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DVD reviews

Looper (Rian Johnson US 2012). Entertainment One 2013. Region 2. 16:9 (2.35:1).
£13.

Rebecca Bartlett

Writer-director Rian Johnson locates *Looper* within a prolific subgenre of sf films; its title refers to time-travel terminology – the paradox of a continuous loop caused by past and future events being dependent on each other – and, within the diegesis, to an occupation: Joe (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) who starred in Johnson's debut feature, the genre-bending high school noir murder mystery *Brick* (US 2005), is an assassin known as a looper. Loopers are so-named because they accept that one day the target will be their future self (interestingly, all loopers are male, although this fact is never addressed in the film). This homicide/suicide is known as 'closing the loop', ensuring the consequences of time travel are fully contained.

Fourth-dimensional travel is always problematic; its paradoxical nature raises countless hypothetical and theoretical questions, which, so far, cannot be answered. Its exploitation as a device in film offers a multitude of variations: travellers into the future often discover a negatively evolved Earth, demonstrated in films such as *The Time Machine* (Pal US 1960), *Planet of the Apes* (Schaffner US 1968) and *Idiocracy* (Judge US 2006). Yet it is travelling backwards in time, rather than forwards, that provides a more extensive opportunity to consider potential outcomes. *Looper* sits most comfortably among the films that address these issues, and is thematically influenced by the likes of *The Terminator* (Cameron US 1984) and *Twelve Monkeys* (Gilliam US 1995), both of which consider the complicated loops created by interference from the future.

Wisely, Johnson's screenplay deliberately avoids being overwhelmed by semantics. Abe (Jeff Daniels), sent from the future (2074) to manage the loopers in the present (2044), glibly states, 'This time travel crap just fries your brain like an egg.' Later, Old Joe (Bruce Willis) tells his younger self, 'I don't want to talk about time travel, because if we start talking about it then we're going to be here all day talking about it, making diagrams with straws', directly acknowledging the inevitable confusion. Logically dissecting a hypothetical situation reveals inconsistencies, and it is difficult to think of any film featuring time travel that has done so. Instead, it is more useful to consider whether the internal logic of the device works within each individual film and, for the most part, *Looper* is successful in this regard. Johnson asks the viewer to accept time-travel's existence and to concentrate on its impact rather than its technicalities. (For those who desire to discuss its specifics, complicated debates can be found in online forums.) Yet its impact is inextricably connected to these technicalities: Old Joe's motivations depend entirely on his personal understanding of time travel, which is not to say that it is correct. More interesting is the relationship between the two Joes and the questions raised by their simultaneous existence.

Joe's problems arise when his future self appears as his latest target. Arriving late, unbound and unmasked, Old Joe's unusual appearance causes Joe to pause for a second and Old Joe escapes. Joe's sense of preservation does not extend to his future self: his concerns are only for his present body and his plans for the future. Joe does not feel any empathy for or connection with Old Joe, and the latter's motivations are as alien to him as any stranger's. 'It *happened* to you', Joe tells his older counterpart, 'It doesn't *have to happen* to me.' Whereas Old Joe's existence is dependent on the survival of Joe, Joe's survival depends on the death (non-existence) of Old Joe; in contrast, Old Joe's body relies on Joe's continuing good health,

but his memories are potentially altered by decisions Joe makes as a result of Old Joe's interference with the present (Old Joe's past).

Looper has a number of interesting motifs: the logic of time travel; the moral issues raised by this technology (if the film had to be reduced to one question, surely it would be, If you knew something terrible was going to happen to a loved one, and you could change it, how far would you go?); and the psychological implications of being confronted with another version of one's self. Perhaps most interesting are the physical implications of this situation, demonstrated by the horrific, brutal demise of Joe's friend Seth (Paul Dano), which makes clear the direct bodily connection between present and future self. Old Seth (Frank Brennan), having evaded his younger counterpart, is sent a warning – long-healed scars appear on his arm, giving him a finite amount of time to reach a specific place. As the seconds and minutes pass, Old Seth becomes increasingly disfigured. Although it quickly becomes clear that his elderly body is bearing the scars of his younger self's torture and mutilation, the mental scars Old Seth also endures are less obvious: his memory is rewritten, replaced with 30 years of disfigurement and disability. Through Seth's present torture, punishment is inflicted upon both him and his older self.

