

## PUPPET MONSTER MASSACRE

Directed by Dustin Mills  
(2010) MVD Video DVD



As that old, worn-out cliché goes, "Dying is easy, comedy is hard". But that isn't necessarily true. Granted, dying is pretty easy—but comedy can be even easier—especially if you actively avoid things like intelligence, having a unique point of view, or crafting an actual joke. Like most intensely unfunny people, Dustin Mills utilized this comedic shortcut when he wrote and directed *Puppet Monster Massacre*. Mills realized that you shouldn't struggle to come up with something genuinely original. You should just glom onto a childhood institution like the Muppets and lazily subvert it with a miasmatic cacophony of swear words, puppet nudity and cheap gore. Oh, and for that added dash of smug irony, you could set the film in the 1980s because that decade was just so completely hilarious. If anything, all remnants of the 80s should be buried alongside those unsold E.T. Atari cartridges in the New Mexico desert. (See, I can be hilarious too.)

Serving as a prelude to the unbearable quirkiness that's waiting just ahead, *Puppet Monster Massacre* opens with a hunter who is attacked and knocked unconscious by a penguin in the middle of the woods. When the hunter gains consciousness, he finds himself in the laboratory of Dr. Wolfgang Wagner and, thanks to some genetic meddling on behalf of Wolfgang, he quickly gives birth to a Giger-on-a-budget parasite. From there it's revealed that Wolfgang has invited four local teens, each with a single defining personality trait (e.g. the hero, the hero's girlfriend, an obnoxious punk guy and a nerd), to spend a night in his mansion. If any of them survive, they'll win a million dollars. But all is predictably not what it seems. You see, the teens share a link to Wolfgang's shady past . . . Should I continue? Because, if you can't see where this predictable storyline is heading then you've clearly never seen a movie before in your life. And if you haven't seen a movie before, *Puppet Monster Massacre* should not be where you start. Try *Bullitt* instead.

Calling *Puppet Monster Massacre* gimmicky isn't all that revelatory because I'm sure even the filmmakers are aware their movie is just a calculated gimmick. But this isn't why *Puppet Monster Massacre* is such a failure. The film fails because it doesn't build anything substantial on top of that gimmick. It is just another cliché riddled haunted house movie—but instead of being populated by a cast of talent less nobodies, *Puppet Monster Massacre* is filled with depressing, off-brand Muppets that are voiced by talent less nobodies who all seem to be standing way too close to the mike.

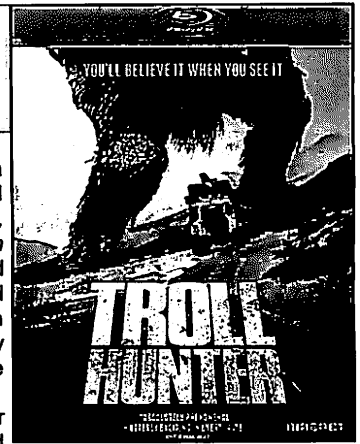
*Puppet Monster Massacre* isn't just predictable—it's also grimly unfunny. Jokes misfire and then drag on endlessly (such as a running joke in which a character is constantly frightened by common everyday objects), shouted swears are repeatedly used as a stand-in for actual comedy, fart gags are ever-present and like every horror film produced within the past 15 years, *Puppet Monster Massacre* falls back on lazy in-jokes and film references. Even worse, those film references are so groaningly obvious you wonder why they even bothered.

Facile and obnoxious, *Puppet Monster Massacre* is a headache-inducing waste of time. Yet in spite of the film's grating pointlessness, Mills plasters his name all over the movie. Say what you want about Andy Milligan, but at least the guy had enough self-awareness and humility to utilize pseudonyms for some of his many on screen credits. Mills, you really have nothing to be proud of here. Please put your camera back in the trash where it belongs.

Mike Sullivan

## TROLLHUNTER

Directed by André Øvreda  
Magnet Entertainment Blu-ray / DVD



Though they're hardly prevalent enough to constitute a "wave," a number of Scandinavian genre films have gained international attention in recent years: *Let the Right One In*, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, *Død snø* (Dead Snow), *Rare Exports*, and now . . . *Trollhunter*. These don't all come from the same country and run the gamut from whimsical fantasy to intricately-plotted crime films, but they do shed light on a region of the cinematic world heretofore known chiefly for Ingmar Bergman and Lars von Trier.

*Trollhunter* isn't a radical departure from hundreds of other fantasy films made over the past few decades. The hackneyed "mockumentary" or "found footage" gimmick is trotted out once more, and the menace happens to be "trolls" but could have been—had the setting not been Norway—the Loch Ness monster, the chupacabra, Bigfoot, giant killer butterflies, whatever.

