



WINDMILLS ①

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Thoughts on The Prisoner

Several weeks ago I watched Patrick McGoochan climb into Kar-1260 and drive off into the closing credits of the last episode of the most incredible thing I've ever seen on television. For over 17 weeks the silly television show involved me more than any dramatic presentation I've ever seen, and the final two part episode which McGoochan wrote and directed himself utterly blew my mind.

When someone asks you what the Prisoner is all about you are torn between the inclination to say "freedom" and one to say "identity". Do you talk about the show on the purely literal level (ie "it's about a spy trapped in a detention camp run by an unknown organization") or do you make broad sweeping allegorical interpretations of the things that happen during the series?

In tackling the issue of what The Prisoner is I feel as though I am undertaking an epistemological exposition on the nature of Man and His Society... ie, I don't know where to begin, am afraid 90% of what I say will be a crock and the rest utterly subjective. I wish I had a list of all the shows so that I could make some pretensions to scholarly analysis, but I don't, so this will be a rap.

The last two episodes of the Prisoner are a mirror image and encapsulation of the first fifteen. There is no specific continuity between any two episodes in the first fifteen although the last two offer evidence that the first fifteen occurred in some sequential order (with the exception of "The Girl Who Was Death" the storybook-dream sequence episode). McGoochan resigned, spent x number of weeks in the village during which he experienced the episodes shown and finally escaped. I don't believe, as Ted White suggested, that all the episodes take place in McGoochan's head and that he relives the same day in each episode.

The early episodes of the Prisoner deal with McGoochan's initial encounters with powerful Controlling Authority. Their theme is his own survival on a mental and physical level. During these episodes the apparent omnipotence and omniscience of the Village hierarchy is established. McGoochan can't escape, he is watched wherever he goes, and his entire external environment can be controlled. He tries to escape to London in an early sequence and is misled into believing he has succeeded until he notices the error made in the construction of the simulacrum Big Ben. This episode is to condition the viewer to doubt any appearance he may view so that when McGoochan escapes to London for the second time, the viewer becomes skeptical as to whether or not he has succeeded. This makes the realization that on the second occasion he is in the "real" London in his "real" house much more vivid. The Village demonstrates that it can tamper with McGoochan's brain and control his inner environment ala O'Brien-Winston Smith on several occasions, but although it is completely supreme in its ability to alter reality it cannot break McGoochan. Even when they make him believe that he is another citizen of the Village, whose job it is to break the real no. 6 they can't alter the basic qualities of his personality. They can wipe out his memory, as they do on one occasion when his brain is transplanted into another body and all memory of the Village is erased. Without any knowledge of the Village at all McGoochan functions as their pawn on an external level. (They have switched his brain in order to get him to track down the man who invented the process, a man known to him). In this episode, as well as the "Happy Birthday" episode in which he tracks down the true location of the Village he is merely permitted to function in the outside world, at no time is he out of surveillance.

These middle episodes are an extension of the earlier ones. The limits of the game have been set up in the first few weeks...in the next episodes the Village tries more and more bizarre alterations of McGoochan's environment in an attempt

to obtain information from him. (We later discover that ~~this~~ is a superficial motivation. The Village wants the information only because McGoochan won't give it).

In these episodes McGoochan begins to attack the village instead of trying to escape from it (or in addition to). The Village maintains its control on his environment, however. All of his plans are foreseen and thwarted, and he is deliberately encouraged to rebel so that continued failure and frustration may aid in breaking him. He is presented with several false pictures of Village Hierarchy. (at one point the Village is seemingly run by a computer, at another by a council)

The fact that the Village wants to use the prisoner for some purpose is developed, and the fact that in the human chess game episode he plays the queen's pawn is a symbolic illustration of his future role. We also see more of McGoochan's fellow prisoners and it becomes evident that he is not the only one who has been abducted. The middle episodes are also filled with social satire and criticism of conformity. The prisoner's character is developed... he constantly attempts to get others to rebel... he feels compassion for others and attempts to help them against the "Establishment."

At an early point McGoochan announces that he intends to separate the prisoners from the Warders... the last few episodes of the show are a development of this theme. (Wouldn't it be a burner on me if CBS showed the damn things in random sequence? Boyd Raeburn noted that in Canada they were not shown in exactly the same order. Because of McGoochan's increasing sophistication in coping with the Village, tho, I'm going to assume that they were shown in some sort of order).

(not counting the final 2-parter)
In the last episodes/he is his own man. On a mechanistic level he understands the Village and can predict what form their persecution can take. He uses their own techniques against them. In the episode where he is declared "Unmutual" he makes a speech about Prisoners and Warders. By assuming an air of arrogance he fools the cadre into believing he is one of them, and by practicing the same sort of misdirection and ideological slander used against him he convinces the Village that No. 2 is unmutual. (He first assumes this air of arrogance in the Chess Game episode, but here he publically disavows the Village and his ally distrusts and betrays him... he later learns that he ~~can~~ rely on no one but himself, however much he may want to help and trust his fellow prisoners).

