



The Lovers and the Despot

Directors: Ross Adam, Robert Cannan

Year: 2016

Time: 94 min

You might know these directors from:

This is the directorial debut for Ross Adam.

Robert Cannan:

Three Miles North of Molkom (2008)

FILM SUMMARY

As the former powerhouse behind one of the globe's leading dictatorships, Kim Jong-il is infamous the world over. On the other hand, director Shin Sang-ok and actress Choi Eun-hee are far less known on an international scale. Although superstars in their homeland, South Korea, their filmic accomplishments were primarily confined to Asian soil. **THE LOVERS AND THE DESPOT** demolishes these confines.

Although primarily known for manipulating and controlling his people, Kim was secretly a dedicated cinephile. Disappointed with his nation's cinematic output and the sub-standard level of directing and acting that his country's film industry seemed capable of (or confined to by strict censorship law), he set out to alter this trajectory. Shin and Choi, living in the adversarial South, were synonymous with high-quality cinematic creations. Bottom line for Kim: bring them to the North and get them working on his behalf.

Through interviews with Choi, her children with Shin, members of the U.S. intelligence community from the 1970s and 80s, and film critics who knew Shin's work intimately, **THE LOVERS AND THE DESPOT** recounts the fantastical tale of Choi's kidnapping by North Korean agents, her imprisonment as Kim Jong-il's cinematic servant for eight years, and her subsequent freedom on U.S. soil. Directors Cannan and Adam also cast a scrupulous light on the veracity of Shin's alleged abduction, leaving us wondering: who is the biggest manipulator of them all in this true tale of love, betrayal, and the silver screen?

FILM THEMES

In ways more fantastical than most films, the true tale of Shin Sang-ok and Choi Eun-hee's involvement with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il has it all: love, drama, terror, power, freedom, and deception.

FILMMAKING AS POWER

Kim Jong-il was convinced of the power of film to not only represent a culture but to control and brainwash a population. In ways Shin shared this belief, devoting his life (and sacrificing his family) for film. In the words of his son, "Film directors are reckless. They confuse films they've made with real life." Not drawing a line between reality and the translation of a tale onto celluloid, both Kim and Shin were drawn to the manipulative force inherent in filmmaking. In their quests for power, both utilized cinema. As a dictator Kim was immensely powerful - film fortified that. As a director, Shin too was "so powerful that he could move mountains," his son declared. The mighty muscle of film was flexed.

LOVE AND DECEPTION

From the film's opening scenes we see a love story between actress and director and the building of a family. Just as love is setting the stage, betrayal enters. A mistress, a divorce, a broken heart. Examples of walking the line between loyalty and betrayal run through the film. Kim Jong-il's passion for cinema drove his pursuit to imprison and deceive. Shin proved his loyalty to Kim Jong-il only to betray him by escaping. Having once hurt Choi, Shin became the only person she could trust in North Korea. But the greatest available love - and deception - was all three's shared relationship to film, the possibility of escape, control, and parallel realities offered through the cinematic lens.

MAKING SENSE OF DICTATORSHIP

The key to any successful dictatorship is to control one's people on both a physical and emotional level, reaching deep down into the soul of individuals and washing away any sense of individuality. In this sense Kim Jong-il was a very successful man. His people were so immensely manipulated, not only on a physical day-to-day level but on a profound emotional level, that their displays of devotion and servitude baffle anyone not living under a dictatorship. New to the North Korean way of life, Choi expressed the survival mechanisms she adopted when living in a dictatorship. "There's acting for films. Then there's acting for life."

MEASUREMENT OF GREATNESS

To Kim Jong-il, Western cinema was the gauge for greatness. As Choi put it, "Having seen many foreign films, he wanted North Korean cinema to be just as great." Winning international awards, competing on the global film circuit - that defined a nation's filmmaking abilities. External recognition serves as a stamp of approval in many walks of life, and rather than feeling satisfied with one's individual output, humans are prone to draw comparisons. Even Choi admits that she values her acting not according to the films she enjoyed most, but to those best received, her winning a high accolade in Moscow the pinnacle of success. The quest for greatness goes hand in hand with external recognition.

"If I were to write a screenplay of my life, I wouldn't focus on the hardships. I'd fill it only with glamorous scenes. Too much suffering."

Choi Eun-hee

"Let's show the West what we're capable of."

Kim Jong-il

"When put in extreme situations, people imitate what they see in movies."

