

# ‘THE PRISONER’ AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

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The television series, *The Prisoner*, ran for seventeen episodes (of an originally intended seven) on ITV between the 1st of October 1967 and the 21st of January 1968.<sup>1</sup> While the series initially raised a storm of controversy over (what the public saw as) the unsatisfactory conclusion of the final episode, the series overall had relatively little impact on its audience as a whole and on the future development of Anglo-American television. The series, nonetheless, had its greatest impact on individuals who recognised within it the qualities of something different — something heretofore not previously seen on television. Over the years, the series has gained an impressive following; most notably in England with the organisation called “The Six of One Society”, the numbers emphasising schizoid play on character identities which is a crucial focus of the series. And this focus was purposefully cryptic. As Stewart Lane of the *Manchester Star* quoted Patrick McGoohan, the series star, executive producer, and sometime writer, “it was the viewer’s responsibility to put their own interpretations.”<sup>2</sup> One can hardly escape noting the plural of “interpretations”.

## Deliberate Ambiguity

Whether one sees the series as “man’s eternal quest for freedom, using modern myths and symbols”<sup>3</sup> or the Vil-

lage as “life, civilisation, us”<sup>4</sup> or as George Markstein, the writer of the initial episode, “If it had any meaning, it was to reflect my deep suspicion of the Welfare State”,<sup>5</sup> the series, as noted above, was purposefully cryptic. The first episode entitled, “Arrival”, began with McGoohan as an unnamed government employee going through the rather stormy and heated process of resigning his position. He does so against the background of frenetic theme music which shows the character walking down a long, bureaucratic corridor, entering an office, throwing his resignation on a desk, then slamming the desk with his fist with enough force to break a tea cup sitting on it. As he leaves and goes home, he is followed by a black car, and, cutting back to the office he

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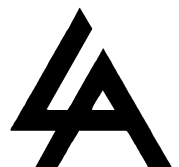
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left, his picture is first shown being crossed out with a series of Xs then automatically dropped into a long series of Kafkaesque filing cabinets. While packing his passport and some travel brochures, gas enters his flat and he falls asleep. He awakes in a place called The Village. The inhabitants are completely controlled and numbered. The Village itself is totally isolated from the outside world. The ubiquitous exchange which became the focal point of the beginning sequence every episode is:

“Where am I?”

“In the Village.”

“What do you want?”

“We want information.”

“Well, you won’t get it.”

“By hook or by crook we will.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“That would be telling.”

“Who are you?”

“The new Number 2.”

“Who is Number 1?”

“You are Number 6.”

“I am not a number; I am a free man.”

*Derisive laughter.*

Number 6 (he becomes known as, since the viewer is given no other ‘handle’ by which to identify him) then proceeds to test the boundaries of The Village. In the concluding sequence of this episode, Number 6 steals a helicopter and flies off. His control of the helicopter, however, is illusionary as the control stick refuses to respond to his manipulations, being instead under control of the ever watchful Number 2. The helicopter returns him to The Village.

The implication, though it is never fully clear during the resignation process or anywhere else in the series, is that the character resigning is a ‘secret agent’ of some kind. The series that McGoohan acted in prior to *The Prisoner* was called *Danger Man* (or *Secret Agent* in the United States) in which he played a James Bond type character named John Drake. The allusion to the continuation of that character tangentially evident. Number 6 and John Drake seem to have the same back grounds and individualistic characters. In episode Sixteen, “Once Upon a Time”, Number 6 is referred to indirectly as “Jackie Drake”.<sup>6</sup> The words from the American overdubbed musical theme of *Danger Man*, state quite clearly that “they’ve given you a number and taken ‘way your name’”.<sup>7</sup> And finally, in episode fifteen, a character who appeared as the bowler in a cricket game is identified as John Drake.<sup>8</sup>

Direct references to The Prisoner’s real identity simply do not exist. He is an anonymous man who has been

given a number in a society in which all people have numbers.

His presence in The Village likewise carries with it its own ambiguity. Number 2 explicitly states that they want to know why he resigned. The reasons for a person’s resignation hardly justify the lengths that the successive Number 2s take. Rather, it appears that what is desired is some thing more subtle.

As Chris Tame has written:

What is wanted from Number 6, in fact, is co-operation. The authorities seek from him a ‘com promise’, no matter how small. For once that first small concession, that betrayal of his own values by Number 6, takes place, further inducements would obviously follow until he has betrayed all his values at his captors’ behest ... he would have lost all autonomy and his abilities would be at the disposal of his masters.<sup>9</sup>

What is ultimately desired of Number 6 then is not really information — that is only a purposefully cryptic ‘coverup’ — but rather two interrelated elements: Number 6’s identity and his integration into society.

