

Interview: Derek Cianfrance Sheds Light on ‘The Place Beyond the Pines’

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on April 2, 2013 - 9:21am

- [Blue Valentine](#) [2]
- [Bradley Cooper](#) [3]
- [Derek Cianfrance](#) [4]
- [Focus Features](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Interview](#) [7]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [8]
- [Rose Byrne](#) [9]
- [Ryan Gosling](#) [10]
- [The Place Beyond the Pines](#) [11]

CHICAGO – The first image that surfaced of Derek Cianfrance’s “The Place Beyond the Pines,” was that of a bleached blonde, tattooed Ryan Gosling seated on a motorcycle. For many viewers, that would be enough to earn their ticket, yet Cianfrance’s brooding epic is bound to give them far more than they bargained for. Some may feel betrayed, others will be hooked.

With the exception of “Brother Tied,” a 1998 effort Cianfrance dismisses as an “exercise in egomaniacal hubris,” the director’s first major feature film was 2010’s “Blue Valentine,” a shattering drama that juxtaposed the dawn and dusk of a relationship between two lost souls (played by Gosling and an Oscar-nominated Michelle Williams). “Pines” unspools an even more ambitious narrative structure, exploring the impact of violence on two generations of men in purely linear fashion. Each segment in the film’s three-act structure is self-contained, shifting the audience’s perspective on an assortment of characters including Luke (Gosling), a stuntman struggling to provide for his estranged family, Avery (Bradley Cooper), a cop haunted by his split-second decision that resulted in a man’s death, and Jason (Dane DeHaan), a troubled teen obsessed with learning the truth about his absent father.

Cianfrance spoke with Hollywood Chicago about Gosling’s fearlessness and Cooper’s untapped depths, as well as his own personal crusade to drain onscreen violence of sensationalism.

HollywoodChicago.com: Some viewers have compared this film to “Drive” simply because it casts Ryan Gosling as a stuntman. But to me, Gosling’s character in “Pines” has more in common with the struggling father in “Valentine.” Did you note a correlation between these characters?

Derek Cianfrance: Yeah. In both films, Ryan and I are dealing with the modern masculine identity of a guy who’s trying to be a father but not really knowing how to do it. When I write, I write from a very personal and vulnerable place. I’m writing about things that I’m dealing with in my life—big, monumental, earth-shaking things like being married or being a father. I’m taking that responsibility and the conflicts and fears that come with that responsibility and putting them on the screen. Ryan is the type of great actor who is willing to go those places. It’s tough to go on the screen and be so vulnerable. As far as “Drive” goes, I saw it after I shot this movie, and it reminded me of the 12 years I spent trying to make “Blue Valentine.” In 1999, I was walking by a movie theater in Santa Monica, and there was a poster for “The Story of Us” with Bruce Willis and Michelle Pfeiffer. My heart sank, and I thought, “Oh no, they beat me to it.” I waited three months until I finally saw it, and it was nothing like my movie. I had the same worries when “Drive” came out, but when I saw it, I realized that [Nicolas Winding] Refn and I are interested in totally different things.



Ryan Gosling, director Derek Cianfrance and Eva Mendes embrace on the set of *The Place Beyond the Pines*, a Focus Features release.

Photo credit: Atsushi Nishijima

HollywoodChicago.com: What made you decide to shoot so many scenes, particularly the chase sequences, in long, unbroken takes?

Cianfrance: I love montage and editing. In my first student feature, “*Brother Tied*,” I was trying to beat “*The Wild Bunch*” and have the most edits in movie history. But that was 15 years ago. As the years have gone by, I’ve been more and more interested in the unbroken shot. There’s an inherent manipulation, an inherent lie, in an edit. There’s truth in a long take. You’re actually filming the world—the air, the atmosphere, the characters, the movements. It’s so much more challenging to shoot things in single takes, but it feels so much better. I remember seeing “*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*,” and being absolutely floored by how real it felt. Whereas “*Blue Valentine*” was noted for its honesty and its frank take on sexuality, [“*Pines*”] deals with bank robberies and cops and robbers, but I still wanted it to be real. That meant I had to do a lot of research with real cops and bank robbers and police wives.

