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The strange, the gothic, the passionate, the difficult and the defiant: these are the bricks of creativity that are rarely built into the shuttered walls of our cultural life. Genres, classifications and labels exist so that thought and interpretation is not required. We can brand, judge and discard excess, confusion and challenge.

Categories are safe. They create expectations and make us feel like we understand the world. If we look at the caustic light of difference, then our identity bearings corrode. Watching *Donnie Darko* pulls a rip cord into the mental anguish and banality of our daily lives.

There are few films that move mind furniture and renovate consciousness. *Blue Velvet*, *Jubilee*, *Memento*, *Alexandra's Project* and *Seven* are a few examples. *Donnie Darko* fits snugly in this list. These films confirm that the most vigorous blading of conservatism comes from cutting up linear time, not gliding effortlessly through space. By (dys)functioning in a Tangent Universe – guided by Roberta Sparrow/Grandma Death – *Donnie Darko* is able to disrupt the cosmic clock.

It is easy to label an odd and disturbing film as a cult classic. This branding is a way to discredit diversity and marginalize critically-edged creativity. *Donnie Darko* is more than cult. It is popular culture. Riveting and unsettling, it requires multiple rescreenings, long walks pondering the ending, and a staunch belief that confusion adds grit and compulsion to filmic experiences.

Donnie Darko was released in 2001, but is set in October 1988. Directed by Richard Kelly and starring Jake Gyllenhaal, it works between the categories of teen flick, satire, horror and science fiction. That the most compassionate character in the film is a medicated schizophrenic who cannot distinguish between high school and a hallucinogenic six foot rabbit demonstrates the scale to which this hypnotic vision spills beyond concise delineations of real life. *Donnie Darko* changed forever the way I see mirrors, rabbits and old women with shock-white hair.

I always return to *Donnie Darko* every October. In October 2004, a lush Director's Cut DVD box set was released to coincide with another US Presidential Election taking place to match the 1988 race that framed the film. Dukakis was played by Kerry. Bush the elder was replaced by Bush the younger. As Australia enters the most significant election in a generation – where citizens must sort out the values, beliefs and commitments that are important in a post-Fordist, post-colonial nation - we must see out the best popular culture that is able to move through time and soak up new marinades, remaking itself and its viewers.

This film is more poignant and horrifying now than the first time I saw it. For that initial viewing, I was in a trendy cinema, in a trendy suburb with too many coffee shops and not enough primary schools. Its magnetism, pulling between horror, melancholy and banality, meant that I was in shock for much of this first viewing, and sat in my seat after the ending - too upset to cry, too confused to think straight. Now - in 2007 - the violence and arbitrary power of the establishment speaks to me, along with the desire to medicate the different and isolate the dangerous. There is no rescue for the Donnie. His destiny is a deadline, not a timeline.

The music of the film is worth commentary on its own. In the year the film was set – 1988 – I was nineteen years old. *Donnie Darko* replays this Generation X soundtrack. The music is so cleverly selected that it accurately recaptures the tracks I was listening to at the time – Tears for Fears, The Church, Echo and the Bunnymen – extraordinarily – Joy Division. These melodies, harmonies and rhythms have been carried forward with us on our journey, offering consolation and well-deep memories of a time when choosing to wear one or both fingerless gloves was the crucial decision of the day. After watching this great film, it is impossible to think of Echo and the Bunnymen's "The Killing Moon" without replaying the opening scenes. The remaking of "Mad World" is one of the great cover songs in our Australian Idol-inspired times.

A few years ago - to celebrate another *Donnie Darko* October - I played Tears for Fears' original version to start my

first year lecture on education. One of the young female students ran to the front of the room and shrieked, “How dare someone redo this song”. Oh, the folly of youth! Having actually survived the 1980s, we Grandma Deaths move through life with a secret smile. I knew if I lived long enough - and kept returning to that post box - Duran Duran would get back together.

While the music is cyclical, poignant and fresh, *Donnie Darko* will always be about something more: the bunny. The iconography of the film circles around Frank, the punked up, damaged rabbit who reminds me of a few ex-boyfriends. He is disturbed, provocative and - like Tiresius - blind. As the guide through a tangent universe, a blind seer is always best.

Guided by Frank, the pop cultural clock does not track predictable intervals of time. The analogue dial, or – even worse – the rigidly digital snap of change, does not convey the waves of memory that wash our minds. Our past selves live with us, keeping us company through the bitter moments of doubt, aloneness, confusion and surrender. The greatest challenge of life is to live with less and loss. Like Donnie Darko’s journey, there is a peace in accepting our limitations and acknowledging defeats – rather than victories – with dignity, integrity and respect.

It is always easier to show courage by accident, to behave well when we did not have time to change our minds. Donnie returned to the ides of October to die so that others could live. Donnie’s courage is mesmerizing in its inevitability. He looped time and knew what was coming. His death signaled survival, but not for him.

In our daily lives – doing the dishes, answering endless emails and remembering to telephone our mother – we rarely confront the gothic grandeur of Donnie Darko’s life. But every October, I celebrate a popular cultural resurrection that reminds us of time, death and responsibility. Every October 2nd, I think about time differently. I know that in 28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes and 12 seconds, change can happen.

Donnie Darko October reminds us to count the seconds and live life with deliberation, consciousness and agency. Politics matters. But so do memories. They outlive us. If we are lucky, then these moments in time return to illuminate the paths taken and the alternatives denied. Grandma Death whispers to Donnie that “every living creature dies alone”. The real trick is to create companionship through living.

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