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*Depiction of North and South Korea In Secretly, Greatly*

With its mild, slapstick humor filled with abrupt scenes of thriller action, Jang Cheol Soo’s “Secretly, Greatly” provides an intriguing if not refreshing take to the perhaps over-used genre of North and South Korean spy films. Certainly, some people may disagree and find offense with one calling North and South Korean Spy films as an ‘overused concept’. However, with the release of classic blockbuster movies like Shiri and Joint Security Area in the early 2000s, it is safe to say that the genre of North-South Korean relations has taken a permanent seat in Korean cinema.

Not surprisingly, Secretly, Greatly enjoyed a blockbuster release in 2013, marking the genre within a relatively fresher timeline that targets the majorly generation Z audience. This in turn allowed for several elements to change within the film’s theme including a slightly more sympathetic depiction of north Korean spies who had backstories and family instead of the image of the stereotypical brainwashed North Korean enemy. In this essay, thus, we will discuss the socio-political ideologies portrayed in the characters as well the extent to which the director has followed a realistic or believable portrayal of North and South Korean dynamics.

Interestingly, the film starts off with an ominous monologue by the main hero, Lieutenant Won Ryu Hwan (hereafter to be referred as Dong-gu) who says : “I was born as a wild dog and raised a monster”. The scene cuts to a dark, desolate setting in Beepa Cape, North Korea where he mentions there being “nobody to cheer on” and “nobody to know we exist.” At first glance, our hero is the typical north Korean character. He has lived a harsh life and has no familial entanglements-a bachelor incapable of any remorse and perfect for the role of an emotionless, anti-hero in a Hollywood style spy film. Certainly, it would be disappointing but not surprising if Jang Cheol Soo had chosen to take that arc given that directors before have relied on it heavily. Suk Young Kim in her article, ‘Crossing the Border to the “Other” side’, mentions this very phenomena where she notes that: “The conventional image of North Koreas is of enemy soldiers, terrorists, guerillas, and snipers. Only rarely have North Koreans been projected as full-blown human beings with the inner capacity to feel, suffer, and fear.” (Pg.220).

Of course, at the start, the audience is meant to think of this stereotype quite seriously. For instance, the 5446 corps training chief has a deep eye scar- a classic Disney style move to signal the villain of the story. His parting speech, however, clearly highlights the unique aspect of this film. Dong-gu only has two options: to stay alive and witness the glory of the nation or die as a legend. The chief even gives him two options of them meeting either as brothers after reunification or as enemies.

This apparent binary psychology of the chief does not allow Dong-gu to think past the restriction of his two equally unfavorable options: to die or to serve. Ironically, though, Dong-gu has unknowingly integrated this numerical mindset in his life where he addresses himself as a number (98-0075) and critically analyses each member in the neighborhood as a fact file(Jeon Soon Im ,58 ,market grannie).

This almost super human trait of his is highlighted throughout the film to the point of over exaggeration where he strategically falls down the stairs every time, purposefully puts his snot on his face and dictates by ‘code of law’ that he should be defecating every six months in public to appear like a fool. The film even goes as far as to credit Dong-gu with detecting ‘high level of diabetes’ by tasting one of the twin boy’s urine. Furthermore ,his counting of 736 days since he left North Korea and meeting his fellow North Korean spy, Mr. Sang Suh, the postal delivery man at ‘idlest hour,2pm’ is also a recurring example of his need to numerically document his events. In a sense, Dong-gu seems to want to resemble a machine-just like the device that he obsessively maintains to hear a message from the North Korean corps for his missions.

We could even go as far as to say that perhaps Dong-gu’s mind has simulated for him an artificially engineered existence where he micromanages and controls each aspect of his life. However, the utter irony of his life seems to be that he is not in control of anything-be it his relationships, his mental allegiance or even his own life and body. This fact becomes particularly clear when he learns towards the end that all the north Korean spies were injected with a GPS tracker inside their bodies. This integration of the machine and the body puts the existence of Dong-gu and his fellows in question .According to the film, it seems that they have been dehumanized and objectified for benefit where they are deemed disposable after they complete their mission-a fact that Dong-gu naively does not realize.

