Cinematic Techniques In Donnie Darko: Film Analysis

Richard Kelly’s, 2001, debut film Donnie Darko embodies a myriad of cinematic techniques such as camera movement, non-diegetic sound (music) and mise en scene within the introductory scene which works hand in hand to convey vital information that places the cornerstone for the whole of the film. Kelly’s exemplary craftsmanship of this selection of film techniques have been intricately woven together in the introductory scene and in effect has not only produced a piece of artwork but conveys much underlying information.

The scene begins with an establishing shot in which the camera pans the mountains exhibiting a vital location of the film. Further on, mise en scene of his neighbourhood foreshadows the transitioning of Donnie’s moral pathways which is accompanied with non-diegetic music revealing one of the film’s major themes. The introductory scene features outstanding use of these film techniques which not only introduce the audience to the protagonist’s world but successfully captures their attention as the film commences. Kelly’s applaudable use of camera movement and shots can be seen from the very beginning of the film utilised for the purpose of establishing Donnie as the protagonist and establishing a key location of the film.

The scene begins with a slow fade transition to an establishing shot capturing the loneliness of the Carpathian Ridge. In this long shot there is an unidentified object situated in the centre of the road which from this distance Kelly successfully makes the object difficult to identify hence posing many questions about the who, where, when, and how of this object. This curiosity captures the audience's attention and keeps them intrigued as they ponder about the identification of this object.

In addition, the fact that Kelly does not only focus the camera on the mysterious object but also on the mountains reveals the importance of this location as it is Donnie’s first appearance in the film and last appearance before he travels back in time. Kelly has done an excellent job of signifying this to the audience through his use of camera movement. Kelly could have easily tracked Donnie with the camera and revealed the location through his backdrop, although Kelly’s decision to solely pan the isolated mountains reveals more about the location giving the audience a sense that this is a significant location. Kelly’s diverse use of camera movement and shots not only introduce Donnie but reveal a key location in the film.