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### 3

## *Life on Mars* Transnational Adaptation

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**Abstract:** Remaking foreign programs is a common strategy for American television producers, but we must consider the contexts of each nation's industrial practices to fully understand such remakes. Christine Becker looks closely at both the British original and the American remake of *Life on Mars* to explore how contrasting norms of scheduling and serial formats help explain the differences in both storytelling and popular success between the two versions.

With the exception of the soap opera format, television dramas in Britain largely operate as short-run series, with as few as six episodes constituting a single “season,” and only one or a handful of seasons making up the entirety of a program's run.<sup>1</sup> As a result, writers for such series can plot out prescribed endpoints to stories before launching production. In contrast to this “definite end” model, American network television generally operates through the “infinite middle” model, wherein writers for successful programs have to continually devise ways to delay the narrative endpoint in order to keep the show running for over twenty episodes a season, year after year, while also bearing in mind that a show could be cancelled at virtually any time. As Russell Davies, the creator of the British *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, 1999–2000), said of the American remake (Showtime, 2000–2005) at the latter's onset: “The most important thing is to think of the U.S. version as a new show, a different show. Even before they'd written a word, a 22-episode series is a profoundly different thing, a different concept, to an eight-parter.”<sup>2</sup>

American remakes of British dramas thus throw into relief the challenge of translating a show from one storytelling mode and industrial practice into another. In particular, the ABC remake (2008–2009) of the BBC's *Life on Mars* (2006–2007) offers a fruitful case study. Both versions have a nearly equal number of episodes: the British version ran for sixteen hour-long episodes split into two series units, and the U.S. season ran for seventeen 43-minute episodes before

cancellation. The latter circumstance further offers an example of what can occur when an American series transitions from an infinite-middle to a definite-end model in response to advance notice of cancellation. Might a similar number of episodes and a similar chance to implement a definitive ending result in similar narratives?

To answer this question, I draw on formal analysis and consider industrial conditions in comparing the two *Life on Mars* productions in order to shed light on the impact that industry practices can have upon television narrative techniques. The essay will center in particular on narrative comparisons of three sets of paired episodes: the premiere episodes; two climatic middle episodes (in the British version, the series one finale and in the U.S. version, the last episode that aired before the two-month-long mid-season hiatus); and the series finales.

The initial premise of both series is the same: a police detective named Sam Tyler is hit by a car in the present day, and when he wakes up from the accident, he inexplicably finds himself in 1973. He is still in the same city and still Sam Tyler but assumed by those in his precinct, which is still the same as before the accident, to be a detective just arriving on transfer from a town called Hyde. Across the course of the series, Sam must figure out how he can get back to the present and keep his wits about him in the process. While this broad premise is the same in both versions, several differences in the opening episodes point to substantial influences from the infinite-middle versus the definite-end storytelling models.

Following the time travel opening, the primary narrative in each version of the first episode revolves around the 1973 search for a criminal suspect whom Sam believes to be responsible for kidnapping his fellow detective and girlfriend, Maya, in the present. Throughout both versions, Sam keeps seeing and hearing hospital sights and sounds, such as a heart monitor and doctors treating a patient, transmitted via radios and TV sets. Thus, it is implied that Sam is in a coma in the present and that the 1973 past is merely a creation of his unconscious imagination. Both Sams come to believe by episode's end that killing themselves in the past world will jolt them out of the coma. But in the U.K. version ("Episode One," January 9, 2006), a sympathetic police officer named Annie talks Sam out of jumping off the precinct building by convincing him that the 1973 world could be reality, and that perhaps he is part of it for a larger reason yet undiscovered. In the U.S. version ("Out Here in the Fields," October 9, 2008), it is Sam's swaggering boss, Gene Hunt, who intervenes by breaking up a situation in which Sam tries to get the criminal suspect to shoot him. One outcome of the British ending is that it places the series' central enigma squarely on the coma situation: is this reality or is Sam in a coma? In contrast, Hunt's intervention in the U.S. opener both plays down the coma possibility and emphasizes Sam's clash with Hunt, a conflict frequently exploited in the series.

In fact, the U.S. pilot advances more potential narrative threads right at the start of the series than the first U.K. episode. For instance, Sam's evident rapport with Annie, coupled with his conflicted relationship with Maya in the U.S. plot, clearly point toward an infinite-middle-model love triangle in past and present romantic relationships and a potentially endless "will they or won't they" scenario. Further tension is also prefigured by the characterization of a cop named Ray, who grumbles when Sam arrives because he fears the new arrival will block his promotion. The U.K. version does unspool these serial threads, but they're not all evident in the first episode. This difference calls attention to the industrial demands of the pilot system in the United States wherein a pilot has to lay its narrative cards on the table from the start or risk not being picked up to series. Conversely, the writers for the short-run British series knew they would have the full eight episodes to play out the stories and could thus utilize delayed exposition.

