

festival review

RIDM 2017: Reagan, Trump, and the Image of Conspiracy

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2017 marked the twentieth anniversary of the annual international documentary film festival in Montreal, RIDM (Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal). It may have just been the films I chose to see, but it seemed like the mark of Donald Trump's presidency was all over the festival. For example, several films I saw took place in and around the U.S.-Mexico border, like *El Mar La Mar* (Joshua Bonnetta, J. P. Sniadecki, 2017, U.S.) and *The Devil's Freedom* (Everardo González, 2017, Mexico), or about social inequality within the U.S. like *Rat Film* (Theo Anthony, 2017, U.S.) which contrasts Baltimore's city planning with studies of rat communities (Theo Anthony, 2017, U.S.), or global inequality like *Les Dépossédés* (Mathieu Roy, 2017, Quebec), about the economics of global food production, all of which resonated with Donald Trump's foreign and domestic policies. But the film that referred most directly to Trump was not about the contemporary political and economic situation, but Ronald Reagan: *The Reagan Show* (Sierra Pettengill and Pacho Velez, U.S., 2017). Although perhaps not representative of the ethos of the entire festival or the films shown, but for obvious reasons, that film made the largest impression on me.

The parallels between President Ronald Reagan, the demi-god of the Republican Party, and President Donald Trump, the current demon-god of the Republican Party, run much deeper than

Trump's détournement of Reagan's phrase, "Let's make America great again," which prompted uneasy laughter in the audience. As Sierra Pettengill, the co-director, said, "Trump is all over this movie" (Dollar 2017), even though production began before Trump was even a presidential candidate. Trump transformed Reagan's declarative statement, implying collective action, into his imperative statement, demanding from some unknown power (the ghost of Ronald Reagan perhaps, or the electorate) to return the country to its former glory, a mythic time of white male American dominance. Ronald Reagan's presidency, image, and achievements became the projection of Trump's spotlight. While Reagan's slogan implied solidarity, active union against a Communist boogeyman, Trump's implies passivity as much as it was a call to vote. Since his election, Trump's talking points and policies recall Reagan's, as his presidency took place more than thirty years ago, and the geopolitical lines have not radically changed since.¹ They reflect Reagan's own simplistic, Manichean view of the world with its Cold War binary,² and his presidential image of untouchable innocence, or in Trump's case, untouchable insanity.

The Reagan Show consists entirely of archive footage- using television news and outtakes from interviews and publicity events- to contrast Ronald Reagan's television personality, which cemented his image and popular appeal, with some sort of "true"

fumbling, off-screen persona. In an interview from 2014, Pettengill remarked, concerning the difference between what happened in the 80s and the façade Reagan created, “History really repeats itself that way and the selling of that presentation is much less effective now” (Cohn 2014). A naïve sentiment reflected in the film’s nostalgia of media specificity, the 16mm film that added “this dream-like layer to the footage,” or the Beta and ¾ inch tape, all of which invoke a time and place distant from the current high-definition digital texture. Covering the eight years of his presidency, *The Reagan Show* provides the major beats of his tenure as told through the media and with the media. In focusing on his television presence, the film presents an almost celebratory image of him, Reagan in his element, like the fiction pushed by the Republican Party now—the grand old Reagan era—which glosses over many of the same things *The Reagan Show* does, limited to the rectangular frame of the screen.

Aesthetically, the film merges the cable television experience with the contemporary genre of the YouTube supercut, like the superimposed presidencies, simultaneously nostalgic and contemporary, a temporal amalgam. Reagan’s platform was based on a return to the golden age, a period he had personified in Hollywood films, modernized for the high-tech 1980s. In *Seeing Through the Eighties*, Jane Feuer argues that the remote control informed a channel surfing aesthetic of television, watching multiple shows at once (1995, 3). The “zapping” or “zipping,” which has also been used to term the style of MTV, can also describe “supercut” videos (Baio 2008). Through obsessive repetition, supercut videos attempt to display an underlying pattern, a cultural unconscious, almost a conspiracy, with its implication of a revelation. For example, the widely shared clip of Sinclair Broadcast Group, from April 2018, cuts together tens of local news anchors repeating the same conservative, propagandistic denunciation of “media bias” (Fortin and Bromwich 2018). In *The Reagan Show*, a series of clips shows Ronald Reagan repeating, “Doveryai, no proveryai,” or “Trust, but verify.” The section depicts Reagan’s blundering attempts at the Russian aphorism, signifying both his bumbling attempts to sign a denuclearization treaty with the Soviet Union and alluding to, although never directly mentioning, the unproven rumours that he had Alzheimer’s while in office

(Shirley and Heubusch 2018). This is mirrored again in the constant speculation concerning Trump’s mental capacities (Lee 2018.). For both men, their role as head of state is doubted.

