

Social and Spatial Representations of the Nerd in Donnie Darko

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Abstract

*The nerds of 20th and 21st century global pop and visual culture have taken various forms over the decades. In a plethora of media - from video games to comic books to film - individuals associated with this subject position have typically been shown to be on the periphery of socio-spatially determined spaces of value. Through contemporary North American high school dramas, comedies, romances, and thrillers ranging from *The Faculty* (1998) to *She's All That* (1999) to *The Twilight Saga* (2008-2012), these socio-spatial spaces of value are typically associated with social capital and popularity. Richard Kelly's protagonist in his directorial debut *Donnie Darko* (2001) raises interesting questions concerning the relationship between the nerd, the outsider and the loner, and their relation to social and personal space. In socio-spatial terms, *Donnie* calls into question the value and power of socio-spatially determined zones of value if one sees such spaces and structures as valueless in principium. This paper conducts a close reading of *Donnie Darko*, beginning with the assumption that *Donnie* is a nerd and, parsing the character through the socio-spatial relations of a variety of adolescent subject positions, what *Donnie Darko* ultimately uncovers about identity, space, and value.*

Keywords: nerd; clique; crowd; outsider; loner; socio-spatial relations

Introduction

In contemporary global society, any definition of the term 'nerd' is necessarily multiform. In view of ongoing issues and debates concerning identity politics, ideology, and the various subject positions through which individuals can experience a modicum of freedom or further subjugation, 'the nerd' can be parsed in various ways. In 20th and 21st century global pop culture, there are 'traditional' characteristics and behavioral modes associated with nerds and/or stereotypes upon which the category of nerd relies. These typically include but are not limited to: a lack of 'cool' which manifests as unrelenting social awkwardness; fastidious punctiliousness which manifests as an intensity of passion for their chosen interests such as comic books, science fiction, technology, and/or science and mathematics more broadly; bookishness or complete scholarly disinterest which manifests as academic acuity, profligacy, or both; and non-athleticism which often manifests as physical diminutiveness and/or chronic ailments such as asthma and astigmatism (**Kendall, 1999, 2000; Boynton, 2017; Bucholtz, 2001: 89-91**). This last feature is often combined with the nerd's stereotypical physical unattractiveness, be it on account of a lack of sartorial sense or trend awareness in fashion and culture, or having conspicuous chronic ailments like eczema or dandruff.

While the behaviors circumscribed by terms such as 'nerd' or its antipodal opposite in social and aesthetic terms 'jock' still exist, these broad identarian categories demarking the popular and unpopular have undergone numerous permutations in 20th and 21st century global popular culture. There are various subsets of the nerd which combine with other stereotypical subject positions produced in and through the typified North American high school milieu. These include but are not limited to: the Goth, Hipster, the Manic Pixie Dreamgirl, or Hippie. Jocks, Preppies, and Populars 'represent identities that carry prestige and bring power. Other crowds – Freaks, Goths, Losers, Druggies, Nerds –represent the bottom of the status hierarchy' (**Bishop et al., 2004: 237**).

The multitalented Donald Glover, who many consider to be an Ur-example of a nerd himself, gives an interesting definition of the term 'nerd' in his 2012 stand-up special *Weirdo*: 'If you like strange, specific stuff – that's a nerd. Kanye West is a black nerd. He likes strange, specific stuff. If you go up to Kanye West and say, "hey, what are your favorite things?" He'll be like, "Robots and teddy bears." That's a nerd.' (**Glover, 2012**) Glover's assertion here accurately sums up the fact that beyond the purview of the North American high school milieu from which emerged the most recognizable pop and visual cultural examples of nerds, the nerd can mean so much more - even to the point of embodying its traditional opposite in being 'cool'. In this way, jocks, preppies, goths, hippies, and nerds are

ultimately undifferentiated by the intensity each subject position brings to its own self-identification with it.

