Complicating Narrative Time In Donnie Darko: Film Analysis

The approach I am going to discuss in this essay is ‘complicating narrative time’. In Storytelling in the New Hollywood, Kristin Thompson argues that Harold Ramis’ Groundhog Day (1993) is ‘’almost completely classical’’ (1999, 131). This is an odd statement to make about a film that breaks several rules associated with ‘classical’ narrative time. This essay will argue that films like Groundhog Day cannot be seen as ‘classical’ as it is too complicated for an audience to understand it without having to give some thought about what’s going on, as you have to work out the tense of things. I will use three films to address Thompson’s argument and prove that Groundhog Day cannot be considered classical. This is because it has a unique structure and its harder to predict what will happen in the film.

Throughout this essay, I will refer to the films Donnie Darko (Kelly, 2001), The Limey (Soderbergh, 1999) and Dunkirk (Nolan, 2017). These three films are significant to use because they have many similarities and differences. The one thing they all have in common is that these types of films retrain us to understand its formal system, playing on our familiarity with mainstream films. These films are all non-linear films, this is significant because the difference between a linear and non-linear film is that linear has a step by step structure that contains a climax in the storyline and then a solid conclusion, whereas a non-linear is seen as a more abstract way of storytelling. Non-linear films use time travel more as an aspect, they can start the story from wherever they want and can also end it wherever and it will still come together and make sense because the only difference is that they make the audience work more to figure out what’s going on in the film. Non-linear films are the ones that use a lot of flashbacks and memory sequences. Therefore, I believe these three films that I will discuss marks a clear diversion from ‘classical’ narrative time in mainstream Hollywood cinema. They show how they complicate our perception of ‘classical’ narrative time. Time seems to be more complicated in modern films rather than classical, meaning we have to work to figure out what’s going on. I can link complicated narrative time to Temporality, this refers to our subjective relationship with experience of time. We learn that with temporality, it attempts to capture or manipulate our subjective temporal experience. Films in the past and films today have a big difference to time in cinema. This is because the art of cinema, temporality is rarely objective and linear as we would expect it to be in classical narrative films that work hard to orientate us in space and time. Classical film narrative is designed to set an illusion of reality, it avoids any device’s that might call attention to the constructed nature of film, therefore how can films like Groundhog Day be considered as a ‘classical’ film when attention is brought to it as the same day is repeated constantly but different scenarios occur each day.

The film Donnie Darko was ‘’set at the time of the Dukakis- bush presidential elections of 1988’’. This is important as it allows the audience to engage in the film more as it’s something they can relate to from the not too distant past. The soundtrack also lets the audience know what time period it was set in by playing 80s tracks. However, trying to figure out when things are happening becomes more difficult when we see it through Donnie Darko’s eyes. Richard Kelly (Director) said ‘’the more things change, the more they stay the same. For example, a boy becoming a man and a girl becoming a woman – these thresholds of adolescence are never going to go away.’’ Therefore, he believes the narrative can go beyond the timeline

which holds real human experience which can teach the new generation. This links with more complex things like ‘’photography in cinema’’ because this creates the past when it captures a temporal instant, yet it is experienced as ‘’now’’ as a succession of images unfolding before us in the present.

Donnie Darko’s story is clearly concerned with the concept of complicating narrative time. This is because if we firstly look at the film on a narrative level, we can see that in the opening of the film, Frank warns that the world will end ‘’28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes and 12 seconds’’. This is seen as a ‘potential apocalypse.’ (Scott, 2004). Furthermore, this clearly links with complications of time as it is shown to have an obvious relationship with time as it’s a countdown of the world supposedly ending, which helps the audience try and figure out when certain things are happening as its not a basic ‘classical’ narrative structure as time is constantly out of joint.

In addition, there was a concept called ‘the loop’ that Powell talks about in Stop the Clocks saying ‘’ the same event happened twice but with different outcomes’’ this is meaning the jet plane as it’s a symbol of time because we see it appear twice but it results in different endings, therefore, this allows the audience to question why the two scenarios occurred. In the first instance, we see that Donnie escapes death and this is where the tangent universe is created. This is before he meets Gretchen and we just see him as a troubled teenager who doesn’t really see the value of life. When he first meets Gretchen his intentions towards her are only sexual rather than emotional, we know this because of the scene with his psychiatrist where he only talks about girls in a sexual way and has no feelings for them in any other way. However, this is why Gretchen is seen as a big influence towards Donnie because further on in the film we see that Donnie has transitioned from physically wanting Gretchen to emotionally care about her. We see that Donnie only feels like he has a purpose when Gretchen was in his life. This links to the second jet plane crashing as we know Gretchen is currently dead. Therefore, we see that Donnie believes this was the purpose of him being able to alter time because he has learned the beauty of life from Gretchen. Therefore, there is no reason for him to be alive. This makes the audience believe he wanted this as he had no purpose to live anymore because the woman he loved died. Nevertheless, ‘’the film dissolves one potential world in which he survives and replaces it with another world where he dies’’ (Walters, 2008) this means that the audience is not sure of the ‘ontological status of anything reality, narrative, causality, temporality, spirituality, and characterisation. In which, to successfully alter the course of history, he stays in bed and laughs to himself, which results in him dying.