### The Question of Identity

Superficially, one could almost assert that, following so closely on the heels of *Danger Man*, the series was a personal biography of McGoohan’s struggle to keep *Danger Man* from degenerating into another of the mass of spy melodramas which dominated the sixties — or of John Drake’s effort to avoid becoming just another cliché. Several such proposals are possible and arguable. They all have a common thread, however, as do most of the explications of individual episodes. This common denominator is the identity of the individual in society. In other words, does or can individualistic identity exist in a society that demands conformity?

Each episode of *The Prisoner* either directly or indirectly puts pressure on the individual identity of Number 6. The most forceful episode, however, is the fifth episode, entitled “The Schizoid Man”. In this episode, Number 2 enlists the aid of a man who in every way is the double of Number 6. Although he is referred to as ‘Curtis’, his number is 12. Through a series of aversion ‘therapies’ while in a drugged state, Number 6’s habits are changed so that he is less like himself — less like Number 6. For example, he is now left handed, he has lost his shooting skills (due to his left handedness), and he is unable to smoke his usual brand of cigarette. The plot is brought to fruition when Number 2 confronts the ‘changed’ Number 6 with the ‘real’ Number 6 (i.e. Curtis). Each claims to be the other, but the original Number 6 cannot prove who he is because the aversion therapy has made him different. In fact, the ‘new’ Number 6 is more like Number 6 than the original because he individualistically wears a white coat with black piping whereas the ‘real’ Number 6 has worn the traditional black coat with white piping of the Village. Number 6

is now someone else and someone else is now him. He has lost his identity wholly.

True to the individualistic spirit which has placed him in The Village in the first place, the original Number 6 recognizes what has been done to him by the fact that the forces of the Village overlooked a bruised name which appeared in a 'pre-therapy' photograph. He then proceeds literally to short circuit the plan. A lamp in his quarters short circuits; Number 6 thus grabs the lamp with the 'offending' hand (much as the bible orders — "if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out") and grounds his body to a gas pipe. He literally shorts out the programmed behavior (a variation of the traditional concept of fire and lightning as cleansing — even enlivening — agents). There now appears to be two Number 6s — both identical or almost. This presents Number 6's first genuine threat to the Village: one is a true enemy of the Village who is indistinguishable from another and is thus capable of true subversion. Number 2, unable to find either of the Number 6s, orders 'Rover' to find Number 6 — an equivalent order in other episodes to 'capture'. Rover is a large, apparently intelligent balloon which guards The Village and prevents escapes by suffocating it's victims.

The climax occurs as the Rover confronts the two Number 6s; it must decide which is the true No.6. It kills the false Number 6 when he tries to flee. The original Number 6 attempts the obvious ruse of escaping with Curtis' identity. Just before the helicopter lifts him to freedom, however, Number 2 approaches.

Number 2: "Give my best to the wife and children."

Number 6: "I will."

The trouble is that Number 6 cannot assume another identity; Curtis' wife is dead. In typical Village style, the helicopter rises up about 100 feet then returns to the ground where a failed Number 2 informs him of his error. Cut to concluding credits which include the image of McGoohan rising out of the Village as bars close with a crash.

### Individualism

Critics are unanimous in asserting that the series' concentration was 'individualism'. *Starlog* asked "Who is to shape the relationship of the individual to the technological society — the state or the individual? ... What must we do to perceive the limits of our personal freedoms?"<sup>10</sup> Alan Grace writing in *Starburst* went so far as to assert that "The real theme was the rights of Number 6 to remain an individual in our ever increasing (sic) computerized society ... the worst enemy of man is surely himself: the evil within him the worst thing on earth."<sup>11</sup>

These comments are typical of that written concerning the Prisoner's idealization of individuality. The individuality that they refer to, however, is vague and nebulous. Only Chris Tame in his *Different Values* approaches a concise meaning of individuality:

McGoohan's Village is a portrayal of the essentials of our own society — with its vicious bromides of "social responsibility", its dominant ideologies of altruism and collectivism, its conformity, and the paternalistic coercion of the "Welfare State". ... The theme of *The Prisoner* was strikingly clear ... the individual versus the collective.

And furthermore,

As Number 2 states in an early episode ..., the day will come when both sides in the Cold War will look at each other and see that they are fundamentally the same.<sup>12</sup>

What Chris Tame points to here is specifically an identity — albeit a political identity. While the individual may struggle for the preservation of individuality, that which he fights for may in fact be undefined and just as vague as all the others who have examined *The Prisoner*. The struggle for 'individual freedoms' which has been so readily triumphed by critics implies in itself a certain degree of conformity. All revolutionaries, for example, tend to be alike — even visually identifiable by dress or mannerisms. Chris Tame, however, narrows the prisoner down to a political identity which automatically implies certain qualities of personality. In other words, the individual versus the collective implies qualities of personal identity and self knowledge which are under identifiable pressures. It is nothing more or less but a vision of the self as apart and different individually rebellious against the whole.

