PLOT:

The story is set in the town of Middlesex during the 1988 presidential election campaign. Donnie Darko is an emotionally troubled teenager who sleepwalks and visits a psychiatrist with whom he discusses his deepest thoughts throughout the film. One morning, an unidentified jet engine falls into Donnie’s bedroom, which he unknowingly avoids by sleepwalking outside and following a voice in his head.

This voice belongs to Frank, an (apparently) imaginary friend in a man-sized rabbit costume. Frank prophesies that the “end of the world” will occur in “28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes and 12 seconds.” Donnie is instructed by Frank to perform further acts, which cause a certain chain of events that allow the final scenario to take place: Donnie floods his school, which gives him the chance to court Gretchen Ross, a new classmate and potential love interest; he pursues the concept of time travel, leading to a talk with his science teacher who then gives him The Philosophy of Time Travel, a book by an elderly resident of the town named Roberta Sparrow (known as “Grandma Death” amongst children). He goes to the theatre with Gretchen to watch The Evil Dead, she falls asleep and Frank appears, inciting Donnie to burn down the house of a motivational speaker whom Donnie had ridiculed at a school assembly, thereby exposing a secret “kiddie porn dungeon.”

The arrest of the motivational speaker causes Donnie’s mother to have to chaperone Donnie’s younger sister and her dance group on a flight to Star Search. Donnie also begins seeing running water in space-time depicted as clear, water-like tentacles protruding out of people’s chests. These tentacles indicate where the person will travel in the near future: in one scene he sees one snake into the room, curving up and down, which is followed by his little sister skipping through the room.

These singularities are described in the book by Roberta Sparrow. One particular tentacle eventually leads Donnie to a gun in his parents’ closet, which he takes and keeps. He is shown a “portal” or wormhole by Frank in a movie theater; where Frank also reveals himself to be a teenager of the same age as Donnie, with a wound in his right eye.

On Halloween night, with Donnie’s parents both out of town, Donnie takes Gretchen and two other friends to seek advice from Roberta Sparrow when they get
ambushed by two bullies from school. In the ensuing struggle, Gretchen is pushed into the road and gets run over by a car and dies instantly, after which the bullies flee. The car that killed Gretchen stops and Donnie soon sees the driver. After realizing that the driver is Frank in a rabbit costume for Halloween, Donnie shoots him in the eye, killing him and giving Frank the wounded right eye (as a precursor; earlier in the film when Donnie is standing in the bathroom talking to Frank, Donnie lifts up a knife and makes stabbing motions at the visage of Frank’s right eye).

As the prophesied time of the world’s end draws near, Donnie takes a car (a metal vehicle is needed to travel in time) and retreats with Gretchen’s body to a hillside overlooking town, where a “portal” opens in the sky. Donnie’s mother and sister experience turbulence on their return flight, and a jet engine detaches from their plane. The engine travels through the portal to 28 days earlier, crashing into Donnie’s bedroom and causing a predestination paradox of time travel.

This time, Donnie chooses to stay in bed. The story ends on the morning following the jet engine accident. Donnie is dead and his body is removed from the house as his family mourns. As all the people Donnie’s actions have had an impact on sit stunned, we see Frank with a prototype bunny Halloween mask unconsciously touch his right eye. Gretchen is alive and rides by on her bicycle. Never having met Donnie, she talks with a neighborhood kid about the sad event. She waves to Donnie’s mother and there is a sense of recognition between them.

THEMES:

• The Nature of “Madness”
  Donnie was diagnosed as schizophrenic by his psychiatrist, however it is revealed that he is taking a placebo. Is Frank a figment of his imagination, or is he real?

• The Nature of Time
  Time splits, changes speed, is manipulated by outside forces. Is time the constant force we experience it to be?

• Teenage Anti-Hero
  Donnie Darko “Sounds like a superhero”. What makes us think he isn’t He shares many qualities with most comic book super-heroes, including a fatal weakness and evil foes.

• Appearances Vs Reality
  Middlesex appears to be an ordinary Mid-Western town. Is everything as it seems? Jim Cunningham is lauded by all. what is going on underneath the surface? Is Donnie a “Troubled Teenager”, or is he the saviour of the world?

• Love Conquers All Things
  Would you go to such great lengths to save the life of the one you love?

• The Existence of God
  If there is a God, then why can it not be proved? What is the force that prevents the world falling into chaos?
MEMORABLE QUOTES:

Donnie: I promise, that one day, everything's going to be better for you.

Donnie: How can you do that?
Frank: I can do anything I want. And so can you.

[At the school assembly speaking out against Jim Cunningham]:
Donnie: Do you want your sister to lose weight? Tell her to get off the couch, stop eating twinkies and maybe go out for field hockey. You know what? No one ever knows what they want to be when they grow up. You know it takes a little, little while to find that out, right, Jim? And you... yeah, you. Sick of some jerk showing your head down the toilet? Well, you know what? Maybe... you should lift some weights, or uh, take a karate lesson and the next time he's tries to do it, you kick him in the balls.

