BURNING – David Stratton's introduction

BURNING. S Korea/Japan, 2018, 148 min, Drama/Mystery, M (Rights held by Madman). Dir: Chang-dong Lee. IMdB vote 7.6

Welcome to Burning, a new film from the enigmatic and graceful Korean director Lee Chang-dong. Some of you may have seen his earlier film POETRY made in 2010.

BURNING, which won the International Critics' Award in Cannes in 2018 was inspired by Burrenburn, a short story by Japanese writer Hiroki Morikami which in turn was inspired by a story of the same name written in 1939 by William Faulkner which was filmed in 1957 as THE LONG HOT SUMMER. So these antecedents add flavour to what on the surface appears to be a quick, essentially Korean story of love and loss.

It is the story of Jong-su, a young man in his early 20's who studied creative writing and whose ambition is to become a novelist. By chance, he encounters Hae-mi, a former classmate who tells him she is about to head off on a trip to Africa and asks him to feed her cat while she is away. And that is the start of what eventually evolves into a love triangle.

Jong-su's rival turns out to be rich and a bit mysterious. This sounds simple enough but there is a great deal more going on beneath the surface of BURNING. Lee poses a great many intriguing questions, not all of which are answered. This is not a film in which all the loose ends are carefully tied together, but I think it is all the better for that. BURNING is a microcosmic depiction of class warfare.

A bit of research reveals that in general the youth and underprivileged in today's South Korea are worse off than were their parents and that the gap between rich and poor is wider than ever. BURNING then refers to the resentment and anger felt by the young and struggling, towards the rich and powerful. Revelations like these hover just beneath the surface of this beautifully directed mystery.

I do hope you enjoy BURNING.

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