

Horror Anthology 'V/H/S' Offers Mixed Bag of Body Parts

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 4, 2012 - 11:50am

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “V/H/S” is a clever concept for a film executed with decidedly mixed results. There are enough smart ideas and chilling moments to recommend it to fans of any of its multiple genres (horror, found footage, indie film, even mumblecore), but I would never suggest it to a general audience. It is a cult film through and through and it feels like that’s just the way its talented team of creators wants it to be.

The foundation of “V/H/S” is remarkably promising. A group of thugs who make small amounts of money sexually assaulting people on camera and then posting them on the internet are hired to break into an abandoned home, vandalize the place, and recover a coveted VHS tape. When they arrive, they find a decaying body of an old man and a number of TVs broadcasting that static that terrified a generation in “Poltergeist.” As the man-children explore the house, one stops to watch a tape and form the structure of the series of short films to follow, all directed by up-and-coming young directors including Ti West, Adam Wingard, David Bruckner, Glenn McQuaid, Joe Swanberg, and a group known as Radio Silence. The six short films (five on the tape within the film and the one that connects them) all work from the found footage aesthetic including shaky cams, improvised dialogue, and that eternal question of the genre – why would anyone still be taping?



VHS

Photo credit: Magnolia

As with any collection of short stories or films, the resulting effort tempts one to rank from best to worst. I generally avoid such a game but the fact is that the biggest problem with “V/H/S” is its running time at nearly two hours. The piece wears out its welcome long before it’s over and I wish someone involved had taken the time to actually rank them and decide which could either be cut significantly or deleted entirely and saved for an extended DVD. And so a discussion of which ones work and which ones should have been saved for bonus material is inherent to a discussion of the quality of the overall film.

On the positive tip, David Bruckner’s “Amateur Night,” which opens the films-within-a-film, is a nice piece of morbid morality tale about a group of guys who go out trying to get laid and cross paths with a creature of the night. The short takes a bit too long to get going as the alpha

males somewhat wear out their welcome but I really liked the way that Bruckner captured reaction shots to the eventual gore in ways that felt genuine. One of the biggest problems with found footage movies as a genre is the sense that too much of it feels written. When the night goes VERY wrong for this group of friends, the “*WHAT THE F**K!*” response has a panicked realism. It’s also worth noting that “Amateur” gets around the “why would anyone tape this” question by cleverly inserting the camera directly into the eyeglasses of the protagonist (later shorts aren’t so lucky).



VHS

Photo credit: Magnolia

The film takes a small wrong turn in the next short, even if it’s directed by the man who I think is undeniably the most talented in this crew, the great Ti West (“House of the Devil,” “The Innkeepers”). West specializes in the slow burn and trying that genre in a short film anthology is kind of problematic right from the start. We just saw a woman eating a dude. Going back to the slow burn is not as effective. And West cuts the climax in a very disappointing manner. If I were to cut one of the shorts, it would be West’s “Second Honeymoon.”

Glenn McQuaid’s “Tuesday the 17th” is a keen play off the “kids in the woods” slasher subgenre but McQuaid gets too carried away with his own camera tricks. Much more effective is Joe Swanberg’s “The Sick Thing That Happened to Emily When She Was Younger,” which is the best of the anthology and so twisted that I won’t even mention the plot, and Radio Silence’s “10/31/98,” which nicely concludes the piece.



VHS

Photo credit: Magnolia

The best of “V/H/S” (as in the best of so much horror) plays off relatable fears: The one-night stand gone very wrong; A deserted motel on a

road trip; The WRONG house at the end of the street; Not being able to help a loved one who is in another place and possibly in danger. I do believe there's enough of interest thematically here for horror fans to be engaged and even scared at times.

Having said that, I SO wanted to take an editing machine to the movie. Cut an entire short (either West's or McQuaid's). Trim SO much of the camera tricks like loud music cues and edits that are made so it looks like the VHS tape is jumping. These effects actually lessen the impact of the scares instead of increasing them. And it's just unacceptable for a movie like this to run nearly two hours.

My overall response to "V/H/S" is much more mixed than the several critics who have come out in full adoration of this film and the others who have told me they loathe it. Perhaps it's because I am a true fan of the horror genre that I can see the value, especially in Bruckner and Swanberg's pieces, and so I must caution that you probably will not unless you can call yourself the same.

"V/H/S" was directed by Ti West, Adam Wingard, David Bruckner, Glenn McQuaid, Joe Swanberg, and Radio Silence. It is now available On Demand and opens in theaters in Chicago on October 5, 2012.



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