

Contagion

Dir. by Steven Soderbergh ; Reviewed by David Gennert

Science is one of the few subjects that Hollywood still has difficulty faking. All too often, science is portrayed as a fix-all tool for instantly matching a criminal's DNA, or explaining the causes behind impending natural disasters, or any one of the numerous plot devices designed so as to not be questioned by the audience. *Contagion*, however, not only portrays science as the complicated process it actually is, but also makes it exciting.

The film centers around many individuals affected by the sudden outbreak of a novel viral infection—a high-ranking CDC official, the husband of the first person to die from the disease, a WHO investigator, and an alternative medicine blogger, among others. Interestingly, there is no unifying struggle. Each character is merely struggling to survive by whatever means they can, be it finding a cure in a laboratory or barricading himself in his house.

Rarely is science made to be an exciting process, but the film takes the viewer through the step scientists take—the real-life protocol, mind you—in order to deal with a threatening outbreak with all their promising successes and frustrating setbacks. The CDC officials piece together the first handful of confirmed cases and WHO investigators set out to track down the exact moment when the first victim contracts the virus and spreads it to the next round of victims in a display of detective work that would make the Law & Order investigators jealous.

Even though the process of scientific investigation is shown in this new light, the audience still needs to be spoon-fed some concepts about epidemiology. Some scenes' dialogue seems unbelievable just because the people on the receiving end of a stream of information would obviously know it already in their position.

The concept of experiencing setbacks in scientific research typically never gets substantial airtime in shows or films. The most we see nowadays is a 20-second montage of a group of scientists scratching out solutions at their desks until one comes up with the perfect plan or explanation. *Contagion* goes beyond this to paint the frustrating delays in scientific research as the source of much of the film's suspense and drive. Even the challenge of finding the correct host cell strain to even begin study the virus in a lab setting is given a large portion of the film's attention. Even armed a functioning host cell system, the scientists are then stuck spinning their wheels trying to develop a vaccine for much of the rest of the film. The constant disappointment of this whole procedure does not detract from the thrilling pace of the plot, but rather, it makes the few successful discoveries that much more satisfying—much like the real-life

emotions of scientific research.

One of the more fascinating side stories in the film is that revolving around the freelance journalist proponent of alternative medicine. Throughout the film, while the researchers are still stuck trying to simply study the virus in a dish, this journalist is spreading information online about supposed over-the-counter cures and government mishandling of the situation. Although it is clear everything he proposes is pure fiction, there are certainly those in reality who not only spout potentially dangerous ideas but also those who listen and take unscientifically backed claims to heart—look into any number of our previously published articles on the vaccination/autism controversy. There is a blurry line between freedom of speech and the spreading of dangerous ideas brought to light by this character, for whom the audience finds itself switching between empathy and disgust rather frequently.

Another talking point that raises some unsettling feelings while watching is the government's procedure for distributing vaccines against the deadly virus. They implement a random lottery system to determine who receives the limited amounts of vaccine as they become available. Any situation where one body is responsible for determining the value of a person makes anyone uneasy. A random system can be argued to eliminate as many of these concerns as possible by effectively removing any choice from the government, but there are other nonrandom methods of distribution to ensure the more deserving receive priority. It can hardly be argued against children receiving immunizations first, as they are the most susceptible to infection and generally have a longer lifetime ahead of them. This paves the way for a slippery slope, though, with the responsibility of determining who

subsequently receives the vaccine falling to the few in government in charge of distribution.

With its truth to the scientific process and its believably motivated characters, *Contagion* is one of the scariest films made in recent times. Realizing that the very events portrayed in the film are not outside the realm of likelihood—even the film mentions the influenza pandemic of 1912 in which 27% of the world's population was infected and 3% died—is enough to commend the filmmakers for such an insightful look into societal and governmental reactions to a major health crisis. If the fact that I now disinfect my hands whenever I see a dispenser is any indication, this was a very compelling film that thrills the audience with the gritty side of scientific discovery.