While Glover's definition is broadly serviceable, its fundamental banality lacks any commentary, incisive or glancing, concerning what we could consider to be the pathological aspects of being a nerd. Moreover, Glover's definition does not address the inexorability of this subject position's association with loneliness, extreme oscillations of mood and action, and sometimes deadly resentment. In this way, the nerd, as represented primarily by white adolescent males in 20th and 21st century pop culture, has been many things: lovesick and homesick; spurned and unrequited; the unlikely hero and the maladroit social baggage; the invisible love interest and the secret beauty reified by the prom king/queen's unlikely attention; the slacker and the workhorse; the scoundrel, knave, or figure of moral rectitude; the merciless logician; the Romantic taker of umbrage; the lone gunman; the selfish creep and the altruistic caregiver (**Willey & Subramaniam, 2017**).ⁱ The variety of things nerds have and can be suggests that this subject position is ultimately a conglomerate of behavioral characteristics and modes, as opposed to an absolutist existential paradigm (**Gruys & Munsch, 2020**). Therefore, what we describe as nerdiness ultimately describes a set of 'practices, engagements, and stances, and individuals oriented to nerdiness to a greater or lesser degree in their actions' (**Bucholtz, 2001: 85**). What is of exigent interest to this analysis, however, is precisely how these concepts manifest in terms of social and spatial (socio-spatial) relations.

Before examining how nerds relate to their socio-spatial milieu, there are several ways to parse the nerd that relate to key socio-spatial concepts beyond the remit of this analysis that need to be at least acknowledged here - particularly those lines of thought that contextualize the nerd within gender and racial discourses. Such work includes but is not limited to: Christopher Fan's *Not All Nerds* (**2014**), which offers insightful analysis concerning the tendency to perceive nerds as a pseudo-race of their own, a tendency which simultaneously and violently permits the continued exercise of white supremacy in industrial nerd spaces such as Silicon Valley; Dan Leberg's *Self-Reflexive Whiteness: White Rappers, and the Nerds Who Mock Them* (**2012**) which interrogates the overlaps between nerdism and the issues and debates concerning cultural appropriation such as the nerdcore subgenre of hip hop music and culture; Lori Kendall's "*White and Nerdy*": *Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype* (**2011**) which deftly reassesses the assumption that the nerd subject position is one marked by a lack of agency by unfolding precisely how nerds act as gatekeepers of certain knowledge and vocational opportunities, specifically in the fields of industrialized nerdism in the form of big tech; Ron Eglash's *Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American*

Hipsters (2002) which provides a comprehensive analysis of the confluence of racial issues and debates that are exacerbated and resisted by and through nerd stereotypes; Scout Kristofer Storey's *Identity and Narrative Ownership in Black Nerd and Wicket: A Parody Musical* (2021) which explores how race, social class, intellectual property, and tensions concerning ownership of the aforesaid intersect; there are also ongoing online spaces such as *Graveyard Shift Sisters* and *Black Girl Nerds* which seek to centralize the fandom and activities of black female horror aficionados in the case of the former, and provide a multimedia platform through and in which geek culture and Black feminism can cross-pollinate in the latter; and William Evans and Omar Holmon's *Black Nerd Problems* (2021) which draws together numerous strands of thought pertaining to race, gender, sociopolitics, economics, and culture in relation to nerds in a collection of thought-provoking essays.

This paper claims that what ultimately binds all of the above permutations of the nerd is a figurative and literal spatial relation nerds have with the centers of sociological spaces of value and access thereto. In other words, whether or not a misunderstood genius or an invisible malcontent sequestered on the periphery of socio-spatial zones, harboring resentment, envy, or praise, waiting for an opportunity to access these centers, the nerd's *outsiderness* is key. In contemporary digital late capitalism, which this paper sees as marked by, among other things, a paradoxical sense of hyperconnectivity facilitated by communications technology and social media, and an accompanying sense of isolation and malaise, there seem to be a variety of spaces - digital and concrete alike - within which a person may find solace or persecution. The tensions between spaces of interiority and exteriority inherent to the relationship between the digital self (the user avatar) and concrete self (what I think of as the user's source code) similarly emerge in Richard Kelly's 2001 debut *Donnie Darko*.

Kelly's exploration of the ellisions and erasures of Darko's sense of hyperreality and social reality, how the interior spaces of his ostensibly time-traveling mind interact, fail to connect, and pre-empt the phenomena he encounters in the social reality of his lived experience ultimately make Donnie's status as a nerd a socio-spatial phenomenon. Kelly exaggerates this concept of outsiderness to a radical extreme in Donnie: Donnie is not only outside of socially valuable spaces he is, on account of his schizoaffectivity and its effects of his personality, deportment, and interaction with others, outside of the socially accepted spaces of both mind and emotion, but also in his mind being displaced in time, Donnie is also outside of the socially accepted flow of time itself. It is for this reason that I have elected to use *Donnie Darko* as a case study. In his performance as Darko, Jake Gyllenhaal brings these antipodal socio-