Donnie: Where did you come from?
Frank: Do you believe in time travel?

Donnie: What happened to your eye?
Frank: I'm so sorry.

Frank: Don't worry. You got away with it.

Donnie: So, what do I tell the other kids when they ask about you?
Karen Pommeroy: Tell them that everything is gonna be just fine.

Gretchen: My mom had to get a restraining order against my stepdad. He has emotional problems.
Donnie: Oh, I have those too! What kind of emotional problems does your dad have?
Gretchen: He stabbed my mom four times in the chest.
Donnie: Oh.

Karen Pommeroy: It was as though this plan had been with him all his life, pondered through the seasons, now in his fifteenth year crystallized with the pain of puberty.

Donnie: I made a new friend today.
Dr. Lilian Thurman: Real or imaginary?
Donnie: Imaginary.

Frank: 28 days... 6 hours... 42 minutes... 12 seconds. That... is when the world... will end.

Gretchen: You're weird.
Donnie: Sorry.
Gretchen: No, that was a compliment.

[from the Extended and Deleted Scenes. The class is discussing Watership Down]
Karen Pommeroy: This could be the death of an entire way of life, the end of an era...
Donnie: Why should we care?
Karen Pommeroy: Because the rabbits are us, Donnie.
Donnie: Why should I mourn for a rabbit like he was human?
Karen Pommeroy: Are you saying that the death of one species is less tragic than another?

Donnie: Why do you wear that stupid bunny suit?
Frank: Why are you wearing that stupid man suit?

Gretchen: Donnie Darko? What the hell kind of name is that? It's like some sort of superhero or something
Donnie: What makes you think I'm not?

Donnie: [in a letter] Dear Roberta Sparrow, I have reached the end of your book and... there are so many things that I need to ask you. Sometimes I'm afraid of what you might tell me. Sometimes I'm afraid that you'll tell me that this is not a work of fiction. I can only hope that the answers will come to me in my sleep. I hope that when the world comes to an end, I can breathe a sigh of relief, because there will be so much to look forward to.

Donnie: [to his mother] How's it feel to have a wacko for a son?
Rose Darko: It feels wonderful.

Gretchen: What if you could go back in time, and take all those hours of pain and darkness and replace them with something better?

Donnie: Frank, when's this gonna stop?
Frank: You should already know that.

Dr. Lilian Thurman: The search for God is absurd?
Donnie: It is if everyone dies alone.

Prof. Kenneth Monnitoff: And did you stop and think that maybe infants need darkness? That maybe darkness is part of their natural environment?

Gretchen: Some people are just born with tragedy in their blood.

Karen Pommeroy: [to Principle Cole] I don't think that you have a clue what it's like to communicate with these kids. We are losing them to apathy... to this prescribed nonsense. They are slipping away.

Kitty Farmer: Fear and love are the deepest of human emotions.
Donnie: Okay. But you’re not listening to me. There are other things that need to be taken into account here. Like the whole spectrum of human emotion. You can’t just lump everything into these two categories and then just deny everything else!

Donnie: Deus ex machina...
Seth Devlin: What did you say? What the fuck did you just say?
Donnie: Our saviour.

Donnie: [reading poem in class] A storm is coming, Frank says / A storm that will swallow the children / And I will deliver them from the kingdom of pain / I will deliver the children back to their doorsteps / And I will send the monsters back to the underground / I’ll send them back to a place where no-one else can see them / Except for me / Because I am Donnie Darko.

Donnie: They say right when they flood the house and they tear it to shreds that... destruction is a form of creation,” so the fact that they burn the money is ironic. They just want to see what happens when they tear the world apart. They want to change things.

Karen Pomeroy: The children have to save themselves these days because the parents have no clue.

Cherita Chen: Chut up!

INTERPRETATION

According to Kelly and his Philosophy of Time Travel, at midnight on October 2 a Tangent Universe branches off the Primary Universe around the time when Donnie is called out of his bedroom by Frank, immediately before the appearance of the Artifact, the faulty jet engine. The inherently unstable Tangent Universe will collapse in just over 28 days and take the Primary Universe with it if not corrected. Closing the Tangent Universe is the duty of the Living Receiver; Donnie, who wields certain supernatural powers to help him in the task.

Those who have died/will die within the Tangent Universe [and would not have died otherwise] are the Manipulated Dead (Frank and Gretchen Ross). Manipulated Dead Frank, at least, is also given certain powers in that he is able to subtly understand what is happening and have the ability to contact and influence the Living Receiver via the Fourth Dimensional Construct (water). All others within the orbit of the Living Receiver are the Manipulated Living (e.g. Ms. Pomeroy, Dr. Monnitoff), subconsciously drawn to push him towards his destiny to close the Tangent Universe and, according to the Philosophy of Time Travel, die by the Artifact.

