

**FREE  
POSTER**

Vol. 1. No. 2. 50p

# STARBURST

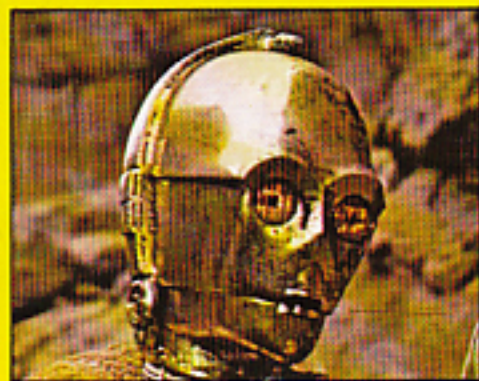
SCIENCE FANTASY IN TELEVISION, CINEMA AND COMIX

**RAY BRADBURY on  
CLOSE ENCOUNTERS**

**THE PRISONER**

**SPIDERMAN**  
-the feature film

**STAR WARS**



**C-3PO UNMASKED**

**PLUS-- SPACE CRUISER • SURVIVAL RUN • WIZARDS**





'THE PRISONER' explained - see page 30



# the prisoner

Feature by Alan Grace

Mention the ITC tv series *The Prisoner* to most people and the chances are that all they'll remember are large white balloons and Mini-Mokes rushing around Patrick McGoochan in a meaningless muddle.

In fact, when the series was first transmitted ten years ago it caused complete confusion amongst the majority of the peak viewing audience and quite a deal of hostility, mainly because most people just couldn't work out what the show was all about. Even today it ranks as one of the weirdest and most thought-provoking pieces of fantasy/science fiction ever conceived.

*The Prisoner* followed closely on the successful *Danger Man* series which also starred Patrick McGoochan as secret agent John Drake and had originally cashed in on the spy/thriller type of film so popular during the early 1960s. Naturally everyone assumed that *The Prisoner* would be similar.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

In the first *Prisoner* episode, aptly named "Arrival", the scene for the entire series is set in the first minute's screening. The pre-credits sequence shows McGoochan in a Lotus 7 heading down a long straight motorway (which resembles an airport runway more than a road). He drives over London's Westminster Bridge, into a car park, and to the accompaniment of a strident signature tune marches into an



office. His fist crashes on a desk, followed by an envelope being thrown in front of the man who sits impassive before him, then McGoochan storms out. Apparently he has resigned, for his now cancelled-out data card moves along the mass of computer indexing to be filed away as he drives off and returns to his London flat. No sooner has he gone inside than another car, a hearse, draws up with obvious sinister intent. So far the plot is a familiar one, the facade that this programme is another

