
The Prisoner: Cult TV Remakes

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Abstract: Two television trends that have grown more prominent in recent years are American remakes of foreign series and the popularity of cult TV. Matt Hills examines an example of both, the American remake of 1960s British “cult classic” *The Prisoner*, and suggests why such “neocult” programs can fail to capture the appeal of the original and alienate cult fandoms.

How should we analyse TV shows that have taken on cult status? Often science fiction/fantasy, these programs typically have devoted fan followings. Perhaps, then, it is important to consider not only the textual qualities that may have incited a cult following, but also the activities of dedicated fans. However, viewed from a contemporary perspective, cult television is not something created by audience activity alone. It is a label, and a phenomenon, with a televisual history stretching back at least to the 1960s. For example, Sue Short has suggested that British series *The Prisoner* (ITC, 1967–1968) “serves as a . . . precursor to the cult telefantasy shows we see today, by dint of its visual detail and narrative intricacy, [and] its ongoing mysteries,” which were “pioneering strategies that would find their way into many subsequent shows.”¹

Over time, “cult” has therefore become an identifiable grouping of TV series with a number of shared textual attributes, meaning that programs can be designed to generate cults. Since the 1980s, cult audiences have become an identifiable group, in turn meaning that generations of fans can now be targeted by TV professionals. Far from being accidental successes triggered by challenging, innovative programming, by the 2000s, cult TV had become one industrial strategy for reaching audiences.

Contemporary cult TV is therefore dialogic: producers can use storytelling techniques and genres to target fans, whilst fans can evaluate shows and share their views via social media, either assenting to their industrial targeting or

rejecting it. Appealing to a built-in, loyal audience helps explain why cult shows with established fandoms have frequently been remade, rebooted, or “reimagined.” *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (syndicated, 1987–1994) was perhaps the first major example of this phenomenon, thereby indicating that self-conscious cult television was marketable by the late 1980s. But the process of remaking or rebooting has accelerated in recent years, with the likes of *Battlestar Galactica* (ABC, 1978–1979; Sci-Fi, 2003–2009) reborn on the Sci-Fi Channel; *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963–1989, 2005–present) revitalised by BBC Wales; *The Bionic Woman* (ABC, 1976–1977; NBC, 1977–1978, 2007) and *Wonder Woman* (ABC, 1975–1977; CBS, 1977–1979) short lived or not making it past pilot stage as U.S. network TV shows; as well as relatively unsuccessful *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)* (ITV, 1969–1970; BBC, 2000–2001) for the BBC, and *The Prisoner* (2009) remade by U.S. cable channel AMC in partnership with the U.K. commercial producer and broadcaster ITV. What this list demonstrates is that self-conscious cult TV designed to generate passionate audience engagement does not always win the affection of established fan-bases. Remaking cult TV in some ways reduces the program-maker’s level of risk by offering an established show that already has some brand recognition, but also introduces a different type of risk wherein fans may judge the new version to be an inauthentic imitation of their beloved series.

Illuminating this process, the 2009 remake of *The Prisoner* can be taken as an example of what might be called “metacult”—that is, a “cult about cult,” or “self-conscious cultism.”² However, what *The Prisoner* remake does is slightly more complicated: like BBC Wales’ *Doctor Who*, it uses cult as one of many modes to target audiences, so the term “neocult” would be more accurate. This term suggests that drawing on cult attributes and speaking to cult audiences, for instance, does not rule out “mainstream” audience targeting at the same time. Rather than a focusing on a metacult niche, neocult seeks to combine cult targeting with other, differentiated audience addresses. Shawn Shimpach has recently argued that contemporary TV shows tend to be designed to be highly “translatable” in that they contain composite elements likely to appeal across national borders and across different audience taste cultures. The results are TV dramas that appear on the face of it to have “universal” appeal, whereas in actuality they are carefully crafted to bring together fragmented, differentiated audiences.³ Considered in this light, neocult combines an appeal to historical, established cult audiences with various “mainstream” audience appeals.

