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Burning (15)

Dir: Lee Changdong

Starring: Yoo Ah-in, Jun Jong-seo, Steven Yeun

Sponsor: The Cheese Society

Synopsis: Working on odd jobs in Seoul, aspiring novelist Lee Jong-su runs into one-time classmate Shin Hae-mi. They date once and have sex; she later asks him to feed her cat Boll while she takes a trip to Africa. Jong-su's father Jung-suk is remanded in custody on a charge of assault and Jong-su moves into the old family home, a farmstead near Paju, to look after the cow. On her return, Hae-mi is accompanied by Ben, a wealthy young man she met in Nairobi airport, who lives alone in a new apartment in Gangnam. Jong-su soon realises that Hae-mi and Ben are a couple. When they visit his farmstead one afternoon to smoke pot, Hae-mi dances topless and Ben tells Jong-su that his secret hobby is setting fire to derelict greenhouses; he says he has already chosen the next one for burning, very close to Jong-su's place. Jong-su scouts the region for likely greenhouses. He calls Hae-mi and hears the sound of running; Hae-mi's phone is never again answered. Suspicious, Jong-su begins stalking Ben. When Ben finds him looking in Gangnam and invites him in, Jong-su finds a watch he gave to Hae-mi and discovers that Ben's new cat responds to the name 'Boll'. Jong-su's father is sentenced to 18 months in jail and Jong-su sells the cow. Called to a rendezvous in remote countryside with Ben and Hae-mi, Jong-su finds Ben is there alone. He stabs Ben and set fire to the body, Ben's Porsche and his own blood stained clothes.

Constructive ambiguity is the watchword for Lee Changdong's fine new film, his first since *Poetry* (2010). It's notionally based on Murakami Haruki's story 'Barn Burning' (first published in English in the *New Yorker*, then collected in a better translation in *The Elephant Vanishes*, 1993), but Lee and co-writer Oh Jungmi have done much more than transpose the setting from Japan to Korea. They've turned the story's first-person narrator into a very un-Murakami-like protagonist, a young man from a broken, working-class home whose father has anger management issues which have landed him in police custody. Then they've made the young woman who fascinates him someone of the same age from the same rural area - and given them a one night stand to sharpen the boy's jealousy when she goes off with a rich, sophisticated guy who is a few years older. And they've introduced a cat (Murakami loves cats, but there wasn't one in this story) and made the possibility that a murder has occurred off-screen much more concrete. Not least, they acknowledge, (and complicate) Murakami's debt to the earlier story of the same title by William Faulkner. As adaptations go, this one is exceptionally smart.

The protagonist is Jongsu, a 20-something creative writing graduate would like to be a novelist but hasn't yet fixed on anything to write about. In one sense, what catches fire here is Jongsu's imagination: his discovery - ruinous, as it turns out - of people, ideas and drugs which get his mind racing in the way he's always



wanted, and inspire him to walk away from the casual labouring jobs that have kept him going. The people are Haemi, a questioning young woman who does casual jobs in the same way as Jongsu while going to classes in mine and finding inspiration from the bushmen of the Kalahari, and Ben, an enigmatic, almost Gatsby-like figure who steals Haemi from Jongsu and admits to feeling jealous for the first time in his life when Haemi told him that Jongsu meant most to her.

It's Ben who provides the drug (marijuana, highly illegal and almost unobtainable in Korea, as in Murakami's Japan) and delivers the film's key metaphor when he claims that his hobby is arson: setting fire to derelict greenhouses which are "just waiting for me to burn them". Jongsu, deeply uncomfortable in Ben's presence and gripped by class resentment, comes to suspect that Haemi herself is the 'greenhouse' which Ben has decided to 'burn'. Ben lives in a sterile and supremely ordered apartment, in contrast with the cluttered chaos in Haemi's bedsit and Jongsu's farmhouse, and his claim that he eliminates 'useless, filthy, unpleasant-looking' structures has a clear metaphorical resonance. When Jongsu is driven to attack Ben, he's following a family trait. His father, who owns the farmhouse is banged up on assault charges. It's Jongsu who starts the film's only actual fire, using Ben's Zippo lighter which suggests how deeply the metaphor has stuck in the mind of an aspiring novelist. Lee has seeded this development with a tiny fantasy sequence: Jongsu imagines himself as a naked little boy in front of a burning greenhouse.

Unless you count the loudhailer propaganda broadcasts from North Korea distantly audible from the farmhouse (it's near Paju very close to the border), there are no politics in *Burning*. There was nothing overtly political in Lee Changdong's previous five features either although his earlier scripts for Park Kwangsu were rooted in opposition to the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. But Lee served as Minister of Culture for a couple of years from 2003 in a liberal government, and political thinking is never far below the surface of his work. *Burning* is primarily about the novelistic imagination, but Jongsu's story also coalesces the mood of uncertainty that has been visible in the Korean left during the ultra right wing presidency of Lee Myungbak and Park Geunhye. It's partly that those in administrations explicitly sought to reinstate the bad old days of cronyism, blacklists and privilege, and partly that the 'sunshine policy' of rapprochement with the North proved ineffectual. Lee himself was directly affected: he and Oh Jungmi have written several scripts since 2013 but shelved them - because they didn't feel those films *needed* to be made at the time.

