

Burning Secret

UK / US / Germany : 1988 : dir. Andrew Birkin : Vestron / NFH / CLG : 107 min
 prod: Norma Heyman; Eberhard Junkersdoft; Carol Lynn Greene : scr: Andrew Birkin
 dir.ph.: Ernest Day Video: Vestron VHS VA 17168
[David Eberts](#) [d]
 Faye Dunaway; Klaus Maria Brandauer; Ian Richardson; John Nettleton; Martin Obernigg;
 Vaclav Stekl, Vladimir Pospisil; K. Karas-Kratochvil; Ivo Niedrle; Jarmila Derkova

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ € Z ⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

“Brandauer offers a splendid performance (as usual) as a charming, amoral baron, a WW1 vet who’s nursing a bayonet wound at a sanitarium. In order to get to Dunaway, he initiates a friendship with her impressionable, asthmatic 12-year old son (Eberts). Generally compelling, and lushly filmed in Prague and Marienbad; however, Dunaway is miscast, and there are several key moments that simply don’t work. Based on a Stefan Zweig short story; originally made in Germany in 1933 by Robert Siodmak, as "BRENNENDES GEHEIMNIS". **½ ”

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

“An asthmatic boy on the edge of adolescence interferes in a holiday romance between his mother and a stranger. Constantly promising more than it delivers, though with some interesting steps on an unsatisfying journey. From the story "Brennendes Geheimnis" by Stefan Zweig. * ”

“Stately, elegant, and stiflingly old-fashioned, producing many exquisite coils of smoke but nothing resembling a real fire”

- Philip Strick, MFB



Rating the Movies (1990) review:

“Flat, ponderous drama set in post-World War 1 Austria about an affection-starved woman (Dunaway) who is seduced by a nobleman (Brandauer). The awkward screenplay and slow pacing sabotage the handsome production values and competent acting. Brandauer’s charming war-hero character is well-drawn, but Dunaway is weak as the refined lady who is won over by the baron’s dubious friendship¹ with her overprotected young son. **½ ”

The Time Out Film Guide review:

¹ How so, “dubious”? How is any mother “won over” by a dubious friendship with her children?

“Based on a short story by Stefan Zweig, set in post-World War 1 Austria. Asthmatic Edmund (Eberts) is the 12-year old son of an American diplomat. In an attempt to cure his wheezing, his mother (Dunaway) takes him to stay in a remote mountain spa where he falls under the spell of the Baron (Brandauer), who fills his head with stories of his war exploits. What Edmund doesn't know is that the Baron is only seeing him to reach his mother. Of course, it all ends in tears.

Snowbound Marienbad looks splendid, Brandauer oozes his usual sinister charm, and Dunaway is at her most haughtily haunted. The well-meaning sensitivity is seriously weakened, though, by the way Edmund's asthma appears to be caused by telepathy:

before his mother has had a chance to become breathless in the Baron's bed, the boy's lungs have already collapsed in sympathy, leaving the audience gasping for air. It isn't meant to be funny – this is a tale about adult cruelty and the tragic loss of childhood innocence² – but the end quotation from Goethe's "Erl King" has all the crashing finality of a coffin lid. ”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“A cool, overly restrained mystery-romance, set in an Austrian health spa in the years between the world wars. Faye Dunaway and Klaus Maria Brandauer star as emotionally crippled strangers who meet when Brandauer befriends her young son. They then carry out a game of seduction that is remarkably short on passion. Rated "PG" ** ”



² "Tragic loss of childhood innocence"? And this from a Time Out critic?

Video - Vestron VHS VA 17168 – sleeve notes:

“Who takes the child by the hand takes the mother by the heart...”

Starring Academy Award winner Faye Dunaway ("**BARFLY**", "**MIDNIGHT CRO-SSING**"), Oscar nominee Klaus Maria Brandauer ("**OUT OF AFRICA**", "**STREETS OF GOLD**") in the most compelling performances of their careers and introducing David Eberts as the young boy, Edmund.

Set in Vienna, 1920³, it is a time of elegance and innocence as a mother accompanies her young asthmatic son when he goes to a sanatorium for treatment. There, the dashing and mysterious Baron Alexander befriends the boy, whilst the mother is seduced by his charm. What happens between them and what the boy witnesses is the passionate story of "**BURNING SECRET**".

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Sundry TV guide comments:

“David Eberts and Faye Dunaway. Amoral baron falls for a woman at a health spa in Twenties Austria⁴.”

“Amoral baron builds friendship with boy to control mother.”

“Scheming aristocrat meets woman.”

³ *The story's set in 1919*

⁴ *The story's still set in 1919*

Released in 1988 – yet this title was already dropped from many film guides before it was ten years old, and is rarely seen on television. But watching the film one can understand why. It seems tailor-made for oblivion, ponderous and static, a three-player drama of Edwardian manners with one of its key roles hopelessly miscast. As with Birkin's later piece "**THE CEMENT GARDEN**", it aspires to emulate continental sensibilities (and perhaps French cinema in particular) but is constrained by its essential Englishness.

