

Norwegian Wood

✘ by John Kennedy

Norwegian Wood

2010 Cert 15

Fans of Haruki Murakami's novel will have to wait a long time for director, Anh Hug Tran's cinematic adaptation, to establish any convincing, empathic character studies of late-teenage transition and relationships because they are hardly there.

Toru Watanabe (Kenichi Matsuyama) and Naoko (Rinko Kikuchi) fumble through confused, sexual explorations haunted, for Naoko, at least, by the inexplicable teenage suicide of their friend, Kizuki. Set in 1967/8 amid Tokyo's New Left students' agitation, Watanabe remains an indifferent by-stander, fixated more by his love-struck, unrequited obsessions.

With the ferment of change all about him, notwithstanding his visits to the very hip record shop and the West Coast acid groove/AgitProp sound-track, the narrative struggles to establish any convincing sense of historical context and counter-culture dynamic.

Perhaps that's the very point.

Enigmatic student, Midori (Kiko Mizuhara) provides some ambiguous love-interest distraction as the increasingly withdrawn Naoko spirals into schizophrenia. Sex, or more so, the painful failure to achieve any satisfying consummation from it, insinuates the protagonists' interactions throughout. Erotic it is not. Perhaps this film will engage art-house devotees with its *mise en scène* naturalism and exploration of dysfunctional, star-crossed lovers' descent into claustrophobic dissipation.

The cinematography has a sensual romance of its own, with set piece seasonal weather locations reflecting internal tensions. Omission of the wry, reflective humour in the novel will be a surprising disappointment for many. Others may come away numbed by its melancholia, turgid plot, auteur aspirations and unconvincing denouement. Caveat emptor.