

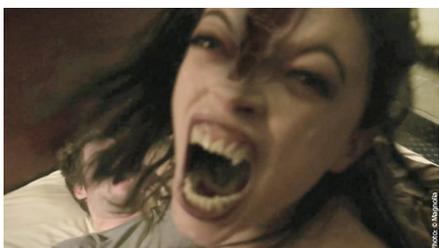
“V/H/S” (Movie Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Thursday, 04 October 2012 16:33



One of the fun things about watching the multipart found-footage horror film V/H/S, for those knowledgeable about its various directors but not about who did which part, is trying to figure out who was responsible for which segment.

For example, I woulda sworn the third episode, “Second Honeymoon,” essentially a relationship drama gone wrong, was the work of Joe Swanberg, who has heretofore specialized in “mumblecore” studies of how men and women relate. Heck, Swanberg stars in this story, playing Sam, whose Southwestern vacation with wife Stephanie (Sophie Takal) gets creepy thanks to an ominous female presence shadowing their hotel rooms. In fact, “Second Honeymoon” was written and helmed by THE HOUSE OF THE DEVIL and THE INNKEEPERS’ Ti West, departing from his usual New England locales but bringing to the short form his traditional talent for a slow burn building to a grisly punchline.



Like a lot of V/H/S, currently available on VOD and opening in theaters tomorrow (go [here](#) for a list of playdates), “Second Honeymoon” pivots on unsteady relations between the sexes, with the voyeuristic possibilities of personal cameras a frequent topic. This has led some viewers to level charges of misogyny against the film, but it’s really more *about* misogynistic males, the ways in which video technology encourages indulging in their baser

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instincts and the comeuppances they receive when they aim their lenses the wrong way.

Certainly that's the case in “Amateur Night,” the second story (following the first part of a framing device) by David Bruckner, part of the SIGNAL team. Clint (Drew Sawyer) is one of three party-hearty dudes who head for a bar to pick up girls, his glasses outfitted with a tiny hidden spy-cam to record their exploits. He attracts the attention of an odd young woman named Lily (a marvelously, spookily wide-eyed Hannah Fierman), who accompanies the trio and another girl back to their motel room. What transpires is not the kind of orgy the pals were expecting, but it is a rousing, freaky experience in which the sometimes steady, sometimes jerky point of view is used to maximum advantage, and comes to a cool and unexpected conclusion.

This and the other tales in V/H/S are viewed by members of a gang of miscreants in the “Tape 56” surrounding story, directed by A HORRIBLE WAY TO DIE's Adam Wingard. This bunch also likes to point their cameras at girls they're disrobing (in one case forcibly), and we just know they're headed for bad ends when they break into an apparently abandoned house to retrieve a particular tape for a mysterious person. While it's certainly hard to sympathize with their subsequent plight, “Tape 56” sets the right mood for the stories to follow, as the crooks sample the many VHS cassettes they find lying around the darkened home.

The fourth and fifth installments demonstrate different uses of video technology itself to elicit chills. “Tuesday the 17th,” as the title suggests, takes off on slasher-movie tropes as it follows two couples into the woods where one of them eluded a mad killer years before. Rather than wearing a traditional mask, the villain here has his entire form obscured, appearing as a glitchy, stuttery silhouette (a takeoff on the way criminal suspects have their faces digitally smeared on reality shows, perhaps?). Pulling a 180 from his classically lensed period horror/comedy I SELL THE DEAD, writer/director Glenn McQuaid elicits solid shudders from this murderous, humanoid video static, with eerie, jittery sound FX to match.

Following up is the piece Swanberg actually did direct, “The Sick Thing That Happened to Emily When She Was Younger.” Focusing here on the movie's most sympathetic female character, Swanberg and scripter Simon Barrett (who also wrote “Tape 56”) build suspense by limiting the point of view to Skype conversations between Emily (Helen Rogers) and her boyfriend James (Daniel Kaufman) about the weird stuff that's been happening in her apartment. At first it seems like a typical found-footage ghost movie (presaging the video-chat haunting narrative we're evidently about to get in PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 4), but Barrett's scenario does indeed have a sick sting in its tail, making this the most disturbing of V/H/S' segments.

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The final venture into handheld hysteria is “10/31/98,” by the filmmaking collective known as Radio Silence. This one is a traditional spooky-house scenario, as four Halloween-costumed guys arrive at an expansive home where they’re told a party is going on. This bunch is more sympathetic than the wolf packs of the earlier stories, and actually try to rescue a girl they find being abused in the attic—but that’s just the beginning of the troubles they face. “10/31/98” goes heavier on the special FX than its predecessors, though they’re still modest enough that they deliver their shivers while staying on the movie’s visually ragged wavelength.

By varying the modes of presentation within the parameters of the *vérité* model, V/H/S’ contributors are able to keep this by now oversaturated approach from bogging down, and their specific flavors of horror are sufficiently diverse as well. Overall, the movie does feel long as it heads into the later stories, and there’s a sense that it probably could have been trimmed by one segment. The good news is that it’s not easy to decide which of them should get the ax.