By marked contrast, the original series of seventeen episodes of *The Prisoner* was far less obviously “translatable” or “mainstream” in design. The series starred Patrick McGoohan as “Number Six,” an otherwise unnamed character who finds himself a prisoner in a strange, unknown location called “the Village,” where everybody is identified only by his or her allocated number. Village society involves

Six being tested by the authorities, with a sequence of different Number Twos (the highest authority besides the mysterious Number One) seeking to discover his secrets, especially why he resigned from his career as a spy. Since McGoohan acted as executive producer and sometime writer-director, as well as playing the titular lead character, he had an exaggerated degree of creative control over the show. As Chris Gregory has pointed out, “The cult of *The Prisoner* is inevitably also a ‘cult of McGoohan,’ which positions its creator as a transcendent artistic ‘genius.’”⁴

McGoohan described “his” show as “an allegorical conundrum,” since exactly what it was saying about identity and individuality remained radically unclear.⁵ In the final episode, “Fall Out” (February 1, 1968), Number Six discovers that Number One is a version of himself and seems to escape from the Village. Critic Mark Bould has pointed out that strictly speaking, the 1960s series is not an allegory, since this would mean that a clear meaning, or decoding, could be arrived at: “to the extent that it avoids allegory, avoids meaning a particular something, it remains a conundrum.” For Bould, it is *The Prisoner*’s persistently enigmatic quality that has been its “source of success and longevity.”⁶ It also suggests that *The Prisoner* was very much ahead of its time, given that this massively enigmatic quality is one of the key attributes of 2000s TV drama as identified by Shawn Shimpach:

Programs [in the 2000s] *had to look good in order to attract attention* amid so many alternatives, but increasingly *they also needed to intrigue and sustain interest*. This interest had to be sustained, moreover, not simply long enough to compel a viewer to set his/her remote down, but over an entire afterlife in which the program could be viewed multiple times in multiple contexts for years to come.⁷

McGoohan’s *Prisoner* achieved both of these aims—it was “high-end TV” before such a thing became a niche industrial category.⁸ It featured extremely distinctive visuals and, by virtue of its puzzling nature, generated intense fan speculation and rewarded fans’ close attention when rewatching on video and DVD. With regard to the program’s “look[ing] good,” Piers Britton and Simon Barker have noted that

The Prisoner represents one of the most striking design packages in the history of screen entertainment . . . [T]he series had a vivid and attractive overall aesthetic. With its primary colors and candy stripes, its architectural potpourri of space-age modernism and picture-postcard prettiness, and even the Albertus graphics used both in the settings and for the title sequences, the crisp character of the aesthetic is in some ways delightful.⁹



FIGURE 31.1.

Star, executive producer, and sometime writer-director Patrick McGoohan as the original “Number Six.”

Given its impressive televisuality—its designed, aestheticised TV image—and what might also be called its accompanying teleconceptuality—the use of the TV image to create conceptual puzzles and conundrums—it is perhaps unsurprising that *The Prisoner*, being so ahead of its time, achieved a cult status. It was highly unusual TV drama, challenging norms of genre and representation. Nowadays, the show is often described as a “cult classic” by academics and critics, as well as being represented in these same terms in publicity for the AMC remake: the European DVD, for instance, announces a “reinvention of the 1960s classic cult thriller.” However, *The Prisoner* was not immediately embraced as a TV classic after its original 1960s broadcast. It would be fairer to say that it has taken on “classic” status over time and through the championing of its cult devotees and critics, thereby according with Leon Hunt’s observation that in some cases “‘classic status’ . . . [is] achieved through the currency of cult” and hence via cult audiences’ practices of evaluation and valorization.¹⁰ Despite the fact that *The Prisoner* bewildered much of its 1960s audience, it has thus been recontextualized as a TV classic, thanks in large part to the long-term aesthetic celebrations and discriminations of its fandom.