All the critics above seem to have missed the point of the story entirely, viewing it as some listless romance, a spontaneous infidelity scotched by the tiresome intervention of Dunaway's son. Not having read the original short story, I can't speak for the author's intentions, but this is clearly not how Birkin read the tale, because he chose not to film it that way (nor, knowing his work, would he have been interested to tackle that theme at all).

"**BURNING SECRET**" is not, as one reviewer alleges, "*remarkably short on passion*" – it's simply that the passion is all expressed by Edmund. He and his emotions *are* the focal point of the drama. The events are seen exclusively through his eyes, yet the critics disregard him as an almost incidental character to the proceedings. Edmund does not function as some passive observation platform from which to view adult life, as children do in some films. He is its emotional and moral core. His name appears first on the end credit roll, and correctly so.

Critics experienced a similar general blindness when reviewing "**DEATH IN VENICE**", and the comparison is far from an idle one. In important ways, the two films counterbalance one another. The one tells of a man's infatuation with an enigmatic adolescent boy, the other of a boy's infatuation with an enigmatic man, and his intense jealousy and woundedness when he finds his place usurped by his own mother. The backdrops of Visconti's Venice and Birkin's Austria have many similarities in the antiseptic rituals of public social behaviour.

Its pointed quotations from Goethe's "Erl King" are not the only clue to a homoerotic reading of the film. Brandauer's Baron Alexander is constantly stroking and caressing Edmund in their early meetings – not in a lascivious way, but with great emotional familiarity. This quickly excites Dunaway's possessiveness, so that in one instance Alexander reaches casually to stroke Edmund's hair, only to pull his hand back awkwardly when Dunaway's hand reaches there first. He describes the two of them as being "like lovers", and so they are. "**BURNING SECRET**", in essence, describes a love triangle not unlike the one in "**CABARET**" (where again a charismatic baron excites passion and jealousy in both male and female).

The reviews state explicitly that the Baron befriends Edmund in order to approach his mother, but when they first meet the Baron has not yet clapped eyes on her. Finding the boy admiring his car he first offers him a drive, then the two go walking in the woods together. The Baron finds him "a most agreeable companion", and the boy is entranced by his tales of ghosts, or his recent war experiences. "You see, Edmund, it is not *the place*, it's the *people* one meets". After quoting Goethe to him in the swimming pool he asks whether Edmund has a girlfriend yet, and then on reflection adds "Why complicate your life with women before you have need of them?" It is a seduction. Whether intended as such or not is scarcely the point – Edmund is captivated by the man's attention just as much as his mother will be later.

There is no reason, of course, to suppose the Baron had sexual designs upon the boy, attractive though he is, because even were the Baron bisexual, his attention soon diverts to Edmund's mother (just as the boy feared it would – "He's *my* friend. *I* met him first") and the son is left feeling doubly jilted. "What have I *done* that you don't want me anymore?" he wails to Alexander in his distress. Soon he finds his mother and Alexander conniving in their clumsy lies to him, or conversing in German purposefully to exclude him.

When they try to dissuade him from joining them on a trip to a boring old art gallery, Edmund refuses to be dislodged: “17th century Bavarian landscapes?” winces Alexander, “They’re my favourites” Edmund announces drily.

The casting of the leads is mysterious work: David Eberts and Ian Richardson are about as American as Nelson’s column, while Dunaway is quite wrong (not to mention way too old) for a thirty-something diplomat’s wife with an itch her husband can’t scratch. It’s true there’s an absence of chemistry between Brandauer and Dunaway, but also, in their few brief scenes with Edmund out of the way, the dialogue between them yields no insights. Alexander tells a little anecdote about a fine wine that was hoarded so long it turned to vinegar, but that is as close as the film comes to exploring the needs of the two adults.

Andrew Birkin’s film career has been – in my judgment at any rate – a succession of interesting misfires after his magnificent and searching TV dramatisation of J.M.Barrie’s life, “**The Lost Boys**”. It is clear that he’s a director keenly interested in children, and is uncommonly willing to enter their emotional world free from condescension. No other contemporary British film-maker handles childhood so honestly and devoid of an agenda, but Birkin simply cannot translate his refreshing insight into a film of genuine power. Such a pity.

Zweig’s story had been filmed twice before under its original title “**BRENNENDES GEHEIMNIS**”, on the latter occasion (’75) for television with German boy star Tommi Ohrner, and as a silent in 1923 under the title “**MUTTER, DEIN KIND RUFT**”. Nothing further is known of David Eberts, although this debut performance won him the Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival, which again suggests he was unfairly dismissed by reviewers.

For an interesting comparison, see “**LE SOUFFLE AU COEUR**” (’72), Louis Malle’s superb study of adolescent sexuality, in which a boy and his devoted mother travel together to a health spa, but emerge from the episode far healthier than Eberts and Dunaway do from this one, and see subject index under **HOSPITALS / SICK CHILDREN, MATCHMAKERS / MATCHBREAKERS** and **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**.