

Nickolas Gilbert - Distortion Field

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Bio Thieves – An investigate documentary

Bio Thieves is a cinematic investigation into the polarizing ethics of large pharmaceutical companies (AKA Big Pharma) and how some of these companies have increased the price of the lifesaving medications that they developed to the point where they are inaccessible to some patients that need them in order to stay alive. While these companies have spent many years and millions of dollars to develop these pharmaceuticals, many consider the practice to be unethical “price gouging” even though many of the expenses incurred in development were necessitated by the Food and Drug Administration. *Bio Thieves* will contrast the perspectives of Big Pharma with organizations like the Four Thieves Vinegar Collective, a bio-hacking team of modern-day pirates who are empowering dying patients to take healthcare into their own hands by providing them with plans to make their own DIY pharmaceuticals, even if it means infringing on Big Pharma’s intellectual property. At its core, *Bio Thieves* asks if it is ethically permissible to encroach on intellectual property and break the law, in order to save life.

If you have the capacity to save a life do you also have an obligation to do so? While most physicians who take the Hippocratic Oath tend to think so, business man Martin Shkreli, AKA “Pharma Bro,” does not. Overnight Shkreli raised the price of Daraprim, a life saving HIV medication, from \$13 to \$750, making it inaccessible to many of those who depend on it to stay alive and earning him the moniker of “the most hated man in America.” While many politicians lobbied to enact legislation that would level the price of life saving pharmaceuticals, to date no laws have been enacted and companies are free to set prices that the market will bear. With major hospital conglomerates, Big Pharma, government agencies and massive insurance companies involved, the answer is not as simple as you might think.

Instead of looking for new ways to navigate what he considers to be a broken system, Michael Laufer, who founded the Four Thieves Vinegar Collective, has another idea. Laufer wants to empower individuals to manufacturer their own pharmaceuticals, at a fraction of the prices demanded by Big Pharma, regardless of the ethical repercussions. The immediate question becomes, is it legal and is it safe to manufacture your own pharmaceuticals even if you have a prescription? Laufer is quick to point out that Four Thieves does not manufacture drugs, instead they offer DIY plans so patients can make their own, using mostly off-the-shelf parts. Currently, Four Thieves offer free plans for two unique products. First is an “EpiPencil” that costs \$30 to make and can be reloaded for \$3 (the original EpiPen now costs over \$300 and is in short supply). Second is a “MicroLab,” which is a personal pharmaceutical manufacturing lab (think of a bell jar, but with a bunch of wires and circuits protruding) that can be used to synthesize a number of medications. The Four Thieves Vinegar Collective are currently working on a Daraprim alternative that could be manufactured with their MicroLab. If they are successful synthesizing Daraprim, could the same device be used to manufacture Covid-19 medications? Aside from the legality and ethical considerations, is manufacturing your own medications even safe and if you can make legal drugs, how about illegal drugs?

If a patient with little to no understanding of chemical engineering can synthesize Daraprim in a MicroLab, what is stopping an addict or a drug dealer from using it to make Oxytocin or another highly addictive opioid? Laufer’s answer is twofold. The first is a bit technical and has to do with the limited street availability of “precursors,” or the ingredients opioid-based pharmaceuticals are derived from. More important though, according to Laufer, is that saving life far outweighs the potential for abuse of such a device. The DEA and the FDA are not on Laufer’s side, but they can’t prosecute because Four Thieves are only providing patients with the information to break the law by manufacturing their own medications, they are not actually doing it themselves.

The Four Thieves Vinegar Collective isn’t the only group of bio-hackers helping patients take control of their healthcare. Mark Watkins, an Australian software developer, created an open source program to hack CPAP machines so patients with sleep apnea can take back control of their treatment from overburdened and underinvested doctors. The hack unlocks certain statistics that the machines monitor while the patient is using it, which had previously only been available to doctors, who often overlook or ignore the data.

On the extreme side, Aaron Traywick, a self-proclaimed bio-hacker who founded Ascendance Biomedical in 2017, was found dead in a sensory deprivation tank after posting a video that claimed he would be

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announcing a “disruptive technology that would upend Big Pharma.” Many in the media suspected he died as a result of injecting himself with an untested and experimental Herpes cure, while many of his peers suspect that he was killed by agents of Big Pharma (his official cause of death was ruled drowning due to Ketamine intoxication). Will the Four Thieves run into similar tragedy?

Bio Thieves will interview members of the Four Thieves Vinegar Collective to get their thoughts on DIY bio-hacking, safety and the permissibility of theft to save lives. We will speak with patients that cannot afford the medication need to save their own lives. We will talk with representatives from Big Pharma to learn about what goes into the development of lifesaving drugs, what the actual costs are and their thoughts on the bio-hacking movement. We will speak with the FDA and DEA to get their perspective on the safety of DIY bio-hacking and the long and costly process that pharmaceuticals must go through in order to get approved in the United States. We will talk to qualified doctors and chemists to gain scientific perspective into the viability of producing DIY lifesaving pharmaceuticals in devices like the Micro-Lab from the Four Thieves Vinegar Collective. We will speak with lawyers, politicians and lobbyists to gain insight into the murky legal realm of DIY pharmaceuticals. We will speak with prominent figures in the bio-hacking movement to get their perspectives on where the movement is and where it could go. We will discuss the viability of patients manufacturing patented covid-19 medication in their own MicroLabs.

Tonally, the film will embrace a rapid-fire point/counterpoint in the visual style of *Take Your Pills*, *Unnatural Selection*, *Citizen Bio* or *Human Nature*, while also embracing the stylized investigative techniques developed by Errol Morris in films such as *The Thin Blue Line*. *Bio Thieves* will feature original interviews and b-roll, artfully cut with archival footage and motion graphics.

In addition to a theatrical run, *Bio Thieves* will be equally at home on a streaming platform such as Netflix, HBO Max or Prime Video.

Examining the spectrum that spans intellectual property rights, to the idea that theft of IP may be permissible if it saves a life, the film will explore the idea of Cognitive Liberty, or our right to mental self-determination, and how it pertains to the freedom of an individual to control his or her own mental processes, cognition, and consciousness. In other words, **the film will consider if the right to live justifies breaking the law.**

We’re currently building our team to help accelerate development, while simultaneously continuing to research archival materials, secure on-camera commitments, budgets and finalize our production schedule.

I look forward to discussing *Bio Thieves* with you.

Thank you,

- Nick

Nickolas Gilbert
writer/director/producer