The AMC/ITV *Prisoner* is hence not just “cult about cult”; it is also a remake of a cult TV series now thought of as “classic” television. As such, it self-consciously engages with notions of prestigious as well as cult TV. The AMC press release repeatedly stresses the “cinematic” and “filmic” nature of the material:

AMC’s reinterpretation of the highly influential 1960s cult classic . . . combines a wide range of genres, including espionage, thriller and Sci-Fi, into a unique and compelling drama that expands upon the network’s distinctive cinematic approach to creating high-quality storytelling. . . . Acclaimed film actors Jim Caviezel (*Passion*

of the Christ, *The Thin Red Line*) and Ian McKellen (*Lord of the Rings*, *The Da Vinci Code*) will star.¹¹

The choice of a six-episode miniseries is significant. This American TV category can be distinguished from “regular” on-going series television, and in recent years it tends to be the culturally highbrow domain of premium cable channels such as HBO. Remaking *The Prisoner* as a “high-quality” miniseries also allows AMC to recruit the likes of Caveziel and McKellen, who would be far less likely to sign on for a twenty-two-episode returning TV series. Furthermore, by opting for a shorter form drama than the original, AMC/ITV can secure a higher per-episode budget, whilst promoting the remake as a “miniseries event” in publicity.¹²

Reinterpreting the show as a miniseries therefore has economic and industrial implications, including allowing this “classic” TV to be positioned as highly cinematic, “event” television in line with AMC’s brand identity. Of course, this revision also brings narrative consequences. McGoohan’s vision was framed as an episodic series, ending almost every time with the same shot of bars slamming across Number Six’s face. It didn’t tell a single coherent story across its seventeen episodes, but instead offered a range of takes on its basic premise. Mark Bould observes that despite audience “attempts to impose a story arc, *The Prisoner*’s [1960s] episodes generally function . . . with no memory of previous episodes, or consequences in following ones.”¹³ In fact, McGoohan had originally envisaged the series as being closer to a miniseries, as his “original plan . . . called for just seven episodes; [ITC boss, Lew] Grade . . . ordered nineteen more, to give an American network a half-year series with the potential for renewal. The two settled on a compromise of seventeen episodes, a standard summer run.”¹⁴ Although McGoohan had originally planned just seven episodes, the commercial goal of selling the show to America resulted in its being extended into a longer run. In a sense, then, the AMC reinterpretation seemingly moves closer to McGoohan’s vision of a coherent, consistent story concept that isn’t stretched out into “filler” episodes, as well as moving closer to cult fans’ desired, imagined text—again, a coherent, consistent serial.¹⁵

In reshaping *The Prisoner* as a miniseries, AMC/ITV made a number of key narrative changes. Rather than facing different Number Two opponents, as per the original’s episodic format, there is just McKellen as a consistent Number Two, as the miniseries structure (and film star casting) requires just one antagonist for Number Six to struggle against. By introducing different, episodic Twos, the 1960s series created a heightened sense of Village hierarchy existing systematically beyond each specific embodiment, whereas in the AMC rendering the Village is far more conventionally identified with Number Two as a repressive individuated villain. And the remake provides Number Six romantic possibilities in the form of 313 and 4-15. The remake thus introduces a far more culturally “mainstream” and



FIGURE 31.2.

The AMC remake of *The Prisoner* privileged televisual flair and production values over the original's persistently enigmatic quality.

“translatable” emphasis on rival love interests that are very much absent in the original.¹⁶ These narrative choices make sense in terms of strengthening a coherent, single storyline expected of a miniseries, but they work against the distinctiveness of McGoohan’s vision. Each narrative shift moves the show away from the out-of-the-ordinary and towards TV drama cliché, turning it into regular rather than “edgy” fare. The remake is also refocused on “universal” meanings of family: Number Two’s relationships with his son, 11-12, and his partner, M2, are explored, along with the possibility that Six has a brother, Sixteen. Other “translatable” elements are also highlighted, such as the implication of the existence of a dangerous corporation, Summakor, in the conspiratorial plotlines. Peter Wright has argued that U.S. remakes of British cult TV can manifest, rather than Americanization, a form of cultural imperialism he calls “mainstreaming,” or the imposition of conventional, dominant meanings on material that had previously been rather more eccentric, idiosyncratic, or countercultural.¹⁷