spatial contents into stark relief on screen. He is at once aloof, uncertain, obsessive, dedicated, intelligent, passionate, removed, and disengaged. In this way, it would be unsurprising for an average viewer to agree that Donnie is a nerd, if asked. This assumption is predicated on the fact that Donnie seems to be a quintessential nerd in every way possible. However, in his complete disinterest in the socio-spatial value of the various high-school subject positions and the spaces they occupy, Kelly's protagonist and anti-hero raises a very interesting question: is a nerd still a nerd if a nerd does not care about being a nerd one way or the other? If so, then what is a nerd of this kind?

In analyzing these questions, I must note that the spatial dynamics of Donnie's nerdism - both internal and external - are exacerbated by the socio-cultural pressure of high-school that often acts as a crucible for the creation and destruction of nerds in contemporary Western culture. Kelly expertly and, despite the sci-fi conceit of the film's precis, naturalistically shows that such a milieu precipitates a type of paradoxical psycho-emotional pressure as well. On the one hand, this pressure pushes nerds to the periphery of social and physical spaces, whereby aggregations of nerd groups find themselves not only on the margin of social acceptability and popularity, but this peripheriness also manifests topographically in nerds being forced out of spaces of centrality within the infrastructure of school domains and the nuanced complexity of social districts. This can take various forms we are all familiar with: good seating in a cafeteria, auditorium, or being barred access to privileged symbolic sites of a certain elevated social status like sports fields and car-parks. They are forced to eat, convene, escape, evade, and endure the psycho-emotional stresses of their outsider status outside the orbit, remit, or aegis of those whose status - such as jocks - is latently hostile to them. Ultimately, Gyllenhaal's performance of sullenness, interiority, and socio-spatial remove from the centrality of popularity in the film highlights a through-line between the nerd subject position and an indissoluble sense of outsidership, making both film and character ideal subjects for the current analysis.

From a theoretical standpoint, there is a pathetic fallacy at play here of a specifically psychogeographical kind. I use the term 'psychogeographic' in line with Guy Debord's definition of the phenomenon; namely, as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals' (Debord, 1955). The sense of internal psycho-emotional ostracization experienced by nerds manifests physically in the external spaces of sequestration, limns, bourns, and margins outside of which they may feel a temporary sense of pseudo-safety or, perhaps even more recessed, belonging. Exemplified in films such as *Carrie* (1976), *Mean Girls* (2004) and a plethora of others in which the nerd subject position fuses

consistent physical and/or psychological abuse, and a desire for revenge, the quintessential socio-spatial politics of Western high-schools is a trope that is, in all its generic permutations seen in teen dramas, horrors, comedies, and romances, latently psychogeographically determined.

With a view to addressing what I shall call the socio-pathology of the nerd, this paper will perform a close reading of *Donnie Darko* in an attempt to move through and ultimately away from the fundamental banality of quintessential conceptions of the nerd. In doing so, it will seek to add to the theoretical scholarship that examines the nerd as type and phenomena, a form and consequence of a confluence of forces; specifically, the nerd's socio-spatial relations to loneliness, misunderstanding, extreme oscillations of mood and action, and resentment.

Theorizing the Spatio-Sociology of the Nerd: Cliques, crowds, & outsiders

Any theorization of the Western nerd ultimately redounds to an exploration of the socio-spatial relations of middle-school/high-school milieus. Coleman's 1961 study of adolescent society was the first sociological examination of contemporary adolescent status systems in a typical North American middle school milieu (**Bishop et al., 2004: 235**). Coleman's study simultaneously sought to determine what it is like to be denigrated by one's middle school classmates; how common predatory anti-teacher peer culture is in junior high-school; whether it typically carries over into high-school; how peer norms of different crowds in a school are established and maintained; the actants that determine them; how they are enforced; crowd and individual variance in terms of influence in establishing peer norms that apply generally to all students; why some crowds have higher status than others; what happens to crowds and individuals who challenge normative dominance of the dominant/popular crowds; the long-term effects of being popular/unpopular during secondary school; the effects of context and educational policy on norms that prevail in youth culture (**Ibid**).

