

# 'CONTAGION'

Biomedical thriller **GETS THE SCIENCE RIGHT**, but at the expense of making a good movie

REVIEWED BY JOVANA J. GRBIĆ

**'CONTAGION'** IS ONE of those all-star Hollywood packages that seem too good to be true, and in this case it is. It's clear that Oscar-winning director Steven Soderbergh ("Erin Brokovich," "Traffic," "Ocean's Eleven") paid attention to his advisers and took the time to get the science right, but perhaps he did so at the cost of creating any real drama in the movie, which opened in theaters on Sept. 9.

The star-studded cast, which includes Matt Damon, Kate Winslet, Marion Cotillard, Gwyneth Paltrow, Jude Law, and Laurence Fishburne, may have delivered great performances in their original story lines. But the final cut is such an odd mash-up of actionless sequences that it's impossible to stay invested in any of their stories.

When Beth Emhoff (Paltrow) returns home to Minneapolis, her bad case of jet lag takes a perilous turn for the worse, and two days later, she is dead. To the shock and dismay of her grieving husband, Thomas (Damon), doctors don't know the cause. Soon, the

contagion spreads around our increasingly interconnected world, and a pandemic ensues. Scientists at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention struggle to decipher the code of a rapidly mutating virus as well as quell the rising tide of public panic.

While Deputy Director Ellis Cheever (Fishburne) allays public panic, Dr. Erin Mears (Winslet) is sent directly into harm's way. Concurrently, the World Health Organization's Dr. Leonora Orantes (Cotillard) oversees the agency's hunt through the maze of clues that eventually lead back to the virus's origins. While doctors race time to find a cure, their efforts are thwarted by extremist activist blogger Alan Krumwiede (Law), whose conspiracy theories that the public isn't getting the whole story from the U.S. government set off a wave of paranoia more dangerous than the virus itself.

As a realistic depiction of a bird flu-type epidemic, "Contagion" attempts to right some of the scientific wrongs of the 1995 film "Outbreak," which played more like a conventional zombie movie than a warning parable about the global reach of modern infectious diseases. The scientific blunders in "Outbreak" include an unauthorized person walking out of a secured government lab with a sample of a deadly virus (without gloves, no less), scientists and

civilians walking into a Biosafety Level 4 lab without proper personal protective equipment, and an unrealistic rate of viral spread.

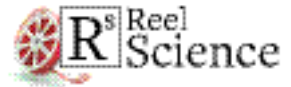
"Contagion" manages to sidestep such scientific inaccuracies. If anything, it is a science film masquerading as a public service announcement to raise awareness about the possibility of such an outbreak and show that widespread panic can be more dangerous than the virus itself. That's a lofty goal, to be sure, but too many minutes are invested in forcing actors to deliver technical language, along with clunky lines explaining their meaning. The balance between scientific accuracy and storytelling ultimately has to tip toward storytelling—the linchpin of all compelling films.

Showing scientists in realistic settings is noble and important, but lab work doesn't

qualify as action. Unfortunately for the viewing audience, that's the only action there is in this "action thriller." For example, Cotillard's Dr. Orantes is introduced in a tense moment of the film with a minute-long montage where we watch her take meetings—she's literally sitting at a desk and talking to people—but we don't get to hear what she's saying because the awkward and uneven score plays over it. This may be the most boring visual montage ever seen in a movie. Then she gets thrown in a van and doesn't return to the screen until another hour into the film.

Soderbergh seems to be trying to outdo himself in terms of the number of plot lines he can weave into a cohesive story, following up on his best director Oscar nod for "Traffic." But where that film succeeded in integrating pieces into a cohesive whole, "Contagion" stretches the audience's emo-

CLAUDETTE BARIUS/WARNER BROS. PICTURES



**Director:** Steven Soderbergh

**Writing credits:** Scott Z. Burns

**Principal Cast:**

- Marion Cotillard
- Bryan Cranston
- Matt Damon
- Laurence Fishbourne
- Jude Law
- Gwyneth Paltrow
- Kate Winslet



tional attention span too thin. As the non-linear plot skips among all of these amazing actors, viewers constantly have to recall who the characters are and what they want.

If you're interested in the subject matter, "Contagion" is well worth the ticket price, but otherwise save some money and catch it later on Netflix. "Contagion" is hands-down the most realistic epidemic movie I've ever seen, but the film's competing interests keep it from succeeding in any of its other lofty ambitions. Ultimately, it just wasn't contagious enough.

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