

Jail Birds (A Film Essay on Confinement)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

Jail and forced confinement are a state in which the space surrounding a subject or subjects is scaled down significantly and in which strict and sometimes unfair disciplinary conditions are imposed, restricting basic rights and freedoms. In the study of three films from different parts of the world, we will show how such loss of freedom can impact family, create separation or division in a circle of allies (or accomplices) and reveal underlying flaws associated with a relationship partner's controlling nature and their adopted traditions.

In Stray Dogs (1) set in post-9/11 Afghanistan, two young children called Zahed and Gol-Ghotai along with a small abandoned rescue dog, struggle to find adequate food and shelter with their mother in jail for adultery and their father imprisoned by authorities for his former ties with the Taliban. After being refused entry into their mother's prison as 'night prisoners', the oldest of the two decides to follow the common last resort practice of committing theft to be put in jail where the state carceral existence is thought to be fraught with less uncertainty and danger than being an impoverished orphaned child in the outskirts of Kabul.

In Bottle Rocket (2), Wes Anderson's first feature film, we meet Dignam, a young radical suburbanite who is always planning robberies and schemes in his trusty notebook. Soon, Dignam and his group of closest associates take part in attempting a larger scale heist in an isolated cold storage warehouse. When the plan falls through, Dignam is quickly singled out by the courts and law enforcement when his white collar criminal boss' role in the heist remains concealed and his team of close allies avoid prosecution forcing the lone 'ring-leader' to be sentenced to do time in a state penitentiary.

In Silent Souls (3), we meet Miron and Aist, two men from a small Russian town called Neyra who embark on a road trip together to take part in the traditional crematory rites of Miron's deceased wife Tanya. Taking a pair of caged buntings along with him on the road trip, Aist fails to see the parallels between the state of being a wild bird stuck in a cage and being relegated to a domesticated existence as a Meryan housewife. Soon the film viewer is led to insinuating that it is only death itself that frees such (winged) captives from a doomed confined existence in an insular home or a tiny bird cage.

Key characters in each of the three films being studied can be represented as birds with the innate capability to soar with their own set of wings if allowed to live freely and independently. However, due to lack of parental supports, recurring criminal tendencies and backward marital traditions these 'wild' birds are in a sense 'captive' or even 'jailed' in their war-torn environment, their dual world comprised of either losers

and winners or their male-dominant prejudiced social milieu. Emancipation, represented as a 'jail bird' finally being let out of its cage is rarely a feasible option with the stark reality of fractured family life, permanent criminal history and the shackles of loveless marriage.

Sources:

1. Stray Dogs (2004). Dir. Marzieh Meshkini. Makhmalbaf Film House. Iran. 93 min.
2. Bottle Rocket (1996). Dir. Wes Anderson. Columbia Pictures. USA. 91 min.
3. Silent Souls (2010). Dir. Aleksey Fedorchenko. April Mig Pictures. Russia. 75 min.