When we shot those [chase] scenes, my reference point wasn’t other movies, it was “*Cops*” and “*World’s Wildest Police Videos*.” I feel like the viewer nowadays is so sharp. With the advent of YouTube, you see these single, unbroken moments, which are my favorite things to watch online. I think audiences know true from false now. They can sense when they’re being manipulated, and I have an allergy towards that manipulation. I wanted to try and shoot sequences in single takes, which makes it very difficult. I took my producers on a tech scout to show them where we would shoot the introduction to Bradley Cooper’s character in a two-and-a-half minute shot from the passenger’s seat of a cop car. I was walking them through this neighborhood, and it took us ten minutes to walk the length that Cooper would be driving at 75 miles per hour. After I showed it to them, it was just silence. I was like, “What’s wrong with you guys? Aren’t you excited and pumped?” They were just trying to figure out how the heck we were going to do it. Instead of sectioning off half a block, we had to section off an entire neighborhood and make people stay in their houses. The logistics are so much more challenging for long takes, but I feel like you can feel that truth.

HollywoodChicago.com: And with Gosling performing his own stunts, this could’ve ended in disaster.

Cianfrance: Trust me, Vic Morrow was in my mind the whole time I was making this film. When you’re making a film and trying to make it as great as it can be, you can easily lose a grip on the real world and being a decent person. So for this movie, we trained Ryan on a motorcycle because there were certain takes where he had to rob a bank, start up his motorcycle, drive out into traffic, be pursued by a cop, blow through an intersection and avoid 36 cars. Ryan had to do that himself. I couldn’t do a Texas switch on that. We had this guy named Rick Miller who was Ryan’s stunt double. He’s the guy who you call when Batman needs to ride a motorcycle.

It was eight weeks before production when he started training Ryan. I asked Rick, “On a scale of one to ten, where do you put Ryan?” He said, “At a three.” I said, “That’s no good. What could he realistically get to in eight weeks?” He said, “Maybe a three-and-a-half or a four. It takes a lifetime of work to get good at doing this. How do you get good at basketball? You practice every day from the time you’re six years old. That’s how you get in the NBA.” I said, “You have eight weeks with him. Just train every day with him,” and he did. A day before production, I asked Rick again, “Where did Ryan get to after eight weeks?” and he said, “He’s about a seven.” So that just speaks to Gosling’s magic and ability as a human being.



Ryan Gosling stars in Derek Cianfrance's *The Place Beyond the Pines*, a Focus Features release.

Photo credit: Atsushi Nishijima

HollywoodChicago.com: How did the casting of Bradley Cooper alter the character of Avery?

Cianfrance: I had met a number of actors for the role of Avery, and I had no idea who it was going to be. One of my scheduled meetings was with Bradley Cooper, and this was before "Silver Linings Playbook." I didn't have high expectations for the meeting. I'll meet with anyone, but I didn't think that anything would come from it. I thought he was just that dude from "The Hangover." When I met him, I was immediately struck by the way he was sitting. There was something going on in this guy, and as I sat there and talked with him, I realized that he was wrestling with many of the same things that I was wrestling with. I was so compelled by him and so struck with how my perception of this guy was so completely wrong. That must've meant that he was a great actor. Then I started thinking about Avery as this guy who's paraded around as the American hero, as the one that everyone aspires to be like, and yet feels corrupted inside. What if there's a mistake he's made and he's carrying this toxic shame inside of him, but on the outside, he's the hero? What would that do to someone?

I started thinking about the American idea of self-preservation and how it's rewarded in American society. I started thinking that Avery could be a real modern American character, so I rewrote it completely for Bradley. I took the character to an even darker place because I felt that Bradley could do it. More than any other character in that movie, Avery is the most real character. I've spoken to a lot of successful men who've seen the film and been absolutely floored by Avery. They've told me that after seeing the film, they called their ex-wife and said, "I know it's not my night tonight, but can I come pick up my son?" They pick up their son and have dinner with him. I think only Bradley could do that, and I think that's because we have a perception of him, but he has so much more inside. He's filled with secrets.

HollywoodChicago.com: Ryan Gosling and Michelle Williams "played house" prior to shooting "Blue Valentine," while the actors in "Pines" spent time with people similar to their characters before production began. Would you consider this approach a variation on the rehearsal period?

Cianfrance: I don't rehearse with my actors. I don't like rehearsals, and I don't really like auditions either. My biggest fear with a rehearsal or an audition is that we get it and then you have it in the back of your mind when you're onset. You're always trying to get it again, and it sets up expectations, which to me, is very dangerous. I like preparation. I like to be absolutely prepared before going into the world with a camera and capturing the sort of magic that sometimes can only happen once. I'm not a theatre director who has to sustain a performance for eight shows a week. For me, it's about getting it one time, and I never want that to happen in a rehearsal. Sometimes you get it on the first take, sometimes you get it on the fiftieth take. It just depends, and I don't want to throw it away. It's really important that these films blur the line between fact and fiction. They blur the line between reality and fantasy, between an actor and a character. I'm looking for the moment when acting stops and behavior begins, so I feel that the more they can be in the real world, the more effortlessly their instincts will kick in [on camera], and they'll just be that person. My two least favorite words on a film set are "action" and "cut," because I don't want you to get "set up," I just want you to be in it all the time.