"~~The Hammer~~ and The Anvil" (the episode shown while BAYCON was in progress) foreshadows the final McGoochan-McKern battle which occurred in "Once Upon A Time" (pt. I of the final show). No.2 determines that the contest between no. 6 and the Village will become a personal duel. He summons McGoochan to inform him that he will be broken; ~~that~~ a man must either be a hammer, shaping those around him or the malleable anvil which is shaped. He demonstrates his power by forcing an innocent girl to commit suicide. McGoochan sees this and embitteredly agrees. He then proceeds to break no.2 down by a series of irrelevant actions which pose a seeming threat to the Village... No. 2's own paranoid mentality destroys him. He attempts to read meaning into all of McGoochan's actions. Finally, in a direct confrontation McGoochan is able to Fake It enough to convince no.2 that he is a high ranking official of the Village present solely to test no.2's ability. It is at this point that we realize that both the Technical Supervisor of the laboratories and No. 2's manservant are higher in the Village structure than Number 2 even though they are subject to his orders. Here we have the final exposition of McGoochan's progress. He has learned to use the system to achieve his ends... he has learned to use the system to make the system break down... but he is still subject to the system. He must still operate by subterfuge and he is not Free.

As far as the episode which succeeded "The Hammer and The Anvil" is concerned I've got to admit that I don't understand at all what it has to do with the rest of the series. This is "The Girl Who Was Death" the story in which McGoochan is in the outer world again as a Secret Agent whose job it is to stop the Mad Scientist. It may have been included to provide continuity to McGoochan's old Secret Agent/Dangerman series. No.6 was definitely identified as Drake during the final episode, and it is obvious that The Prisoner is an extension of the character development of the earlier show. Drake, you will recall never killed unless his back was to the wall, and had severe doubts as to the rightness of what he was doing upon occasion.

There may be a relationship between the Lighthouse-rocket in this episode and the rocket which takes off in the last episode... In both they were commanded by an insane villain, and this episode may be meant to foreshadow the end in some symbolic way. Or maybe they just needed an episode to pad out a week. I don't know. It is unclear whether the action is a fictional story told by McGoochan to the children or a narration of a previous adventure of his. It is a bizarre little goody thrown in to further intrigue us like the little signs in the Village that say "Walk on the Grass." Since I have the kind of mind that likes things to be cohesive I even played around with the idea that this might have been McGoochan's last case (the one which caused him to resign from the Service). I doubt this though. Usually when they want you abstract something about the Weltanschauung of the Village they make it clear enough... some of the ambiguities in the series are, I suspect, deliberately open questions.

And speaking of ambiguities, I come now to the hardest part of the whole deal... trying to piece together some sense from the two parter which closed the series. I have listened to tapes of the soundtrack several times, and a group of Los Angeles fans is currently engaged in trying to wangle prints of the shows so that we can see them again. (Well, actually, Ken Rudolph in his guise of TV Executive is trying to obtain them)

This much I believe. The first segment in which Degree Absolute conditioning was applied to the prisoner mirrored the first 6-7 episodes. Leo McKern as no.2 reduced no.6 to the mental level of a child. He then conducted numerous tests and experiments and subjected no.6 to several ordeals in an attempt to break him. McGoochan was completely controlled and directed in the first half hour of the show in the same way as he was completely controlled in the early episodes. And just as the paranoid world view of No.2 finally defeated him in "Hammer & Anvil" No.2 was defeated in "Once Upon A Time" by his total inability to crack McGoochan and by McGoochan's turning the tables on him and becoming the interrogator himself. The role of the major-domo here, is significant. He is no.2's servant until McGoochan manages to reverse the roles of prisoner and warder and place McKern behind bars. From that point on the major domo is McGoochan's servant.

In probing into the Prisoner's background the show tries to get to the crux of what makes him rebel. The prisoner's antagonism toward authority goes back to his attitude toward his father. The first half of the show is devoted to McKern's attempts to become McGoochan's father in a number of guises, and McGoochan rebels on an instinctive rather than an intellectual level each time. The musical motifs here can be very useful in understanding what's going on. "Pop goes the Weasel" is played and the two of them do several little surrealistic schticks around the theme. It's clear that to McGoochan Pop is the Weasel.

I'm not clear about the conditioning that was imprinted on McGoochan concerning the number "five". At first I thought that was the mental age they were regressing him to, but his refusal to say the number later is part of his rebellion. It is also a key to when he is under conditioning and when he is his own man. When

he is under conditioning he cannot say "five" either as the answer to a mathematical problem or in its proper sequence. When he snaps out of it (due to McKern's carelessness in not renewing the light-bulb ray treatment) he says five with impunity.

The point at which the series reveals that this man is John Drake is the sequence in which the prisoner is attending school in his mind. McKern as the dean says "See me in my office, Drake." At this point he makes the customary bid for information to no avail. Here, McGoochan is still subject to the system but he will not violate his own personal ethics.

We do finally get a statement from McGoochan on why he resigned, but only after he has become master of the situation. "Too many people being killed. Too many people know too much." One assumes that McGoochan has become appalled by his job. He reacts quite violently to the mock bomb-run which McKern sets up... he dislikes killing.