Towards the end, we see De Ja Vu between Gretchen and Donnie’s mum. This is another type of ‘time’ where a character recognises something has happened before but doesn’t recall what. This shows that ‘’Donnie is able to undo the narrative or reverse the narrative and all the user is left with is vague remnants and signs of what the narrative actually was in the real primary universe.’’ (Powell, 2012) Therefore, this links to time being is constantly out of joint because it breaks the rules, we associate with classical narrative time by forcing the protagonist Donnie to try and save the world in this tangent universe within a certain time limit, which creates a clear diversion in from a classical narrative time in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Furthermore, the narrative clearly adopts a ‘submerged forking path structure, in which the end of the film returns to an alternative temporality which invalidates everything else that has gone before’’. (Powell, 2012)

Linking back to the start of the essay, there isn’t a set in stone closure for the film because

even though it ends with Donnie taking his own life, it still makes the audience question what will happen next as it links back with the ‘’looping effect’ within the story that we ‘’become too confused about and disorientated to discern any sense of temporal positioning in terms of the past and the present’’ (Powell, 2012) This also links with the film The Limey because similarly to Donnie Darko it also confuses the audience of the disorientated past present and future by embedding flashbacks or memories so tightly within the storytelling that we still get confused with the past, present and future.

The Limey (Soderbergh, 1999) ‘’warms us to the idea of timeliness’’. It is an American crime film about a man called Wilson who goes to investigate in America about how his daughter (Jenny) died, as he doesn’t believe the reason, he’s been told to why she has died. ‘’This film is seen as a modernist (rather than a postmodernist) film in both its theme and style. While postmodern art is ‘relative’ and infinitely open, it clings to questions of meaning.’’ (Totaro, 2002). This is a modernist film because it is not afraid to break the rules of a classical narrative given that there is no order of events, therefore you are able to read the film backward and it can still make sense. It ‘’looks back’’ in several different ways. Lee Carruthers suggests that this film ‘’requires an unusually high level of attentiveness from its viewer’’ this is because the film uses flashbacks which will confuse the audience as they have to figure out if they are watching the past, present or future, meaning they have to focus more, therefore this shows that it complicates narrative time. It’s hard to figure out what tense the film is because, for example, the airplane shots are repeatedly shown throughout the film and we usually see them as flashbacks to the moment before he arrived in America. However, because his meeting with Roel occurs in the future, (Roel is the person Wilson is going to see to gain information about his daughter). This expresses that those shots must be flashforwards. The shots where Wilson is sat on the airplane in deep thought as we know is shown repeatedly, therefore the audience would assume that this was a flashback. But in actual fact, it could be seen as a flashforward to the present day. The audience IS only able to figure this out when it comes to the end of the film and all the flashbacks and flash forwards piece together. However, this shows the complications of the narrative because it is still impossible to be fully certain about what tense the shots really were.

In addition to this, the audience has to work harder to understand what time period it is. They can do this by recognising how camera angles have been used and how it has been edited. For example, the colour of some of the scenes in The Limey (Soderbergh, 1999) when flashbacks, flash forwards occur look different to when it’s present day. For example, the images from Poor Cow shown in the film are grainy. This scene is doubly filtered to represent them being Wilsons reconstruction of Roel’s memories. Whereas, when its present day, for example, Wilson sat on the plane, its filmed in a more of a classical and realistic style. This also links with star theory. This is because the film ‘poor cow’ that is shown in the film is actually meant to be seen as a flashback to the audience therefore this will have confused the audience at first because they will have recognised it differently which grabbed their attention but, in their mind, they had to automatically perceive it as a flashback rather than a cut out scene from a different film. This was interesting because having this scene kept the audience engaged as it will have confused them, therefore they had to work harder to figure out why the scene was included. This is seen as ‘defamiliarisation’ as it makes something an audience who are familiar with something to seeing it as unfamiliar.

During the film we also Soderbergh has created a historical symmetry between the past and present. This is when we see Jenny as a young girl holding the phone and threating to ring the

police on her father and similarly an older Jenny holding the phone in the same way towards her partner. The means the closer Wilson gets towards the truth he realises its partly his fault to why the tragedy has occurred with his daughter because she never really had a proper father figure and the more, he comes to realise the truth the more he understood that she was just hungry for attention.

There is also a shot of Jenny (the daughter that died) of when she was younger and this shot has very bluish tones to show it's a flashback in comparison to present day where it's got more warm yellow tones. This links with David Lynch's style of a film. This is because he uses colour a lot to symbolise things, for example, red for danger and blue for mystery. This is the effect Soderbergh used because it looks like he wanted to emphasise the flashback of Wilsons daughter when she was younger as a sad memory as Wilson can't remember it properly so it reflects how he feels for not being able to remember. It is also quite blurry. Its blue toned to tell the audience it's still a mystery to be solved and this is why it's unclear until right at the end of the film when you see element of catharsis between Terry and Wilson and this is when it cuts back to the scene of his daughter and its in full colour and clear. This shows that he finally came to an acceptance about his daughter and can remember that flashback without feeling guilty.

