

Blu-ray Review: Found Footage Anthology 'V/H/S' Falls Frighteningly Flat

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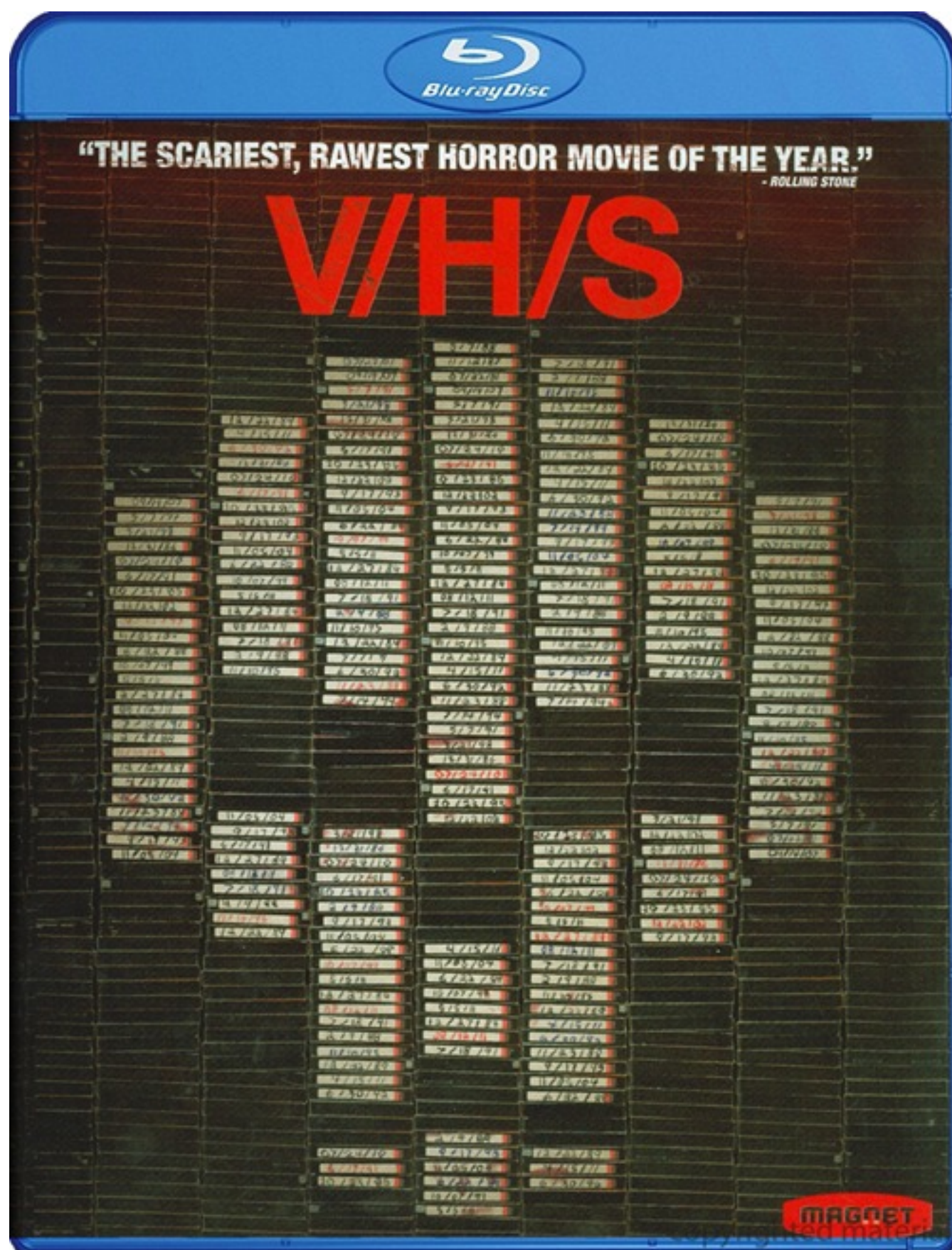
CHICAGO – There are a great many talented people involved in the over-hyped, underdeveloped horror anthology, “V/H/S.” It’s a sad sight to see so many gifted filmmakers assembled for a project so misguided. What could’ve been a launching pad for several exciting careers ends up being a mildly diverting curiosity well worth taping over.