Shin Sang-ok

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Had you heard of the story of Shin Sang-ok and Choi Eun-hee and their time in North Korea before watching THE LOVERS AND THE DESPOT?
2. After watching the evidence presented in the film, what are your thoughts on Shin Sang-ok's alleged abduction by Kim Jong-il? Do you believe he found his own way to North Korea to continue his work as a film director, or was he forced against his will?
3. How knowledgeable are you of the history of North Korea and its contemporary state of affairs? Do you remember what you were taught at school about North and/or South Korea? Do you have any personal connection to either North or South Korea?
4. The film touches briefly on Kim Jong-il's childhood and odd upbringing. In his mind, kidnapping a South Korean director and actress were logical steps towards creating great cinema. Can he be blamed for his actions? Are the characteristics used in the West to define a respectful person applicable under a dictatorship?
5. In what ways were Kim Jong-il and Shin Sang-ok similar, regarding their relationship to film and the art of filmmaking? In what ways were they both manipulative?
6. Discuss the concept of dictatorship. Can any individual be brainwashed to accept a certain way of life? What does the notion of "emotional dictatorship" entail? How are citizens manipulated emotionally, as well as physically, when living under a dictatorship?
7. In a digital world where most information seems to be available at the click of a button, how has North Korea managed to maintain its secrets relatively well-kept from the rest of the world?
8. In what ways is film a powerful medium? More generally speaking, how are the arts a potent means of exercising control and expressing belief systems, more so than political speech? How does art reach and connect with the human psyche?
9. Describe your relationship to film. Do you ever think of your life in terms of a film script? Have you ever been so immersed in watching a film that the lines between your reality and the film blurred?
10. Choi Eun-hee states, "It seems that Shin and I were always meant to be together." Discuss your thoughts on destiny and fate. Do you believe that certain things in life are predestined and out of our control? Are you more the type of person who surrenders to life or fights to have ultimate control over the direction of your existence?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- THE LOVERS AND THE DESPOT premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize.
- Shin Sang-ok was born in 1926, the son of a prominent medical doctor. He spent three years in Japan studying at the Tokyo Fine Arts School, before returning to South Korea to establish Shin Films, which produced over 300 films in the 1960s alone. Known as the Prince of Korean Cinema, Shin directed around 100 films and produced 70 over the course of his life. He lived in Los Angeles from 1986 and worked under the name Simon Sheen, returning to South Korea in 1999. He passed away at the age of 80, in 2006.
- Choi Eun-hee was born in 1926, and acted in a theater troupe before becoming one of South Korea's biggest stars and co-running Shin films together with her husband. She appeared in 81 films.
- Prior to taking over as leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-il served as the Movie and Arts Division Director in the government's Propaganda and Agitation Department. During his time at university, he allegedly wrote 1,500 books and expounded on his many theories regarding art, film, and opera. A lover of cinema, he possessed over 20,000 films in his personal library.
- Directors Adam and Cannan approached the North Korean government during the making of the film, who refused any involvement.
- Obsessed with creating films that could compete on an international level, Kim Jong-il was hard pressed to find top directors in his country. When looking to educate prospective filmmakers on the art of cinema, he could only send them to countries sharing the same political ideology as North Korea. This included East Germany (film editing), Czechoslovakia (camera technology), and the Soviet Union (directing).
- Kim Jong-il wrote a book entitled "On the Art of the Cinema" in 1973, in which he discusses several theories of filmmaking and the arts in general. The book is mandatory reading for North Korean literature and filmmaking students.
- The formation of two separate Koreas took place in 1948, with the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), often referred to as DPRK. Three supreme leaders have held control over the DPRK: Kim Il-sung (1948 to his death in 1994), his son Kim Jong-il (1994 to his death in 2011), and the former's son Kim Jong-un (2011-).
- Kim Jong-il never spoke in front of the North Korean public. The taped recordings of him in the film provide some of the few examples of his voice.
- According to Human Rights Watch, North Korea continues to commit human rights abuses without comparison in today's world, including extermination, murder, enslavement, torture,

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Read** A Kim Jong-il Production, a 353-page book on written by Paul Fischer and first published in 2015 if you are intrigued by the story of Choi Eun-hee and Shin Sang-ok's and want to delve deeper. For another interesting perspective on Kim Jong-il's extensive ideas behind film, read one of the many books he wrote on the subject, including The Cinema and Directing and On the Art of the Cinema.
2. **Learn** more about the work of the Human Rights Watch that works around the globe to collect data on human rights' abuses, and continue to work for justice in North Korea. Consider donating to their cause.
3. **Watch** one of the many films Shin Sang-ok produced during his time as a director.

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