been newly re-created by Richard Kelly at Gradient Effects for this presentation.

Gradient Effects, CA:  
Ashley Manning, Sean Rutledge, Olcun Tan, Fergie Torres

Special thanks:  
Mike Lechner, Gavin Citron/Lakeshore Entertainment, Chadi Bousleiman, Erik Forsberg, Dennis Schroeder/Technicolor Production Services, Todd Wiener/UCLA Film & Television Archive

Special thanks to Richard Kelly and Stephen Poster for their generous participation on this project.

# PRODUCTION CREDITS

## Original 2016 Release

Discs and Book Produced by **Anthony Nield**  
Production Assistant **Liane Cunje**

## 2021 4K Ultra HD Release

Discs and Book Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
Disc Production Manager **Nora Mehenni**  
QC **Michael Mackenzie**  
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**  
UHD Mastering **Fidelity in Motion**  
Design **Obviously Creative**  
Artwork by **Luke Preece**

# SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Michael Andrews, Sam Bauer, Jason Buckley, Walter Donohue, Caroline Duborg, James Duval, Dino Everett, Roland Feliciano, April Ferry, Lawrence Greenberg, Daniel Griffith, Alec Hammond, Richard Kelly, Barbara McCarney, Sean McKittrick, Steven Poster, Vicki Robinson, Cody Spencer









