

REVIEWS

William Graham's Harry Tracy

When a good film is made, you can see why it was made just by looking at it – a sense of urgency, of compulsion that separates the best movies from the run of the mill. One can look at a film like *Thief* or *Ordinary People* and see what makes it different from agent productions like *The Main Event* or the James Bond movies. You can hear it when David Cronenberg talks about starting to write one film and then having it turn into something else as it is being written. You can see it even in a misshapen monstrosity like *Heaven's Gate*: Cimino should never have made that film, but he had to.

The problem with most of the tax-shelter movies produced in this country is that they were not put together by people with any real feel for the cinema, or even with any particular love of the cinema. With rare exceptions, the films produced under the shelter lack urgency, immediacy, or reason for existence.

One can justify the cheap horror movies and the food-fight comedies by saying that there was, at some point, an indication of box-office potency in these disreputable genres. But how does one justify an international caper movie like *Hot Touch*, a disaster movie like *City on Fire*, a big-buck melodrama like *Your Ticket is no Longer Valid*, three films which represent the absolute nadir of this country's film industry?

While *Harry Tracy* is better made than the above-named films, one has to wonder exactly what attracted producer Ron Cohen to this dull, ordinary, structurally flawed Western. It is hard to imagine that he thought it could make money, because not a single straight western has turned a profit since the very early '70s. Indeed, Andrew Sarris, in a recent issue of "Film Comment", attributed the failure of *Heaven's Gate* to the fact that it was a Western. While people were willing to tolerate Cimino's meandering obscurantism in a war movie, which was perceived as serious by definition, they were not willing to make the same concessions to a Western, which was by definition trivial.

The Western has been transmuted in recent years into space movies like *Star Wars*, urban thrillers like *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry*, and into futurist slash-and-burn pictures like George Miller's *Mad Max* movies.

The cowboy and Indian iconography seems to have lost its meaning, with the result that none of the Westerns of recent years, be they good (*The Long Riders*, *Cattle Annie and Little Britches*), indifferent (*Barbarosa*, *Tom Horn*) or awful (*Heaven's Gate*), has connected in any meaningful way with that mythical beast, the mass audience, which seems to come out once a season for one or two movies.

Which brings us again to *Harry Tracy*, directed by William Graham, an American TV-movie maker, from a script by David Lee Henry, with Bruce Dern, Helen Shaver, Michael C. Gwynne and Gordon Lightfoot.



● Bruce Dern as Harry Tracy, with Helen Shaver at his side, aims for that mythical beast, the mass audience, and misses

Harry Tracy is the last member of The Wild Bunch in this putatively biographical drama, and at the beginning of the film, he is captured in the snows of Colorado by his nemesis, U.S. Marshall Morrie Nathan. At his capture, he meets briefly the girl of his dreams, Catherine Tuttle, and, despite the fact that he is on his way to prison in Utah, the two become mutually obsessed.

Harry escapes and meets an artist, David Merrill, who came west to paint the great outlaws only to find that there were none left – except Harry. Merrill decides he wants to ride and rob with Tracy, and since Tracy is loaded with mythical self-consciousness, he knows that he needs a sidekick.

Harry and Merrill go off to Oregon to meet the dream girl, but through an act of stupidity so immense that the mind reels, they are captured and sent to prison.

Since it would not be much of a picture if they were to spend most of its running time in prison, they escape; Harry grabs his dream girl and off they go into the wilderness with a huge posse, led by Nathan, hot on their heels.

The ending is the expected one, with Harry going down, the last romantic outlaw crushed beneath the hobnailed boots of repressive, mechanized, modern society.

The biggest problem here is the screenplay. It does nothing that is not ordinary, predictable, and clichéd. All the moves are plotted so far in advance that one can chart the narrative's trajectory from the first five minutes. It is obvious that no one ever got the script in shape, or someone would have noticed that it could at least be tightened up by fifteen minutes just by removing a sequence so out of place one wonders who was asleep during the editing. Most of the shots go on far too long, and the ends could easily have been trimmed.

Towards the end of the film, Harry and his girl are on the run from, as

described by one character, the biggest manhunt in the history of the state. Do they behave in an intelligent manner, steal a couple of horses and run like hell for Canada, Idaho, or even California? No. They decide to go sailing. It is hard to decide who has less sense, the producers or the characters.