From Coleman's data, it can be easily deduced that nerds emerge out of and against two dominant types of conglomerate structures of the student body. These are cliques and crowds, each which operate under different, sometimes malleable, conditions determined and manifested by, in, and through different figurative and literal zones of social capital. These zones are as much spatial as they are social. For example, the library is a *physical space* whose *social value* within a typical American high-school milieu sees it as being inextricable from knowledge, physical weakness, insularity, cravenness and therefore nerdiness by default. The socio-spatial capital of

the high-school library contrasts starkly with that of a space like the high-school sports field, for example, which is associated with physical prowess, the openness and adulation of spectatorship and spectacle, communal support, and popularity.

Some terminological definitions are necessary here. Cliques are small groups of friends who maintain close personal relationships where members spend a lot of time with one another. On account of this high interpersonal proximity, members thereof tend to share similar attitudes and behaviors. The small size of the clique is no guarantee of its permanence as sociometric studies like Bishop et. al.'s indicate that there is a consistently high turnover rate in clique membership and affiliation. While the mobility in and out of cliques might intimate an underlying sense of identarian agency, the assignation of a specific type or subtype of belonging is difficult if not impossible to disrupt. As Bishop et al. note, 'once classmates categorize you, changing categorization is difficult. In small schools changing one's crowd essentially involves convincing classmates you have become a different person' (Bishop et al., 2004: 237). Crowds are larger 'reputation-based collectives of similarly stereotyped individuals who may or may not spend much time together....Crowd affiliation denotes the primary attitudes and activities with which one is associated by peers....Whereas clique norms are developed within the group, crowd norms are imposed from outside the group and reflect the stereotypic image that peers have of crowd members' (Ibid: 236).

In terms of the socio-spatial aspects of his nerdism, Kelly's characterization of Donnie is fascinating and unique because it both adheres to and rebukes Coleman and Bishop's socio-spatial structuralism. This is on account of the fact that Donnie is so preoccupied, so often outside of the space and time of his peers, their squabbles, gripes, desires, and fears that the value of any and all structures within which they emerge, interact, change, and dissipate described by Coleman and Bishop are moot to Donnie. He is a boy snidely mocked by his peers who is simultaneously also perceived as socio-culturally aberrant but altogether brilliant by his detractors as well as both his English and Science teachers (Drew Barrymore and Noah Wyle). At the same time, he is described in the exact same way by his own outsider friends, his sister, mother, and even his therapist. In this sense, the multigestural assignation of Otherness that emerges from a broad network of sources and spaces – the scholastic, the clinical, and the domestic – pervades every moment and strata of Donnie's life. Regardless of whichever space Donnie finds himself in, the liminality of his oddity and the oddity of his liminality remain undimmed. Despite this, however, his status as being on the ascendancy or descendancy of popularity and social power is largely irrelevant to him throughout the entire film.

While the power(lessness) of crowds varies from school to school, and at different stages of secondary education, there are, of course, intra-subjective interlopers: liminal figures who do not properly, rightly, or adequately adhere to or embody any of the common crowd identities, nor their respective clique subsets. This group, which researchers of peer culture refer to as 'the normals', typically experience and exert a nominal, average status and popularity (Bishop et al., 2004: 237). Despite his outsider status, Donnie is shown to have a very rich personal history, explored and presented to the viewer through the robust interiority of Donnie's *innenwelt*, which is portrayed abstractly in dream sequences and premonitions, as well as through his concrete interpersonal interactions: such as his intimate conversations with his therapist Dr. Lilian Thurman (Katherine Ross) who is treating Donnie for schizophrenic symptoms, mother (Mary McDonnell), love interest Gretchen Ross (Jena Malone), and small clique of friends (Ronald Stone, Gary Lundy, and Alex Greenwald). As such, within the socio-spatial zones of value within his high-school milieu, which subtends the suburban domesticity of his middle-class life outside of school, Donnie could be described, paradoxically, as a 'normal': as an individual both above and below average, a type of Outsider of outsiders. I will comment more on this later.

For now, let us acknowledge the fact that despite Donnie's strange and indeed strained relationship with *external* spatio-social centrality, Kelly lays the intricacies of Donnie's detailed, turbulent, and confusing psycho-emotional interior space bare. This transparency between inner and outer spaces which the omniscient gaze of the viewer has access to does not guarantee comprehension of what that gaze perceives. Often, the viewer is just as confused about Donnie's socio-spatial relation to fundamental forces of nature in space and time as Donnie is about both himself and his relation to the same forces. To the other characters of the film, Donnie is near or completely unfathomable. He belongs to no clique or crowd, suffers no authority save that of a mysterious anthropomorphic bunny that only he can see: a being impelling him to not only consider grand philosophical and scientific phenomena including eschatology and time travel, but fear and prepare for the end of the world itself. As a result, one could argue that Donnie simply does not figuratively and literally have time to worry about his reputation, the latest trends, the status and security of the clique and crowd affiliations of his classmates, nor what that means or entails at any given time within the socio-spatial zones he navigates.

