

Analysis of Mise-en-scene and cinematography in the opening sequence of 'Donnie Darko' (Richard Kelly 2001)

Throughout the opening scene of Donnie Darko, mise-en-scene and cinematography has been used to create a certain effect on the audience as well as creating a specific emotion, creating a mood that sets the film as a whole.

As the opening sequence is the first thing the audience sees of the film, it is very important and is where the film is beginning to be set, at the start of the sequence the film opens up to an image showing the open

country side and mountain valleys, with this the camera pans to show a large amount of this until showing the road with the character (Donnie) lying on it; this shot is very important as with it the audience seems to get a calm feeling from it, the wide open space shows that nothing is being hidden, as well as this the audience can see that it is set in the



Figure 1

early morning, although the colours are calming including the diegetic sound of birds singing when the camera pans to Donnie, connoting the sense of calm around the character, the sound of birds singing is usually used in a setting or situation that is that can be trusted, it does also show that he isn't supposed to be there creating an mystery about the character and why he is there.

Cinematography is key to this sequence, when the camera starts to zoom in from a wide angled long shot on the character it shows the main focus of the shot, which the audience can assume is the

main character, because of this it also allows the audience to see his face and the emotion that needs to be portrayed; while the shot allows the audience to see this, with each frame the camera still shows the characters surroundings making him seem alone. After the camera had zoomed in on the character it then starts to show the closer features



Figure 2

of him, by tracking him, with this the audience is then able to see his face for the first time and specific features to

what is happening in the film so far, one key thing is that while the camera is turned to Donnie's



surroundings again he moves into the shot and blocks it and comes into focus, this gives a sense that he knows where he is and that he's in control overlooking the vast valley.

During the next few shots of the sequence a variety has been used, as the character is on a bike in nearly all of them, they consist of tracking with him as well different shots themselves, one thing that is certain is that all of the time the film is showing the audience the character in his surroundings, making the audience feel that they know the character well without actually knowing anything yet. While most of the shots at the beginning of the sequence consist of the character just moving, in the shot shown below the character isn't in the main focus for the first time, but to the right of the shot, instead, the camera is focused on a bright orange 'Halloween carnival' sign, while the sign shows the audience where the film is set it also has an element of foreshadowing, shown in the date and the 'sponsor, M.A.D.D' words, also with an ironic twist, as well as foreshadowing important dates that are relevant to the film later on.

One thing that is interesting during the course of the sequence is that the audience is introduced to new characters, but when these are shown they are shown in slow motion, this feature has been used to amplify the importance of the characters as well as their impact they may have on the main character they can assume is the one on the bike.



As well as cinematography, mise-en-scene is also a very important micro feature, throughout the shots in the sequence a lot of light has been used especially when the character is biking, in the shot below it is shown that sunlight is coming through the trees, although this light has specifically been used when the character is shown he is mostly shaded by the trees creating a dark aura about him. One way the light has been used is to show the suburban area that Donnie ends up in after he has biked, as it is a bright sunny morning it shows that it is a happy place and that everyone is going about their business.





At the very start of the film, one key feature that can be noticed by the audience is that the character is in pyjamas. From this it displays that the character isn't supposed to be where he is and as he wakes up looking around it is apparent that he doesn't know how he got there in the first place. From this it can be elaborated that there are a lot of things that point towards the fact that Donnie doesn't know where he is and that he isn't supposed to be there, however from his surroundings and in the image below it is shown that there isn't a sense of urgency around the fact the he isn't where he's supposed to be. The surroundings that he is in are calm and bright, not a rushed dark setting that would be expected from a film showing someone that is lost, as well

as this when the audience is shown the sign on the fridge and the characters that are introduced going about their own business demonstrates this point, as well as the fact that the writing on the fridge looks like it hasn't been written in a hurry and looks very neat. However another interesting point that can be made is that one of the characters Donnie walks past is drinking a glass of wine in what the audience can already assume is the morning.



Both cinematography and mise-en-scene play a big role in the construction of the opening sequence of Donnie Darko, what is particularly good about the sequence is that the audience can gather a huge amount of information from it when there is no dialogue at all, from the way the opening scene has been set shows the films nature and also gives a feel for the main character; the audience can tell the main character doesn't really care that he wakes up in the middle of nowhere as well as the fact that he just walks past his family without saying anything, this is also shown when he just drops his bike on the ground almost falling over. Both of the micro features help to show that there is a degree of unreality to the start of the film, foreshadowing the surreal quality of the film.



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