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JOHNNY MNEMONIC

Keanu Reeves and director Robert Longo explore the dark side of the info-age in Johnny Mnemonic

by Mo Ryan

Human beings are little more than techno-drones in William Gibson's future, useful to their corporate overlords only as workers or as consumers of prepackaged mind candy. To the director of *Johnny Mnemonic*, that sounds a lot like the present.

"The future is not something I'm really interested in," says Robert Longo, the controversial visual artist who helmed the cyberpunk epic starring Keanu Reeves. "What I'm interested in is using [the future] to talk about now. I think it's the same with William [Gibson]. *Johnny Mnemonic* is just an extreme version of now," Longo says.

The fledgling filmmaker says Johnny's story is about the potential dangers of relying on technology at the expense of less marketable concepts like compassion and altruism. In the movie, Reeves plays a data courier who stores information in his "wetwired" brain. His greed leads him to take on a job that's too big for his cerebellum to handle, and when the deal goes sour, Johnny is left with a bleeding brainpan and no one to help him download the information before it kills him.

"Johnny Mnemonic *is* his job," says Longo. "He's like the ultimate Yuppie." To free up storage space in his brain, Johnny has "dumped" many of his childhood memories. Now he suddenly finds himself with no control over his situation, and he must rely on trust and other human qualities that he had long ago abandoned as useless and irrelevant.

"This role is very demanding because of the limitations of what you know about this guy," Longo says. "This is about a guy who avoids everything ... like *The Man Who Knew Too Much* or something like that. It's just about a guy who goes about doing his job and takes a real risk and ends up in way over his head."

When he began casting the movie, Longo despaired of ever finding an actor who could embody Johnny's surface sheen and his inner turmoil. Then Keanu Reeves came along. "One of the great moments was when he got fully dressed as the character—to see this guy that William and I had talked about since 1989. That was really

quite a rush, more than any set [design] or anything else," Longo says.

Gibson, author of the short story upon which the film is based (as well as sci-fi classics like *Neuromancer* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive)*, reserves the highest praise for Longo's vision of his work and Reeves' interpretation of Johnny.

"The first time I came in [to the set], I was on the verge of tears for about two hours. It was just emotionally overwhelming," the author says. "For 13 years I've [been] describing environments like this. For some reason, it's very central to my art. And I never expected to see [my vision] realized to this degree."

Keanu Reeves says he envisioned Johnny as a man who, despite his avaricious nature, takes pride in his work. "It's not in the script," the actor says, "but from my own thinking, it was a reputation [issue], so it's a risk he knowingly takes on."

Reeves, Gibson says, captured the sort of overly clever kid that the author wrote about in the original story, which was published in *Omni* magazine in 1981. "There's a childlike quality, which, when you get to the end of the movie, you understand—he makes perfect sense."

Those childlike qualities that emerge in Johnny may have something to do with the fact that, as the story unfolds, memories that he had thought were long gone come crowding back into his overloaded brain. Suddenly, he is discovering—or rediscovering—himself.

For Longo, whose visual art has long been concerned with morality's place in a cynical and crass world, that emerging humanity in Johnny is what made the character fascinating. "He's on a journey," Longo says. "[He] finally comes to find value in life, in friendships and relationships and things like that. It's kind of a cathartic awakening."

But while *Johnny Mnemonic* is made accessible through its exploration of character, its narrative is powered by politics, both personal and political. It's no accident that in his flight from those seeking his head, Johnny ends up among the Lo Teks, a group of outlaws who reject the oppressive technology of the electronic future.

"I find [the on-line world] kind of bullshit," Longo says with typical bluntness. "I think people have to improve as people. It's kind of scary that people think, 'Now we'll just take all our problems on-line.'" As Johnny finds out, cyberspace offers nowhere to hide from the demons within. ◆