In this way, Donnie is truly *outside* scholastic space-time and the socio-spatial relations to districts of social value they govern. He moves through but never settles or is settled in a plethora of socio-spatial zones. These include domestic spaces, scholastic spaces, therapeutic spaces, and broader social spaces, such as the one he and Gretchen inhabit when the

pair attend a midnight showing of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in, unsurprisingly, an empty local movie theater. He also maintains a periphery space in the form of an abandoned plot of land where he and his friends shoot pellets at empty cans, debate the sexual life of the Smurfs, and deliberate on the odd, sad existence of another displaced socio-spatial outsider, author, and potential time-traveler Robertta Sparrow a.k.a Lady Death (Patience Cleveland). Here, Donnie's Outside-of-outsiderness ruptures the assignation of 'nerd' and tends, in its seemingly total disinterestedness in the present, and the tenuous hold on various quotidian spaces that make up his life marked by an essential sense of remove or recession, toward a type of misanthropy-by-dissociation. For Donnie, the interior (and perhaps even inter-dimensional) spaces of his imagination and emotions are of far greater importance to him than the physical spaces of his life and whatever social capital they can educe.

Theorizing the Spatio-Sociology of Donnie Darko: Nerd, outsider, loner

Let me open this section with two broad questions: first, what is the relation between being a nerd and suffering under a particular pathology, in Donnie's case, schizophrenia, for which he is seriously medicated? Second, how does Donnie's pathology influence not only his ostensible displays of nerdishness discussed above, but his relationship with space in general? Donnie's relation to external and internal spaces is a central part of Kelly's thematically dense text. Jonathan Eig, describes the film as a agglomeration of themes including 'time travel, God, free will, education, and mental illness [as well as] child abuse, ageism, body type, and cultism' (Eig, 2003). Critics like Alex Blazer assert that Kelly approaches these themes 'without glorifying them; and instead asserts the power of art to traverse coming-of-age anxiety, psychotic fragmentation, and death itself' (Blazer, 2015: 209).

Like the nerd within the high-school milieu, the question of the veracity of who Donnie is and what he experiences, beyond being simply abject, remains a mercurial mystery. To this end, Eig notes that Donnie is a hero who 'does not know the true nature of his identity and so is not simply keeping a secret from us. And the audience [...] are not let in on a secret the hero does not know' (Eig, 2003). Blazer makes a similar point albeit one which is specifically spatial in nature, asking 'whether the world of *Donnie Darko* (the film) a dream, a hallucination, reality, or merely one reality among multiple universes? Does Donnie Darko (the character) sleep, delude, wake, or imagine?' (Blazer, 2015: 209). However, at the center of the film's handling of socio-spatial relations is a presiding kernel of a theme: the paradoxical disillusionment of a potentially hallucinatory teenager surrounded by hypocrisy at every level and in every space his life

subtends – from the familial to scholastic, the amorous, clinical, and even hallucinatory space (Eig, 2003). Parsed through various spaces in this way, this theme offers a deep dive into the socio-spatial liminality of the nerd as maladaptive and, ostensibly, permanently displaced within a range of relationships, each with different stakes, which manifest differently in different internal and external spaces.

Kelly's dramatization of Donnie's life, its complexities, pleasures, and pains, glamorizes a strange outsider with latently destructive proclivities, but euphemizes his potential danger through science fiction. Geoff Klock makes a similar observation by noting how *Donnie Darko* is a bildungsroman complicated by time-travel tropes that 'critiques reductive, empty, shallow, suburban surface life' (Klock, n.d). Other commentators like Megan Hess posit that the film has nothing to do with time-travel at all, that none of the film's action is 'real' externally to Donnie's internal experience, and as such, the film *in toto* is, despite the fact that Dr. Thurman admits to prescribing placebos in the course of the film, 'just part of a schizophrenic episode that Donnie [has]' (Hess, 2016). Such a position is buttressed by the fact that one of the first things the audience learns about Donnie is that he has stopped taking his medication. This allows the audience to conclude that the audiovisual hallucinations Donnie experiences are purely biochemical responses to the interruption of his treatment and, as a result, all perception of socio-spatial phenomena filtered through Donnie's experiences thereof is radically unreliable. However, this sense of hermeneutic uncertainty and play is not only predicated on the post-modern manifold of narrative interpretations available to the viewer, but on the fact that Donnie is subject to a regime of both analysis and medication.

