

NUMBERS IN THE PRISONER

Surprisingly, numbers do not feature as much in the series as is widely perceived.

It is a truism to say that our daily lives are tied up with numbers: everything from phones, TV channels, computers, clocks, personal and official data, measurements and distances, addresses, weights and sizes, and of course money. However, in the case of humans, The Prisoner has always been regarded as delivering a warning about numeralisation.

Back in 1966, Patrick McGoochan was claiming that by 2000 we would all have numbers and no names. In 1968, after *Fall Out*, the actor was still insisting "We're all becoming numbers." It seems, in retrospect, that it was more a case of McGoochan's own assertions which led to our believing that *The Prisoner* was a protest against the rise of numbers.

In the episodes there is, unexpectedly, only a small element of resistance to numbers. Ignoring simple mentions of people's badge numerals, the issue of numbers does not feature anything like as much as we might anticipate. In fact there are only a few stories in which there is any challenge to figures being used for identification purposes.



In *Arrival*, the topic arises early on, when the new man in the Village tells the telephone operator, "Haven't got a number," resulting in being informed, "No number, no call." Later, in Number Two's lair, Six makes his position abundantly clear: "I will not be pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed or numbered!" At the end of the story, the New Number Two dismisses him, "Good day, Number Six!" The subject challenges the term, "Number what?" and is told, "Six, for official purposes everyone has a number. Yours is Number Six." The man objects, declaring, "I am not a number, I am a person."



McGoochan seemed to inject a few ideas from *Arrival* into his self-penned *Free For All* episode. Once more we have the operator calling and asking, "You are Number Six?" He replies bluntly, "That is the number of this place." Later, when the electioneering gets underway, Six tells the crowd, "I am not a number, I am a person." The platform he adopts even interferes with his

sleep, when we see him dreaming, delivering again his mantra to the crowd and reinforcing it, “I am not a number, I am a free man!” The standard opening beach sequence uses the same defiant words.



The most substantial reference to the Village’s classification system comes, surprisingly, in *Many Happy Returns*, when the escaped ‘prisoner’ is being debriefed, back in London. His former colleague Thorpe seeks to clarify what the returning man is claiming, “And they’re all numbers, no names, no names at all?” He receives the confirmation, “Just numbers. Numbers in a Village that is a complete unit of our own society.” The numbers topic seems to disappear from following episodes and, ultimately, we reach *Fall Out*, in which The President declares, “He must no longer be referred to as Number Six, or a number of any kind!”



So, what even is the objection to having or ‘being’ a number? There is the connotation of prison inmates, who are each given a number; the resulting dehumanising effect and link to criminality is not something with which we would wish to be associated. Also our own identity is what we build up throughout our lives; we can enjoy having a ‘good’ name, or regret developing a ‘bad’ one. There is also the aspect of control; if another person were to assign us a number, we would object to that exercise of authority over us.

In *The Prisoner*, Number Six wanted his freedom and individuality back, by escaping and returning to the real world. The fact that he disapproved of having a number seems of less consequence than his having been abducted and held against his will by an unknown power. Or was the device of having numbers simply a convenient way of presenting McGoohan’s character as a man of mystery, his true identity unknown? He couldn’t be John Drake from *Danger Man/Secret Agent*, for copyright reasons, but having the figure unchanged as to his looks and manner, being given only a number, smartly allowed the highly popular Drake persona to endure.

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