

A Giant Misstep

by Joshua Siegal

Looking at Brad Bird's *The Iron Giant* was a pleasure I almost didn't have. This feature, released by Warner Brothers in 1999, produced a giant "thud" when it came out,¹ and was lingering in the DVD store's bargain bin when I found it. It languished around 9th or 10th in gross for a few weeks, before eventually dropping away to the world of video rentals and sales. This is sad, because it is a quality film that deserves its place in Bird's historical catalogue (along with *Plague Dogs* and "Family Dog" from TV's *Amazing Stories*). It is a crime because, by many accounts, the film was sabotaged by Warner Brothers' own gumdrop-and-radio-flyer marketing efforts. The *Iron Giant* opened (and finished) behind such fun family films as *The Sixth Sense*, *Bowfinger*, *Deep Blue Sea*, *Brokedown Palace*, *The Blair Witch Project*, and *The Thomas Crown Affair*, among others (ibid).

In the weeks after it came out, Warner Brothers tried in vain to pump life into their drifting *Giant*. They created breakfast cereal and United States Congress tie-ins (including, painfully in retrospect, children's film advocate Mark Foley), and even went so far as to hand out *Iron Giant* coupons to audience members attending showings of the *Pokemon* movie (ibid). As any former child knows, coupons smell of desperation to clear out the shelves. Warner Brothers' president of production claimed that this was proof: make an intelligent family film and you get "slaughtered" (ibid). Brad Bird evidently did not agree. He signed with Pixar afterwards and wrote and directed *The Incredibles* and *Ratatouille*.

He also created his own version of a trailer for *The Iron Giant*, and he included this "'Brad Bird' Trailer" in the *Iron Giant* DVD special features. Can a bad trailer really wreck a movie's chances? Doesn't word get around about the good films? That kind of speculation is fodder for debate, especially in an era when DVD sales can force a cancelled TV series back on the air. The original Warner Brothers' trailer for this film is so bad, though, that it bears serious consideration as the culprit in this case.

Given the controversy that surrounded its marketing campaign for *The Iron Giant*, it is humorous in retrospect to see everyone's old pal Bugs Bunny accompanying the WB logo in the official trailer's early seconds. 'Here it is, folks - another gem from Warner Brothers animation!' This is suspect, probably sheer arrogance, and is ineffective, compared to letting a very talented animator and director try to pitch his own movie to his audience.

The drawing and animation in this movie are so charming, there is absolutely no need for Warner Brothers to drag out classic Bugs, or to transition conspicuously from him to the high-tech approach. Their trailer starts off with images of a UFO in flames descending from outer space into a hurricane, with a CENTCOM security briefing in the voiceover. Perhaps this was to lure in 3-D buffs, a ploy that would be unnecessary even today, as *The Iron Giant* handles scale and perspective as well as any digital animation.

Bird's trailer, by contrast, starts with a scene much more in tune with the emotional tone of the movie. A boy lies under a blanket fort, munching snacks and freaking out to sci-fi television of the 1950s. Suddenly the power goes out, and, strapping on a pilot's helmet and picking up a toy rifle, the boy wanders out to "find trouble", according to the narrator. Boy finds giant robot from space, boy runs for his life, and we're off on a ride through a tightly-edited appetizer of a trailer, with dramatic music, little voice work, and tantalizing clips of mayhem, destruction, and really good animation.

Borrowing a page from Hitchcock and Spielberg, Bird's trailer doesn't shove a giant robot in our faces. Instead, it relies on his animation and character design to give us our first impressions of the movie's eponymous star. Obviously, he's really big, really scary, and somewhat out of control. We know this from just several close character reaction shots. Sadly, the WB trailer wants to immediately reassure us. What is a necessary plot device in the movie thus becomes just the kind of trailer moment that makes both kids and adults immediately stop paying attention. Hogarth looks up at the metal giant in the daylight and says, "you're not going to hurt me?" Remember, this happens after Warner Brothers has tried to first sell the movie as an exciting action adventure. This loop is closed midway through the WB trailer, when the government-agent antagonist shows up at Hogarth's home, only to get his head closed in the

bathroom door by Hogarth's mother. What is he doing in their bathroom with Hogarth and his mother? If you're going to give away plot points like unused amusement park tokens (or movie ticket coupons), they should illicit the right questions, not the creepy ones. For the record, the official trailer gives away *at least* eight separate plot points that I was able to count.

Whoever came up with the "boy finds giant space robot and frolics with enormous new pal" premise that is the meat of the WB trailer must not have seen the movie. The lighter moments from the film work because they are set against some pretty heavy social and interpersonal themes. Besides the obvious danger of hanging around with a 50-foot iron alien who needs a constant diet of metal food, Hogarth must struggle with his own conscience as he betrays his mother and possibly his country during a particularly xenophobic period of the nuclear age. This, and the absence of his war-fatality father are what outline and make tolerable his boyish frolics with the robot. Further, Hogarth draws upon his religious instruction to conclude that the Iron Giant has a conscience as well.

Wisely, Brad Bird includes almost none of this information in his trailer, instead relying on a steady stream of clips that show, in an almost abstract sequence, danger, fun, more danger, more fun, and a bunch of terse interpersonal interactions. In the end, Bird's trailer leaves unanswered perhaps the biggest questions of the movie: how do you know who to trust, and who will hurt you? Giant robot from space: good guy? Bad guy? Who knows? Looks cool. Makes you want to see the movie and find out.

Presumably rejecting the idea of hinting at a vague, exciting tension, Warner Brothers seemingly wants us to buy into another, simpler movie, which they will ruin for us with spoiler after spoiler, including the unbelievable voiceover, "you can't save him, Hogarth!" According to the WB trailer, people should be more interested in trying to figure out what clips that didn't make it into the trailer will be interesting, if any. At one point in the official trailer, with Hogarth literally in hand, the Iron Giant shoots jets out of his feet to narrowly avoid the wet end of a tumble from a waterfall. Ecstatic, Hogarth yells, "you can fly?! You can fly!" At this point, even after having watched the feature, my brain reflexively thought, "well, now I don't need to see this movie."

As for Warner Brothers, what could have been a fruitful relationship with a top-notch writer, director, and animator became a footnote, a failed marketing plan. Bugs Bunny, master of just desserts, would approve.

Sources

1. *<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0129167/news>*