Following the opening, both series structure each episode's narrative largely as a police procedural, dominated by a crime of the week that often ties in with something Sam knows about from the present, while serial elements related to Sam's mysterious situation and interpersonal relationships constitute one-quarter or less of a typical episode. Many of the episodic elements in both versions are similar, as the American version drew liberally from the procedural stories of the original. However, the U.K. version keeps serially developing the coma as a logical explanation, while the U.S. version shifts away from that rationale without clearly defining what Sam might be experiencing. In the second U.S. episode ("The Real Adventures of the Unreal Sam Tyler," October 16, 2008), Sam lists off some possible options—mind experiment, time travel, extraterrestrials—and we get various hints pointing toward those options as the episodes continue.

What was clearly being laid in beginning of the American *Life on Mars* was the groundwork for a science-fiction series mythology for fans to try and piece together as the show continued, akin to *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010). Indeed, it would appear that ABC hoped *Life on Mars* would offer life after *Lost*.<sup>3</sup> For a significant chunk of the U.S. version of *Life on Mars*, narrative elements point toward where future action could take Sam, while the episodic action continues largely parallel to that long-term storytelling. Conversely, the U.K. version uses its coma allusions, and the unification of past and present and the episodic and serial modes that they engender, to delve more vertically into Sam's character, deeper into his mental state. Here we can see a significant impact of series duration, wherein the infinite middle can allow for a wider range of serial options while the definite end encourages a narrower focus.

Such contrasts are further evident in the eighth and seventh episodes of the U.K. and U.S. versions respectively (the U.K. episode being a series one ender, the U.S. one a hiatus launcher). Both episodes present Sam re-experiencing a traumatic

childhood incident that he now intends to prevent, as he tries to convince his violent father not to desert the family. While Sam does prevent one past certainty—namely, Vic viciously beating Annie—he fails to stop Vic from departing. In both episodes, four-year-old Sam gets the same speech from mom about dad leaving that he was always destined to get. But importantly, in the U.K. version (“Episode 8,” February 26, 2006), Sam willingly lets Vic go in order to prevent his childhood self from seeing his dad sent to prison. In the U.S. version (“The Man Who Sold the World,” November 20, 2008), Vic shoots Sam in order to escape. Given that U.K. Sam’s anguish over whether to let Vic go or not is once again laden with more hospital sounds, it cements even more the likelihood that he is experiencing a coma vision. Subsequently, his decision to let his father go constitutes an acceptance of staying in that coma and in the past. This leaves the narrative open for a second series continuation of the show’s central dilemma even as it provides a measure of emotional resolution if this was to have been the end of the series.

In the U.S. version’s midpoint, there are no coma allusions, nor are we confronted with Sam’s psychological torture over whether or not to let his dad go free. Instead, he tells Annie, “I thought this was the reason I was here, to stop my dad from leaving. But I think maybe it was to show me who he really was.” Sam’s connection to his father is thus stressed episodically, while the serial mythology resurfaces in the next scenes, when Sam follows a set of clues to an address and receives a phone call there from a mysterious, robotic-sounding male who tells him, “You’re doing a good job, Sam. I need you to go to the basement. Go down to the basement, Sam.” The episode ends, Christmas hiatus cliffhanger in place, with a tantalizing tease for where the show’s mythology might take viewers next. The U.S. halfway point ends on a promise of more plot, while the U.K. midpoint dwells more on character emotion, with both options partly driven by scheduling requirements.

The next set of episodes in the U.S. version (episodes 8–11, January and February 2009) push even more heavily toward possible options for the show’s mythology: information about Sam is being filed into something called the Aries Project; a Russian man whom Sam interrogates says that Sam previously worked on experiments that involved sending miniature robots into the human body to plant memories; a UFO expert says alien abductees commonly tell stories of being plucked from earth and dropped into the same place only years earlier; and Sam comes across a city councilman who claims he is from 2009. These elements don’t all fully cohere together serially. Some could fit together, like the Aries Project and the councilman; some really couldn’t, like the Russian experiment and the alien abduction. Even so, the serial mythology elements dominate viewer attention in this middle set of episodes, and it is evident that the writers were searching for expansive narrative options.