However, the central manifestation of this unreliability takes the form of Donnie's relationship and interaction with Frank (James Duval). One of, if not the most, significant questions the film raises is whether or not Frank is a schizophrenic hallucination. Though perhaps not obviously, this question is actually a deeply spatial one. In the director's cut of the film, Kelly implies that Frank is perhaps an avatar, conduit, or manifestation of a higher cosmic intelligence that exists alongside or over the space of Donnie's diegesis, in a tangent one. As such, 'the director's cut offers the possibility that Donnie's experience of Frank stems from the space outside of his consciousness rather than originating from within' (Jordan, 2009: 49). The implication of this higher dimensional hyperspatiality is that the socio-spatial relations of the lower quotidian dimension in which Donnie lives out a strange, stunted, reclusive, yet unpredictable social life despite the predictability of its middle class Americana backdrop is also of lower priority to him. Despite the fact that much of what Donnie experiences in this space does not make ostensible sense to him - liquid pathways

emerging from the torsos of individuals, the liquefaction of mirrored surfaces, and black outs - he is certain that the answers to life's questions are contained in the hallucinatory space (one he treads alone with Frank), not in the spaces of high school or suburbia.

In the socio-spatial gyre that Donnie finds himself in, one that is compounded by inter-dimensionality, Blazer rightly draws attention to the film's fundamental sense of conceptual disorientation and identarian multiplicity - as evidenced in the fact that Donnie is very different behaviorally in different spaces: when he is in English class (disinterested or bold, intelligent, and assertive), with his therapist (confused, clinically depressed, puerile), with his mother (despondent and disrespectful), with Frank (a bleary-eyed time-traveler lost in the unfolding concatenation of disjointed moments), and Gretchen (adroit and tender) (**Blazer, 2015: 208**). The radical implication here is that while the self-identification or assignation of belonging to a specific socio-spatially determined identity can afford comfort and consternation both, it binds the individual to that socio-spatial zone, its rules, requirements, symbols, behaviors, and performativity. It sequesters the mercurial possibilities of becoming that, ironically, are recursively associated with youth and adolescence. It is therefore precisely because Donnie is a 'bad nerd', a 'half nerd', 'not quite a nerd' on account of his unwavering disinterest in the identity that he is and can be many things, in many spaces, to many people.

In analyzing *Donnie Darko's* interdimensional play of themes across internal and external spaces, it is helpful to assess what information Kelly provides about Donnie's personality and how that sets up the audience's perception and understanding of the character as nerd or not. Initially, Donnie is presented as being rather unsympathetic, specifically as abrasive, sullen, and rude. At a dinner scene that opens the film, Donnie calls his mother a bitch. Later, at his high-school bus stop, Donnie is coarse, ostensibly uncaring, perhaps even latently cruel. While the viewer's reaction might be aptly described as a mix of intrigued and hostile in response to Donnie's behavior and what that may suggest about who he is, as the film progresses, this changes. Whether one sees Donnie as sympathetic, sad, sequestered, stunted, sick or stifled by the realism with which Kelly depicts teenage life in late '80s American suburbia, Donnie:

...reveals his intelligence, bravery, and passion. He gets a friend in Frank and a girlfriend in Gretchen. He even seems to find that time travel may answer the questions of morality and free will which plague him [...] Even his death is shown as positive. [Donnie states, in earnest] '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'. (Eig, 2003).

In a sense, this ostensibly thanatotic desire for experiences divorced from the hypocrisies and inconsistencies of a world he feels bound in, one whose ultimately meaningless socio-spatial structures and zones of value are on the verge of an apocalypse he cannot prevent, is perhaps the non-nerdiest thing about Donnie.