But *Trollhunter* works, and not just because it's a "foreign film"—with the snobbish cachet that designation has with some audiences—either (although the amazing Norwegian scenery doesn't hurt, nor does the Scandinavian sense of humor). It's simply a well made movie, with decent special effects, some humor, generally likeable characters (though not a lot of time is spent on back story or character development), an interesting script and satisfactory production values. The ending isn't quite perfect, but it's not a cheat or major let-down, either.

Three Norwegian film students—on-camera "talent" Thomas, sound recordist Johanna, and cameraman Kalle—set out to make a documentary about the mysterious Hans, who has been seen in the vicinity of some suspicious "bear attacks." Eventually, they discover Hans is the government's official "troll hunter." Trolls are not magical, fairy tale monsters, but real, long-lived humanoid (though quite large) creatures who have recently been straying out of their assigned "territory" for unknown reasons. Hans and the students try to solve the mystery of the wayward trolls, while the government—in the person of annoying and officious bureaucrat Finn—attempts to keep the existence of the creatures a secret.

Hans is played by well-known Norwegian television personality Otto Jespersen. Although Norwegian viewers familiar with his previous, often politically-oriented humor may have had to exercise their willing suspension of disbelief to accept Jespersen as the gruff but dedicated troll hunter, in truth he plays his part 100% straight and is very convincing—in fact, he's almost the only person in the film who seems to have a "past" and is the only one who gets any introspective dialogue. The performers playing Finn, Thomas, Johanna, and the others are all fine, but since *Trollhunter* is, ostensibly, footage of a documentary about Hans, it is only logical he is the most developed character.

While exposure to a different culture is one of the pleasures of watching international cinema, certain socio-cultural references are inevitably lost on non-domestic audiences. A bit of research helps, but even if one knows nothing of Norwegian folklore (or Norway itself, for that matter) and therefore misses some jokes or allusions, *Trollhunter* is still good enough to appeal to all audiences.

Regardless of one's cultural ignorance of troll lore—Hans says fairy tales aren't exactly accurate in their description of the trolls—non-Norwegian viewers can pick up a few things as the film goes along. Trolls have a good sense of smell, so the hunter and his aides smear "troll stink" all over themselves to avoid detection. Trolls can sense Christians and are hostile to them. Trolls will eat almost anything, like to chew on old tires, can be lured into traps by using concrete and charcoal as bait, and so on. They also explode or turn to stone in the sunlight (or when Hans wields his artificial-sunlight, troll-killing weapon), seemingly-magical reactions which are explained away scientifically later in the film.

*Trollhunter* doesn't overexpose its trolls too much. There are only three major "troll scenes" in the film, and while they're clearly CGI creations, the quality of the effects is quite good. The trolls themselves—who come in two primary models, mountain trolls and forest trolls—aren't too ferocious-looking, with their wrinkled, old-man faces (and some big, honking noses) on shaggy, Teletubby-like bodies, but their sheer size and power make them rather fearsome, indeed.

However, *Trollhunter* doesn't demonize the trolls: they're not quite human but they're more than simple animals or monsters, and the film works up a fair amount of sympathy for them. The film draws parallels between the trolls—who've left their "reservation" and must be hunted down as they approach "civilization" (Hans even describes an earlier time when he was ordered to massacre a whole tribe of trolls, down to the females and babies, because their presence impeded a government-supported construction project in troll territory)—and various beleaguered indigenous groups of the past, including Native Americans and aboriginal Australians.

This allusion to official genocide and the depiction of the relentless government cover-up give *Trollhunter* a hard edge beneath its excitement and suspense. There's humor, to be sure—Finn making fake bear tracks which fool no one, a hilarious if wholly incongruous scene featuring some enterprising Poles who deliver the carcass of a Croatian bear to be used as part of Finn's misinformation plan, even the basic concept of giant, woolly trolls to begin with—but this isn't a parody or a cynically comic riff on the monster genre, it's a righteous horror movie.

*Trollhunter* could easily have been made in another country with another central menace, yet retained all of the characters and plot—and such a film might have been entertaining, or it might have been just one more routine, faux-documentary monster movie. Luckily, *The Trollhunter* was made in exactly the right place, at the right time, by the right filmmakers, and it's well worth a viewing. . . . or two. Blu-ray and DVD extras include: deleted scenes; improve and bloopers; extended scenes; HD Net: A look at *Trollhunter*; behind the scenes; and a photo gallery.

David Wilt