

Interview: Rian Johnson Crafts a Sci-fi Masterpiece with ‘Looper’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 26, 2012 - 3:15pm

- [Breaking Bad](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [Brick](#) [4]
- [Bruce Willis](#) [5]
- [Emily Blunt](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [Interview](#) [8]
- [Joseph Gordon-Levitt](#) [9]
- [Looper](#) [10]
- [Rian Johnson](#) [11]
- [Terriers](#) [12]
- [The Brothers Bloom](#) [13]
- [Vince Gilligan](#) [14]

CHICAGO – Rian Johnson’s “Looper” is going to blow your mind. The third film from the director of “Brick” and “The Brothers Bloom” (as well as episodes of “Terriers” and “Breaking Bad”) is a highwire act of time travel action and human drama. The writer/director recently sat down with us for a great conversation about his experience, his friendship with star Joseph Gordon-Levitt, the tricky nature of making an action movie for adults, and what influences him creatively.

The title of “Looper” refers to the profession of its title character, an assassin named Joe (Gordon-Levitt). In the near future, time travel has been invented and it’s used to kill people. A victim is sent back to Joe’s time and shot. Things go relatively well until Joe is staring into the older eyes of himself (Bruce Willis) and old Joe fights back. Old Joe has not come back to die. He has a mission. Giving away more than this would ruin many of the film’s wonderful surprises but feel free to read [my full review](#) [15] for more thoughts on the film.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: 100% on Rotten Tomatoes in your first 23 reviews. Were you expecting that?

RIAN JOHNSON: No. You never know what to expect. “Brothers Bloom” got a much more mixed reaction. It was similar because we went to Toronto with it and there were people who really into it and I’m really proud of the film. It’s nice. I get tweets and emails from people about it. But, at the time, to put it out and get the very mixed reaction...I think it was actually very healthy. It allowed me to realign my priorities and go, “You know what? Not everyone is going to like everything I do. You can’t place its value on the reception.” And you learn to read the bad reviews and not take them as definitive but still find them really interesting too. Now that I got used to that, THIS is making me nervous. (Laughs.)

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: And there had to be a little bit of nerves given what the film is. I have to admit when it was over, I turned the critic next to me and said, “How did THAT get made?” It’s so dark. Props to Film District for not meddling. Did you ever get notes on the dark stuff or pressure to change it?

JOHNSON: Endgame Entertainment are really the ones. They gave us the greenlight based on the script. It was a lot of trust. They didn’t kick back to the point where anyone else would. But it was something that a lot of discussion went into, rightly so. And “that moment” specifically and the ending are two things that I wanted to talk about. I wanted to make sure. They’re the sort of things where an audience can disconnect. And the ending is a very tricky thing to make feel satisfying. You can’t take that for granted. You can’t say, “This is challenging, so screw the audience.” You have to make sure that you’re baking it into the bones of the whole thing and you’re carving it so, in the end, they’re uplifted.



Looper

Photo credit: Sony Pictures

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: To a certain degree, can't you not over-worry about those things because there will be some people who you can never bring to the table to handle some of the dark places this story goes?

JOHNSON: There will be. You can never pull punches because of the extremes. What you can do is make sure that it's honest, make sure that it's earned. From my perspective, the thing that turns me off in moments like that is when I feel like it's being done to provoke me. That's what I wanted to avoid. And it was just a matter of making sure it was not just a shocking moment but that it was a moral choice. It was a choice that Bruce's character had to make that he then had to deal with. And Bruce's performance helps save our ass and lets the audience accept it.



Looper

Photo credit: Sony Pictures

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: And the way it's shot because you take it from a wide shot instead of a close-up, which would have felt more like heartstring-pulling.

JOHNSON: Right. Thanks.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: It doesn't feel exploitative.

JOHNSON: That's the key. That's the word. If you can avoid that, then it will work.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: I’m curious how much of this universe you know that we don’t see. Do you know Joe’s story for the 30 years that we only see in montage? The details of it?

JOHNSON: Yeah, I have a sense of it. I talked Joe through it a little bit. I didn’t write out like a novella but it is important to know how the character got to the place that he did. For me, it was as important to know the broad strokes of how he got there so we could communicate them through that montage.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Let’s talk a little bit about Joseph Gordon-Levitt from “Brick” to this — how has he changed?

JOHNSON: It’s hard for me to define because I’ve changed too and we’ve stayed such really close friends. It’s hard for me to separate. It’s easy for me to see what’s similar.



HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: What’s similar?

JOHNSON: First off, we just love working together. Even in our friendship, which is largely fused around creating things together. We’ll make a song or a short film. Something to keep ourselves occupied. From when I first met him until now, the big thing that’s consistent is the reason that he chooses the things that he decides to engage with. He has no other criteria other than what is interesting to him. It’s why he chose “Brick” and it’s why he chose Batman. He’s very honest about whatever hooks him next instead of plotting out a strategy. And that’s how I approach. I’m in the process of it right now, trying to figure out what the next thing is, and it’s like fishing. It’s filling your mind with as many ideas as possible and seeing which one grabs you and takes you off on the next path.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: You seem to be a director who’s not defined by genre? Is that intentional?

JOHNSON: I guess. It’s never the driving factor. There’s appeal to making a sci-fi movie but it would never have happened if I hadn’t struck on this idea that excited me. Time travel, for instance. I wasn’t hungry to do a time travel movie. But the idea required it. The same thing with mixing genres — it’s almost a byproduct of what I try to do to keep it interesting to myself. I’ll come up with a basic notion but then I’ll live with it for awhile and then I’ll try to respark it for myself by infusing something new with it. Through that process, different things start getting mixed in there. It’s never as simple as “What if I mix this with this?”