With the supercut, *The Reagan Show* gestures toward interior psychology, yet, more than anything, the film depicts a presidency that was all surface. “Reagan himself, as many have argued, was as much an image as anything else on TV during his presidency” (Feuer 1995, 1). Similarly, there are many close ups on the president that pull back to show the crowds of cameramen, reporters, and television crews recording his every action, muscle twitch, expression. The zoom out, signalling the constant camera and lack of privacy, is intended to show simultaneously the “man behind the curtain,” or in Reagan’s case the lack of man behind the performance. By using outtakes and recorded mistakes, Pettengill and Velez present a mediated sense of the personal, which does not peer behind a façade but plays into the desire to see *more* of Ronald Reagan, past actor conflated with current president. His body, while perhaps not mediated in the same way, performed, is still acting *as if* it reveals an always-questioned mental fitness.

Published a year before Reagan’s president ended, in *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*, Michael P. Rogin argued, “If there are two Ronald Reagans, we owe his integration to film” (Rogin 1987, 8). The two bodies, the “Body natural,” and the “Body politic,” a doctrine from Elizabethan England, is problematized both within Reagan and Trump’s presidencies. While Trump refuses the division-refusing a Body politic, putting always his own interests (personal and economic) first, Reagan resisted the Body natural (Rogin 1987, 81-2). President Reagan’s character was formed out of the films he acted in, and it was the confusion between on- and off-screen that brings the president into focus. Reagan’s rebirth on television screens made him untouchable, a filmic presidency. Film was used to reflect “how he felt and who he was” (Rogin 1987, 4), not art imitating life, but life lived through art, or politics experienced through Hollywood’s literally black and white image. “He could claim to embody the nation, exploiting the boundary confusion between the president’s body and the body politic, because he had risen from the confusion between life and film” (Rogin 1987, 16). As Rogin argues, Ronald Reagan amputates his second body, existing only as a floating, mediated

manifestation. Those shots of his hands, outtakes, imply an interior state read through the body, read externally, not on his face, the part controlled by the conscious brain, but those parts that have been amputated, removed, like his legs in *King's Row*, when he asks, his most famous line (and title of his autobiography), "Where's the rest of me?"

What connects Trump to Reagan, and rapidly edited shots together in a supercut, ignoring historical context in favor of surface similarity, is also the logic of conspiracy theories, whose connections are not causal but mimetic. That conspiratorial logic is neither new, nor extricable from the American political form, although Trump's presidency has so often been painted as an anomaly. Using the example of Ronald Reagan, Michael P. Rogin's larger argument concerns the "countersubversive tradition" of "political demonology" (Rogin 1987, xiii) central to American politics, by which he means, within the heart and head of democratic American political power is the conspiratorial effort to limit democracy. In *Conspiracy Theories*, Mark Fenster compares Rogin's "realist" approach with Richard Hofstadter's famous "symbolist" analysis of the conspiratorial nature of American politics in his 1964 essay, "The Paranoid Style of American Politics." While Rogin focuses on the "instrumental motives of the centers of power" (Fenster 1999, 55), Hofstadter attempts to diagnose the pathology of American politics, locating the mental illness not in the head of state, but at the periphery of the body politic, the "lunatic fringe." Hofstadter reasserts a consensus history, a centrist view of American politics that is threatened by the "radical" edges. He, like the film, diagnoses the mental health of American politics through the extremities, the fingers and hands, in close up, as if the symptoms of mental illness are themselves the problem. Conspiracy theories cause these tremors and omissions, tics.

Since the 1980s, conspiracy theories of the far right can be described as what Michael Barkun calls "improvisational millennialism"—their catchall, bricolage quality, like alt-right Pokémon trainers. Every detail, no matter how minute, becomes the seed of truth, evidence of cover-up. Endless media coverage means endless hours of footage, any of it potentially the proof they need. While there are many other aspects and features of conspiracy discourse (see Keeley, Dean, Knight, Anderson, Pratt), I am concerned with how conspiracy

theories posit an "underneath," an unveiling (see Sedgwick), a psychology of power that, like conceptions of the mind, has another side, another, unseen, uncontrolled side (see Kripal), only seen through the body, divorced from cause or history, replacing the head with small hands. For alt-right groups, the uncontrolled side is the Bilderbergs, the Illuminati, aliens, the "Washington swamp" full of establishment politicians, the "real power," not the people, who in a democracy are supposed to be in control. They are supposed to be the body politic, but Reagan detached it, amputated, and cut it up. With enough pieces, gathered up like an archival film, those pieces only reveal, like *The Reagan Show*, that the truth is simply a record, and records never say what they mean, they can only be read through.

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Endnotes

1 For example, when he talked about "the encroachment on the western hemisphere" in a recent UN speech, or his claim that China will have to negotiate ignores their current status as an economic equal to the United States, and he treats Russia as if we are still in the Cold War. Also see, Cobb 2017.

2 This binary is its own form of imaginary, a "closed world" complicated by the multiple meanings of what is closed, what is contained. See Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World*, 1996.