The slack editing creates a second problem. This might have been expected, because however one feels about last year's *Genies*, Ron Wisman's award for cutting *Ticket to Heaven* was the least deserved, and the cutting is no better in *Harry Tracy*.

Among the performances, Bruce Dern delivers a solid, intensely low-key performance in the title role, giving a screwball twist to lines like "No one calls me Harry except my Mama, and she's in Indiana." Michael Gwynne, as Tracy's scruffy partner, is extremely good, bringing a jagged paranoia to the artist-turned-outlaw who does not like prison one little bit.

Gordon Lightfoot in his movie debut as Harry's nemesis, acts in a manner as stolid and lumpy as his music suggests he would – whenever he is on screen, images recur of Rick Moranis' Valiumed-out impression of Lightfoot singing "Every song ever written". Helen Shaver is wasted yet again in a nothing role. (It is hard to tell what Canadian producers have against Shaver, but if you want to see her do a good job, you have to go to her short-lived TV series, *United States*, or to her recent appearances on *Hill Street Blues*.) In *Harry Tracy*, she seems to have been turned loose on the set without a single instruction or comment on her performance.

Yet *Harry Tracy* is essentially well-made – there are no embarrassing continuity screwups, no horrendously bad performances, and the technical credits, with the exception of the editing, are quite good. But it is an empty pretty package, never achieving the beauty that Allen Daviau's cinematography

aspires to, above all because beauty is a product of function. The cinematography of *The Grey Fox* is extremely beautiful because it is being used to set nature and technology side by side for comparison, and it also contrasts the grubby motivations of half the characters with the serene, uncaring natural world. *Harry Tracy* is never more than pretty – and in desperate need of recutting.

John Harkness ●

HARRY TRACY d. William A. Graham p. Ronald I. Cohen sc. David Lee Henry co-p. Alan Simmonds assoc. p. Patricia Johnson exec. p. Sid & Marty Krofft, Albert Tenzer d.o.p. Allen Daviau p. man. Bob Gray p. des. Karen Bromley 1st. asst. d. Scott Maitland 2nd. asst. d. Bruce Moriarty 3rd. asst. d. David Rose cont. Christine Wilson cam. op. Rod Parkhurst focus puller Theo Egsleder art d. Michael Bolton asst. art d. David Davis, Graeme Murray unit man. Keith Large loc. man. Gordon Mark. Hagan Beggs set. dec. Jacques Bradette, David Jaquest const. man. Kenny Chang prop master Douglas Madison, Frank Parker cost. des. Olga Dimitrov ward. mistress Veronica Plewman Dern's dresser Mark O'Hara make-up Linda Brown, Linda Gill hairstylists Malcolm Tanner, Susan Boyd ed. Ron Wisman 2nd. asst. ed. Michael Smith 3rd. asst. ed. Richard Martin ed. mix. Rod Haykin boom Omero Pataracchia sp. efx. co-ord. Lee Routley stunt co-ord. Walter Scott gaffer Hal Trussell key grip David Humphreys dolly grip John Scott best boy grip Ben Rusi electric Ron Williams best boy elect. Ken Hemphill genney op. Tim Atkins p. controller Jak King asst. account. Susan King cast. Claire Walker asst. Lynne Carrow p. sec. Trudy Work p. co-ord. Cathy Howard p. asst. John Graham, Tom Braidwood, Carol Maitland asst. to p. Deborah Thomas acts. sec. Lorraine Baird transp. captain Jake Callihoo driver captain Bob Bowe Dern's driver John Cocks wrangler ramrod John D. Scott stills John Shannon unit pub. Julia Frittaion l.p. Bruce Dern, Helen Shaver, Michael C. Gwynne, Gordon Lightfoot, Jacques Hubert, Daphne Goldrick, Lynne Kolber, Alec Willows, Frank C. Turner, Fred Diehl, Charles Siegel, Jack Ackroyd, Susie Payne, Richard MacBride, Kerry Salisbury, Jim Roberts, Tom Braidwood, Jim Defelice, Dennis Robertson, Joe Dodds, Jim Sparkman, Jak King, Conrad Fitzgerald, Ed Hong-Louie, Peter Manning, Harvey M. Miller, Walter Scott, John A. Scott, Lou Patterson, Mike Tyree, Marty Corsberg, p.c. Ronald Cohen prod. running time: 107 min. colour dist. Astral films.