

Acropolis Cinema and Los Angeles  
Filmforum present



September 24, 2018 ~ 8:00pm ~ Downtown Independent

## ABOUT THE FILM

*Napalm* is the story of the breathtaking and brief encounter, in 1958, between a French member of the first Western European delegation officially invited to North Korea after the devastating Korean war (4 million civilians killed) and a nurse working for the Korean Red Cross hospital, in Pyongyang, capital of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Nurse Kim Kun Sun and the French delegate had only one word in common, that both could understand: "Napalm", hence the title. Claude Lanzmann returned to Korea without the permission to film and each take represents an extraordinary victory over the permanent control of the regime's political police, who discovered the real reasons for his return, sixty years later, to the peninsula of this extreme North. (uniFrance)

100 min // France // 2017

### **A Cold War Affair by Daniel Kasman**

*The following article was originally published by MUBI Notebook, May 25, 2017*

Claude Lanzmann is best known for turning the camera on Holocaust criminals and survivors in his landmark documentary *Shoah* and its feature film offshoots like 2013's tremendously powerful *The Last of the Unjust*, but in his new documentary *Napalm* this master of recording human memory turns the camera on himself.

Based a story in the French director's book *The Patagonian Hare*, *Napalm's* centerpiece is a long recounting to the camera by the 91-year-old Lanzmann of his trip to North Korea as part of an international delegation in 1958. During this long visit, he met a beautiful nurse that didn't speak his language, yet with whom Lanzmann nevertheless embarked upon an almost unbelievably remarkable day of courtship, political fear, exotic fascination and personal desire. It is no wonder this experience so stuck to his mind. Lanzmann returned to North Korea nearly 50 years later first in 2004 and then in 2015, and in this most recent journey snuck footage out of the country, footage shot by Caroline Champetier, assistant to *Shoah's* cinematographer William Lubtchansky and herself one of the best and most adaptable of camerapersons.

This footage is, to begin, of monuments, statues and streets in Pyongyang, but also includes three unexpected encounters with women, one with an actress on the set of an action movie—"she is so supple," ogles Lanzmann—another at a Taekwondo practice, and the third an impressive tour guide on the DMZ. Visiting immense statues of the country's beloved leaders allows Lanzmann to reflect in voiceover on North Korea in a general and poetic sense. He observes that the country is uniquely frozen in time since the Korean War, and it emerges that this is also how he sees his memory of this brief, remarkable romance: as something similarly unchanged and locked in time. The Korean women of today that Lanzmann admires lasciviously become estranged echoes of the young Korean in his memory. Yet they are also part and parcel with the director's startling chauvinism and egotistic false-modesty on display in his oral history of his affair, a deeply

uncomfortable part of the film's intense encounter with Lanzmann's storytelling, face to face.

Yet this discomfort is transformed as the movie draws to a close around Lanzmann's visit to the sites in Pyongyang of his long-ago illicit rendezvous: a bridge that served as the couple's meeting point and a boat dock they used, still there after all this time. This meeting between Lanzmann's deep personal memory from 60 years ago and its real world location today is where, finally, *Napalm's* meaning, force and emotion emerges. The vast gulf of what might have been between these two unlikely people is bracing to realize. As the visibly infirmed director rekindles sensations at the site of his mad fling—he quotes a *Shoah* interviewee, “*Das ist der Platz*—this is the place!”—the film's prelude is recalled, where Lanzmann says that man wants to “abolish and mask the inevitable end.”

Taking this further, Lanzmann sees in his lost lover an explicit political factor which gives their relationship an obvious but powerful symbolism. A fierce, complicated human connection there was halted and severed due to national political interests at a major site—graveyard, even—of Cold War ideological conflict. Within this moment, this story, is the tangible sense of a lost hope and the impossible possibility of union in the shadow of 60 years of North Korean isolation and misery. “Once world peace has been established,” Lanzmann's memory-woman says, “all those who love peace will meet each other.” *Napalm* mines Lanzmann's own prejudices and past to reveal that a mere passing anecdote in the 20th century's political and human history in fact holds at its core the wisdom of the tragedy of the battle of communism and capitalism. ♦

## Six Questions for Claude Lanzmann by Steven Zetchik

*The following article was originally published by the Los Angeles Times, May 24, 2017*

### **So, the most obvious questions first: Why North Korea, and why now?**

It was in me a long time this idea — it marked me. I wrote the book where I told the story [of the romantic encounter], but many people don't read — they go see movies. So I did this. The challenge was how to make it there. A Spielberg could have told the same story in fiction and chosen another city, another river, to shoot it. And for me, this felt like a betrayal.

### **Shooting in North Korea is indeed very difficult. You had officials watching you as you made your way even to benign places like a military museum and a martial-arts academy. How did that constrain you?**

The government was very suspicious, and they were always near me. I was afraid, because they were holding me strongly. But I think I found ways to get around that. I wanted to make a film where the words are images and the images are words; I wanted to explore the dichotomy between documentary and fiction.

### **You have these great images of North Korea's leaders early in the film on a**

**plaza there, and you combine it with notions of mortality and the "standstill" that the country has been in for more than 60 years. Can you explain that a little more?**

I think there is a desire for eternity. That's why the government stopped the past, and there are these giant statues, so they cannot die. When Kim Jong-il died, the reaction in the streets was astonishing. Their struggle against death is astonishing. You see it in every civilization, a solution to cope with this terrible situation. This is how they do it.

**Your film aims to evoke sympathy for North Korean people, particularly by showing some graphic images of North Korean deaths in the Korean War. Why was that a priority for you?**

North Korea has a history of terrible destruction. [Douglas] MacArthur wanted to repeat Hiroshima. It's very clear this is the greatness of [Harry] Truman, to fire MacArthur because he knew the consequences. The movie is not a complete stranger to 'Shoah' because of what happened [during the Korean War]. The scene on the bridge [from the story] when the police surround me — it is like 'Shoah,' where there is a return to the place where something happened.

Even as we speak, there are reports of missiles being fired, of nuclear tests being conducted, by the North Korean military. Did you come away with any insights on the current political situation?

I am not a political filmmaker. I could have shown the 'Axis of Evil,' as our friend [George W.] Bush called them. I try to avoid government and politics completely. They [the people of North Korea] are very human, and when they told me their own stories of war, I saw people who had been real heroes and many thousands of dead people. We are one mankind.

**Most people would reach your age and place in the film world and say, "I don't need to keep working." Why don't you say that?**

It required a lot of chutzpah to tell a story at my age — I'm not a young man and I cannot change my face. There are all these impediments. I don't say I succeeded, but I don't say I failed. ♦

**Coming Soon to Acropolis:**

- *The Guests* (Dir. Ken Jacobs, 2013)—Oct 9, Downtown Independent. Ken Jacobs in person.



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