This seemingly passive *amor fati* is countermanded by the presence of an underlying volatility within Donnie, regardless of its provenance – clinical imbalance or inter-dimensional intervention. One notable scene of this kind involves Donnie committing a serious act of arson. Ostensibly, this act is irredeemably destructive – an addled youth, selfish and uncaring, burning down an innocent and reputable, albeit insufferably caricatural and ostensibly disingenuous, man's house. Donnie's apparent amorality is redeemed as later it is revealed that Cunningham (Patrick Swayze) has been a purveyor of child pornography. To some viewers, Donnie therefore attains a measure of righteousness and personal vindication in and through destruction. This may be a convenient coincidence to yet other viewers. However, the point of duplicity that Eig comments on relates to the duality of the figure and subject position of the nerd itself: 'Darko's plot indicates there is often little distinction between what we perceive as good and what we perceive as evil' (Eig, 2003). Interestingly, this entire act of arson occurs outside of the space of Donnie's conscious mind and the space of his volition and agency. This makes the moral rectitude of this passive immoral act without a sense of direct meaning to Donnie himself. Being outside of the basic socio-spatial zone of full consciousness, the ostensible moral and emotional ambivalence with which Donnie carries out the act of arson is as ambivalent as Donnie's waking regard for the socio-spatial zones of school and suburb in which the act occurs. Despite this seemingly radical ambivalence, a sort of anti-socio-spatiality, or supra-socio-spatiality, both the theatrical and director's cuts of the film tend to frame Donnie, his experiences and actions, in a sympathetic light. In contrast to this seemingly nihilistic solipsism, in one scene Donnie corners Cherita Chan (Jolene Purdy), a pariah in their school harboring a secret infatuation for/with Donnie, and says earnestly to her 'I promise that one day everything's going to be better for you' (Kelly, 2001). This powerful and seemingly uncharacteristic and surprisingly sudden display of altruism, empathy, and a mutual understanding of marginalization might suggest that beneath the multitude of behavioral modes he expresses, Donnie is ultimately a 'good kid'. In another example, during one of his therapy sessions, Dr. Thurman asks Donnie about his feelings concerning death and solitude. She asks him whether he feels alone in that very moment the question is asked, to which Donnie answers with earnest uncertainty, that he would like to believe he is not, but that he has never seen any proof contrariwise, so he considers the question both absurd and

moot. Dr. Thurman follows up by asking: 'the search for God is absurd?' to which Donnie answers 'it is if everyone dies alone.' Dr. Thurman then asks: 'does that scare you?' to which Donnie answers 'I don't wanna be alone' (**Ibid**). In this scene, a viewer may be driven to empathy by the earnestness of Gyllenhaal's moving performance of a teenager grappling with his own mortality, but also his strangely un-egotistical, earnest belief that he can prevent not only his own death, but the end of the world itself.

This sense of isolation and paradoxically nihilistic fear, and their latent tension with Donnie's obvious assertiveness and intellectual vigor, extends and is intensified by his domestic situation. In one scene, Donnie's mother attempts to comfort and (re)connect with her disturbed son. She states 'you know, it would be nice to look at you some time and see my son. I don't recognize this person today' to which the frustrated and antagonistic youth responds by calling her a 'bitch' (**Ibid**). As stated above, these behavioral expressions of what we can now begin to concretely conceptualize as pseudo or even anti-nerdism are socio-spatial phenomena. Donnie's latent volatility, as well his irrevocable loneliness, take different shapes and hues in different spaces, and are expressed variously in and through different relationships. When alone, Donnie might be seen as an example of a type of transcendental Nietzschean loneliness. With his friends, he appears to be the misunderstood genius whose intellect and its seemingly inextricable boredom and disillusionment with reductive social and educational ideologies at school leaves him permanently frustrated and terse. Within the space of his family bonds, Donnie is perhaps best described as symbolic of the loneliness experienced by a so-called 'problem child'. Within the amorous space of his and Gretchen's mutual attraction, Gretchen regards Donnie as attractive, strange, and unique specifically because of his loneliness. Gretchen, like Donnie, cares little for how she is perceived and fits in (or does not). It should be noted that the reason Gretchen is so important to Donnie in specifically socio-spatial terms is due to her ironic socio-spatial status. While Gretchen is the most important aspect of Donnie's young life, she emerges from a space which is devoid of value for him; namely their shared high school milieu against which both share a critical disinterest.

