Death Rides in the Back Seat

by James Wolcott

Sunday’s episode of The Killing (AMC) was the best yet of the new season, evoking director Michael Mann in its meditative flow, its dreamy, nocturnal synesthesia (car lights, store lights, street lights, LED lights of electronic devices glancing and playing off each other), its sense of sprawling chaos contained within an urban grid. Linden (Mireille Enos) being held captive at the steering wheel by an abductor in the back street was like a dark inversion of Mann’s Collateral. In Collateral, the kidnaper was Tom Cruise’s psychopathic hit man, a gray wolf of grinning, vicious proficiency, with charisma and cold charm that could be turned on and off with a switch. Linden’s abductor was a virtual abstraction, a floating head in the rear view mirror in a pool of darkness bisected below the chin by shards of glassy reflection; his voice sounded disembodied, ghostly, as if it belonged to an abusive phone caller. The helicopter shots of the car moving through nighttime Seattle: also reminiscent of Collateral, Heat too. But perhaps the most Mannish thing about The Killing this season is its hulking awareness of the internal subcontinent that dominates so much of American life while being barely acknowledged: our prison complex, the great American gulag. Think how largely prison looms in Mann’s work, from TV’s The Jerico Mile to Public Enemies to HBO’s Luck; prison culture and codes of male survival saturate Heat and provide the white supremacist tattoo skinscape of Miami Vice. The teenage junkies and prostitutes in this story arc are warped products of the juvenile justice system and family breakdown and many of them will end up in prison (if they live that long), where they’ll meet such charming new friends and learn ever so useful new skills. Peter Sarsgaard’s Ray Seward, on death row for a murder he probably didn’t commit, represents the cursed, violent, wasted-opportunity end-result of our crime and punishment production line, where his father is also a con in an orange jump suit and some of the guards are as cunning and brutal as the hard cases in the cells. The overhead establishing shots of the prison in The Killing remind you of a military base, or a secret government installation in The X-Files: an occupation camp. The Killing is a study of how power relations play out on the murky fringes, feeding in and out of the penal fortress.

Hardly anyone I know personally seems to be following The Killing and it gets scant mention on my Twitter timeline (compared to the orgy spasm over Sharknado or the weekly bull sessions over Mad Men), and I get why so many are unable to get into it. It’s so somber and monochromatic in mood, look, and weather, so hunched over and mutterly, so full of pondering pauses, with none of Breaking Bad’s declamatory rhetoric, savage moments of Road Runner cartoon slapstick (‘Magnets’), and parched, expansive mock-Sergio Leone horizons and standoffs. Its humor is very sidelong and sly, nearly all of it due to Joel Kinnaman’s genius line delivery as Holder. But it’s very compelling and it’s drilling deep into the American dysfunction of drugs, infrastructural decay, discarded children, the hustling for smaller and smaller sums in the lowest tier of the underground economy, the garbaging of the human body, the general blech happening below the underpass. (Converting the underclass into zombies is taking the easy narrative way out.) Given its forbidding load of foreboding, The Killing wouldn’t work if it didn’t cast a visual-aural spell, and I’m finding the trance strengthening as the season goes on. I also think Sarsgaard’s performance—crafty, bluffing, nasty, anguished, at times defiantly opaque (as if the hood of his thoughts has been pulled down)—deserves way more attention and commendation than it’s gotten.