

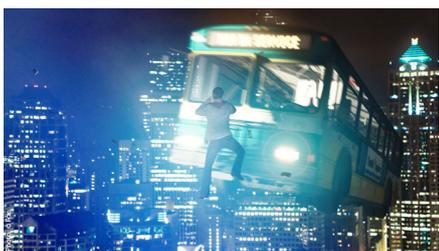
“CHRONICLE” (Movie Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 03 February 2012 11:24



Found-footage movies tend, by their very nature, to deal with intimate subjects; the form doesn't easily lend itself to spectacle, which generally requires multiple points of view. Director Josh Trank and writer Max Landis find a way around this in CHRONICLE, a sort of superhero-origin story grounded in the portrait of a young man dangerously losing his mind.

CHRONICLE can also be seen as something of a gender switch on CARRIE, as its put-upon teenage protagonist (here a boy named Andrew, very well-played by Dane DeHaan) discovers burgeoning telekinetic abilities that mean bad news for those who have wronged him. In this case, those powers don't well up from within Andrew, but begin to develop after he, his cousin Matt (Alex Russell) and popular kid Steve (Michael B. Jordan) have a strange encounter in the woods when they take a break from a rave. In the following days, they discover that they can move objects and themselves just through the forces of their minds—and of course, boys being boys, first employ them to pull pranks on unsuspecting citizens and cheerleaders.



All of this is captured on video by Andrew, who has decided to document his life and begins the

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movie as the classic comics archetype of the underdog who has superhuman gifts bestowed upon him. Unfortunately, he has no Uncle Ben to advise him that with great power comes great responsibility; his father Richard (Michael Kelly) is an abusive drunk and his mother Karen (Bo Petersen) a helpless invalid. Efficiently establishing his beleaguered home life (and a school milieu that's not much better), Trank and Landis establish sympathy for Andrew that carries over as he lets his new abilities get the better of him. His dynamic with Matt and Steve is convincing too, with all three actors giving persuasively naturalistic performances that make the film's fantastical elements believable.

That helps when the CGI employed for a few of their earlier tricks is a little too slick for the overall camcorder aesthetic, though once the boys go from levitating Legos and playing cards to themselves, vehicles and other, bigger objects, the visual FX are first-rate. Throughout CHRONICLE, Trank takes a somewhat different approach to this particular vérité feature; CHRONICLE is established as neither a collection of footage assembled for purposes of evidence or public viewing nor raw, unadulterated material. He simply tells the story via whatever lens will best sell the scene, introducing a cute classmate, Casey (Ashley Hinshaw), who totes her own camera and is thus handy for reaction shots, and eventually, once Andrew starts taking out his anger on downtown Seattle, incorporating security and surveillance video. (When it comes time to capture a crucial moment hundreds of feet in the air, you can't help but smile at the solution Trank employs.) Speaking of the Seattle setting, that city and its suburban environs are seamlessly recreated on South African locations with digital augmentation.

One might quibble about the fact that there's always a camera in just the right place to pick up all the action and dramatic moments, though Andrew and co. at least have the courtesy to hold (and in some cases levitate) their devices smoothly to avoid jerky-cam overkill. And it's a testament to the force and intelligence of Trank and Landis' storytelling that CHRONICLE surmounts both this issue and a certain schematic nature (it's no surprise what eventually happens to Andrew's dad or a classmate who bullies him at school, though the details of the latter are a nasty surprise) to remain compelling throughout its swiftly paced 84-minute running time.

The filmmakers maintain that interest by keeping the focus literally on Andrew and his downward spiral. As his mind becomes clouded by philosophies of superiority that lead him to turn on his friends and society in general, CHRONICLE becomes a very modern update on classic genre-movie themes of people transformed for the worse by newfound supernatural abilities. No matter how spectacular the destruction wreaked by Andrew becomes (and it becomes pretty spectacular in the final reels), he remains a tragic figure rather than transforming into a simple supervillain for his similarly gifted friends to oppose. In that sense, for all its 21st-century trappings, CHRONICLE harks back to a tradition of human-monster stories as old as the Universal classics.

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