It is this concept which is at the core of "The Schizoid Man" and, in fact, revealed by Rover's apparent misidentification.

The Village and Number 2 removed Number 6's identity; they made him doubt the identity he saw when he looked in a mirror. It was removed 'surgically' and placed in another (Number 12 or 'Curtis'). The purpose of the subversion was strike at the weakest point in any person's or group's mentality: he or its identity. Ironically, it is clearest using the analogy of the group. Colleges and universities have identities; individuals willing to subvert their individual identities (that which sets them apart) in order to become synonymous with the group (school colors on ties, scarves, etc.). Robbing an individual of his diploma, his school tie, or other such activities (such as the 'silent treatment' at West Point in recent years) become a traumatic event simply because an identity or, in this case, identification is being attacked. In "The Schizoid Man", that which Number 6 calls the 'self' is removed. His identity is given to one who conforms and Number 6 while still trapped in the Village is not even given recognition of his former rebellious behavior.

The obvious response then is "why not surgically make him conform". Conformity by definition requires a willing submission of the individual identity to the group identity. In fact, one of the more troubling aspects of the series is that Number 6 does conform by wearing the Village clothes and — most of the time — his number.

Discreet leeway, I suppose, must be allowed to avoid the obvious clichés of McGoohan attempting to pass naked through seventeen episodes hidden behind a bush or only in close shots. It is thus all the more surprising when Curtis appears in the white coat with black piping. This obviously visual advantage of individuality has been denied to Number 6 from the start. Nonetheless, any allowance given to the demands of conformity requires some submission of the self. Number 6 has even lost this ability; he has nothing to submit since his identity is gone. Thus, he must destroy or purge himself. And in the interests of twelve more episodes he selects the latter. Having regained his identity, he can reassert himself against the pressures of Number 2 because he has regained his definition of 'self' — regained his behavioral characteristics which identify him as Number 6.

Once this happens, however, danger now confronts the village; two Number 6s are loose. One is a conformist part of the Village's identity (Curtis), the other the true individualist. They are indistinguishable (apparently), and, if the real Number 6 survives with the apparent identity of Number 12, then he becomes a true subversive element in the Village — much like a foreign agent who burrows into the intelligence network of an enemy. Untold damage is possible to the conforming actions of the Village.

That Rover kills the false Number 6 is no fault of its own; it is a consequence of and testament to the technology of the Village. As the Rover confronts the two apparently identical men, both assert that the other is Number 6 by giving the password, "Schizoid Man", that supposedly only the false Number 6 knows; both men willingly give up their identities in order that the other might be destroyed. The Rover, however, was created by a society of conformists, so the identity of the Village must also become a part of the identity patterns which Rover recognizes. Therefore, when faced with an 'intelligent' decision as to which Number 6 is which (or rather which is *not* Number 6), it can only recognize that which has recognizable patterns. In other words, Number 12, the fake Number 6, is selected by Rover because he is an agent of the Village — has the identity of conformism - that quality which the Village desires most. This is compounded by the fact that he runs when the Rover is obviously indecisive. The 'real' Curtis supposedly has nothing to fear in uttering the password. Under Village expectations, Number 6 would obviously be trapped by the falsehood of knowing the password and flee. The real Number 6 survives because his identity sets him apart from the members of the Village. Thus, as a consequence, Rover selects what is familiar to it not what it cannot recognize. The Rover's choice is the ultimate conformist choice.

In another turnaround in the choice, it is more difficult for Rover because Number 12 - having completely taken on the identity of Number 6 (and in all respects is Number 6) — denies that he is Number 6. This is an act which is exactly what can be expected from the true Number 6 ("I am not a number; I am a free man").

## Identity, Conformity and the 1960s

Identity is thus critical to those who yield to the forces of conformity (the Village) and to those who struggle against it (Number 6, The Prisoner). Critical to a full understanding of *The Prisoner* and this concept is the period in which it was released. During the late Sixties, a general nearly worldwide youth movement looked upon conventional adult society as a bland, conformist, mindless existence — a submersion of individuality and individual beliefs to the herd mentality. They demanded and got separation — a 'drop out'. But they failed to recognize the insidiousness of conformity, of the loss of identity. They formed communes, wore 'hippy' clothes, and wore their hair long; in short, they all did the same thing. Thus, in seeking individual identity, they chose conformity. Society, it seems, whether conventional or nontraditional, has little tolerance for individual identities. Thus, by attempting to form an individual identity, the seeker walls himself off from any and all societies; he creates his own prison.

## NOTES

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