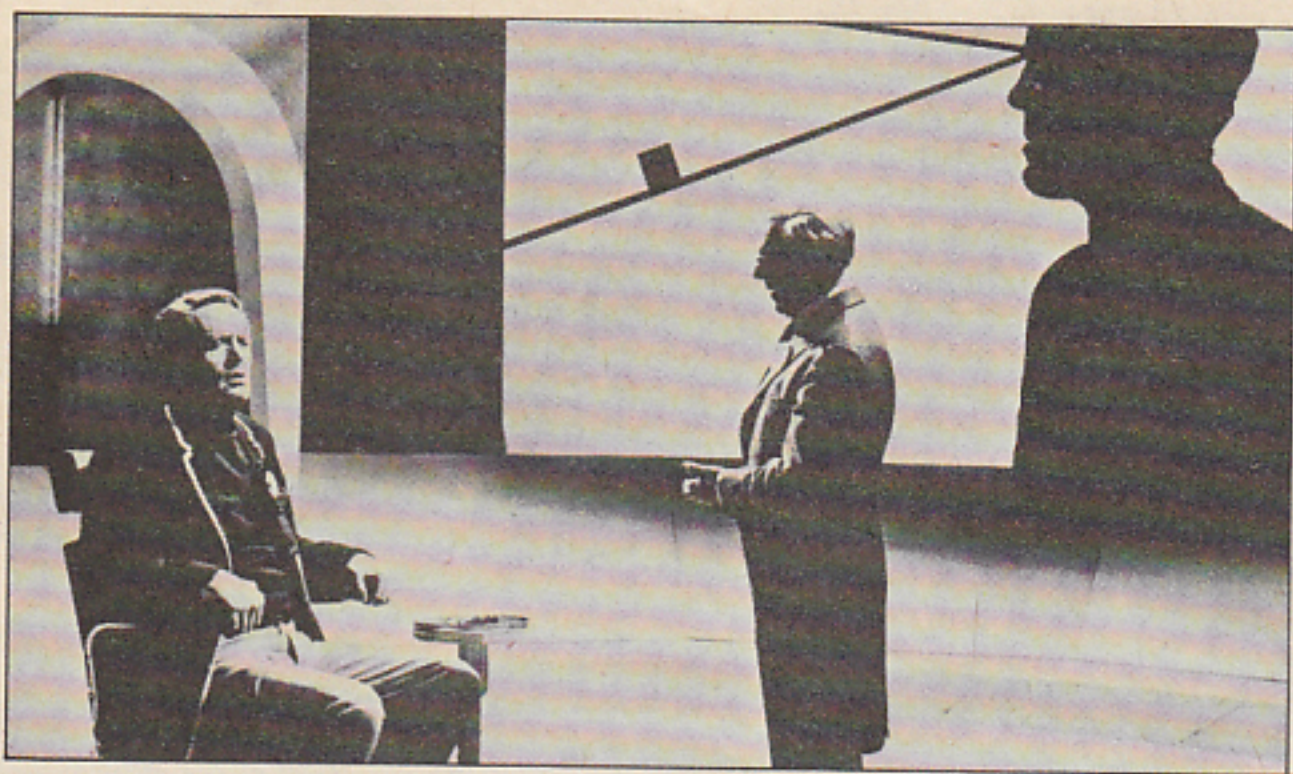
spy thriller being allowed to continue.

McGoochan, inside his flat, frantically packs his suitcase when gas begins seeping through the keyhole. He falls to the floor, unconscious, only to awaken in a strange room. Crossing to the window, he looks out to see a small town totally unfamiliar, a village of strange buildings with confusing architecture. What he does not yet know (nor do we), is that it is a place from which he will never escape, a place he will spend the rest of his time wondering why









he is there, who put him there, *where* is "there" and how he can escape. Thus McGoochan/Drake becomes *The Prisoner*.

This pre-credit sequence is one of the tautest pieces of tv film-making ever, not a shot is wasted, editing has left the basic essentials to tell the most possible in minimal time. In fact the entire sequence only lasts two and a half minutes, and this pattern is followed throughout the series. The cinematic techniques are excellent, each episode succeeding in maintaining the high quality of construction that sets film apart from any other form of art. In no way can *The Prisoner* be referred to as "televised plays", in fact McGoochan at times carries the symbolism and allegory that the medium of television allows much too far for simplistic viewing. Much of the meaning behind the series is lost on an initial viewing, and this could be one of the main reasons why *The Prisoner* has never been recognised for the unique art that it undoubtedly is.

The first hints that something is amiss in McGoochan's new environment soon appear after the opening sequence in "Arrival". Wanting to leave, he goes to the door of the house in which he awakes, and is surprised to find it opens of its own accord. (Later we discover that this door opens to the Prisoner only at certain times, and that if he tries to leave his house after

curfew the door remains closed.) He walks into the small town square to find out where he is, but everyone he asks evades his questions, refuses a straight reply. "Where am I?" he demands. "In the Village" is the vague response. No-one seems to know, or even care, about the whereabouts of the mysterious "Village", and the Prisoner eventually returns to his house where he notices a sign outside with a number . . . *Number 6*. Bewildered and frustrated he goes back inside to find the phone ringing. "Is your number 6?" the operator asks.

