

The new Hellboy is a death-metal cover of Guillermo del Toro's work

There's a point in Neil Marshall's *Hellboy* reboot where a handful of demons get loose on Earth, and the audience can practically hear the film's special-effects artists rolling up their sleeves and cackling. As the demons tear through crowds of screaming, terrified bystanders, the film breaks down into a bloodbath. Writhing bodies are ripped apart. A man's face is torn off. Moaning people are skewered on the legs of a walking demon, and heads explode into gushy messes. Why is any of this happening? What in the action that led up to this moment would justify what's going on? The filmmakers don't particularly seem to care. It's enough for them to have gallons of vivid CGI blood splattering the lens, turning the screen into particularly gory death-metal album art for a few vaguely justified moments.

That sequence is a particularly blatant statement of purpose for Marshall's *Hellboy*, but it isn't the only one. From an introductory wrestling sequence in a Tijuana luchador ring to at least half a dozen other bloody sequences where bodies get hacked, smashed, and reduced to rubbery gobs of meat, the film seems like it was made by people who were honestly frightened the MPAA vetting squad might only watch one sequence, fail to see enough gore, and slap a PG-13 rating on the film. The 2019 *Hellboy* feels like a metal cover version of Guillermo del Toro's earlier *Hellboy* films. Mike Mignola's source comics give the story the same central characters and basic ideas, but all the action has been ramped up and rushed, taken to extremes that feel like they're meant to serve a younger, cruder, angrier audience.

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The film opens with a flashback to the Dark Ages, as King Arthur (Mark Stanley) and Merlin (Brian Gleeson) face down an immortal, immensely powerful witch (Milla Jovovich) who claims she wants humans and monsters to live together in a shared world. Perhaps cued by the fact that she goes by “Vivienne Nimue, the Blood Queen,” Arthur and Merlin betray her and hack her into bits, crating up the parts of her body and sending them to the furthest reaches of Britain, in a clear setup for a complicated fetch-quest. In the modern day, some of Hellboy’s worst enemies team up to nab those parts and reassemble Nimue, in order to end the human world.

One of the great peculiarities of Andrew Cosby’s script (which melds stories from a number of Mignola’s comics arcs) is that all this happens before the audience has any idea who these enemies are, or even who Hellboy is. The story regularly introduces characters like Hellboy’s partner Esteban (Mario de la Rosa), or his spirit-medium acquaintance Alice Monaghan (*American Honey* star Sasha Lane), with offhand references that suggest the audience already knows them from previous stories. It’s a frequently confusing approach that may leave viewers feeling like they’re watching a sequel to a movie they never saw – except that eventually, at weirdly inappropriate moments, the film heads into flashback territory to fill in the gaps.

Photo: Mark Rogers / Lionsgate

Handled with more finesse, that approach might feel daring. It challenges the audience to keep up, and doesn’t bother them with information until they need it. The problem is that those flashbacks are virtually all lumbering and awkward. The inevitable one explaining why Hellboy, a giant, cranky, hard-drinking, stone-handed demon, is living on earth with a human father (Ian McShane), and fighting supernatural nasties with the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense, is set up in a

way that literally has a seer telling Hellboy his own history as if he wasn't there for it. There are aspects of that history that he doesn't know, and isn't pleased to learn. But when she tops it all off by also earnestly telling him everything that's happened to him since he was summoned to Earth, the film lurches into laughably clumsy territory.

It's an ongoing problem for a script that isn't interested in much, besides the many fight scenes and the wide variety of ways human bodies can be turned into pressurized gore-spritzers. Mignola's comics have a kind of grim, stately dignity, with their stark lines, woodcut-style artwork, and subdued colors. Guillermo del Toro's two film adaptations, 2014's *Hellboy* 2008's *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, rendered his work as a dark carnival, a bleakly complicated world packed with diverse and colorful critters, often in frantically busy motion. Marshall's version is darker and messier, except when those arterial sprays of blood slather color all over the screen. He preserves the manic energy of sequences like *Golden Army*'s tooth-fairy fight, but spreads that tone through virtually the entire movie.

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And over the course of two hours, the mania becomes exhausting and numbing. Hellboy's biggest asset as a monster-fighting hero is that he's hard to hurt and quick to heal, and the 2019 *Hellboy* takes advantage by constantly throwing him through walls and floors, smashing him off surfaces, running him through with blades, and otherwise subjecting him to punishment no human hero could withstand. But while the action sequences can be individually thrilling, the sense that both Hellboy and all his enemies are basically invulnerable, identical CGI constructs sets in early and undermines any sense of stakes or drama.

Hellboy's appeal has always relied on his fragile humanity,

and how he balances it with his demon nature, and the way the world sees only the latter and judges him for it. He's a character designed as a soulful, relatable outsider, a hero whose internal struggles match the external ones. But in this latest version of the character, the internal battles only come across in the bluntest, most over-described ways. Cosby's script gives Hellboy the right things to say about feeling torn between his human world and his demon heritage, and has him openly wondering whether Nimue's right, and people and monsters could just live in peace, if humans weren't so damned xenophobic.

Photo: Mark Rogers / Lionsgate

But given how dedicated the film's monsters are to treating people like wet tissue paper, any moral complexity in the film is just loud window dressing, with no sense that anyone cares about what they're saying. Hellboy here comes across like a WWE wrestling heel – sullen, glowering, showily simplistic, and maybe ripe for a moral turnaround, but not until the film has wrung every possible fight sequence out of him.

And the film seems unusually determined to turn him into a clumsy meathead, a dim-witted, easily angered, easily manipulated rube who grumbles, "Why does this book have so many *words*?" when asked to read, and turns into a sulky adolescent every time he's dealing with his father, who Ian McShane plays with a tough-love contempt that's just slightly short of treating his adopted demon son like a badly trained dog. There's no reason *Hellboy* on the screen has to be an intellectual story, and probably no way a mainstream action film could maintain the spookier, lonelier tone that turns up in animated Hellboy adaptations like *Sword of Storms* and *Blood and Iron*. But there's also no reason the series needs to be this shrill and thudding, or this gleefully obsessed with exploding human corpses. The film's soundtrack, featuring

songs by Mötley Crüe and Alice Cooper, is a throwback to an earlier era of metal. The rest of it feels like the shallowest version of a modern metal cover – a version that cranks up the volume and speed until the words don't really matter as anything but noise.

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