Strikingly, despite the U.K. first series' finale seemingly locking down the coma story, the initial second series' episodes complicate matters with the additions of the mysterious caller and a possible new explanation: Sam really is from Hyde and working undercover to root out corruption, but, suffering from amnesia due to a car accident, he has confused his cover story and his actual life. Head writer Matthew Graham said that he wanted to add more spice to the second season with this ambiguity, even as the coma story was still intended as the explanation all along.<sup>4</sup>

The good news for *Life on Mars* U.K. was that this serial nuance helped to keep viewer interest up. The bad news for *Life on Mars* U.S. was that its mythology teasers were evidently not effective at drawing in *Lost* viewers or anyone else, as the ratings only kept dwindling. Accordingly, ABC publicly announced in early March that the show would be cancelled, infinite middle no longer required. However, the network did allow the producers to complete the seventeen-episode commitment, and the cancellation order reportedly came with a handful of episodes yet to be locked in, thus granting the writers the opportunity to provide a definite end to the story.<sup>5</sup>

The primary crime story of the U.K. series finale ("Episode 8," April 10, 2007) centers on Sam taking down Hunt for corruption and police brutality. At this point, Sam believes that his present coma self has a brain tumor, and the logic of the past-present analogy suggests that Gene Hunt is his tumor. Subsequently, an ill-fated crime sting that Hunt has devised goes awry, putting all of the cops' lives in jeopardy, and as Sam sees Hunt shot down, he is brought back to the present, awakening from his coma and recovering from what was indeed a tumor. Sam struggles to feel alive and involved in the present, however, and he's haunted by an unfilled promise to Annie that he would save her. Thus, in a stunning act, Sam jumps off the precinct roof, apparently putting himself in a coma again, and returns to 1973 to save Annie and the others. As with the series one finale, Sam once again reconciles himself to staying, only this time we recognize it's for good, as the car radio plays the sounds of Sam flat-lining in the present-day hospital and he drives off with his fellow detectives.<sup>6</sup>

The U.S. version ("Life is a Rock," April 1, 2009) is completely different. Sam is contacted by the mysterious caller again and told that if he completes a set of three tasks, he can go home. However, after completing the first two, Sam hangs up on the caller before receiving his third instruction, deciding that he prefers staying in 1973. He hugs Hunt in a gesture of reconciliation, the image suddenly pixilates, we hear audio flashbacks to key moments through the series, we see flashes of spaceship imagery, and Sam then awakens in an astronaut pod. The year is 2035, and Sam is in a space ship approaching Mars.

In the show's final scene, we learn that Sam has been traveling for two years on a mission to Mars—a development that nearly literalizes the show's title. To

keep his brain engaged throughout the long trip, Sam was kept in a neuro-stimulation virtual reality dream state. “Sam 2035” chose to experience the virtual reality of being a cop in 2008 (the show offers no explanation why), but a meteor storm disrupted the program, which subsequently left Sam’s 2008 virtual self surrounded by a 1973 virtual reality. As in *The Wizard of Oz*, most of the past 1973 characters have present 2035 counterparts. Most importantly, the man we knew as Gene Hunt is a fellow astronaut and—surprisingly—Sam’s father. All of the astronauts converse as they awaken, with Sam being only slightly bothered, and more bemused, by what he has experienced.

In a moment of seriousness, Sam tells his father, “I really don’t want to fight with you anymore, Dad.” Thus, the U.S. version’s serial elements add up not to a complex mythology or an existentialist tussling with reality, but instead are part of a dream simulation in the course of which Sam apparently came to terms with his relationship with his father. The show’s creators have insisted that this was the ending they had in mind from the start, and certainly the space travel and rocket references are evident from the early episodes of the show.<sup>7</sup>

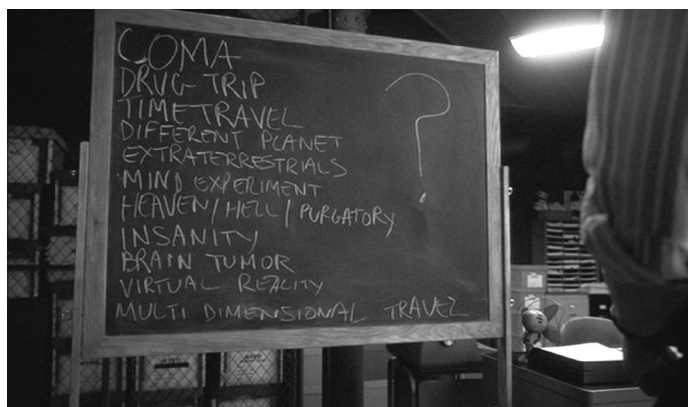
However, the middle episodes, produced before cancellation was a likelihood, unquestionably point toward a much more comprehensive explanation for Sam’s predicament.<sup>8</sup> I believe that a more complex serial mythology would have been a necessity if the show had received a second season order. In comparison, episodes 12–15 only barely touch on the mythology aspect and are much more heavily episodic in nature. Whether this is because the writers suspected the show would be cancelled by the time of their production and didn’t need to develop the wider mythology further or because the writers were just trying to stretch out the infinite middle in case of a renewal is unknown. But if the U.S. ending that was delivered had been the ending after multiple seasons, telling the audience that everything they had watched for season after season was fake, with relationships turning out to have minimal consequence and purpose, and with clues small and large being a huge collection of mere red herrings and brick wall diversions, fan outrage probably would have dwarfed the controversies surrounding other frustrating finales of shows like *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *The Sopranos*.