Another well run pun throughout the film is certainly the naivety of the three north Korean spies-Dong-gu, Min-su and Hae-jin as they pretend to be normal South Korean residents. Dong-gu continually tries to convince the audience and his fellow spies of his emotional detachment which eventually ends in failure as he gets flustered with romantic feelings for Yoo-ran, helps the twin brothers, gives cigarettes when Jeom-ran exposes her cleavage and even fights on behalf of market granny, Soon Im’s son. All these incidents showcase Dong-gu’s growing feelings and attachment with the neighborhood people.

Similarly, the audience is introduced to Dong-gu’s young comrade Hae-jin as a loyal North Korean spy who seems to consider the suicide mission a duty. Having been trained to kill since a young age, Hae-jin seems to consider beheading the attacker a kindness for the victim such as when the Yoo-ran’s boss was harassing Yoo-ran. Interestingly, the director chooses to portray skin ship between Hae-jin and Dong-gu as a way for him to show his humanity. This subtle undertone of homoeroticism allows the audience to see Hae-jin, the firm and loyal north Korean soldier as a boy exploring his sexuality and entering the realm from innocence to adulthood or even enlightenment. The audience is, however, unsure if Hae-jin really does reach an understanding of his own existence and purpose.

This question of existence is also pertinent for the other north Korean spy, Min-su who is disguised as an aspiring K-pop idol while ironically lacking any musical skills. As a result, he is basically living a purpose less life voluntarily cleaning sardines while comparing himself to spawning salmons. Min-su’ s lack of purpose in his mission puts him at a direct contrast to Dong-gu and Hae-jin because unlike them, he seems to possess rebellious thoughts of not always listening and being careful of north Korea. Even his appraisal of South Korea having more musical talent puts him as a potential sympathizer from the start. Even though, praise of South Korea from a North Korean soldier like Min-su may seem unrealistic, it is important to note that the film avoids a pro South Korean view. The director could have opted for a more flashy setting in Seoul like Gangnam t, but he chooses to show a run quiet ,run down neighborhood in a distant village while the North Korean setting is mostly carried out in an office with North Korean soldiers dressed smartly in army uniform. This intentional attempt to not differentiate and demonize or romanticize the spatial settings of North and South Korea respectively signals a more mature perspective towards the concept of north-south films.

This mature perspective is intriguingly highlighted in the personalities of the neighborhood especially Soon Im, the market granny and Dong-gu’s host mother who tacitly ignores the nationalistic concept of ‘othering’. By taking care of Dong-gu while knowing or at least being suspicious of his north Korean identity, Soo Im becomes an inspirational character for the audience. Suk Young Kim in her article supports this by saying that: “Such psychological identification with the conventional enemy, which is diametrically opposed to the Volkanian notion of “psychologizing” the “other” as evil, becomes a critical device to make South Korean audiences rethink the conventional ideas that saturated the national imagination about the evil other.”(Pg.227)

Indeed, it is Soon Im and Dong-gu’s mother-son relationship that actually transforms the mood of Secretly, Greatly from one of harmless comedy to that of immense tragedy. Dong-gu’s realization that he loves Soon Im as much as his birth mother comes only in his dying moments. Thus, the audience is left wondering whether the ending signals a win for the South or North. One might say it was the South that won because the neighborhood was spared from being hurt by the North Koreans. Others might point out that the North actually succeeded in their plan to kill off their 5446 corps spies. However, in reality, it seems that Secretly, Greatly does not wish to delve into who is right and wrong. Instead, it questions whether the price for staying loyal to an ideology is worth it-especially if threatens to erase your purpose of existence.

*Works Cited*

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