

The latest blockbuster from CIA Pictures: *The Interview*

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Directed by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg; screenplay by Dan Sterling

The Interview, a Hollywood comedy about two celebrity journalists recruited by the CIA to assassinate North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, has improbably enough emerged at the center of international geopolitics. The reader will likely be familiar with the controversy that first led Sony Pictures to shelve the film—in response to threats from hackers who leaked thousands of embarrassing internal studio emails and documents—and subsequently to release it last week.

Co-directors Seth Rogen (who also plays a leading role) and Evan Goldberg and screenwriter Dan Sterling have created a work that consists largely of a series of unconnected vulgar jokes and gags strung over a plot that glorifies state murder. One of the sharper characterizations of the film is to be found in the emails from Sony executives, who panned *The Interview* as “desperately unfunny and repetitive.” The studio officials termed the film “another misfire” by Rogen and [actor James] Franco, in which “Franco proves once again that irritation is his strong suit.”

The film’s approach to comedy can perhaps best be described as “throw enough mud at the wall and some of it will stick.” The topics touched upon in this “satire” include incest, bestiality, sodomy, defecation, urination and various other bodily functions.

Franco plays Dave Skylark, a bottom-feeding celebrity interview show host, and Rogen is Aaron Rapaport, his producer. The latter, seeking to prove he is capable of covering “real news,” decides to try to set up an interview with Kim Jong-un (Randall Park). Much to Rapaport’s surprise, the North Korean leader, a fan of Skylark’s show, agrees to the globally televised conversation. Learning of the upcoming event, the CIA, through its Agent Lacey (Lizzy Caplan), proposes to the duo that they assassinate Kim during his trip, to which they agree

without too much hesitation.

Once the two American journalists have arrived in North Korea, Skylark at first falls under Kim’s seductive spell. The unlikely pair spends a day playing basketball, drinking margaritas, hanging around with sexy girls and, eventually, joyriding in a tank, by which point the talk show host is fully taken with Kim. However, the North Korean leader shocks Skylark when he throws a tantrum after the more or less accidental deaths of his two right-hand men and threatens to burn “a billion people across the earth and in my own country.” Moreover, the same evening, Skylark discovers that a well-stocked grocery store he passed earlier in his trip is actually a fake, and he reaffirms his commitment to the plan to get rid of Kim.

Skylark declares his intention to reduce Kim to tears in the interview (and thus demonstrating to the people of North Korea that their leader is not a god), which he accomplishes by referring to Kim’s fondness for margaritas and singing the lyrics of a silly pop song the supreme leader has a fondness for. Embarrassed, Kim soils himself, at which point Skylark declares, “Ladies and gentlemen, Kim Jong-un has just pooped in his pants.” This supposedly triggers an uprising in the country.

Back in the video control room, Rapaport and Sook (Diana Bang), a prominent North Korean official, fend off an attack by guards that involves numerous close-ups of fingers getting bitten off. Sook, Rapaport and Skylark escape in the same tank, whose large-caliber cannon they use to blow Kim’s head off (in slow motion, no less). The duo is then extracted by Seal Team Six, the American commando unit that assassinated Osama bin Laden.

Within the framework of *The Interview*, oddly enough, the only individual for whom the viewer feels much sympathy is Kim himself, amusingly played by Park.

This meager, implausible and terribly unfunny story is extended to a nearly mind-numbing 112 minutes by means of innumerable and strained gags. To the above-

mentioned topics of the supposed humor, one might add the jokes at the expense of African Americans, women and Asians. The second half leans heavily on stock Asian gags such as “Guess who’s going to America, where they don’t eat doggies.” As if this were not enough, the writers felt compelled to add this kind of thing: “Don’t shake his hand, Aaron is a Jew!” No film of this genre would be complete without puerile sexism, centering on the two unfortunate female characters, Agent Lacey and Sook.

One feels ashamed for the performers and crewmembers involved, and one feels embarrassed to have watched the film.

Is this merely “adolescent humor”? Although there are adolescents who will respond to it, something else, far nastier and “grown up,” is at work in *The Interview*.

The Rogen-Goldberg effort is a hybridization of much that is the worst about American filmmaking at present. It unpleasantly combines the lowest common denominator “raunchy,” tasteless sensibility of blockbusters such as *The Hangover* series (and other Rogen-Judd Apatow undertakings), touches of the sadistic violence of Quentin Tarantino and Kathryn Bigelow’s devotion to the military-intelligence apparatus (*Zero Dark Thirty*).

In regard to the latter, aside from its hearty endorsement of the CIA, alias “Murder Inc.,” *The Interview* is peppered with nods to the military, including a convincing sequence of a drone pilot firing a missile, the appearance of the Navy commandos and numerous dramatic cuts to soldiers watching the interview with Kim.

The film reeks not only of political ignorance and reaction, but of laziness and intellectual complacency. Its affluent creators do and represent whatever seems “natural” to them, whatever comes most easily and effortlessly, i.e., they give in to every wretched petty bourgeois assumption about the world. *The Interview* is the work of those who have chosen to go entirely and wholeheartedly with the (bourgeois, conventional, foul) flow. The racial insults or backwardness, the sex innuendos and the pro-imperialist outlook itself all speak to an upper middle-class layer that has broken with liberal respectability and restraint, so to speak.

There is nothing genuinely critical-minded or unconventional in *The Interview*. Its claim to “edginess” is based on the fact that supposedly no subject is taboo. Yes, nothing is taboo...except US foreign policy, US military and intelligence operations, US geopolitical interests, and so forth. The humor has nothing liberating about it because it comes from a privileged and officially sponsored source. To the extent that the filmmakers take

on “political correctness” or identity politics, they do so from the right.

How daring of Rogen and Goldberg, with the full weight of the American state and media behind them, to make a film about Kim Jong-un! Truly, what audacity and bravery!

The critics, for the most part, have lapped it up. Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone*, for example, concludes that the film is “stupid. It’s in bad taste. It [sic] impossible.” But then Travers adds, “It’s a farce, people.” He continues, “*The Interview* hits the sweet spot for raunchy fun and spiky lampooning because Franco and Rogen are effing hilarious and fearless about swinging for the fences. It’s the American way.”

According to *The Interview*’s creators and leaked internal correspondence from Sony, the film was made in consultation with US intelligence agencies and the State Department. After Sony announced that it would continue with its plans to release the film, President Barack Obama, on vacation in Hawaii, and mid-way through a round of golf, declared, “I’m glad it’s being released.”

The Rogen-Goldberg work is being promoted as America’s answer to North Korean totalitarianism. The release of *The Interview* apparently proves that freedom of artistic expression is alive and well in the US. If this trivial rubbish is what the American establishment now champions in order to assert its “values” on a global scale, that itself suggests a profound social and cultural crisis.

In addition to being a testament to the banal vulgarity of the Hollywood “elite,” the movie may well accurately speak to the cultural and moral level of American state officials. One has the impression that, while most viewers would find the film “desperately unfunny,” the pathological types of people who dreamed up the sadistic torture methods depicted in the Senate’s recently released report might well get a kick out of it.



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