

Tribeca Film Festival: Johan Grimonprez Shines a Light on a Corrupt 'Shadow World'

BY CRAIG HUBERT | APRIL 21, 2016



A still from Johan Grimonprez's "Shadow World," capturing President Ronald Reagan aiming a rifle while flying aboard Air Force One during a trip to California in 1983.
(Ronald Reagan Library)

“Shadow World,” a documentary about the origins and effects of the global arms trade from filmmaker Johan Grimonprez that premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, is an oddly conventional film. Grimonprez, a Belgian visual artist who has exhibited work at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston, and many other places, has made films before: “dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y” (1997) premiered at Documenta X in Kassel, Germany, and has since screened all over the world; and “Double Take” (2009), with narration written by the novelist Tom McCarthy, had a commercial theatrical release. But despite their distribution model, each film was steeped in a cinematic hybridity that allowed them to exist in both the art and film worlds.

The same cannot be said for “Shadow World.” This doesn’t mean that it’s a bad film — just that it lives squarely in the world of mainstream film. It’s a detour for Grimonprez, who incorporates found footage and poetic dialogue taken from the work of Latin American novelist Eduardo Galeano with conventional talking head interviews (journalists, activists, whistleblowers) in this adaptation of the book by Andrew Feinstein. The reasoning behind the inclusion of the talking heads might be to iron out the creases in the story, connecting the dots between a number of complicated world-historical events in a bid to make the argument that the contemporary conflicts the United States and England are involved in have their origins in very clear decisions we made in the past. “Policy has been based on greed and it has ruined the world,” the journalist Vijay Prashad says in the film, speaking as its conscience. “It’s not the world I want to live in.”

The film looks at countless levels of corruption: money laundering, bribes, offshore companies, and eventual cover-ups. The most notable is the 1986 deal that led BAE Systems, one of Britain’s largest defense companies, to land the biggest defense contract in British history with Saudi Arabia. But that is just the surface. Behind the scenes there was a reserve of money provided for Saudi princes, allegations of bribes aimed at Mark Thatcher, the son of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and the use of a United States bank to funnel the money to Prince Bandar bin Sultan. Later, Tony Blair would halt an investigation into the contract, despite criticism.

Ronald Reagan was the person who passed the deal to Thatcher, and the film includes a parallel thread linking the increasingly growing United States defense industry, which has provided contracts to companies such as Lockheed and Haliburton, and its role in the so-called war on terror. These companies, which wield a staggering amount of government influence, don't want war to end. When we stop invading countries, the film makes clear, they stop making money.

"Shadow World" does a good job of maneuvering through these various webs of conflict. Grimonprez skillfully uses found footage in a way that is reminiscent of Adam Curtis, and often just as darkly funny, but then allows his interview subjects to take over. At times it feels like he's backing away from what the film is doing, and often doing very well, in order to appear less complex. In the past, the artist has made films that never directly state what they are about, using sound and image less as a direct message than a set of ideas on which to ruminate. He's working in a different mode here — it's just as striking, but ultimately undeviating in its aims to reach a wider audience.