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1226 N Salsipuedes Unit C 1(805)704-5994 |https://hollywoodglee.com Larry@HollywoodGlee.com

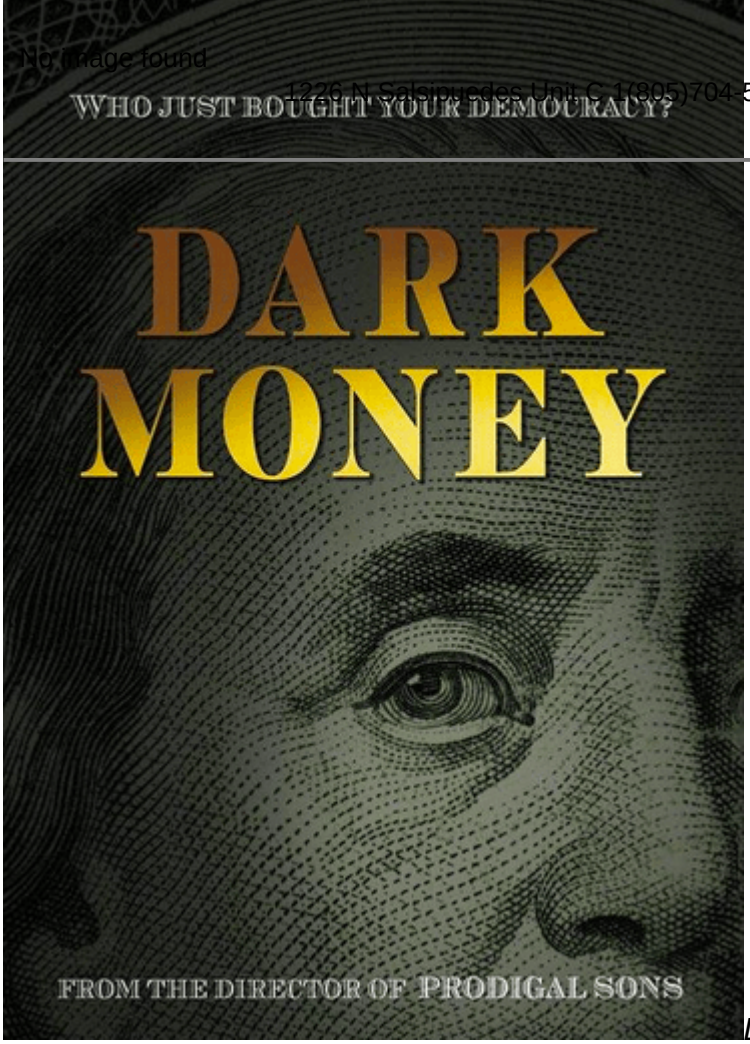


AFI DOCS 2018 Film Review: Dark Money

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Viewed by Larry Gleeson as part of the 2018 American Film Instituteâ??s AFI DOCS, Director Kimberly Reed (*Prodigal Sons, Paul Goodman Changed My Life*), weaves and bobs through a heavyweight political fight with *Dark Money*.



Dark Money opens with a gaggle of geese and a news report stating the number of dead geese is higher than thought followed by some interesting aerial shots of a large swath of strip-mined land. With some montage editing, the mise-en-scene changed to black and white with an assortment of old mining photos, including the Anaconda Copper Company operations what seems to be a familiar voice-over (I thought it was Jesse Ventura â?? I was wrong).

To me, the opening seemed a little choppy as the next sequence revealed a farmer lamenting some malfunctioning plow implement â?? only the farmer turned out to be a U.S. Senator, Jon Tester, from the state of Montana. Well, that got my attention. His description of the way he carries out his vocation sounded as though he were the legendary Roman statesman, Cincinnatus. This was not a very flattering portrait of Senator Tester. Fortunately, Senator Tester, like the film, looked and got better as the film progressed.

Reed lays down some nice background material with archival photos and overlays before getting into the essence of *Dark Money.* Several Montana state officeholders hold ordinary jobs and share their advocacy for political engagement. Another political candidate laments his inability to respond to a series of political ads that flooded mailboxes and media three days before the election linking the candidate to John Wayne Gacy, an American serial killer and rapist. The ads were run by Mothers Against Child Predators and ran in a predominantly Catholic area. Upon inquiry, no one could determine who Mothers Against Child Predators were. After extensive investigation, it was determined

that two women sent out the ads as part of a political process to gain access to seats in state government offices and the state judiciary.

I noticed a nice non-diagetic score mimicking a racing heart as a narrative voice-over from Ann Ravel, a Federal Election Commissioner, who uncovered how groups like Mothers Against Predators operate while hiding where their money comes from. Reed moves the setting from rural Montana to the nationâ??s Capital. Seemingly, Reed is alluding to the real seat of power and then juxtaposes the Capital with a little house with a sign that reads â??Commissioner of Political Practices.â?•

Interestingly, Montana presently has a Citizen Legislature after a corrupt political past primarily associated with the Anaconda Mine. The Anaconda Mine site is one of the largest Super Fund cleanup sites in the world. According to a diagetic docent the Anaconda financed the Industrial Revolution. Yet, the trade off is that it is home to the greatest potential disaster threatening the Northwest as the toxic waste water sitting at the head of the Columbia River is so acidic that a gaggle of geese who lost their way and settled onto the Anaconda pit perished.

In 1912, Montana passed Corrupt Practices Act. This law was held in place until the *United Citizens* decision by the United States Supreme Court allowed dark money into elections. Proponents celebrated the decision as a win for free speech.

Later, Reed supplies footage of a Russian-style town hall meeting called by American Tradition Partnership.The goal is to get rid of all disclosure, all regulation and all truth-in-advertising mandates so corporations can dictate policy and influence government by manipulating the voting populace just as the Anaconda Mining Company had done a century earlier.

Thanks to a laid off investigative reporter, John Adams, who lost his job when the state news bureau was disbanded, corruption is uncovered in a series of American Tradition Partnership emails with evidence of illegal direct mailings. A trial is held pinning a state legislature with violations of the Montana Disclose Act. He is fined. And, much like the Trump Administration Cabinet appointees, he claimed during the hearing he didnâ??t know anything about the coordinated in-kind contributions he received from dark money groups.

Fortunately, Reed doesnâ??t stop here. A link is made between the inaction of the Federal Elections Commission and its failure to require foreign government political contributions to be reported. Also, Reed slips in a call to action in the form of followthemoney.org.

Dark Money is an interesting film as it delves into what dark money is, how it can affect political campaigns and how foreign governments are using it to influence the outcome of electoral processes â?? until ultimately controlling the United States Supreme Court. Highly recommended.

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Author

hollywoodglee