Movie Review: 'Untraceable'

by Arthur Salm

It opens with the torture and slow death of a kitten, which neatly captures the spirit and tone of the execrable, excruciating "Untraceable."

Yet another serial killer is on the loose. The worst kind, at that: A fiendish computer wunderkind whose machinations send police and FBI agents scurrying to their terminals, where we endure scene after scene of fingers tapping on keys. I ask you, what kind of society produces monsters like these? Or, more to the point, movies like this?

'UNTRACEABLE' - Diane Lane and Billy Burke star in the thriller 'Untraceable.' CNS Photo courtesy of John Bramley RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Jennifer Marsh (Diane Lane, trying to look drab and not coming close) is just another single-mom FBI agent in Portland, Ore., assigned to nab Internet crooks with her whiz-kid pal Griffin (Colin

Hanks). Tonight, a new Web site called "killwithme" has a live feed of that pitiful, dying kitten, and there's a tip that the location is in Portland. Agent Marsh is alarmed.

Her officious boss (Peter Lewis) sees it as less than a threat, but not long after the kitten dies, the site is up again - this time with a human victim. The Web master/torturer has rigged things up so that hits on the site amp up his Rube Goldbergian death apparatus. "They're all accomplices," Marsh says of the Internet voyeurs after the first man expires rather painlessly of a slowly, then more rapidly (as the number of viewers goes up) dripping intravenous sedative.

More people get snatched off the street for starring roles on killwithme. The ratings, as it were, are going through the roof, and the methods of execution are getting ever grislier. Heat lamps, for example. Sulfuric acid.

And everyone who's ever seen a movie knows why there's a little more of Marsh's home life than necessary: Her 8-year-old daughter will clearly be a target.

The killwithme site is, of course, untraceable. Griffin explains why in a rambling monologue, after which the boss finally speaks some sense, and indeed speaks for all (well, most) of us by saying that he didn't understand a word of it.

Marsh is teamed with a local cop (Billy Burke), but any sparks that may have ignited are doused by Portland drizzle and scene after relentless scene of hideous torture. The film cynically demands its blood cake, then gobbles it: It pounds home the vapid notion that a cold, uncaring, heartless society will rush gleefully to the great national keyboard to enjoy the slaughter of human beings. Then it grabs us by our figurative lapels and shakes us, telling us what a truly awful thing this is.

Then it rubs our face in it.

The tape of a horrific, brains-into-red-mist suicide is shown at least three times. A victim literally comes apart in an acid bath. A writhing woman is hung by her ankles and slowly lowered toward whirling blades.

"Untraceable," (slickly shot, unfortunately - Portland is a gorgeous gray) is hateful, brutalizing, inexcusable. The contempt with which the film regards the audience should by all rights be returned, with well-earned outrage flung back in its face as bonus. Free of charge. No, really - it's on us.

A Screen Gems/Lakeshore Entertainment release. Director: Gregory Hoblit. Writers: Robert Fyvolent, Mark R. Brinker, Allison Burnett. Cast: Diane Lane, Billy Burke, Colin Hanks, Joseph Cross. Running time: 1 hour, 41 minutes. Rated R. 1 star.

Movie Review: 'Untraceable' by Arthur Salm