

Burning (15) S

Directed by Lee Chang-dong



'18 South Korea 2hrs 28mins

Fri 1 Feb for at least one week

South Korean master Lee Chang-dong follows up 2010's *Poetry* with this sublime mystery thriller of obsessive love adapted from a short story by Haruki Murakami.

Seoul deliveryman Jongsu's (Yoo Ah-in) unremarkable routine is pleasantly disrupted when he runs into childhood acquaintance Haemi (Jeon Jong-seo), and the pair soon begin a romance. When she returns from a big trip to Africa accompanied by wealthy, handsome Ben (Sorry To Bother You's Steven Yeun), Jongsu's jealousy over the shift in her affections builds - until Ben tells him about his very strange hobby...

Featuring a missing girl (and her missing cat), an arsonist and a possible murder, Chang-dong has crafted a slow-burning study about male rage, class conflict, and unrequited love that is alight with mystery.

This interview by Karen Han with director Lee Chang-dong and actor Stephen Yeun originally appeared on vice.com in Oct 2018.

Karen Han: One of the major themes in the story is anger in contemporary youth; what about that particular theme struck both of you?

Lee Chang-Dong: I don't know if it was something I was particularly interested in, but I thought it was a problem in the world we live in now. As I've lived, people have gotten angrier and angrier. I don't know why; each person has his or her own reasons for being angry. Young people, old people, rich people, poor people—even people who have everything are angry. Trump's angry, though nobody knows why. I thought a long time about anger, and in that time, wrote a lot of different scripts, including some that were about anger. Eventually, I came across the Haruki Murakami short story [the story that the film is based on], and though it's not necessarily about anger on a surface level, it's connected to it.

Steven Yeun: I would say—there's that moment where Haemi talks about being trapped in a well and nobody heard her, and then you keep going down that storyline, and nobody believes her. I feel like that's a very millennial situation to be in right now, where you're telling people that there's crazy shit going on for you, and the parameters are much different than your parents' parameters, and they're saying, "Tough it out. Pull up your bootstraps and go for it." I think that's a fitting allegory to that idea. But then there's also what director Lee was talking about—there's rage everywhere. I don't know if I have a sound theory about it by any means, but in some ways *Burning* touches on it:

Poetry and burning desire: The films of Lee Chang-Dong - An Illustrated Talk

Sun 3 Feb 15:30

In honour of the release of *Burning* we invite you to join film writer and Box Office Supervisor Sven De Hondt for an illustrated talk about the career of Lee Chang-Dong that will dive into the mystique and technique of one of the world's foremost film auteurs.

We're all edging toward becoming sociopaths. I personally think that just having your own timeline on the internet, now, and you can find what you want and you can find your own reality. It was always that case, mentally, that your reality is your reality, but on the internet, it's now manifested. You can create it and say, "This world is this," and when you can do that, you're angry when things don't go the way that you want it to, or you're angry when people aren't controlled the way that you think that you're supposed to be controlled from your POV. These things are supposed to happen this way, and that's supposed to happen this way. When you can find people that hopefully have a deeper opinion—like director Lee—you don't clash with that as much, but... I don't know, it's weird time.

Karen Han: Would either of you say that frustration or anger that comes out of that self-curation that you were talking about is something that you personally experience?

Steven Yeun: I think maybe that's a battle from the beginning of time, as man has gained some sort of ego. You're just warring with your ego. The scary part, now, is that it's physically manifested, so you can almost point to evidence that says your way is the right way. It's validated, whereas it's not living in your brain anymore. It's on paper, and you go, "This thing says this, and I believe this." I had to quit Twitter because you'll go through it, and you'll think that it's real, that this is your singular reality, that this is how the world works, and then you look at someone else's timeline, and it's completely different. We're in weird vacuums these days. I fall into that vacuum all the time; that void is easy to slip into.

