YOO AH-INFILM: “BURNING”

AH-IN

BURNING

What if we’ve been wrong about watching paint dry? What about the upsides? It’s true that, while the paint sets, you could be folding clothes or streaming an entire season of some TV show. At first, as you watch Yoo Ah-in move through “Burning,” slowly undertaking the most mundane tasks (chitchatting with a lonely cow; masturbating), you might think, a little resentfully, I’m watching paint dry. But eventually his methodical manner darkens outward into a kind of cosmic alienation. How Yoo goes from recent college graduate and struggling writer to vengeful stalker without outlining how, exactly, he got there — that’s the drying of the paint, and it’s riveting.

This film-in barest outline a love triangle, liberally adapted from “Barn Burning,” short story by Haruki Murakami from 1983- is as interested in negotiating our emotional distance from his protagonists as it is in all of the bad luck that befalls them. Ambiguity is never sacrificed at the altar of his disdain, which means that his characters do not get to be anything as basic as passive martyrs or agents of triumph. Like most of us, they tend to fall somewhere in between.

The movie, a slow-boiling thriller that Lee Chang-dong directed and adapted from a Haruki Murakami story, needs Yoo to do more listening and looking than talking. His character, Jong-su, befriends a girl who seduces him and then asks him to feed her cat while she’s away, which means driving to Seoul from the failing rural farm of his incarcerated father. She returns with a smooth yuppie whose seeming indifference to her subsequent disappearance arouses Jong-su’s gathering suspicion.

Yoo is a big, charismatic star in South Korea. Through Lee, he achieves a kind of sleight of hand, conjuring a state of bemusement that deepens into anomie. He’s almost anticharismatic — almost. He’s still got that open, handsome face, so you’re drawn to him, which allows for a grand misperception. It’s entirely likely that the person we’re left with at the end of the movie was also there in the opening minutes. All that drying paint has become an abstract painting — grim and stunning. *W.M.*

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/12/05/magazine/great-performers-best-actors-2018.html>