Much is made in *The Prisoner* of our dependence on numbers, in fact virtually everyone in the Village is known by a number, there are no names. The Prisoner is number 6, his main adversary is number 2, and the rest of the cast sport a variety of numbers that identify them, all wearing a badge with their number superimposed on a picture of a penny-farthing. The Prisoner wears his badge for only a few moments before tearing it off, exclaiming "I am not a number—I am a free man!" This statement reveals much of the secret of the series.

*The Prisoner* can be taken on several levels. On the surface it is a spy thriller after all (with a science fiction slant) for we soon learn that the reason for Number Six's abduction is that he has been removed until "they" can discover the real reason

**Number Two represents all forms of authority in the world today . . .**

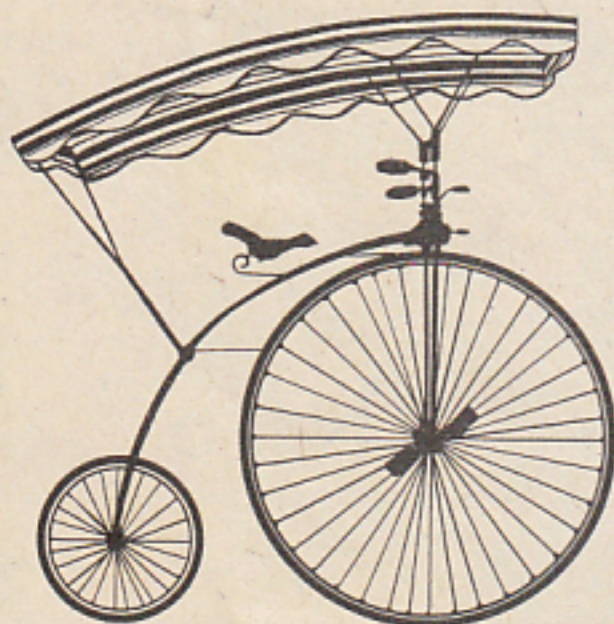
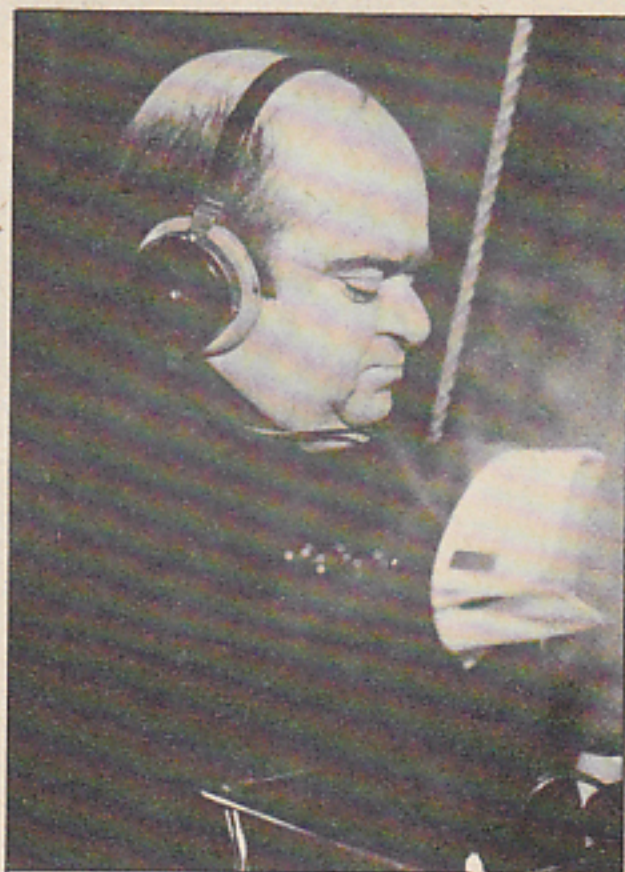
why he resigned. Exactly who "they" are is never revealed, whether his former employers at Whitehall or some enemy country, but whoever "they" are, they have created the Village to intern dangerous ex-agents and brainwash them. The Prisoner is never sure if it is all a plot by foreign powers to find out what he knows, or simply a way of keeping him from defecting.