Even more problematically, as a miniseries telling a single overall story, the AMC version moves towards narrative closure, and hence towards a clear explication of its premise. The Village is explained in a way that makes it a well-worn sci-fi trope (a dreamscape created by the character M2) rather than an ongoing mystery. Rover, the Village guardian, is also explained away as one of Six’s own projections. And the reason for Six’s resignation is likewise explicated. Although Sue Short suggests that the final shots of episode six, “Checkmate” (November 17, 2009), are meant to be “chilling” but are actually “absurd”, more significant is the fact that they offer a clear and obvious resolution to the miniseries.¹⁸ An almost catatonic and yet tearful 313 in effect becomes the new M2, responsible for dreaming the Village. And Number Six becomes the new Number Two, in charge of making the Village work. According to episode three, “Anvil” (November 16, 2009), there is no Number One, although the anomalously named M2 is ultimately revealed to have been the first occupant of the Village, whilst Six is revered as “the one” by Villagers prior to taking up the role previously inhabited by

Two. There is precious little to speculate over here, and little for fans to pick over and actively reconstruct. Despite seeming to get closer to the authenticity of McGooohan's original serialized plan and fan readings of the 1960s series, then, the AMC/ITV *Prisoner* replaces enigmatic teleconceptuality with the definite ending and explanatory exposition that are characteristic of a closed miniseries.

Ironically, by distorting McGooohan's vision of a coherent seven-part *Prisoner*, ITC's responses to the commercial forces of 1960s American TV helped create an incoherent, muddled, imperfect show that cult fans could actively reread *as if* it were a miniseries. But by directly crafting the 2000s remake as a miniseries, commercial forces of contemporary U.S. quality TV work *against* the newer show having a cult "afterlife" as an open philosophical conundrum. Viewers are given too much meaning, and are not left to puzzle out events. Although some aspects of the show's paratexts, such as episode titles, also hark back to the original, this act of homage is undercut somewhat by the end credits, which, right from episode one, indicate that Jim Caveziel plays "Michael/Six," thus naming the character and removing a key sense of mystery.

Although failing at the level of teleconceptuality, the AMC *Prisoner* boasts pronounced televisuality, using Namibia as a location, and Swakopmund for the Village, along with Michael Pickwood's production design. It repeatedly deploys "epic" landscape shots of swirling sands among otherwise untouched dunes, dwarfing Number Six by the immensity of surrounding geography and nature. This visual coding is essential to maintaining AMC's "quality" and "cinematic"-style drama, and hence to the notion of producing prestigious "event" TV which lives up to the standards of a television classic. Appeals to the cult fan audience are also made through production design: a Penny Farthing (an icon of the original Village) is visible in the Go Inside club; Number 93, the old man first encountered by Six, is dressed in a jacket strongly reminiscent of McGooohan's original costume; and the mise-en-scene of the original Six's Village apartment is recreated. The implication is that 93 may have been the McGooohan Number Six, a design strategy which subtly and subtextually repositions the remake as a continuation of the narrative universe beloved by fans. Numerological games are also played with cult fandom intent on reading for clues, with "93" hinting at the number six (9 minus 3), whilst "313" also hints at an unusual status, displaying its number one symmetrically hidden within a six (3 and 3). And this latter clue does, indeed, fit 313's eventual fate, as she becomes the new equivalent of M2 (number one inhabitant of the Village) working alongside Six. Other narrative games are knowingly played with the cult audience, such as the use of almost subliminally edited, fleeting images of Village characters framed in non-Village or "real-world" CCTV footage (e.g., Number Sixteen in "Harmony" and 909 in "Anvil"). These images can be seen if digital freeze-framing or screen-grabbing

is used in a manner that suggests that the program-makers expect attentive fans to explore these momentarily flashed-up images and their implications—implications that are solidly confirmed by diegetic explanations given in later episodes. Such investigatory tendencies are frequently a hallmark of cult TV, and their presence strongly suggests that *The Prisoner* was simultaneously targeting *Lost*'s (ABC, 2004–2010) fandom by emulating aspects of that neocult show. For instance, AMC's *The Prisoner* focuses on numerological games and number-spotting; it represents an isolated, mysterious locale; and it features a shadowy, mysterious corporation. There are certainly cult intertextualities on display here, as indeed there were between *Lost* itself and the 1960s *Prisoner*.

