

Burning (2018)

“It’s not a question of making yourself believe there is a tangerine there. You have to forget there isn’t one.”



Major Credits

Director: Lee Chang-dong

Screenplay: Lee Chang-dong and Jungmi Oh, based on a story by Haruki Murakami, itself influenced by a story by William Faulkner

Cast: Ah-in Yoo (Lee Jong-su), Steven Yeun (Ben), Jong-seo Jun (Shin Hae-mi)

Cinematography: Kyung-pyo Hong

Music: Mowg

Production Background

Burning is Lee Chang-dong’s first film in eight years. Ah-in You has been called an icon of youth in South Korea; similarly, Steven Yeun is an experienced actor in international films. Jong-seo Jun, by contrast, appears here in her first feature film.

Burning might be described as an existential thriller, along the lines of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’avventura* (1960) or *Blow-Up* (1966). Its concerns are more philosophical than psychological, although the audience does learn a crucial bit of back story about Jong-su.

Cinematic Techniques

Although the narrative remains ambiguous and slowly paced—one is tempted to call it “simmering,” a slow burn—the dramatic structure is quite clear: a lengthy exposition followed by a plot point when Ben appears on the scene; a protracted transformation at the mathematical middle when the threesome gathers at Jong-su’s farmhouse; a prolonged “investigation” leading to a cathartic climax. Lee Chang-dong’s cinematic style is both assured and restrained: Nothing is as remarkable as the total effect.

1. Long takes: Hae-mi’s dance at twilight to Miles Davis’s “Générique” consumes two and a half minutes in a single shot. Its duration reflects the mesmerizing effect on Jong-su. The climax is even longer: the first shot takes more than four minutes; the final shot is a minute and a half.

2. Music: The emotional intensity of certain scenes is enhanced by the *kabuki*-like abstract music added to the sound track.

Questions for Discussion

1. Describing the art of pantomime, Hae-mi says the key is not the performer's talent but the audience's response. "It's not a question of making yourself believe there is a tangerine there," she tells Jong-su. "You have to forget there isn't one." How does this observation made at the beginning of the narrative resonate throughout the film?
2. After returning from Africa, Hae-mi describes the Kalahari Bushmen's ritual dance combining Little Hunger and Big Hunger. How do these concepts describe the characters' motivations that reverberate in the narrative?
3. In Paju, near the DMZ, Jong-su can hear the North Korean propaganda sounding over the hills. With characteristic glibness, Ben finds this detail "interesting." How does this element of diegetic sound affect the viewer's response to the film?
4. Describe the political subtext of the narrative. Can the characters be better understood in ideological rather than psychological terms?
5. When asked why he has not yet written his story, Jong-su tells Ben, "The world is a mystery." Of course, the world of the movie is also a mystery, one that seems, in several examples, unresolved. Usually, such inconclusiveness would seem to be an aesthetic flaw, a mark of pretentiousness, confusion, or artistic laziness. How does *Burning* overcome this potential disappointment for the spectator?
6. *Burning* makes for an interesting comparison with Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* (2019), which won the Academy Award for Best Picture, the first international film to do so. Both works deal with class conflict: Bong's is an allegory, Lee's is something more subtle... and more empathetic. Which film appeals more to you, and why?