Jongsu doesn't really understand Haemi's interest in the 'Great

Hunger', the Kalahari bushmen's quest for meaning in life, but the way his resentment of Ben's privilege and confidence evolves into paranoia and rage matches a global, inchoate anger especially amongst the young.

Credits

Lee Jongsu	Yoo Ah-kin
Shin Haemi	Jung Jongsoo
Ben	Steven Yeun
Yeonjoo	Kim Sookyung
Yongsuk	Choi Seungho
Director	Lee Changdong
Screenplay	Lee Changdong, Oh Jungmi
Cinematography	Hong Kyungpyo
Editors	Kim Dawon, Kim Hyun
Art direction	Shin Jonghui
Original music	Mowg
Sound	Lee Seungchui
Costume	Yi Cheungyeon

**S Korea, Japan, Australia
2018. 148 mins**

Another View

Twentysomething delivery boy Jong-su (Yoo Ah-in) is the guy who never gets the girl, but out of the blue, Hae-mi (Jun Jong-seo), a cute promotions assistant who claims to have gone to his rural high school, is making her interest in him very obvious. Soon they're canoodling in her tiny Seoul apartment just as the sun illuminates the place. This is the crowning moment of Jong-su's life, but Lee Chang-dong, South Korea's master of glitchy storytelling, doesn't allow him to enjoy it for long.

Hae-mi has a friend, the oleaginous Ben (Steven Yeun). A rich guy coasting along in his Porsche 911 on daddy's money. He's smugness personified, and just a tiny bit creepy, though Jong-su can't say what he really thinks for fear of upsetting Hae-mi. Frankly, we feel his pain, and when Haemi suddenly disappears without trace, he's convinced that Mister Trust Fund is somehow involved. Ben, after all, has a predilection for unusual mementos, and has confessed to a habit of burning down abandoned greenhouses for pulse-quickening kicks.

In the Haruki Murakami short story, 'Barn Burning', which inspired all this, it is farm buildings which go up in smoke, but the film is, in many respects, about burning inside, and how a class-driven sense of ingrained victimhood and social frustration can impact on the way you actually see the world. South Koreans fought hard for democracy but now find themselves partly in thrall to an untouchable corporate uber-class, though they're hardly alone in feeling bristling exasperation at the undeserving rich. Can Jong-su really be sure though?

The film's 148 minutes amble along with the teasing uncertainty of, say, Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, leaving us eager for a compelling narrative pattern to offer closure. Where the likes of 2007's *Secret Sunshine* and 2010's *Poetry* affirmed Lee's precise narrative facility, in *Burning* it's the play of ambiguity which draws us in, for although Jong-su is nominally the would-be writer, he might just be being played by the sheer slipperiness of his Manic Pixie Dream Girl lover and her sleek pal.

It's a film where every detail counts, so pay attention to the conversation about miming how to eat a tangerine, and keep your eyes peeled for Hae-mi's seemingly invisible cat. There's a dialogue going on here about how we can ever be certain about what we think we know, yet it's couched within a film whose lurching handheld CinemaScope framing and penchant for turning magic-hour light into a symphony of murk leave us in an enveloping miasma of unease.

The performances, too, are spot-on: rough-hewn Yoo Ah-in is somehow gormless yet sympathetic as the bumbling Jong-su; US-based co-star Steven Yeun exudes superiority while also finding a complex humanity in his character; and startling newcomer Jun Jong-seo is a quicksilver discovery as the mystery girl. Underscored by a suitably spooky ambient score from Lee Sung-hyun (aka Mowg), it all comes together in a truly haunting piece of cinema, impacting on heart, mind and the very pit of your tummy. It's gripping in the moment, but with plenty to take away for afterwards. Genius really isn't too strong a word.

Trevor Johnston: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday October 18th, 7.30pm *The Guilty* (Denmark 2018, Cert 15)

Reminiscent of Steven Knight's fine film *Locke*, which we showed in 2014, director Gustav Möller also puts a single character at the centre of this gripping drama. Set in a police control room, the story turns on policeman Asger who takes a call from a woman clearly in distress, who appears to have been kidnapped. Asger calls all his skills and training to prevent something more serious happening - but as the tension mounts and the stress starts to tell, we learn more about Asger and the reasons he's in the control room in the first place. Lean, mean and held together by a really fine performance by Jakob Cedergren, *The Guilty* shows that Danish cinema has lost none of its quality.

This film will be followed by the Society's AGM