The physical relationship between present and future self extends beyond the body horror of Seth's death. *Looper* is an impressive visual representation of the dystopian future: futuristic skyscrapers and hovercycles mingle with familiar architecture and old cars (albeit updated to accommodate new fuel options). One contentious aspect of the film's visual effects is Gordon-Levitt's prosthetic nose, used to create a similar appearance between present and future Joes. In contrast to the diegetic relationship between the two bodies – the older self bearing the scars of injuries inflicted on the younger – the alterations to the actors are reversed by this prosthesis, with Willis's body mainly unchanged while Gordon-Levitt's is altered. His performance, too, is overtly based on Willis's, familiar from many previous films in which he plays variations of the same character. Gordon-Levitt faithfully replicates Willis's stoicism, stubbornness, wry looks, furrowed brow and pursed lips featured in films such as the *Die Hard* franchise (US 1988–), *Twelve Monkeys*, *The Fifth Element* (Besson France 1995), *Armageddon* (Bay US 1998) and *Red* (Schwentke US 2010).

These creative decisions raise a number of questions regarding the audience's acceptance of and appreciation for multiple actors portraying the same character. Do we really care if the various incarnations of a character perfectly resemble each other? The much-derided decision to use computer assisted imagery to supplant actress Mackenzie Foy's features onto the various stages of character Renesmee (when she was too young to be played by the actress) in *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 2* (Condon US 2012) suggests the viewer is less distracted by obvious difference than by attempted similarity. Gordon-Levitt's prosthetic alterations serve an aesthetic purpose but also drag the viewer out of the diegesis because we are always aware the actor's features have been distorted. Arguably this decision provides a connection between the two Joes whereas their motivations stand in direct opposition. Curiously, Paul Dano is not afforded similar physical alteration as Seth; he bears little resemblance to Brennan, yet this fact does not diminish the emotional impact of witnessing Old Seth's destruction.

It is perhaps surprising that, despite attempts to connect the two Joes visually, they share only a small amount of screen time together. Initially, there is a deliberate distinction made between them, demonstrated by Johnson's decision to show one sequence of events twice, first from Joe's perspective, then from Old Joe's. It is only by witnessing both points of view

that the 'whole' picture emerges, but the sequence vividly reveals the interconnectedness of the two bodies and lives. A subsequent scene in a diner further emphasises the physical similarities and emotional differences of the two, and it is the latter that leads them (separately) to a rustic farmhouse location, signalling an unexpected shift in tone and pace in the film. Having established the philosophical, psychological and physical implications of one person sharing its space with an older, or younger, version of itself, the focus changes to explorations of family and the sf trope of telekinesis rather than time travel.

Instantly evoking ideas of family, safety and comfort, the familiar domestic space of the farm stands in contrast to the unwelcoming, violent city, with its slums and strip clubs. This familiar opposition suggests a desire to return to old-fashioned ideals and a rejection of technology in general, which has, as insinuated by the state of the city, done more harm than good. This contrast is further emphasised by the appearance of the homestead's incomplete family unit – single mother Sara (Emily Blunt) and her ten-year-old son, Cid (Pierce Gagnon). Sara represents the most rounded female character of the film, which previously showed women as sexual objects (a stripper), subordinates (a waitress) or lost perfection (Old Joe's wife); in Sara, Joe finally encounters an equal. She also proves to be the biggest direct threat to Old Joe's memories – and, consequently, his very reason for returning to the past – as her appearance signals a possible deviation from the past as lived by Old Joe.

A new narrative threat is quickly established in Cid, whose telekinetic abilities explode when the child is under duress. There are comparisons to be made with *Scanners* (Cronenberg Canada 1981) – indeed, the death of a man caused by Cid's powers plays like a slow-motion, morbidly beautiful re-imagining of Cronenberg's iconic head shot – and with more conventional horror fare, particularly *Carrie* (De Palma US 1976). The interference of both Joes catalyses the far-reaching consequences of Cid's actions and, as the paradox dictates, past, present and future are wholly, problematically, dependent on each other. *Looper* presents an interesting, complex psychological situation, in which the younger/present self is unhindered by his future life, while the older/future self benefits from hindsight but is ineffectual in changing their past – not only because they have already lived but also because their younger self retains his own motivations. The film's conclusion may be more inevitable than innovative, but the intelligent implications contained within the complex narrative leading up to it indicate a film ripe for further analysis.