In the end, even though both the U.S. and U.K. versions aired nearly the same number of episodes, Russell Davies’s distinction about remakes being different shows still applies. Because the U.S. producers were initially planning for an infinite middle based on the industrial demands of American network television, the U.S. *Life on Mars* is a fundamentally different show than the U.K. one. The U.K. version’s serial elements are primarily focused on character psychology, resulting in a thematically fused and rather dark story about existentialist alienation and liberation. British head writer Matthew Graham highlighted this emphasis in discussing his choice of ending with the predicted coma explanation: “For me, it



FIGURE 3.1.

The U.S. version's Sam writes out possible explanations for his situation, evoking the image of an American writer proposing plotlines on a writers' room whiteboard.



was much more important that there was a strong emotional closure to the story. That was more important than a massive twist.”<sup>9</sup> Such intricate emotional cohesion is lacking in the lighter, truncated U.S. story. Instead, *Life on Mars*’s seventeen American episodes are fundamentally about plot, about what happened, not so much why it happened or how it affected its central character.

I suggest that this circumstance is at least partly borne of the industrial model of American long-form network television, in which seriality is about getting to next week and next renewal, not necessarily to the end of the story. Of course, the journey to that end still has the potential to be every bit as gratifying to viewers as a more focused short-run British drama, and *Life of Mars*’s U.S. writers certainly had ambitious creative visions for the series. But as the comparisons outlined in this essay indicate, writerly ambitions in both U.S. and U.K. television are usually subordinate to industrial demands, whether an untimely cancellation or a limited-episode order. And as this case thus further illustrates, only by marrying industrial analysis with narrative analysis can we properly understand seriality on American and British television.

## NOTES

1. The term “season” is not used in Britain because their programming schedule is not dictated by the September-to-May cycle as it is in the United States. Instead, a grouping of successive episodes is called a “series.”
2. Della Famina, “Enquiring Minds Want to Know,” *Television Without Pity*, October 26, 2000, [http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/queer\\_as\\_folk\\_uk/enquiring\\_minds\\_want\\_to\\_know.php](http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/queer_as_folk_uk/enquiring_minds_want_to_know.php).
3. In fact, the show’s producers reportedly called the serial elements “the *Lost* side” of the show when breaking story. Interview with Mark Ambrose, Vice President of Drama



Development, 20th Century Fox Television, February 21, 2011, Los Angeles, CA. Notably, ABC aired *Life on Mars* after *Lost* at midseason.

4. Ian Wylie, "Life on Mars: The Answers," *Life of Wylie*, April 17, 2007, <http://lifeofwylie.com/2007/04/11/life-on-mars-the-answers/>.
5. Josef Adalian, "ABC Gives Life on Mars a Finale," *TV Week*, March 2, 2009, [http://www.tvweek.com/news/2009/03/abc\\_gives\\_life\\_on\\_mars\\_a\\_final.php](http://www.tvweek.com/news/2009/03/abc_gives_life_on_mars_a_final.php).
6. Due to space limitations, I am not addressing the final reflexive shot that closes the episode.
7. Brian Ford Sullivan, "Interview: *Life on Mars* Executive Producer Josh Appelbaum, Part 2," *The Futon Critic*, October 6, 2008, [http://www.thefutoncritic.com/interviews.aspx?id=20081006\\_lifeonmars](http://www.thefutoncritic.com/interviews.aspx?id=20081006_lifeonmars).
8. As aired, the U.S. series' final revelation lacks coherence and was roundly mocked by the show's committed fans. After all, why would a virtual reality simulator create such a bizarre, spiraling set of paranoid circumstances for what is supposed to be a comforting state? Plus, in the final episode we see neither Maya's 2035 counterpart, nor that of Sam's 1973 father, nor does the virtual reality premise explain why we saw scenes that Sam wasn't a part of. I could go on.
9. Ian Wylie, "Life on Mars Was Wonderful," *Manchester Evening News*, April 11, 2007, [http://menmedia.co.uk/manchestereveningnews/tv\\_and\\_showbiz/s/1004158\\_life\\_on\\_mars\\_was\\_wonderland](http://menmedia.co.uk/manchestereveningnews/tv_and_showbiz/s/1004158_life_on_mars_was_wonderland).

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