

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT: Vampire Hunters - Modern Day Heroes
Plus: A review of ***Van Helsing*** – July 2004

Of all the classic monsters in cinema history, it can easily be argued that the vampire has always been one of the most enduring. While other screen menaces such as werewolves and mummies seem to run in cycles, remaining popular for a number of years and then fading away for awhile, vampires consistently maintain a strong presence on movie screens both big and small. This is evidenced by the continual stream of bloodsucker pictures produced by both large Hollywood studios and independent filmmakers alike. The history of vampire movies has been discussed in depth in numerous articles, publications, books and videos, so I will not delve into that subject here. However, what I would like to talk about is the enduring popularity of a related horror icon - the vampire hunter. With the recently released Universal Studios monster epic ***Van Helsing***, and the upcoming ***Blade: Trinity***, not only do vampires continue to retain their hold on audiences, but now it appears the vampire's counterpart - the vampire hunter - is taking center stage as well.

What I think is most interesting about vampire hunter characters in recent movies is how they are really an odd mix of the old and the new. They still battle classic creatures, but at the same time the movies are fast-paced, with lots of action and elaborate visual effects. This is especially true of the recent ***Van Helsing***, where the (re-imagined) famous vampire hunter not only battles his arch nemesis Dracula, but also has to deal with classic monsters such as the Wolf Man and Frankenstein, as well as Dracula's flying vampire brides. These creatures are greatly enhanced in this film by modern CGI (computer generated images), in addition to elaborate makeup effects. This technology essentially brings a classic character like Van Helsing into the arena of today's modern-day horror scene. This is necessary to attract the youth audience, an audience that has

already seen ultra-hip horror films like **Scream** (see previous TFTM columns). Obviously the filmmakers hope a movie like **Van Helsing** will also appeal to long time fans of the character as well.

Besides being a mix of the old and the new, another interesting aspect about vampire hunter characters is their dual nature. Often these characters are portrayed as anti-heroes. They frequently have a dark past, sometimes having done terrible things in their lifetime. To use the new **Van Helsing** movie as an example once again, the advertising for the film spotlights the fact that the character is called a murderer by some and a hero by others. An example from independent cinema would be the character of Shadow Tracker from the 1998 film **Shadow Tracker: Vampire Hunter**.^{*} In this movie Shadow Tracker is a Vietnam War Veteran who is in pursuit of his old war buddy Jonathan Stokes, who is now a ruthless vampire. However for all his ruthlessness, Stokes is portrayed in an almost heroic manner, having a charming and civilized demeanor. In his hunt for Stokes, which is all consuming, Shadow Tracker winds up killing a young couple whom he believes to be vampires. As it turns out, the young man is not a vampire, but rather just someone who is trying to save the woman he loves. However he is in the wrong place at the wrong time and gets staked by the vampire hunter. In this way, Shadow Tracker can be seen as being more of an anti-hero in the film. Perhaps these types of depictions are in a sense more believable than heroes who are totally virtuous. And perhaps audiences are attracted to these characters precisely because of their dual nature. Now on to the review of **Van Helsing**...

In **Van Helsing** (2003) the title character is portrayed much differently than he has been in the past. In previous film versions Van Helsing has appeared as an aged, often ragged-looking gentleman who fights Dracula mainly by brandishing a cross or other holy implements. Here he is an action hero capable of going at it head to toe with the famous Count and the other monsters involved in the film. Add to this the aforementioned CGI effects, and what we have is a fast-paced and visually exciting action/horror flick.

In general I enjoyed **Van Helsing**. The movie begins especially well with a lengthy scene that is basically a reenactment of the famous scene from **Frankenstein** where the villagers try to break down the doors to the castle where Dr. Frankenstein and his monster reside. This film makes the story even more interesting by throwing Count Dracula into the scenario and proposing that he was at least partially responsible for the creation of the creature. This opening is visually stunning and lots of fun to watch. It starts the movie out with a bang and should be greatly appreciated by fans of the classic monster movies. It was definitely my favorite part of the movie. While I have to say that the rest of the picture never really matched the excellence of this opening, it still held my interest throughout.

Van Helsing is basically a giant popcorn movie that is not without its flaws, but is nonetheless good fun. Hugh Jackman plays the title character competently enough as the man-of-few-words-type action hero. ^{**} Kate Beckinsale is appealing as heroine Anna Valerious, displaying a talent for convincing European accents, and the supporting cast members give strong performances, especially Richard Roxburgh as Count Dracula. However, the real stars of this movie are the visual effects, which effectively enhance the various monsters. After the opening scene described above, there is a relatively brief scene where Van Helsing battles the Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde monster. This part of the film actually had me worried it was going to be all downhill for the remainder of the running

time, because the CGI looked glaringly obvious and was way too over the top. However, luckily, after this the effects start to fade into the background and do what they should do, which is to effectively (and seamlessly) enhance the visuals and action. Sure the effects were still evident in some scenes, such as those where the werewolf moved at lightning speeds, but they never seemed intrusive like in the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde scene. I should also note that these types of fast-paced chase scenes really dominated the movie. In fact, this movie hardly gave viewers a minute to breathe. Just when I thought we were in for a lengthy dialog sequence, another creature would jump out of the shadows triggering another extended action sequence. The film really kept me on the edge of my seat and because of this I recommend it. Make no mistake, ***Van Helsing*** is basically a big- budget action picture that you probably won't be thinking about the next day, but it's also a highly enjoyable way to spend a couple hours.

* ***Shadow Tracker: Vampire Hunter*** was directed by my friend filmmaker Joe Bagnardi. The film provided me with one of my early acting gigs. I appear in the movie as a vampire who attacks Shadow Tracker in the latter part of the film.

** Personally I think Kate Beckinsale was even more appealing in her sexy role as the vampire Selene in ***Underworld*** (see the October 2003 TFTM column for a review of ***Underworld***).