Lee Chang-Dong: I don't know what to do or how to change the way that people live today. It's not clear exactly how to move forward—it's all a mystery, and it's what's central to *Burning*. But because you don't know the source of the mystery, you get even angrier. In the old days, if you had a problem, you shared that problem. For example, in Korea, the

cause could have been the fact that democratization hadn't happened yet or economic inequality; everyone had the same problems. But now, that's not the case—problems are more individualized. Because the problems are trapped within the individuals, for instance, Jongsu is poor and seems to be trapped in a hopeless situation, and then there's Ben, who has everything, drives a Porsche, makes his own pasta—but he still has this emptiness. Everyone has their own reasons for being angry.

Karen Han: Speaking more broadly, where did the idea for the setting's proximity to North Korea come from?

Lee Chang-Dong: It had a little to do with Jongsu being able to hear the propaganda broadcasts coming from North Korea, but there was more to it than that. Rather, it was that the town, Paju, is about an hour from Seoul by car. It's not far—it's about a half hour from where I live. Despite the fact that it's so close to the city, it just looks like abandoned land. There used to be farming communities there, but it doesn't look like that anymore. So it's close to Seoul, but also very far. And then there's the propaganda. Like when Donald Trump comes on TV—you can't hear the propaganda from Seoul, but if you drive just an hour, you'll hear the broadcasts, and if you hear it every day, like seeing Trump on TV every day, you take it as a part of your everyday life. It becomes one of life's mysteries. You can tell something's wrong, but it just keeps happening. Something in your life is inherently thrown off-kilter. You think of a mystery as a phone call you get in the middle of the night, but we don't consider these other things mysteries, even though they're the same thing.

Steven Yeun: It's strange, my father-in-law lived very close to North Korea, and my mother lived near the southern tip of the country; the difference in rage in those places was huge. My father, whether we would be talking about North Korean propaganda or the Japanese occupation, would get so angry, but my mother wouldn't react with the same kind of extreme emotions. I think he felt all that war in real-time, whereas my mother was only hearing about it, or experiencing it from a second or third party. That got me thinking about Jong-su's dad, who had to listen to these broadcasts all the time, and relived these atrocities over and over and over.

Lee Chang-Dong: Yeah, Jongsu would have been listening to these broadcasts as he was growing up. Can you imagine how much he would have hated it? Of course he'd want to leave. Both he and his father would have wanted to escape. But now he's returned to this place he'd wanted to escape ever since he was a child he's returned to the past. That's a mystery, too. In a usual mystery, if a girl goes missing, once you find her, things resolve. But in Jongsu's case, I didn't want a typical mystery. Haemi's disappearance, Ben's true nature—they're connected to the mystery of Jongsu's life. I wanted the audience to experience that. I wanted to tell that story.

Karen Han: I couldn't find any clarity as to whether Ben was written to be Korean or Korean-American, but it inherently

"others" him. Was that intentional?

Lee Chang-Dong: I didn't write him as Korean-American. But I didn't want him to come across as every other Korean, either. That's why his name is Ben. Americans may not get why his name is Ben, but Koreans will know; it's a more common name now, but there's nobody who uses that name unless they deal with foreigners in some capacity. I wanted there to be something strange about him. It's not a matter of whether he's American or not, it's just that he's different. But, for instance, in the movie, Steven pronounces "William Faulkner" and "metaphor" in the Korean way. He doesn't say them like an American. I wanted it to feel a little like he's not human. And I think Steven did a wonderful job with that.

Karen Han: Steven, you said in an interview with the LA Times you were afraid to take this role because you didn't want to do something you had no business doing; I was wondering if you could expand on that.

Steven Yeun: We never got to that point for me to really say that to director Lee. [laughs] But when I first got the call and the short story, all I could think about before I read it was, "Why me? What do you mean?" Not only out of reverence for director Lee's work, but it kind of became an identity issue in some weird way, like, am I able to switch that switch, and go in there, and pretend as if I am not Korean-American? Can I be fully Korean in that place? And can I do it at the level that he's going to require? I'm such a huge fan of his films; I don't want to be the stain on his filmography. I was very prepared to even say no to director Lee if the parameters didn't make sense to me, but what I know now is how foolish I was because director Lee wouldn't have called me if he didn't think I could do it. And that's his wisdom.

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