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: One of the things I love about the movie is the way it’s grounded in the world of today. Visually, it’s more “Minority Report” than “Fifth Element.” There are going to be parts of the heartland in 100 years that look like they do today. Was that intentional? To make it not too “futuristic-looking”?

JOHNSON: Yeah. That was always our intention from the beginning for a couple of different reasons. The least reason I’ll lead with is that it was do-able on our budget. I didn’t have to create a whole world. But that’s the least concern. The bigger one was that it felt right to me that it was a grounded world. I wanted to do something that the audience would recognize. There’s so much that we’re asking the audience to absorb, especially in that first half-hour, that I didn’t want them also to have to take in what the world was. And so it’s intentionally a recognizable world that we’ve seen a version of in other movies. We don’t explain anything about it.



Looper

Photo credit: Sony Pictures

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: There seems to be a cinematic language that touches on things that we’re familiar with as well. The first half is very noir and the second half is practically “High Noon” with its Western feel.

JOHNSON: Absolutely.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Were there cinematic influences that were intentional and creatively guiding during the project?

JOHNSON: Less so than with “Brick” and “Bloom.” With visual references, I always find it better to look outside of the genre that you’re in. The second half owes a lot to “Witness,” visuals and structurally. Looking at how that movie kept the tension up even on the middle of a farm was something I studied. At the end of the day, it all has to be driven by story. The main reason that I wanted to set Sarah’s part visually apart and have it be pastoral is because the split in the middle kind of represents the two halves of the moral compass that the film comes down to — Old Joe vs. Sarah. Making those as Yin and Yang as possible seemed right. Even down to the vertical nature of the city and the horizontal of the farm. It was a narrative gambit but all you can do is take that really seriously in terms of trying to make it work as much as possible.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: If I use the phrase “greatest challenge,” what’s the first thing that comes to mind?

JOHNSON: Time travel. Keeping it tamed. Riding the balance of having it be subservient to the story and character. The temptation as a writer when you come up with a system of time travel rules, there is a foundation of very solid rules of how these paradoxes work. It’s having the discipline to not explain all those rules to the audience and just have them see the effects and hope that it feels cohesive. You can dig in and figure it out or sit back and take in the story.



Looper

Photo credit: Sony Pictures

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: You’ve done some great TV since we last talked — “Terriers,” “Breaking Bad.” How’d you get involved with that?

JOHNSON: Vince Gilligan had seen “Brick” and he got in touch during season two. I was doing “Bloom” at the time and I couldn’t do it. In the third season, I came and did that episode, “The Fly,” and it was a love connection on every level. Vince is incredible. The crew. The cast. They give you a lot...you’re there to serve Vince’s vision. It felt really good to me. It almost felt like a vacation — bringing to life the vision of

somebody I really respect. And they give you a lot of freedom. But what you want is to come in there and tell the story that’s on the page as much as possible.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: How hands-on is Vince?

JOHNSON: It’s an interesting process. You have a tone meeting and get on video chat and have a four-hour conversation. I’ve storyboarded it out and I explain my approach, not just visually but story-wise. “I’m going to emphasize this.” And then he’ll give feedback. Then he’ll give adjustments. “The scene should emphasize this character more.” He won’t give you specifics but he’ll tell you what’s important and then have you bring it out.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: I heard you might do a “Game of Thrones” too.

JOHNSON: I’m friends with the guys who do it and it’s a fantastic show. I’d love to do it. It didn’t work out because of schedule but if it does...I can’t imagine anything more fun. (Laughs.)

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Has working in TV made you a different film director?

JOHNSON: I don’t know. I feel like every working experience helps you learn, grow, get better. I guess it was nice to just have the experience of taking a piece of writing that you really respect and bringing that to life. It felt good. It felt productive.

HOLLYWOODCHICAGO.COM: Back to “Looper” for a bit. This is kind of a tricky question. There are movies like this, sci-fi films that get some critical attention, “Dark City” comes to mind, that then fall flat when they hit the box office. They draw later on. Sci-fi is a tricky thing to bring to the mainstream. So, do you have specific expectations for what this is going to do and how it’s going to perform?

JOHNSON: I got no expectations. You have no control over that aspect of it. At the end of the day, it’s important for a lot of people and a lot of reasons but you can’t let it be important as a filmmaker. I’m also just an optimist in that neither “Brick” and “Bloom” made any noise in theaters but found their audience after the fact. The opening weekend and all that jazz doesn’t really matter for what I care about, which is the right audience and people who love the movie finding it. On a long enough time scale, that will happen. And that’s all you can care about.

Find “Looper” before everyone you know does so first when the best sci-fi movie of the year opens on September 28, 2012. And read our rave review [here](#) [15].



[16]

By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [17]
Content Director
HollywoodChicago.com
brian@hollywoodchicago.com [16]

Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 28 2024 - 9:43am*):
<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/20079/interview-rian-johnson-crafts-a-sci-fi-masterpiece-with-looper>

- Links:**
- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/briantt>
 - [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/breaking-bad>
 - [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/brian-tallerico>
 - [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/brick>
 - [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/bruce-willis>
 - [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/emily-blunt>
 - [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
 - [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/interview.html>
 - [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/joseph-gordon-levitt>
 - [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/looper>
 - [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/rian-johnson>
 - [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/terriers>
 - [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/the-brothers-bloom>
 - [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/vince-gilligan>
 - [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/19830/stunning-creative-vision-of-looper-with-joseph-gordon-levitt>
 - [16] <mailto:brian@hollywoodchicago.com>
 - [17] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#BRIAN>