Some fans and critics have criticized the AMC *Prisoner* for being an “Americanized” take on a British show.¹⁹ And though it is both Americanized and mainstreamed, seeking to reach a range of different audiences as well as established cult fans, it is the desire to produce “event” TV (i.e. “quality,” “cinematic” television) that perhaps most directly counters the effective targeting of cult fans. For it is this drive towards the miniseries centered on (film) star casting and narrative resolution—this attempt to do justice to a “classic” by (mis)understanding its classic status only as a matter of televisual flair and production value—that renders *The Prisoner* an “event” that is ultimately uneventful for established cult fans. It doesn't linger in the mind because it's just so obviously on the money. In neocult TV, cult fandom becomes one audience addressed amongst a multiplicity of others. And whereas the original *Prisoner* was ahead of its time, the 2009 remake is all too strongly of its time. This is true not just in terms of gesturing at post-9/11 meanings (via Summakor's shimmering “twin towers” and references to terrorist attacks), as well as incorporating representations of homosexuality and stronger roles for non-white actors. It is also true in terms of how the remake demonstrates the economic, industrial, and cultural requirements of an “event miniseries” by prioritizing televisuality over and above the original cult's enduring teleconceptuality. In short, AMC's *The Prisoner* highlights one of the dangers of neocult: by targeting established fans of cult TV, along with audiences for contemporary “quality” and “mainstream” television, neocult can end up being dismissed, if not reviled, by the very fans it had hoped to attract.

NOTES

1. Sue Short, *Cult Telefantasy Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 196.
2. Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Minerva, 1995), 210; Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton, *Cult Cinema* (Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 235.
3. Shawn Shimpach, *Television in Transition* (Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010),

4. Chris Gregory, *Be Seeing You . . . Decoding The Prisoner* (Luton, UK: University of Luton Press/John Libbey, 1997), 197.
5. Alain Carraze and Helene Oswald, *The Prisoner: A Televisionary Masterpiece* (London: Virgin Books, 1990), 6.
6. Mark Bould, "This is the Modern World: *The Prisoner*, Authorship and Allegory," in *Popular Television Drama*, Jonathan Bignell and Stephen Lacey, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 108.
7. Shimpach, 28, my emphasis.
8. Robin Nelson, *State of Play: Contemporary "High-end" TV Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
9. Piers D. Britton and Simon J. Barker, *Reading Between Designs: Visual Imagery and the Generation of Meaning in The Avengers, The Prisoner and Doctor Who* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 130.
10. Leon Hunt, *BFI TV Classics: The League of Gentlemen* (London: BFI, 2008), 17.
11. Available online at <http://www.sixofone.org.uk/Prisoner-Remake.htm>.
12. Trisha Dunleavy, *Television Drama: Form, Agency, Innovation* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 154.
13. Bould, 104.
14. Jeffrey S. Miller, *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 46.
15. Rupert Booth, *Not a Number: Patrick McGoochan—A Life* (Twickenham, UK: Supernova Books, 2011), 219.
16. Short, 28.
17. Peter Wright, "Expatriate! Expatriate! *Doctor Who: The Movie* and Commercial Negotiation of a Multiple Text," in *British Science Fiction Film and Television*, Tobias Hochscherf and James Leggott, eds. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 142.
18. Short, 29.
19. Russell Lewin, "Spies, Lies and the Lovely Mrs. Peel," in *The Best of British: SFX Collection Special Edition* (Bath, UK: Future Publishing, 2011), 44–51; and see Short, 28.

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