

Asian and Arab Film Festival

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The 10th Osian's-Cinefan's Asian and Arab Film Festival at New Delhi, of July 08, mounted films that grappled with social, political and emotional conflicts, which cannot be settled by superheroes or special effects. Jonnie To's "Sparrow" (Hong Kong, 2008, colour, 87mins) is set in Hong Kong. There are no guns in the narrative, and the script spills just one drop of blood. 'Sparrow' is a colloquial of 'pickpocket' in Hong Kong. Fu (Simon Yam), a middle aged man is sitting on his bed, and stitching one morning. A sparrow flies into the room. Fu grips the bird, and flings it off from a window. The sparrow returns to the window sill. Fu cycles through the city, and sometimes sits in a restaurant. The 'sparrow' bird signifies bad luck. Fu is the leading member of a gang of four pickpockets. With every theft, Fu pops a toffee in his mouth. Wallets and valuables are stolen from men and women walking on the streets or riding a bus. The loot is shared for about \$ (H) 10,000 a day. The emptied wallets are thrown in letter boxes. Fu deposits his share in a locker. With a camera, Fu photographs street passer-bys, scenes of theft, roads and passing traffic. A girl Chung (Kelly Lin) is captured on Fu's Camera. She tries to run.

The pickpocket friends are at a betting pool casino. The mysterious girl joins the pickpockets at the betting tables. After drinks, the girl gets drunk, and crashes her head on a betting table. A man tries to snatch the girl's watch. Later the girl and another man are on a lift. A floating balloon between the man's back and the girl's bust bursts. The girl leaves her address. Another day, the girl's car has broken down. She takes a scooter lift with a man, and obtains the man's phone number. Travelling in a car with Fu, the girl receives an expensive necklace as gift. Fu processes his colour photo negatives. When Fu is cycling, the girl invites him to her car. A lipstick stained cigarette is shared. From Fu's apartment window, she points to her own apartment in the neighbourhood. The girl is surprised at the black and white prints of her own photos. Chung, the neighbourhood girl, frees a sparrow from a cage, but the bird scratches her hands. She burns one photo, and is adamant that nobody should see her photos. Fu steals the girl's purse, and from her identity card, learns her name as Chung Chun Lai.

The four pickpockets ride one cycle. They fall, and the cycle is damaged. Fu chases Chung through lanes, with a camera tripod. Three men attack the pickpockets with wooden bars. Fu's left arm is in slings. The pickpockets are puzzled whether they had seen a beautiful woman. They break into the girl's flat. There is a collection of bird cages with sparrows. Chung is running on the streets, and is confronted by the injured pickpockets. Two men with an aquarium volunteer to protect the girl. Soon Chung is on a roof top, under Fu's protection.

Chung returns money stolen from a pickpocket, who now has head bandages. In tears, she speaks to someone from a telephone booth. She feels she is being spied on by others. Fu refuses to help. The four pickpockets go to a swimming pool. One pickpocket robs a policeman's hand cuffs. There is rivalry between Fu and a young pickpocket—each has to prove who is good. Returning home, Fu finds his caged sparrow has gone. Chung's necklace, with a key to a

safe, is stolen. The key is stuck in a boy's satchel. Fu assures the girl that she would inherit everything, and there was no point in stealing. There are posters on walls, with photos of the pickpockets. Pickpocket Bo's locker is full of such posters. Fu returns Bo's stolen watch. When Bo would wear diapers, Fu was a pickpocket. When Chung returns stolen jewellery to Fu, Chung's stolen passport is returned to her. It is raining, and people on the streets are with umbrellas. As cars splash water, Bo slashes the trouser of a goon. Men with umbrellas cross a road. A goon steals Bo's passport, and passes it to Fu, who is encircled by three others. There is a circular motion amongst the umbrella carrying men, wearing black suits.

Johnnie To's "Sparrow", essentially a story of bonds between crooks, becomes a geometric ballet of pickpockets. Beautiful chung interposes herself amongst the brigands, and seduces the members of the gang, one by one. The sublime and pleasant music, composed by Xavier Jamaux and Fred Auril, energises the film to a musical drama, of a crime thriller. There are accumulated film references from Ernst Lubitsch's "High underworld" (1932), to Samuel Fuller's "Pick up on South Street" (1953), to Robert Bresson's "Pickpocket" (1959). The polar swings of Siv-keung Cheng's camera documents the life and colours of Hong Kong. While the characters maintain an air of non-chalance, To's filming is precise. The concluding sequence, where numerous umbrellas are held open and high against the rain, builds a squaredance choreography of umbrellas. Ultimately Fu spots his sparrow amongst green leaves of a tree. □□□