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The Tube: Rectify's slow and deliberate pace makes for one of the most unique shows on television

October 24, 2014 Melissa Zimdars Arts & Entertainment, The Tube No comments

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In an existential prison, even a loved one can seem like a jailer.

"I can't quite get a handle on the concept of time yet."

These words by Daniel Holden (Aden Young) in the first episode of *Rectify* describe both his experience in adjusting to life outside of prison and the viewers' extended sense of time watching his story unfold on the screen.

Debuting in the spring of 2013, *Rectify* is Sundance's first wholly owned original series, and it has quickly become one of my favorite shows on television. Daniel is a convict who spent 19 years on death row only to be exonerated after DNA testing overturns his murder conviction. The show primarily follows him reacquainting himself with the physical world as well his family and the small Georgia town in which they reside.

Through Holden's thoughts, dreams and flashbacks we also get a sense of the tortuous amount of time he spent isolated in his small white cell, unable to even hear the rain outside. As the series follows Daniel becoming accustomed to his "freedom," and his family to him being around, an area politician who played a huge role in putting Daniel behind bars as a teen makes it his mission to see him return to prison.

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What I like most about this show is its slow, deliberate narrative. My biggest complaint about television dramas right now is that storylines move too quickly; they all want to be fast-paced thrillers. Shows like *Scandal*, *Extant*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *Homeland* feel like their narrative pacing is specifically designed to maintain the attention of viewers who are assumed to be distracted and tempted to channel surf if they aren't experiencing constant visual change or major plot advancement.

Rectify, on the other hand, spends long amounts of time showing Daniel listening to his Walkman or staring at a store display of flip flops. The show doesn't move from event to event, but instead lets each scene slowly unfold and just be, which gives viewers a chance to identify with each character's complicated emotions while experiencing and contemplating their own. But the show doesn't feel slow in a boring way or like nothing is happening. Instead it feels full and rich in detail and like everything that should be happening actually has a chance to happen. And we, as viewers, actually have a chance to process what is happening.

Rectify explores feelings of loss and what it means to be a "good" person, but its dominant theme is one of confinement, whether in a prison cell, a marriage or in one's own head. Prisons are more than just enclosed, isolating physical places on *Rectify*, they are also the thoughts, feelings and situations from which we as individuals often cannot escape. Despite being outwardly "free," Daniel is trapped in his past both because many of the people surrounding him resist seeing him as someone other than a murderer and rapist, and because his life was literally paused upon being locked up as a teenager.

References to Daniel being teen-like abound in season two, in particular, as he often rides around on his high school brother's bike, experiments with drugs and meets his lawyer on a merry-go-round at a park. Daniel's sister, Amantha (Abigail Spencer) is confined by her concern for Daniel's safety and never-ending advocacy of his innocence. Her life is not hers or even about her, it's about Daniel. Similarly, Daniel's step-brother, Ted (Clayne Crawford), is stuck in a constant state of anxiety and insecurity over Daniel potentially taking not only his business (technically it's Daniel's business), but also his wife, Tawney (Adelaide Clemens).

Narratives of confinement are then matched by aesthetics that convey feelings of emptiness, from Daniel's colorless and possessionless prison cell to Amantha's near-empty apartment or the family's usually costumer-free store. A later episode in season two depicts Ted crying by himself in his and Tawney's shared bedroom, Tawney drinking by herself in a dimly lit motel room and Daniel standing by himself in the backyard; yet they are all connected by their emptiness, by their feelings of loss and the pain of physical absence.

Like *Parenthood* and *Friday Night Lights*, *Rectify* will make you feel a lot of feelings. For me, it is the kind of program that's hard to watch if you're going through your own tough time.

Some people like music, movies and television shows that reflect the way they're feeling inside, perhaps in search of that cathartic emotional release. But I can only handle seeing sad when I'm feeling happy, and the second season of *Rectify* was at times too unsettling for me to watch during a sad spell I had recently. I say this not to draw pity or concern over my well-being (it's okay, I'm cool!), but to emphasize how this show can emotionally affect you. I know it definitely had me reflecting upon my own feelings of loss, the ways in which I'm "stuck" or whether I am a actually a "good" person.

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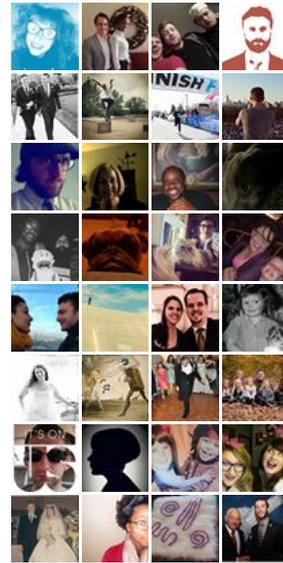
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About Melissa Zimdars

Melissa Zimdars is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, specializing in all things television.

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