On the literal level, McGoochan forces no.2 to break down by in effect setting an example of conduct which makes no.2 feel inferior and guilty. McGoochan asks no.2 why he submitted to the Village's techniques and no.2 can't reply. Finally, symbolically no.2 becomes the prisoner... becomes no.6 and dies. The Village has done its worst to McGoochan and McGoochan has survived. It is hinted that McGoochan's entire ordeal is training for him to assume the position of no.1 previous to this, and this now becomes explicitly stated. Temporal authority has done its best to control McGoochan and failed... now McGoochan must control it... hammer or anvil. This is the position taken by the people who are still McGoochan's enemies, though they now wish him to govern them.

A one to one interpretation of "Fall Out" the last segment is something I'm not capable of. I'm not even sure about what I saw on the screen at two points. It is clear that society (the establishment) is symbolized by the Village and that McGoochan is watching a trial concerning two types of rebellion against the establishment. The first young hippie totally ignores the Villagers, and when they threaten to kill him he tells them "The bones are yours". The council is wearing masks which are equally divided between black and white. The hippie sings the dry bones song several times and is silenced, but finally the entire tribunal starts dancing to his music... only they are not dancing with the beat, they are botching it. The surrealistic dialog falls into a Youth vs. Authority harangue which McGoochan merely notes.

The second rebel is a revived Leo McKern. He symbolizes a loyal servant of the establishment who now rejects it utterly. McGoochan asks whether McKern has ever met no. 1, whereupon McKern stares over at the omnipresent mechanical eye and laughs. McGoochan is taken to meet no.1 while the music faded over plays "The Bear Went Over the Mountain," The speech which McGoochan had previously tried to give was never completed because the council wasn't really interested in what he said... they were merely trying to harness him, to feed off him in Ayn Rand Villain fashion. All McGoochan could get out was "I" whereupon the Villagers repeated it. Again the question of identity. Having no identities of their own, they now try to assume McGoochan's.

At this point I'm not sure what happened. McGoochan went past the three detention capsules, and his own of course had no number. He went into the room with many globes, and the camera closed up on the western part of Africa where a circle was marked on the globe with several airline routes. This was where McGoochan had tentatively located the Village the time he escaped. Then over to the masked no. 1 and the unmasking sequence.

McGoohan's voice saying "I" was repeated again and again until it was distorted by speeding up the recording into a gibber. McGoohan removed the mask and found no.1 wearing an ape mask. The second mask was removed and--

Several people claim it was McGoohan's own face under there. Some say it was a total stranger. Whoever it was gibbered insanely and vanished toward the top of the rocket.

While I was watching it I thought there were two McGoohan's... the mad one launching the rocket and escaping and the sane one busting out with McKern and the Major Domo in the portable prisonmobile. You can bet that when Rudolph gets the print we're going to freeze frame at that point and take a close look at no. 1.

I think the next sequence showed the essence of the Show when it portrayed McGoohan, the Major Domo and his fellow rebels dancing and drinking a toast inside the portable prison on the way back to London. Yes, they were still dazed, but in bars of their own choosing. The enclosure within bars was useful in breaking out of the Village's underground tunnel, and they were their own jailors. Bars can be used to imprison... but they can also be used to keep intruders out. The little man whose car radio was playing "Dry Bones" was Sir Charles, head of British Intelligence. It is an open question through the series as to whether Sir Charles was a member of the village. Here he merely observes that McGoohan has escaped.

There is a moment of sheer terror when McGoohan lets the major domo out in front of his home (which has the house number "1"). The little man walks toward the door and it opens automatically and closes behind him. And while McGoohan is dancing in the streets of London a crack of Thunder sounds reminiscent of the sounds of the Bubble pursuing escapees.

I think for McGoohan all the world is a large Village. He has escaped physically, but spiritually the Village still hems him in. There will be other battles. But now he is a declared enemy and a competent one.

Who is Number One? I think Number One is meant to be God or spiritual authority. Number 2 is Temporal Authority. Remember the songs "Now hear the word of the Lord" and the Latin melody during the destruction scenes "You you you are too Divine". Whether or not No.1 was also meant to reflect a part of McGoohan is something I'll wait on until I can see the thing again. The point is that No.1 is insane. At the top of the ruling hierarchy there are no rational motives. Power for its own sake... crush anyone who rebels merely because he rebels.

Why does the Major Domo escape...he seems loyal to McGoohan now, but he was loyal to No.2 before, and he does walk up to that automatic door as though he expects it to open. I think the major domo serves whoever is in control.

And what the hell does that high-wheeled bicycle mean, if anything? Something as simple as "Blessed be those that run in circles...?"

This has been my rap on The Prisoner. If any of you are as interested in it as I am I'd love to see yours. I don't know how much of what I've said I believe... I'm just trying it out.

Be seeing you.

This has been WINDMILLS #1, first of a new series of SAPSazines published by Len Bailes of Box 474, 308 Westwood Plaza, Los Angeles, Calif. 90024. This is a Bailesania publication... who knows what number? 1/11/10/1/1/11 [for SAPS 85/