But this surface level of understanding is difficult to take too literally, for many of

the gadgets and methods used by the Village are too fantastic for normal belief. Escape from the village is impossible because of the *Rovers*, seven foot high balloons that are able to pursue and smother any potential runaway. Not only is the Rover apparently capable of independent thought, but it can change size rapidly, appear anywhere in the Village instantly, in fact act as a total mobile force field that is totally impenetrable. It is, by definition, impossible.

There are other signs that suggest the spy story cannot fully explain all that the series has to offer. At times the other Villagers (supposedly other secret agents who defected or resigned), can disappear completely, to reappear in a few moments, as in the episode "Many Happy Returns." The techniques of brain-washing and mind manipulation are beyond the capabilities of today. The mysteriously-controlled doors throughout the Village that open and close, the radio without wires or other apparent power source that continuously plays soothing music interspersed with propaganda, the lack of explanation for food supplies, all these things are both unexplained and inexplicable. But in reality—do they matter?

Once the idea that the series is meant to be more than just a spy thriller is considered, then the whole concept of the Village takes on a new meaning. The story was never meant to be taken literally, it was intended as a framework to allow the viewer to think about aspects of life in the civilised world of today. The Village serves as a model of the world. Number Six is the one man trying to remain an individual in a society that tries to make him conform, to make him lose that individuality for the good of society as a whole. *Number Two*, the mysterious leader who tries to break Number Six and find out why he has resigned, represents all the forms of authority in the world today. Escape from the Village is impossible, as is escape from civilisation. But rather than







accept that fact, the Prisoner represents that individualism within us all that rebels, only to be forced back into line at the end of each episode. Whether or not he should be allowed to escape, or we allowed to rebel, is never truly answered.

And so the series begins to unfold. "Arrival" sets the scene for us and introduces us to the concepts behind the series. When the next episode begins Number Two has changed, a new man has been found to try and break Number Six, a new form of authority. Each episode deals with another aspect of Village life, and with another escape attempt which fails. It is possible to see analogies in the various plots for edu-

cation, justice, politics, freedom of speech, art, crime, almost every aspect of life as we know it. How we let others control our life-style, our beliefs, even our dreams is parodied in the almost idiotic acceptance by the other Villagers of anything and every-

**For Number 6 to escape from The Village is impossible, as is escape from civilisation.**

thing; only Number Six rejects, questions, refuses to believe. And only Number Six asks "Who is Number One?"

Despite the fact that Number Two is the visible authority, he is always at the beck

and call of a higher authority, a person we never see or hear but communicates with Number Two by phone, the enigmatic *Number One*. As the weeks passed the identity of Number One became the talking point of those following the series, although many people lost patience with the refusal of McGoonan to give answers, instead forcing his audience to work for their entertainment.

Was Number One the silent butler, a figure played by the late Angelo Muscat, who appeared in virtually every episode yet never spoke? Was Number One the Supervisor, the man who put into operation the various orders given by Number Two?







No hint was ever given. It was impossible to guess.

As the weeks passed, the ratings began to drop and so the original idea of 26 episodes was cut to 17. Patrick McGoochan then announced that the answers to the whole series would be given in the final episode, entitled "Fall Out." This was perhaps McGoochan's best way of holding his audience, for most people assumed that all would be made clear. It was not to be so.

"Fall Out" is undoubtedly the strangest episode of all. The Prisoner is brought into a cave after recently winning a fight to the death with Number Two, where he faces an audience of cowed figures presided over by a judge.

