

Secrecy

Contributed by Tracy Jones
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Peter Galison and Robb Moss' *Secrecy* is a documentary that, as its title implies, explores the theory that institutional secrecy in America corrupts and keeps society suspended in fear. The branches of the US government are, according to the constitution, supposed to share power. *Secrecy* exposes an incompetent system that's at war with itself. Government policy is to gather and conceal sensitive information that poses a threat to national security, but what happens when various branches of government refuse to share classified information between themselves?
Reviewed from the San Francisco International Film Festival; Photo Courtesy Filmmakers.

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Thomas S. Blanton, Director of the National Security Archive at George Washington University, describes a culture war between the "Cold Warriors" versus the "Web Crawlers." The "Cold Warriors" are old school rogues refusing to adapt to the information age. Their philosophy is to fight the dangers that pose a threat to national security. Translation: Do not leak classified information to the media. The "Web Crawlers" believe information networks empower the public, contradicting the concept of the "need to know basis." The "Web Crawlers" want to exchange sensitive information with outside sources for the possibility of unanticipated findings. They believe a well-informed media is a well-informed and active community, while a society kept in the dark is in a perpetual state of subordination.

The interviews are conducted on a sound stage with a projected image behind each interview, lending the interviews a subversive omnipresence. The music plays a subtle role in conjuring the audience's curiosity without sounding like an X-Files episode. The drawn out sounds are reminiscent of voices trying to speak despite the inability to use a human language.

The animation that cuts in and out during key parts of interviews acts as a metaphor for unseen mechanics. The smeared twitching black and white figures symbolize polar opposites of the known versus the unknown. The figures flicker to the music, suggesting an eerie jagged dance between the tangible world and the invisible forces that control its motion. Aesthetically engaging, the technique seems to compensate viewers' short attention span and difficulty connecting the dots, or perhaps it's just the film's self-conscious attempt to convey multi-layered meaning. Still, I appreciate the film's attempt to incorporate animation and art instillations into a commentary on American culture.

Secrecy suggests the emergence of a new America that breaks with past abuses like McCarthyism, Abu Ghraib, unlawful wiretapping and torture. It raises questions about the fundamental principles of America and the ways in which they have been put into practice. But beyond critiquing a corrupt system that facilitates illegal torture, kidnapping and arresting people without due process, *Secrecy* highlights a lack of respect for human life in the name of democracy. Is America a true democracy? Is democracy any different from Communism or a socialist economy: Great in theory but not in practice? What is it in human nature that leads people to think that secrecy allows one the "freedom" to participate in the evil that men do? Former US intelligence officer Melissa Boyle Mahle explains that U.S. democracy is protected by secret methods that directly contradict American values. However, some might agree with Mahle in reference to 9/11, "When you're attacked at home, the rules change."

After viewing *Secrecy*, one could walk away thinking that the US government is fundamentally guided by the belief that what you don't know cannot hurt you--unless you know it.