

Screen, Screen Features

Tales around the campfire: The Anthology Film

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Written by [& Jacob Heayes](#) | Dec 7, 2018

With *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, the Coen Brothers have pushed the anthology film back into the awards sphere and popular conversation. It's notoriously a genre so often varying in quality and consistency that it can be tricky to garner much serious attention, let alone awards buzz. Yet these films can be gleefully unorthodox in structure, unpredictable in content and stylistically diverse. Whether in the hands of a singular vision or an eclectic group of directors, the anthology is often uneven but simultaneously explosively creative.

All things considered, *Buster Scruggs* is a reasonably controlled and understated anthology. Each segment is written and directed by the Coens, all set in the Old West, all shot by the brilliant cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel and all tied together by the overarching theme of death. This tight structure results in a comparatively more palatable and cohesive film, if arguably one that grows overly familiar by the sixth and final story. Having said that, this methodology allows the Coens to craft a unique tapestry of the Old West, threaded together by the curious stories of the residents who inhabited it – Tim Blake Nelson's singing hooligan Scruggs, Liam Neeson's struggling performer or James Franco's hapless thief make up the idiosyncratic ensemble on offer here. In one epic overarching narrative, these performances could easily have dwindled into the background or been written-out altogether. It's admittedly difficult to imagine a single film that could've branched Nelson's self-referential Scruggs with Tom Waits' gentle

prospector. This is a testament to the flexibility of the anthology format – this is a film not solely concerned with characters, but with a place and time at the forefront. In this sense, it shares a fair few similarities with *New York Stories*, an anthology film that brought together Scorsese, Coppola and Allen to paint a portrait of the heterogeneity of New York City.

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When multiple directors collaborate on an anthology film as with *New York Stories*, the results can be akin to a short film festival, stringing together several distinct forms and genres into a constantly unpredictable experience. This naturally lends the anthology format to the horror genre, creating its own sub-genre ‘portmanteau horror’, popularised by classics as *Creepshow* or *Tales from the Crypt*. Much like telling ghost stories around a campfire, the delight of portmanteau horror rests in their ability to surprise and routinely refresh the threats. The run-time restrictions allow these segments to avoid the protracted pacing issues that often inhibit the frights of feature-length horror films. Take *V/H/S* for example. This portmanteau horror is linked with the formal restriction of found-footage, resulting in several takes on shaky-cam spooks and mockumentaries that quickly turn sour.

David Bruckner, director of *V/H/S*’s
‘Amateur Night’ section

A breakout hit from the first instalment was David Bruckner’s *Amateur Night* – a riotous slasher featuring none other than a succubus tormenting three fairly detestable friends. This segment found its bite with an unexpectedly gruesome creature design and a unique take on the found-footage device (spy glasses rather than a clunky camera). Four years later, Gregg Bishop adapted the short into its own feature *Siren*, one that ditched the found-footage conceit and unfortunately failed to garner much attention or notoriety at all. It’d be naive to argue that all shorts are unfit for feature adaptation. Yet in the case of *Amateur Night*, this was

evidently a film purposed within the *V/H/S* framework, one designed for an overblown and entertaining adrenaline rush that would've easily lost its lustre taken any further. However, for David Bruckner, the anthology film propelled his career and opened the doors for his 2017 feature *The Ritual*. The anthology film – particularly in the horror genre – serves the function of giving amateur and debut directors the exposure and creative freedom to craft their own narratives and screen them to wide audiences. Whilst *V/H/S* has attracted such influential filmmakers as Gareth Evans and Adam Wingard, it has similarly elevated the likes of Bruckner, Joe Swanberg and Radio Silence. Disregarding their uneven quality, portmanteau horror is vitally important in granting talent the funding and spectators that otherwise may have been a pipe dream.

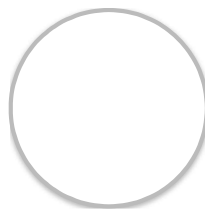
Veering wildly from blood-soaked nightmares to Western tragedies, the anthology film has the potential to be an oddball cove of wonders, given audiences are willing to take the plunge. Whilst the inconsistencies can be too frustrating for some, I wholeheartedly encourage viewers to take the risk. For every segment that drags or deflates, there could lie one immediately after that inspires and ignites the imagination. If *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* has any influence, I truly hope it's in giving more of these bizarre and diverse storybooks a home.

Image credit: Film director David Bruckner © Michael Gluzman

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anthology film

Feature



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