Chronicle: A New Take on Mockumentary

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I walked into Chronicle expecting another “found footage” thriller, basically Cloverfield or Paranormal Activity meets Heroes, but was surprised at the depth of the characters and the fresh take on the “teens get superpowers” story. More so than that, though, I was excited to see that their take on the found footage approach to mockumentary transcended the usual continuity issues present and eschewed the traditional but ultimately over-done shaky camera. The title of the movie, which after watching previews just seems like cheap use of an archaic word, carries actual meaning. Chronicle properly uses the mockumentary genre to both examine an aspect of the documentary genre and to tell a character-driven story.

Josh Trank and Max Landis’ story follows the unpopular and reclusive Andrew Detmer, his cousin Matt, and football star Steve Montgomery through their acquisition of telekinetic powers. The plot unfolds in a simple way; they gain powers after Matt convinces Andrew to come to a party, and Steve tells him they need to get footage of a strange cave. They grow closer because of their shared abilities, playing pranks with it and flying, and learning how their telekinesis grows stronger with use. Eventually, they grow apart for their personal choices of how to use their ability; specifically, Andrew’s willingness to use it against others.

The first shot of the film is a camera set on a tripod facing a mirror mounted on a door. Our protagonist, Andrew Detmer, tells his drunken father through the door that he is filming everything from now on, and so we have our found-footage story-telling method. Andrew, for reasons we will investigate later, has decided to document his life. The majority of the film is told from Andrew’s perspective; it’s his camera, after all. We’re not limited, however, and others use his camera and footage from other cameras is used. For example, tertiary character Casey Letter uses a camera for her blog, and the perspective shifts to her camera a few times, security footage on occasion, and near the end Andrew when uses his power to surround himself with cell phones and small cameras. The introduction of the camera and Andrew’s use of his power allows the film makers incredible leeway into cinematographic style; allowing them to participate in the genre without having to make it look amateurish. Given the fact that Andrew has the foresight to use a tripod, we can assume he knows how to compose a decent shot and his ability to move the camera telekinetically justifies all manner of shooting styles. Fantastic and difficult shots don’t take us out of the mockumentary style because of the unique circumstances of the story.

Initially, the title seems like something slapped on as a cool sounding word with little bearing on the actual story. However, the name appropriately ties in the mockumentary style; Andrew is chronicling his own life, and it is arguable that if he wasn’t carrying a
camera everywhere, Steve wouldn’t have bothered to invite him to film the cave and he wouldn’t have gained powers in the first place. This partially answers the question of why they picked the mockumentary genre. Why make characters aware of the camera? Why is the primary film maker also the protagonist? The answer lies in the intimacy the genre allows us to have with the characters, even though a barrier is still present. It also lies with the introverted and rationalizing characterization of Andrew; his need to be seen and recognized is the reason he begins filming his life and informs his actions within the film. The genre gets the most out of Andrew’s personal breakdown, and every shot that he controls gives us insight into his personal character, rather than the artistic directions of the actual cinematographer. As he documents his more distressing uses of his abilities, it’s his reasoning we see, the rationalization and subsequent abuse of his power over others. When others hold the camera, they’re most often speaking of or to Andrew, and they’re most often talking directly to us about the current situation. Each is a contribution to Andrew’s chronicle; in any other genre, the title would have less meaning.

The term found-footage is to be applied to this movie lightly; in past found-footage films, it is generally implied that the footage is actually found. With Chronicle, one often gets the feeling that the audience switches from lens to lens at will and in real-time, rather than viewing footage that was compiled after being found. In the last shot, it’s implied that the camera is left in Tibet, and that Andrew’s first camera was buried in the cave. We’re not watching a compiled chronicle after the fact; we’re watching events unfold as we would in a traditional film. This only strengthens the mockumentary elements, however. While watching, the mockumentary style gives us a greater connection to the characters. Without that style, it would just be another teens-get-super powers movie; without a camera to interact with directly, the characters would have to be completely rewritten and given different directions and motivations. Mockumentary has moved on from comedy and horror. The shooting style works seamlessly into the story, and that’s the way it should be.