Brad Miska’s concept of a “Creepshow”-style amalgam of found footage shorts is certainly promising in theory, but he falters in the execution. At an interminable running time of 116 minutes, the concept outstays its welcome several times over. Miska’s interview in the disc’s plentiful special features indicate that he wasn’t shrewd enough to cut the segments down to sharpen the pacing, while cutting others altogether.



Blu-ray Rating: **2.0/5.0**

The wraparound vignette, “Tape 56,” was shot before any of the shorts had been planned, and its disjointed presence in the film is a conspicuous distraction. Director Adam Wingard is the masterful cinematographer of such first-rate indies as Joe Swanberg’s “Marriage Material,” but he appears to be adrift in this segment, which follows a passel of lowlives as they wreak havoc before meeting their inevitable demise. There’s an especially unpleasant sequence of the cheerful vandals destroying an empty house—shattering glass and hammering holes into the wall for an unseemly amount of screen time. No doubt some stodgy critics believe these actor/filmmakers—including Calvin Reeder and Kentucker Audley—are destroying traditional theories regarding cinema with their unconventional methods and microbudget craftsmanship. Many of the people involved in “V/H/S” have been trailblazers in their own right, but this particular project reeks with the stale air of commercial calculation. Though the film will likely give these filmmakers their biggest audience to date, it barely scratches the surface of their potential. Wingard’s wraparound is so poorly shot that it makes the varying degrees of handheld camerawork in the other shorts look restrained by comparison. Instead of providing breathing room between the accompanying yarns, Wingard’s film makes the very act of sitting through this interminable shaky cam enterprise an even graver chore.



V/H/S was released on Blu-ray and DVD on December 4th, 2012.

Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment

Perhaps Miska's plan was doomed from the start. What made "The Blair Witch Project" and "Paranormal Activity" such spectacular successes was their immersive power. The scary scenes wouldn't have been as effective without the slow passages designed to ease the viewers into the banal rhythms of the characters' lives, while simultaneously building suspense. Since the "V/H/S" filmmakers are roughly allotted twenty minutes apiece, the picture devolves into nothing but blood-spattered climactic set-pieces as shrill as they are numbing. The one truly chilling performance is delivered by Hannah Fierman, whose wide-eyed, animalistic mischief bolsters David Bruckner's "Amateur Night," while Helen Rogers is marvelous as Emily, the only character in "V/H/S" worthy of an audience's sympathy. Rogers stars in Swanberg's segment, "The Sick Thing That Happened to Emily When She Was Younger," which unfolds like a sly parody of "Paranormal Activity"—it even takes the form of Skype conversations, which turned out to be a major gimmick in "Paranormal Activity 4." Yet Swanberg's twist ending falls flat, largely because it's more or less identical to the last few twists that preceded it. Each of these segments would undoubtedly work better when viewed on their own terms. The anthology structure does them no favors.

"V/H/S" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio) and includes a lively commentary track chockfull of self-deprecating asides. When one filmmaker counters that Swanberg has in fact dabbled in horror prior to "V/H/S," citing his deliciously eerie "Silver Bullets" for having "some dark stuff," Swanberg quips, "By dark, you mean under-lit?" There are also some fascinating conceptual sketches of Fierman's eye-popping monster, as well as a brief interview with Ti West, whose well-acted yet problematic "Second Honeymoon" appears to have borrowed its best jolt from Dallas Richard Hallam and Patrick Horvath's "Entrance," an indie gem as nerve-racking as "V/H/S" is enervated.

'V/H/S' is released by Magnolia Home Entertainment and stars Hannah Fierman, Sophia Takal, Joe Swanberg, Kate Lyn Sheil and Helen Rogers. It was written by Brad Miska, Simon Barrett, David Bruckner, Nicholas Tecosky, Ti West, Glenn McQuaid and Radio Silence and directed by David Bruckner, Ti West, Glenn McQuaid, Joe Swanberg, Radio Silence and Adam Wingard. It was released on December 4th, 2012. It is rated R.



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