

Crisis: The big pharmaceuticals’ “Holy Grail”

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Written and directed by Nicholas Jarecki

Crisis is a political crime thriller, written and directed by Nicholas Jarecki (*Arbitrage*). Its three interconnected segments deal with the legal and illegal drug business. One of the narrative strands is particularly hard-hitting and compelling, pointing to the profiteering and homicidal activities of the giant pharmaceutical companies.

The movie was the highest-grossing independent film at the US box office on its opening weekend and became the highest-grossing film playing in limited release.

Crisis opens with the arrest of a young drug runner illegally crossing the US-Canada border south of Montreal. The episode links to Armenian drug dealers against whom Detroit-based Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) undercover agent Jake Kelly (Armie Hammer) is running a narcotics sting operation. His target is drug lord Claude “Mother” Veroche (Guy Nadon), a major fentanyl distributor and cross-border operator.

The second storyline follows architect and recovering addict Claire Reimann (Evangeline Lilly), who seeks revenge for the murder of her son caught in Mother’s crosshairs. Kelly is also personally motivated to bust the drug ring, as his much younger sister (Lily-Rose Depp) is fighting a losing battle against addiction.

Meanwhile, in the third and most gripping portion, a tenured professor and research scientist, Dr. Tyrone Brower (Gary Oldman), discovers during a drug trial that the product in question, touted by its makers as the “Holy Grail,” the first non-addictive painkiller, is in fact highly addictive and potentially fatal. This discovery is made as the wonder drug is slated for Food and Drug Administration (FDA) greenlighting and blockbuster status for the drug company.

Both the pharmaceutical company and Tyrone’s university employer, which receives large amounts of money for aligning its research with the demands of the drug monolith, bring immense pressure to bear on the educator/scientist, who threatens to turn whistleblower.

Tyrone’s supervisor Geoff Talbot (Greg Kinnear) gives a pro-company spiel: “We’re talking about Northlight, a multibillion-dollar manufacturer from three generations of one of the richest families on the planet...”

Replies Tyrone: “If we knew about oxycodone then and could have spoken, look at all the harm we could’ve prevented, the lives we could’ve saved ... not only is this painkiller not non-addictive, it’s three times more addictive than oxy.”

“They’re in the final stages of their FDA submission.” Talbot pushes back. “If your report became public, they’d have to withdraw their request for approval, all for some mice that are outside the scope of the agreed protocol?”

Tyrone: “This is the biggest public health crisis since tobacco! We can’t just turn a blind eye! We can’t weather it!”

Talbot: “We barely have enough funding to get by. You understand that? And I’m responsible for thousands of students, and faculty, and...”

Tyrone: “Oh, Geoff, this drug will fucking kill people. Just like oxy, just like fentanyl!”

Talbot: “We’re a university, we’re not the FDA. It’s not our responsibility.”

Eventually, to get him out of the way, Tyrone is framed on a sexual harassment charge and dismissed from his position. The FDA approves the drug because “it is our position that the benefits of the item outweigh these potential risks.”

Crisis at its best is a taut exposé. The corrupt

relationship between the drug companies and academia is a pressing and largely unexplored issue, given that public monies via universities and public laboratories fund much of the science in drug development.

“And as I did the research, I learned how the pharmaceutical companies will often play a role in university funding,” explained writer-director Jarecki in an interview with KCRW in Santa Monica, California. “Products developed at universities in the research labs can bring in a great deal of money for the universities, because they get patent royalties, and a patent royalty on one drug could run into the billions. So there is a conflict when it comes to: are these drugs safe? And this is something I want to make really clear.”

Although the dramas dealing with addiction and drug trafficking are more predictable and less socially incisive, the director generally exhibits great empathy for the problems involved in drug addiction. In an interview with flixchatter.net, he commented: “How do we treat addicts? Do we treat addicts as the enemy, or do we treat them as our brother and sister ... and understand that this is crossing all walks of life. It’s like a category five hurricane. And what we really need to do is to have some understanding, put some money towards treatment and to de-stigmatize and take away the, ‘oh, they’re bad people’ mindset.”

It is also to Jarecki’s credit that he raises the issue of politically motivated #MeToo frame-ups—in essence, McCarthyite witch-hunts. In Tyrone’s case, the university, at the behest of Big Pharma, dredges up an old incident, a lapse in judgment involving a student, for which the professor was never charged. Tenure or no tenure, Tyrone gets fired not because he did something stupid in the past, but because he will not sign off on manipulated research that means billions of dollars for corporate thugs, a fraction of which will trickle down to their willing academic enablers.

Although *Crisis* was made before the onset of the pandemic, the WSWS pointed out in an April 2021 article that the coronavirus had proven “an opportunity for profiteering on a huge scale, aided and abetted by imperialist governments that have protected Big Pharma’s monopoly profits ... The unrestrained drive for profits has put vaccines out of reach for most of the world’s population and will serve to massively increase global death rates as more virulent mutants proliferate.”

A further WSWS article, in May, concluded that

while “the production of vaccines has yielded immense [obscene] fortunes for a tiny layer within the ruling oligarchy, the vast majority of the world’s population have been denied access to vaccinations. Distribution of vaccines,” the article went on, “has been hobbled by nationalism, profiteering and the outright sabotage by the major imperialist powers of any coordinated international campaign to combat the pandemic.”

With a committed cast, *Crisis* reveals that the “Holy Grail” for the drug makers can mean the “holy grave” for the population.



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