Events don't seem to happen one after the other like a classical narrative. ''These new narrative forms are more complex in time frames where they challenge a simple sense of causality and instead play upon the interaction between multiple persons and their worlds. For example, with things like memories, dreams and fantasies all weave in and out.'' (Powell, 2012) This means that rather than having an order of events their multiple cuts of memories, dreams and fantasies keep the audience engaged. ''Wilsons journey from uncertainty to acceptance is formally rendered in the film's uncertain gaze (questioning of perception) which comes to us through (mainly) Wilson's refraction of character subjectivity, memory, and stylized authorial narration.'' (Totaro, 2002) therefore, we follow the narrative through the fragmented memories and flash forward and flask backward. We see predictions of where the narrative is going through his memories and it then bleeds information into the future. This is almost like Soderbergh is creating an effect which is almost like the 'waiting' for the film to catch up on itself. This is seen as a ''bleeding sense of time''.

Dunkirk is seen as a non-chronological film as it jumps back and forth from memories to the present day and we see these scenes repeated from various point of views. Most films are made using the three-act structure where there is a beginning, middle and end pattern. However, Dunkirk does not use this as it follows three separate stories in different time frames and it all comes together all at one point. Therefore, this is not like a 'classical' mainstream Hollywood film because it doesn't follow a sequential beginning, middle and end cause and effect pattern. '' "The film is told from three points of view: The air (planes), the land (on the beach) and the sea (the evacuation by the navy)," Nolan explained. "For the soldiers embarked in the conflict, the events took place on different temporalities." It follows separate stories in different time frames and still manages to keep the audience engaged. Our brains will automatically reconstruct the storyline in chronological order. It is clearly not classical in the same sense as The Limey and Donnie Darko are not either.

Dunkirk is seen to be episodic. This means consisting of a series of separate parts or events. Therefore, we see it as an episodic as the film is split up into different time periods and as an audience, you have to work out when things are occurring. Dunkirk follows the lives of several characters, by the end of the film we have watched these characters encounter many problems

and a lot of people dying along with their journey, however, we don't feel as emotional as we should for some characters because we weren't able to get to know them. The audience doesn't really get to know any of the characters fully. This shows that its not a 'classical' narrative because Thompson suggests that ''in many classical Hollywood films of all eras, a central character trait will be determined by the stars public persona'' however, we don't get to know them, therefore, there's nothing in the way of a character arc.

Helen Powell suggests ''the classical Hollywood narrative embodies a specific representation of temporal flow, rational and linear in its construction; it reflects the standardised views of time.'' Therefore, with Dunkirk its obviously not classical because as an audience we feel like time is expanded, where we are passing through it quickly and its hard to follow as there is a lot of scenes that are shown from different point of views so you become disjointed with the what type of tense it is and with what's happening. Therefore, it throws things in such as present-day cuts to keep the audience engaged with what's happening. This links to The Limey because going back to when its repeatedly showing the scene of the airplane, the audience find it hard to tell what tense it is in; however, the audience are still able to follow the film and not lose them because throughout the film there is conversations that Wilson has that are split up over time. This is so that we can learn more about the situation and why they occur so then it makes more sense to the audience to why he's doing certain things. The scenes we see in a linear fashion in The Limey are the ones where Wilson is trying to find a man called Terry. This is to keep the audience in the loop of what is going on.

In conclusion, Modern day films more tend to follow non-linear structure as it grabs the audience's attention and makes them work more to understand the film, it's not just spoon fed to them like traditional which makes it more interesting. These films back up my argument about Groundhog Day not being a 'classical' narrative because it is just as complicated to an audience as the other three films I have talked about. This is because it's a film that's harder to follow where we need the audience to work out what's going on and its harder to predict what is happening. It doesn't follow a linear fashion. There are more features to a none classical film rather than a classical because an audience can become confused within the narrative and have to work harder to figure out what's going on. Thompson says ''Hollywood's success was based in telling stories clearly, vividly and entertainingly'' and she said to grab an audiences attention ''the techniques of continuity editing, set design, and lighting that were all developed during that era were designed not only to provide attractive image but also to guide audience attention to salient events from moment to moment'' however in today's era you don't just need a clear order for the audience to be engaged and understand what's going on in the film, you can use different technique's in films, just like Donnie Darko, The Limey, and Dunkirk what don't use all of the above effects and use time travel effect instead as their main feature to grab an audience's attention by making them work harder to understand what's happening in the film. Therefore, this links with Groundhog Day not being a classical narrative as it is a story that's not told clearly and vividly as the same day repeats in it throughout. Therefore, is seen as a complicated narrative.