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SONGS FROM THE NORTH

A film by Soon-Mi Yoo

2014 Locarno Film Festival, winner of the Golden Leopard for Best First Feature
2014 Toronto International Film Festival

USA, South Korea, Portugal | 72 minutes | 2014

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Synopsis

SONGS FROM THE NORTH is an essay film which offers an unique look at the enigma of North Korea, a country typically seen through the distorted lens of jingoistic propaganda and derisive satire. Interweaving footage from director Soon-Mi Yoo's three visits to North Korea together with songs, spectacle, popular cinema and archival footage, SONGS FROM THE NORTH tries to understand, the psychology and popular imagery of the North Korean people. To look closely and objectively at North Korea, a country that challenges our most fundamental assumptions about the human condition is ultimately to question the meaning of freedom, love and patriotism.

"...the revolutionary state of North Korea was born out of songs= the songs the country's founding leader sang in his arduous march to Natinal Liberation- and these songs are the soul and pulse beats of the Kim Il Sung generation."
From Rodong Sinmum April 6, 2007

Director's Statement

Our Deepest Wish is Reunification was a popular children's song when I was growing up in Seoul, South Korea. Reunification occupied a large part of public and private discourse. The separation between North and South was considered unnatural, as if a living being had been severed in half. The pain felt by Koreans was real, not imagined. Reunification was considered a remedy, a destiny.

When I was finally able to travel to North Korea in December 2010 I crossed the Tumen River, the border with China, where a North Korean guide met me at customs and accompanied me in a state-run taxi. Night was falling as we crossed over a snowy mountain range. I remember my surprise to see people walking in the dark alongside the road, briefly glimpsed in the headlights as we drove past. I wondered how they were able to find their way in complete darkness. It was the coldest winter in thirty years on the Korean Peninsula. Some people carried bundles of kindling, gathered in wooden A-frames on their back. Another was dragging a tree trunk. The next morning I looked out my hotel window in Rajin City and saw people running from the cold. I wanted to ask them, "How do you manage to survive?"

Because of the tight control of the North Korean "guides" I was not able to travel or photograph freely. But I was able to film fleeting moments and encounters in between. I was deeply moved by the grace and dignity of the North Koreans I met during that trip and during my two subsequent visits in the summers of 2011 and 2012.

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I was never able to ask my question to any North Koreans. Instead I had to look for answers in the footage I brought back and in the North Korean material- songs, cinema, spectacle, publications- that I researched. The longer I stared at the images, the longer I listened to their voices, I no longer saw the propaganda. What remained were the beauty of their faces, and the melodies of the songs which carried a genuine emotion that I found consoling. I began to understand that perhaps this is how they manage to survive I also came to understand that these are people who would rather die than be humiliated and subjugated. And so they continue, walking in the dark, and maybe humming one of those patriotic songs that I heard everywhere throughout my travels in North Korea.

Soon-Mi Yoo, Lisbon, July 2014

Director Biography

Born in South Korea, Soon-Mi Yoo studied German Literature at Yonsei University before earning an MFA in Photography at the Massachusetts College of Arts where she is currently a member of the Film/Video faculty. Yoo's films embrace and expand avant-garde and essayistic modes of non-fiction cinema, reopening forgotten, often suppressed, chapters of modern history in order to explore the still unresolved conflicts and collective memories that continue to haunt and define the Korean Peninsula. In short works such as DANGEROUS SUPPLEMENT and SSITKIM: TALKING TO THE DEAD Yoo defines a lyrical mode of essay film that uses poetic forms to mine the deeper archaeological and emotional levels that standard histories are unable to engage. Yoo's first feature film SONGS FROM THE NORTH looks differently at the enigma of North Korea, a country typically seen only through the distorted lens of jingoistic propaganda and derisive satire. Interweaving footage from her three visits to North Korea, together with songs, spectacle, popular cinema and archival footage, SONGS FROM THE NORTH tries to understand, on their own terms, the psychology and popular imaginary of the North Korean people and the political ideology of absolute love which continues to drive the nation towards its uncertain future. SONGS FROM THE NORTH reveals that to look closely and objectively at North Korea, a country that challenges our most fundamental assumptions about the human condition, is ultimately to question the meaning of freedom, love and patriotism. Yoo's films have screened at major international film festivals, including Locarno, DocLisboa, the Viennale, Rotterdam, Oberhausen as well as the Harvard Film Archive, the Centre Pompidou and Museum

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of Modern Art. SONGS FROM THE NORTH won the prestigious Golden Leopard for Best First Feature at the 2014 Locarno Film Festival, and the prize for Best First Feature at DocLisboa 2014.

Filmography

2014 SONGS FROM THE NORTH

2012 AFGHANISTAN: THE NEXT GENERATION

2011 PINK

2006 DANGEROUS SUPPLEMENT

2004 SSITKIM: TALKING TO THE DEAD

2004 ISAHN

Credits

Writer, Director, Cinematographer, Editor.....Soon-Mi Yoo
Producers.....Soon-Mi Yoo, Haden Guest
Co-Producer.....Rui Alexandre Santos
Post-Production Coordinators.....Marta Alves, Andreia Oliveira, Ana Ramalho
Sound Editor and Mixer.....Nuno Henrique
Assistant Sound Editor.....Miguel Cordeiro
Assistant Editor.....Luis Nunes
Visual Effects.....Rita Patacas
Graphic Design.....Sofia Bairrao