

# A Love of Movies Is the Real Star of “Kim’s Video”

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Kim's Video premiere at 2023 Sundance Film Festival. Photo by Becca Haydu

By Peter Jones

What goes around comes around, or at least rewinds back to the beginning.

It is with some irony that one of the highlights of the 2023 Sundance Film Festival is a documentary celebrating a virtually extinct media that many once considered a threat to the big screen. On the other hand, *Kim's Video* — in both style and substance — is ultimately a celebration of the movies and everything a film festival would hope to represent. *Kim's Video* premiered January 29 at the Ray Theatre.

For years, the business named in this film's title was the ultimate go-to for New York film lovers. The mecca for committed cinephiles was once a VHS treasure trove boasting everything from Fellini and Bergman to *Debbie Does Dallas*, as well as blatantly pirated editions of esoterica that would never have been otherwise available on home video.

But then, the collection disappeared when Korean-American owner Youngman Kim closed shop and made an unusual deal that transported the entire collection — more than 55,000 titles — to a small Sicilian village that promised to be a loving curator. But in a turn of true-life events that could have been written for the screen, nothing went as planned or promised.

Directors David Redmon and Ashley Sabin, film aficionados of the first order, treat their subject as a mystery before switching to the action-packed heist genre for their documentary's final reel. Part of the deal with Kim was that the transported collection would still be available to Kim's Video members, as if lower Manhattan's movie fans could take a crosstown bus to Italy.

When the filmmakers travel to the small village of Salemi to make good on an empty promise, they uncover a dusty warehouse of videos — not to mention a labyrinth chock-full of stock characters, self-serving politicians, and the mafia.

This is Sicily, after all, and this is a movie about movie lovers. Salemi, as it turns out, is a bullet's flight from where early scenes in *The Godfather* took place.

Along the way, clips of everything from *Paris, Texas* to *Night of the Living Dead* help tell a story, whose nonfiction Hollywood ending is one even film snobs can appreciate.

In the Q&A after the screening, Redmon said he understands why many in Salemi were hesitant to get onboard with his offbeat investigative documentary.

"A stranger comes to town who wants to rent a movie — that just seems a bit bizarre," he said. "... I went to Salemi on my own without a translator, without a smartphone. What you see happened is only half of what happened."

For Kim's part, he told the audience that *Kim's Video* is also an immigrant's story of economic survival in what was then a dangerous area of lower Manhattan.

"A 21-year-old Asian man didn't have a choice, but I wasn't afraid to start there and [accept the] challenge in the East Village," Kim said, receiving enthusiastic applause.

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