



THE PROPAGANDA GAME is a feature subtitled documentary filmed mostly inside North Korea by Spaniard **Álvaro Longoria** and a crew comprised of his countrymen. Kino Ken screened it at the 2016 Carnegie Mellon International Film Festival in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Below is his review of that film.

13 of a possible 20 points

*****1/2 of a possible *******

North Korea 2015 color 81 minutes subtitled live action feature documentary Morena Films Producers: Álvaro Longoria, Tanja Georgieva, Alexandra Lebret

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 1 Direction: Álvaro Longoria**
- 2 Editing: Victoria Lammers, Alex Marquez**
- 2 Cinematographers: Rita Noriega, Diego Dussuell**
- 2 Lighting**
- 1 Narration Script: Álvaro Longoria**
- 1 Interviewees: Alejandro Cao de Benós, Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch, others**
- 2 Music: Fernando Velazquez**
- 1 Sound**
- 1 Research**
- 0 Insightfulness**

13 total points

THE PROPAGANDA GAME attempts the impossible: to produce an objective documentary about contemporary life in North Korea. In this closed

society, no public statements are open to debate, contradiction, or revision. All media is subject to intense government scrutiny. Any new information is unacceptable for disseminating to the masses, who are only to be brainwashed with slogans specially created by the nation's ruler.

This disposes of all issues relating to internal news.

How are foreigners to be similarly blinded?

Fortunately for successive dictators, a hardcore Communist sympathizer is ready at hand: Spanish native Alejandro Cao de Benos. Alejandro physically towers above native Koreans, barrel chest loaded with medals proudly displayed, indicators of government honors and official sanction. Alejandro's function, quite a difficult one, is to explain actions of North Korea's government to outsiders, making him a one-man national press agency. With years of experience in how to dodge controversies and still be garrulous, not letting slip a single syllable even remotely critical of state policy, Alejandro is combination tour guide, political theorist, trained apologist, and affable companion. He happens also to share a common language with film director Alvaro Longoria, making possible the latter's entry with film crew into what remains The Hermit Kingdom despite its official name of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. That designation affirms existence as a democracy and republic, with a government answerable to popular appeals. In fact, it is neither democratic nor a republic, people being harshly penalized whenever daring to question any law propagated by their country's rulers.

Longoria is allowed bus transportation from misnomer DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) — a supposedly neutral strip of land separating two Korean nations into individual armed camps, each suspecting the other of future annexation plans — to Pyongyang, showcase capital city of the north. The highway travelled is all but totally devoid of additional traffic moving in either direction. This mysterious absence, like so many other enigmas that surface during the film's eighty plus minutes, is left unexplained by appointed hosts. These prefer to praise fulsomely dictator Kim Jong Un and his heroic efforts to make their land self-sufficient, free from corruptive advertising, imperialists, and critics of any stripe.

It appears he has succeeded. Until telltale pop dispensing machines and foreign computers show up, company names clearly visible.

Viewers are treated to skateboard veterans, Catholic church attendees at a Mass oddly lacking any Eucharist ritual or priest, a museum with spotless halls and massive interpretive displays of wartime history but no other patrons than camera crew and protective entourage, and a wedding in

traditional costumes performed at the DMZ to prove current absence of tension there.

Not on the agenda are visits to indoctrination camps where thousands are held captive, often for nothing more serious than being related to a malcontent or dissident. Surely foreigners don't expect to tour places whose existences are not even indicated on local maps?

A philosophy called Juche dominates lives of citizens. It basically consists of accepting unquestioningly whatever statements officials care to make publicly. In return, people are granted apartments in which to live, food rations, periodic changes of wardrobe, and, for the most part, primitive means of locomotion from one section of town to another.

Farmers are notable for their absence from the film. A string of enormous crop failures, resulting in considerable famine scourging rural regions, is not something the government wishes to feature, discuss, or even deny. The simplest method of insuring no negative comment about that appears is to ignore agriculture as much as possible, keeping visitor observation directed at urban skyscrapers. Many of these exist for decoration alone, unoccupied and barren, mimicking neighbor China's spree of building apartment complexes and shopping centers to stand in monumental desolation amid teeming masses of people. So what if they lack functionality, beauty, or even productive futures?

A sort of history winds its way through this putative documentary, as a handful of approved interview subjects defend their isolated way of life. Several speakers give the impression they truly believe what they utter, either by dint of habitual rote practice or through fear of consequences should any hint of dissatisfaction or rebellion issue from their lips.

What emerges, then, is a collection of unanswered questions concerning what is visible and also the even larger set of things unseen, doubtlessly every bit as real.

Probably even more so.

Who is funding new construction, pursuit of atomic weaponry, computers for a university teaching such arcane subjects as locomotive driving? If European nations refrained from demonizing the country in their media outlets, would the Kim Jong Un regime respond with equivalent banishment of propaganda bludgeoning outsiders? How many of the nation's twenty-three or so million people wish fervently to exit immediately? When will anyone be granted the legal right to do so? Can North Korea's Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, currently a solo operation of

Alejandro's, indefinitely maintain itself as lone cultural bridge for the entire nation?

Cinematography by Rita Noriega and Diego Dussuell is appropriately beautiful, as one would expect of a modern travelogue glorifying everything in sight. Each attempt to poke a camera into off-limit regions is blocked. Consequently, little is documented, plenty staged for dramatic effect.

No obstruction mars lighting. Range of illumination, in every respect, is preset and strictly limited.

Sound is more fluctuating, which is quite curious considering the minimal number of audible sources Spanish guests are authorized to approach, let alone record.

Aside from what handlers contribute for interpretation and publicizing, Longoria interjects post-production comments, musings, and brief intercut interviews featuring outside specialists with lengthy experience analyzing and usually refuting nuggets of information leaked, never inadvertently, to the outside world. These experts include Kenneth Roth, representing Human Rights Watch, a group not welcomed by Alejandro or his superiors.

Fernando Velazquez's lively music is far peppier and more open than the lives depicted here, a gratifying treat needing no elucidation or commentary to enjoy.

The single most memorable aspect of this film, though, is an anonymous female xylophonist whose mastery of her instrument is unquestionable. Unless film of her performance was wedded to prerecorded music later in post-production. In that case a new question would arise: Whose propaganda are audiences truly encountering?

Since THE PROPAGANDA GAME includes vile language and presentation of several instances of atrocities in explicit visual and / or auditory form, it is not suitable viewing for anyone other than adults. Even those must filter the contents through their own life experiences, attempting to distinguish between fiction disguised as fact and fact so improbable it inspires cursory rejection.

This author is greatly obliged to www.hollywood.com for credits information relating to the film.