Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 22 February 2013 16:31

As news stories about sociopaths whose actions seem unfathomable continue to permeate the media, perhaps it’s inevitable that thrillers concerned more with examining the devolution of their antiheroes’ minds than with the violence of their deeds should become a minitrend. This week’s example, RUBBERNECK, particularly foregrounds character over action, and cerebral thrills over the visceral kind.

In its examination of how emotional instability can slide into a dangerous lack of conscience, RUBBERNECK (opening today at New York City’s Lincoln Center and also available on VOD) bears some similarities to Antonio Campos’ soon-to-open SIMON KILLER, albeit with a much more clinical veneer. A good deal of the film is set in a scientific research firm outside Boston where Paul Harris (Alex Karpovsky) is employed, though it opens at a Christmas party where he meets and chats up pretty new co-worker Danielle (Jamie Ray Newman). Paul makes a good first impression, and soon the two are sharing his shower and bed, where they open up a bit about their pasts. He believes a connection has been made, but when he has to cajole Danielle into a second date, it’s clear their night was much more casual to her. And when he tells her, “I’m not going to take no for an answer” to get her on that follow-up outing, it’s an uncomfortable signpost of things to come.

Cut to eight months later, and Paul hasn’t let Danielle out of his head. His behavior toward her

would amount to stalking if they didn’t share a workplace, and he becomes especially put out when she shows a romantic interest in another co-worker. We also learn more about his life outside the lab: His only friend seems to be his sister Linda (Amanda Good Hennessey), and the only woman he can find companionship with is one he pays for it. Clearly, he has issues relating to women that are only going to get worse as his obsession with Danielle deepens even while it’s thwarted, and Karpovsky, an indie-film fixture who has specialized in awkwardness (and achieved greater recognition recently from his regular role on HBO’s GIRLS) conveys a patina of burgeoning danger roiling under Paul’s science-geeky surface.

Things eventually get out of hand, violently and otherwise, but as noted above, Paul’s actions aren’t RUBBERNECK’s foremost point. Karpovsky also directed the movie and scripted it with Garth Donovan, and steers it as a showcase for his portrait of a man struggling with—and eventually giving in to—private demons. That may disappoint those seeking the jolts and intensity of a typical case-history genre film; RUBBERNECK elicits a more subtle kind of unease, guided through often determinedly sterile images by James Lavino’s moody score. It’s the sort of film where the antihero’s capacity for brutality is meant to be the point, not the moments where he gives in to it.

As such, there are passages of genuine suspense throughout RUBBERNECK, some of which incorporate suggestions of a damaging incident from Paul’s past. And like so many screen villains before, he’s scarier when his motivations aren’t fully explained; Karpovsky and Donovan eventually clarify what warped Paul in his youth, and the revelation turns out to be too pat and simplistic, taking some of the sting out of their tale (which also comes to too non-committal a conclusion). In attempting to get us to understand his protagonist better, Karpovsky the writer/director lets down Karpovsky the actor a little, though RUBBERNECK demonstrates his promise as the former and, given his prior focus on comic roles, serious range as the latter.