Donnie's non-socio-spatially conformist encounter with the cruelties, paradoxes, and aporias of life draws together themes of self-sacrifice, martyrdom, violence, and suicide. While Donnie is indeed an outcast, he is not a submissive one. He is intelligent, well-spoken, outspoken, and sure. Though intellectually engaged, he is awkward in his forwardness with Gretchen, but successful therein. She is receptive to him, they trust one another. In contrast to the traditional nerd described at the beginning of this analysis, Donnie has a specific kind of outsider charm. One that is not concerned with being humiliated by or intimidating or harassing other

students. Equally, he is not intimidated by any other student, save perhaps for Gretchen, whom he is attracted to. However, the clear intensity and advancement of his intellect is shown to intimidate others, for example during his masterfully improvised hermeneutic insights into a passage of *The Destroyers* being studied in Karen Pomeroy's English literature class.

Whenever it does emerge, Donnie's aggressivity is directed almost entirely toward what he deems to be instances of fakery and disingenuousness that indelibly mark the typified flows of power and value in the socio-spatial structures of his school and his home. Jocks and Preps are beneath Donnie's ire, the target of which is precisely the system that produces and perpetuates types of absolutist identarian delineations, and over simplifications of this kind represented by Cunningham's Love/Fear binary. Nor does Donnie spend his highly idiosyncratic passion seeking to gain approval and status by mocking his school's unpopular crowds – the Goths, Freaks, and Punks to which he and his cadre are socio-spatially adjacent to. Donnie's pseudo-clique of outcasts have no specific individual within their cohort to intervene in defense on Donnie's behalf because Donnie, despite his *angoisse* and ennui, does not require it. As their unofficial, reluctant leader, Donnie takes it upon himself to fight his battles individually and for no purpose other than righteous, passionate youthful indignation. He has no inclination to destroy this system because he is engaged in a puzzle in a higher dimensional space upon which the continuation of the meaningless of the lower socio-spatially determined dimension depends. In this way, neither Donnie nor his friends are cowards in the way stereotypically expected of nerds. Donnie is also popular enough, despite his outsider status, to find pleasure, respite, and connection in this space. He and Gretchen are invited to a raucous Halloween party during which the pair are physically intimate with one another. These nerd/anti-nerd paradoxes point to a taxonomical irony with Donnie: based on his clear status as an outsider, but an atypical one, Donnie would, according to Bishop et al.'s framework examined above, be best described as a 'normal' on account of his liminality – and yet, there is clearly nothing normal about Donnie.

Conclusion: Donnie Darko & The socio-spatial relations of nerds, outsiders, and loners

The above analysis of Donnie ultimately suggests that there is an important difference between the identarian positions and socio-spatial value of nerds, outsiders, and loners. On the one hand, Donnie is not a nerd precisely because he does not direct his attention and care to the various socio-spatially determined points of interest and disinterest that a traditional nerd in a typical North American high school milieu would. Nerds of a traditional kind value the socio-spatial dynamics of high schools

because within said spaces, being a part of a group - even a maligned, low prestige group - affords one a sense of community, shared experience (joy and hardship), and safety, regardless of how meagre. In this sense, the socio-spatial dynamics of the high school milieu are just as important to a jock as they are to a nerd. A loner, on the other hand, finds no value in these spaces, can endure, permeate, and/or ignore them all but entirely. They afford a loner no protection, no community, no purchase on popularity precisely because these affordances are valueless to a loner. What studying Donnie as a nerd reveals is the key difference between nerds, outsiders and loners predicated ultimately on each type's socio-spatial relations to zones of value. While a nerd might see this valuelessness as a terrifying untethering, an outsider and loner would see it as an opportunity, a freedom to try a variety of becomings whose value cannot be circumscribed by any single or joint zone(s) of socio-spatial structure.

Aside from lecturing full-time in the HSS Department of Ashesi University, Kwasu David Tembo's research interests include – but are not limited to – comics studies, literary theory and criticism, philosophy, particularly the so-called 'prophets of extremity' – Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. He has published on Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige*, in *The Cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the Impossible*, ed. Jacqueline Furby and Stuart Joy (Columbia UP, 2015), and on Superman, in *Postscriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies* (2017).



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Endnotes

ⁱ Examples of films featuring nerds and loners as protagonists include but are not limited to: *Psycho* (1960); *Peeping Tom* (1960); *Bowling for Columbine* (2002); *Her* (2013); *Paterson* (2016), *I Don't Feel At Home In This World Anymore* (2017), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Ex Machina* (2014), *The Machinist* (2004), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Stoker* (2013), *Youth in Revolt* (2009); and *Brick* (2005).