He is given back his individualism, won at the expense of the old Number Two, and taken at last to meet Number One. He is led to an operations room where another cowed figure sits holding a crystal ball, its back to the door. McGoochan approaches Number One. The figure turns. The cowl falls away to reveal the face of a grinning ape. Number Six rips the monkey face away to reveal his own face, grinning idiotically. The figure faces him for an instant—then runs before we, the audience, have time to grasp what is happening. The final few minutes show Number Six bring about a holocaust of destruction upon the Village before returning to his old flat in London along with the Butler. He climbs in his car, the Lotus 7, and drives off. The Butler goes to the door of his London home.

The door slides open, the Butler goes in, the door slides shut. The door acts and sounds exactly like the door of the Number 6's house in the Village. The final confirmation that the Village is only a symbol for the world as a whole.

And what of the Prisoner himself. As the episode closes we see him in his car, driving down a long straight road resembling the runway of an airport. A full circle. We are back at the beginning again.

There was outrage when "Fall Out" was first broadcast. The switchboards were jammed with viewers, enraged because the last episode hadn't explained anything at



all—it had been more infuriating and mysterious than all of the previous episodes put together. People felt cheated, they had expected a neat explanation that would tie up loose ends. They thought they had received nothing.

What they had received was the key that the series was always intended to mean more than just the surface level spy story about secret agents held in a mysterious Village.

**Number Six finds throughout his escape attempts that he can never trust women, they invariably betray him.**

The real theme of *The Prisoner* was the fight of Number 6 to remain an individual in our ever-increasingly computerised, categorised, conformist society. The background was irrelevant, the spy story just a layer of icing to hold the series together in an acceptable form. The episodes were all depicting various aspects of society that fitted into both the main theme and also the spy story. And each episode was filled

with so many sub plots, inferences and little touches of detail that it was up to the individual viewer to get as much (or as little) out of each story as he wanted. In fact there was no definite answer or conclusion to the series, for to do so would spoil the subtle interpretations that each of us could ponder or debate afterwards.

Take, for example, the identical doors in Number 6's house in the Village and London flat. Is it not possible that McGoochan is telling the viewer that the house in the Village and the London flat are one and the same? That the Village was not really a separate place into which Number 6 arrived, but was in fact the real world.

With this realisation I began to re-examine the whole series, to see depth in the stories, to make my own conclusions about the whole series. When it was repeated recently I watched again with new insight, and I saw even more meaning, gained even more enjoyment. Like good art, be it music or literature, the *Prisoner* is the only television series I know that becomes richer with repeated viewing.

A quote from a magazine in 1968 by Patrick McGoochan states it all. He says, "The object of the television series, *The Prisoner*, was to create a feeling of unrest about life today. It was an abstract impression of the world we are living in and a warning of what would happen to us when gadgetry and gimmickry take over from creative people. From the beginning of the series the character called Number One was responsible for death, torture and war. So the worst enemy of man is surely himself; the evil in him the worst thing on earth."

Even ten years later, with rescreenings across the whole country, wide controversy still exists over the exact meaning of the series. Because so much of *The Prisoner* is left to each person to interpret many varying ideas are put forward.





Some consider the affair to be the gradual breakdown of one man's mind, a kind of personal nervous breakdown of the character McGooohan portrays.

Another idea is that the story is to be taken on face value, that the Village really does exist, that the spy story is the only theme.

Whether one, all or none of these theories is correct is immaterial to the total enjoyment, and thus *The Prisoner* remains unique television.

Although Patrick McGooohan is the only regular well-known actor throughout the series (Angelo Muscat as the Butler and Peter Swanwick as the Supervisor being the only other fairly regular parts), a succession of well-known personalities follow each other in the role of Number Two. Leo McKern is probably the best remembered for he played the part three times in all, in the episode "The Chimes of Big Ben" and in the final two episodes "Once Upon A Time" and "Fall Out", and he has retained a favourable impression of the series to this day.