There are two “Franks” in the story: the living boyfriend of Donnie’s sister Elizabeth, and the Manipulated Dead Frank who appears to Donnie as a premonition from the future in the disturbing rabbit suit (the second Frank is dead, or undead; at the end of the film he is killed by Donnie). Dead Frank is aware of Donnie’s fate and destiny.

The director has also said that the depiction of the high school in the film was meant to reflect his own personal experience during his high school years.

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SYMBOLISM

rabbits/bunnies/ bunny rabbits (+ hares)

• Life, healing, clear-sightedness, gentleness / Luck; trust; love; friendship; fear; evasion /

• Rabbit symbolism concerns the Moon (Intuition).

• The rabbit represents humility, because he is quiet and soft and not self-asserting.

• Older than Christianity, the symbolism of the hare is thus a celebration of life’s continuation with rebirth, as in each spring, and the rabbit expresses hope that life will be renewed, and better than before.

• Although the hare is not a symbol for Christ some analogy might be made to Christ who was sacrificed in the form of a man for the feeding of God’s people.

• To Buddhists the hare is a symbol of self-sacrifice. Legend says this creature threw itself into a fire in order to feed Buddha when he was starving. As a reward, it was given a new home in the moon. Because of its fertility (one doe can produce 42
young a year), the rabbit or hare is an emblem of fertility, abundance, good fortune, sexuality, lasciviousness, lust, procreation, puberty, renewal, spring, rampant growth, excess, and love gods and goddesses such as Venus, Aphrodite, and Cupid.

• The white hare sometimes found at Mary's feet represents her triumph over lust or the flesh.

• Because it signifies abundance, the rabbit is sometimes used in western countries as a harvest or fall symbol. It also stands for madness and the month of March.

• The rabbit's burrow is a symbol of Christ's tomb

• The rabbit's trembling makes it a symbol of cowardice and timidity. However, Judeo-Christian writings recommend a holy trembling before the Lord. [1 Chr 16:30; Ps 96:9, 99:1, 114:7; Is 19:1, 66:2; Jer 5:22, 33:9] The writer of Philippians warns the Christian to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." [Phil 2:12] In Medieval times, cowardice was personified with drawings of an armed man running from a hare.

Alice in Wonderland - rabbits & more

There are many similarities between the two narratives.

Donnie falls asleep, and hears, then sees Frank, a 6-foot tall rabbit-costume wearing being. Alice's summer slumber brings a vision of a talking rabbit wearing human adornments. Frank tells Donnie to follow him, & leads Donnie to a golf course. Alice chases her rabbit, following him right down the rabbit hole.

Character introduction and water/metal symbolism aside, the golf course/rabbit hole relation seems obvious. Like Alice's rabbit, Frank acts as Donnie's guide in the mad world of the "underground". [This aspect is suggested by Donnie's poem.] Alice's rabbit is a servant of the Queen / Frank is a being manipulated by the master force. Alice and Donnie are similar in their confusion and curiosity, both are desperate to figure out what is happening to themselves.

Also... eat me/drink me similar to Donnie's pills, both characters are changing lifeforces – Alice grows tall / shrinks, Donnie grows stronger & superhuman-like when he's sleepwalking. These physical changes give solution to the current dilemma the character is facing, but also cause feelings of isolation and fear.

The mirror imagery of Donnie's bathroom communion place with Frank is similar to Through the Looking Glass.

CAST

• Jake Gyllenhaal as Donnie Darko
• Jena Malone as Gretchen Ross
• James Duval as Frank
• Drew Barrymore as Karen Pomeroy
• Mary McDonnell as Rose Darko
• Holmes Osborne as Eddie Darko
• Maggie Gyllenhaal as Elizabeth Darko
• Daveigh Chase as Samantha Darko
• Patrick Swayze as Jim Cunningham
• Noah Wyle as Professor Kenneth Monnitoff
• Beth Grant as Kitty Farmer
• Katharine Ross as Dr. Lillian Thurman
• Patience Cleveland as Roberta Sparrow
• Ashley Tisdale as Kim
• Alex Greenwald as Seth Devlin
• Seth Rogen as Ricky Danforth
• Jolene Purdy as Cherita Chen
FILM TECHNIQUES:

Mis En Scene:
Darkness plays a major role in many of the scenes in Donnie Darko, as does the cinematography reminiscent of the Thriller genre - close-ups and over the shoulder shots abound keeping the audience on a very tight focus on the main protagonists and their thoughts and experiences. Degradation in the weather and the inclusion of computer generated elements act as symbolism for significant events (the GGI of the flooded school for example) and hint at the significant themes.

Montage:
Much of the film, particularly as it progresses is edited to reinforce a growing atmosphere of unease that descends into chaos. Unnatural speed changes, [fast forward, slow motion], camera movements such as rotation, and juxtaposition of scenes through series of fast cuts are all deliberately used to create associations in the viewers’ minds that play on their sub-conscious, placing clues just beyond the grasp of the first-time viewer of what is truly going on in this most cryptic film.