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Tribeca Film Review: 'Shadow World'



Johan Grimontez doesn't want audiences to get out their handkerchiefs; he wants them to get out their protest signs, their megaphones and their voting ballots. Whether documentaries have that ability is sadly open for debate, but "Shadow World," Grimontez's superb, gut-punching exploration of the global arms trade is the sort of catalyst to energize politically-minded viewers. Flawlessly juggling an impressive array of talking heads with archival footage, the director ("Double Take") aims his disgust at politicians, from Reagan to Obama, Blair to Prince Bandar bin Sultan, and the billions invested in ensuring militarization and war never get put on ice. Smart, hard-hitting and possibly too intellectual for many, "Shadow World" deserves wide exposure at home and abroad.

Grimontez bases his research on Andrew Feinstein's 2011 book "The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade," bringing the South African author in as co-writer and talking head. Bookending the documentary is archival footage from the "war to end all wars": ghostly black-and-white images of World War I soldiers in the trenches are accompanied by archival interviews with such noted veterans as Henry Williamson, George Ashurst and Smedley D. Butler, with author Williamson recalling the "Christmas Truce" of 1914, when soldiers from both sides spontaneously co-mingled with the so-called "enemy." Opening with this footage is Grimontez's way of saying war is not necessary, yet the decision-making has never been in the hands of foot soldiers.

Such is the documentary's nod to early 20th century history: from there it jumps to the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan had Margaret Thatcher arrange massive arms deals with Saudi Arabia so that Israel wouldn't accuse the U.S. of collaborating with the enemy. This, according to "Shadow World," was the crucial moment when Saudi influence began its staggering ascent. There are a number of nemeses here, but none as adept as the Saudis in manipulating world powers to ensure monumental kick-backs.

That's probably the biggest takeaway, along with the harsh realization that governments are heavily invested in ensuring the "war on terror" remains an undefinable state of semi-emergency with no end in sight. According to the film, the reason is simple: War is lucrative, especially for lobbyists and politicians who ensure the arms trade remains a feeding frenzy with no oversight. It backs that point with mind-boggling figures: an \$87 million slush fund from Britain's BAE arms manufacturer to Saudi beneficiaries (Maggie's son Mark Thatcher got more than \$17 million for that one), plus a \$1.5 billion bribe to Prince Bandar bin Sultan; \$10 billion paid by South Africa for arms they certainly didn't need, with \$300 million as bribes to ANC officials; etc., etc.

Much of this information has been published in the British newspaper "The Guardian" (journalist David Leigh is among those interviewed), but of course documentaries have a particularly potent way of conveying information when done well, as is the case here. Tony Blair comes off as little more than a

slippery arms salesman (Grimonprez doesn't point out the laughable irony of Blair's post-ministerial position as "peace envoy"), while the portrayals of Reagan, Thatcher and Bush make them out as war criminals.

"Shadow World" does a far better job nailing Donald Rumsfeld than "The Unknown Known," and accomplishes the take-down in a more succinct manner, showing how he and Dick Cheney have reaped the rewards of their time in the private sector with companies like Halliburton, which is in the business to ensure that wars continue; Casper Weinberger's association with Bechtel could equally have been included. Barack Obama is also implicated, especially for signing off on targeted assassinations, along with billions of dollars in drone contracts.

Grimonprez and his editors are exceptionally clever at clearly presenting information and then following through with the consequences, so a discussion of C.I.A. funded right-wing coups leads to an interview with El Salvadorean activist Marta Benavides, who talks in concrete terms about the results, followed by a section on the Iran-Contra scandal to help connect the dots. Two talking heads are especially chilling in very different ways: One is jailed arms dealer Riccardo Privitera, a self-aggrandizing sleazeball fond of making bald-faced statements with the incontrovertible ring of truth. The other is "New York Times" war correspondent Chris Hedges, who movingly speaks of the psychological trauma from seeing so much killing. He also offers one of the most accurate statements about the crisis in the Arab world: "The disease of permanent war is what's destroyed the Middle East, not Islamic fundamentalism." As the documentary clearly demonstrates, the U.S. and U.K. keep ensuring that this particular disease remains incurable.

Much as "Double Take" maintained an audacious balance thanks to masterful editing, so too "Shadow World" successfully corrals a remarkable amount of information via impressive montage work. Passages from stories by the late Eduardo Galeano are layered throughout the film, offering a poetic, if not entirely well-integrated, commentary.