Other actors spring to mind such as Peter Wyngarde, Darren Nesbit, Patrick Cargill, Colin Jordan, and Kenneth Griffiths. Women, however, tended to take more of a back seat (although such actresses as Virginia Maskell, Jane Mellow and Rosemary Crutchley play opposite McGooohan) and the element of sex is virtually absent from the entire series, with Number Six finding throughout his escape attempts that he can never trust women, they invariably betray him. Indeed in the final episode McGooohan escapes from the Village without apparently considering taking a woman with him, and most of the roles played by females consist of subservient background roles (the waitress, the maid, the secretary). Could this be McGooohan commenting on life in society again?

Much of the success of the Village lies in the existence of a place already designed and built to resemble a mixture of designs and architecture by the Welsh architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis. In the final episode the location of the Village is revealed to be

Portmeirion, on the coast at the head of Cardigan Bay, built as a tribute to Portofino in Spain and still owned by Sir Clough. In fact the hotel Portmeirion takes guests still and the Village is visited by the *Prisoner* fans each year almost as a form of pilgrimage.

Memories of the *Prisoner* still remain very much a personal thing—some people remember certain episodes, some remember the theories behind the themes shown, some the characters—but certain features are easily remembered by everyone who has seen perhaps all or only a few of the episodes.

The firm favourite must be the *Rovers*; the name given to the large balloon-like objects that act as a police force within the Village. Their presence is menacing, their power absolute. They literally stifle escape by suffocation of the victim, and they have total control of their environment (even to the extent of being able to herd a ship back to port in the episode "Checkmate").

Rover was conceived as the only practical way of making the Village totally escape-proof, so that boat, car or helicopter were all subservient to the fantasy-element of capture without resorting to excessive violence. With Rover patrolling the perimeters of the Village there was never any need to attack Number 6, for if he did escape he would always be brought back.

Thus Rover is part of the allegory, part of the idea that the Village represents the world and there is no escape from our world. If we try and buck the system we are often smothered, either by red tape and officialdom or in some cases by kindness and good intentions. There are many forms of Rover in our society. We have only to look to find them.

Another memory must be the catch phrase "Be Seeing You!" This is more subtle, for it can be heard often enough as part of everyday speech today, yet in the series the phrase takes on sinister overtones. Everybody says it, even Number 6 (though he uses it as if in defiance of his captors). It stresses the fact that life in the Village is inevitable, each person must see

the others because none of them can escape.

Perhaps the most enigmatic symbol though is the penny-farthing. The end-titles are seen over the background of a drawing of a canopied penny-farthing, the badge of each person in the Village has the symbol of the penny-farthing, there is even a real penny farthing in Number Two's control room, so the thing is obviously intended to have a prominent significance. But what? It is never explained, not even hinted at.

One possible explanation is that in our world the penny-farthing resembles the ultimate in unreality, and a penny-farthing with a canopy tops that! Another is that the two wheels, a smaller next to a larger, act as a key to the concept that life, history, everything, exists as circles as does the series itself (the fact that the very last shot of "Fall Out" is the same as the first shot of the lead in is often interpreted as a circle—as "Fall Out" ends then the first episode, "Arrival", begins again).

But there is always the danger of taking the whole show too seriously. Some fans analyse each shot, each sentence, to high degrees of detail that was hopefully not intended by Patrick McGooohan. Too intellectual an approach spoils the enjoyment of the show, for basically viewing *The Prisoner* should be fun as well as stimulating.

*The preceding feature represents Alan Grace's interpretation of the TV series (with the grateful knowledgeable help of Six of One). It is not meant to be a definitive piece on the series. In fact, a further feature in our interrupted Telefantasy series (which started last issue on Star Trek will follow later in the year, giving a full cast and credits listing for the series.*

*However, by way of promoting a healthy letters column, if you have your own view on The Prisoner, put it in writing. The best opinions will be printed next issue.*

