

"Side Effects" Film Lets Pharma Off the Hook, While also Painting a Dark Picture of Medication Use

By Michael A. Bedar, MA, Natural News

Side Effects is a fictional film starring the likes of Jude Law and Catherine Zeta-Jones, directed by Steven Soderbergh, that looks at the possible side effects of prescription psychiatric drugs on the mind and human actions.

According to screenwriter Scott Z. Burns, *Side Effects* had its origin about 10 years ago when he tailed forensic psychiatrist Sasha Bardey on the job. Bardey was working on cases of violent and deranged people such as the "subway-pusher" and a "vampire." From his observations, Burns became interested in writing a film on forensic psychology.

Sitting next to Burns for an interview panel at Film Society Lincoln Center, director Steven Soderbergh said that he directed *Side Effects* with a particular fascination. He reflected that, when making *Sex Lies* in 1989 which featured a character seeing her therapist, it "hadn't occurred to him that the character would be medicated."

Soderbergh continued, "Here we are, twenty-plus years later, and the idea that she *wouldn't* be medicated wouldn't occur to anyone. That's a big movement."

Many citizens share Soderbergh's astonishment at how prevalent psychiatric medications have become, which is why *Side Effects* is engaging, infuriating, frustrating, and disappointing.

Film with a conflicted message

Despite citizens' concerns about the widespread prescribing of mind-altering medications, and a promising first half, *Side Effects* ultimately moves away from the pursuit of truths about name-brand drugs that it appeared to begin with. As Soderbergh says, *Side Effects* uses "a very zeitgeisty social issue as a Trojan horse to hide a thriller inside of."

In the movie, big-pharma corporations slip away from being indicted for murder by the fact that the plot diverges into a thriller that uncovers only a drugless killer - at least one not taking any actual name-brand drugs (only a made-up drug).

Why, after initially conveying the obscenity of real psychiatric drugs being as used widely, easily, and questionably as they are, did the film let the prescription pill companies off the hook?

Can art no longer imitate life?

What does it say that the film could not, or did not, implicate an actual drug in causing any of the acts of physical wrongdoing in the film? Today - in real life - we have killers who, according to the evidence, are on name-brand drugs when they commit acts that devastate people, families, and this whole nation.

What happened to art imitating life? Can it no longer? **Are our lives too infiltrated by patented intellectual properties, and are actual real-life profiteering plots "too big" to cover them in art? Where are the risk-taking artists portraying reality transparently?**

A mixed review is due

Likely, people will come away from *Side Effects* with a darker image of the pharmaceutical industry and prescription pills, purely by association. To its minor credit, the film actually never backs away from the insider financial transactions that are part Big Pharma's profit game. Indeed, the film explicitly portrays the stock-value calculations that figure into pharmaceutical companies' money-games on Wall St.

The characters' dialogue even nods to the insider trading that did, in fact, truly occur when huge quantities of options on United Airlines and American Airlines were sold before the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, which "Side Effects" uses as a spooky comparison to what pharmaceutical industry traders might do if insiders knew that something grotesque was going to happen to society through their products.

Further to its credit, in the characters' skeptical, sarcastic usage of phrases like "better living through Chemistry," the film does suggest the possibility that psychiatric pills could cause mental derangement and unnatural levels of violence, and not be of much help to people at the root level of people's problems.

Was the plot forced to take a hard twist?

Yet *Side Effects* disappoints by not portraying violent criminal acts that turn out to be tied to actual drugs that circulate in our pharmacies. The film could have done so, in this day and age when the saturation of drugs into the minds of Americans are helping destroy our security and our freedoms.

Why did the film not directly implicate actual name-brand pills? Could practical concerns about the risk of legal actions by drug companies against the producers ultimately have prevented the filmmakers from doing so? Today, money from Wall St. and corporations is, after all, required to finance Hollywood studio films. Is all media, thus, blacked-out beyond a certain point of revealing the truth? Even the news channels can't seem to release which drugs are involved in mass homicides. Is the same true for films?

Also, interestingly, Soderberg did say in the *Film Society Lincoln Center* live interview that this would be his last film that he directs. It is curious whether there could be a connection between this film's subject matter, even with the said limits to risky ground it covered, and its being his last film.

Careful what you say

The films' actors are heard in interviews covering both sides, saying that pills may help some people, while at the same time offering real warnings. Actor Channing Tatum, who plays a character in *Side Effects*, says in an *AMC* interview that water is the healthiest substance, but "in excess there can be overdoses." He continues, speaking about advertisements constantly visible in billboards and on television, "It is our responsibility to see through the propaganda."

Actress Rooney Mara from the film says, "Drugs can help people," but they can "be abused and lead to a vicious cycle."

Why would such a confusing message come out of the people closest to the film? On one hand, the actors offer a warning about the dangers of pills and the need for vigilance. On the other hand they also actually compare them to something as good for you as water (we can assume he meant as good for you as pure water; not water laced with discarded pharmaceutical chemicals, as some American drinking water has been proven to be).

Sasha Bardey, the forensic psychiatrist whose work helped inspire Scott Z. Burns to write the screenplay, shares a similar conflicted viewpoint, saying in an interview with *The Cinema Source* that the drugs, even the "great new" ones come with "benefits and risks."

Maybe Channing and Mara know people who are using psychiatric pharmaceuticals, and are concerned about saying something bad about drugs that could be interpreted as cruel or insensitive toward a friend. This raises the issue that once a product becomes prevalent enough, where lots of people's feelings can be hurt, it is hard to extricate that thing from a culture. That is important, as flooding the population with a product seems to be a tactic, available to those with the means to do so, for making a product permanently a part of a society's life - or death - spiral. Which one is yet to be determined.

What is it to "help people?"

The confusion over stating a clear message about prescription mood pills may come down to the definition of what "helping" people means. If "help" is to:

- fit in with others who fake happiness
- become numb
- get addicted
- deaden your faculties
- constrict your individual creative potential
- pass on biochemically altered nervous systems to your children
- ignore the effects of the nutrient depletion and genetic modification of our soils and food
- continue to go along sheepishly with the imperial direction of this society

Then perhaps psychiatric drugs "help" some people.

But if "help" means to:

- free yourself
- develop self-sufficiency
- be aware of and address external reality
- cultivate responsible behavior
- uproot the causes of traumatizing households that scar the psyche
- strengthen authentic wellsprings of joy from within and without
- grow and eat nutrient-rich organic food
- claim your birthright of profound health nourished by the air, water, sunlight, wilderness, and ecology on the planet we have been given
- be a responsive and inspired leader that shifts the culture of followership to a culture of sovereignty

Then who do psychiatric drugs help?

And even if there are grey areas for certain individuals, how widespread should prescriptions be?

Sources for this article include:

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