The difference between this and "Blue Valentine" was that "Valentine" was about love, and we all have a reference point for love. We can all draw from something in our life. With this movie, it's about robberies and cops, so that meant that we needed to do more research. We had never robbed banks or been cops before, so we had to spend more time in those real worlds. Rose Byrne spending a lot of time with cops' wives was huge because she realized that the divorce rate was skyrocketing. She could hear all of their stresses, and I'm not saying that every cop's wife is living in a stressful world, but it's a big deal when their husband goes out and takes risks like that. It's important to me that the real world [resonates] in the film, and that's why I shoot in real locations. I hate shooting on sets. We shot in real police stations and a real working hospital. Our extras were real cops and there was a retired judge up on the stand. I can't tell a guy how to be a judge, but I can have

a judge tell me how he does it. It gets tough in the edit because you have these sprawling moments that you have to shape, and to me, that’s just the problem I need to deal with.



Bradley Cooper stars in Derek Cianfrance’s *The Place Beyond the Pines*, a Focus Features release.

Photo credit: Atsushi Nishijima

HollywoodChicago.com: There are a few great laughs in “Pines” that give the audience a momentary release from the consistent tension.

Cianfrance: When people are in the desert of drama, they need a little drink of water. Humor was the saving grace of “Blue Valentine.” Without the humor in “Pines,” it would’ve been too flat. You need that variation. My wife is a comedian and I tend towards tragedy, but that balance is key.

HollywoodChicago.com: What made you decide to avoid utilizing flashbacks in this film?

Cianfrance: When I first sat down with my co-writer Ben Coccio, we decided that we would write a triptych about legacy, and would keep it linear because it was about lineage. I had done the crosscut storytelling in “Blue Valentine.” I had seen Iñárritu and Coppola and D.W. Griffith do it, and I love the parallel storytelling technique that utilizes flashbacks. But with “Pines,” I’m dealing with violence, and the actions that lead up to violence. There’s a violent event and then there’s the reverberation. As an audience member, I’m so tired of guns in movies. I don’t know when guns became so cinematic. It must go back to Sam Peckinpah, but I think with Peckinpah’s violence, you felt like he was writhing in the flames with his characters.

I see a lot of violent films these days that’s fetishizing violence in a slow-motion ballet. I have kids and it drives me crazy to see that violence onscreen. It’s irresponsible to make violence look cool, and I don’t think it’s cool at all. I’m not interested seeing how realistic I can make the blood and the brains and the sound of the skull cracking. I’m interested in the narrative of violence—what happens when someone in your life has something violent happen to them—and I wanted the audience to experience violence in a real way. When a gun comes out in the film, there are three shots fired, but they all have an impact. It’s not like we’re spraying the screen with ten thousand bullets all jacked up in the sound room.

HollywoodChicago.com: In a way, this film continues “Valentine”’s preoccupation with how parents irrevocably impact the lives of their children, regardless of their intentions.

Cianfrance: You hit it on the head. I had been working on this film since 2007, a few years before I shot “Blue Valentine,” and it felt like the next logical step.

‘The Place Beyond the Pines’ stars Ryan Gosling, Bradley Cooper, Dane DeHaan, Emory Cohen, Eva Mendes, Rose Byrne, Bruce Greenwood, Ray Liotta and Ben Mendelsohn. It was written by Derek Cianfrance, Ben Coccio and Darius Marder and directed by Derek Cianfrance. It opens at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema on April 5th, 2013. It is rated R.

By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [13]
Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com



[12]

matt@hollywoodchicago.com [12]

Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 28 2024 - 6:45am*):

<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/21759/interview-derek-cianfrance-sheds-light-on-the-place-beyond-the-pines>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/mattmovieman>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/blue-valentine>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/bradley-cooper>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/derek-cianfrance>
- [5] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/focus_features.html
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/hollywoodchicagodotcom-content>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/interview.html>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/matt-fagerholm>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/rose-byrne>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/ryan-gosling>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/the-place-beyond-the-pines>
- [12] <mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#MATT>