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Fan homecoming: analyzing the role of place in long-term fandom of *The Prisoner*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the potential role and use of place in long-term fandom, via a case study of fans of *The Prisoner* and its main filming location of Portmeirion in North Wales. Much research on film tourism focuses on one-time encounters, but fans of *The Prisoner* have been visiting and revisiting Portmeirion regularly for over 50 years, potentially developing a different sort of relationship with it. Based on interviews with 16 long-term fans of *The Prisoner* and participatory observation on site, we develop the concept of the “fan homecoming,” a return visit to a familiar fandom-related place, and show how this relationship with place can shape long-term fandom. In facilitating repeated and ritualized practices, being able to regularly gather with other fans, and providing a “safe vault” for the fandom and its memories, place is shown to have an integral role.

Introduction

Portmeirion is not the most accessible place. Located in the small community of Penrhyndeudraeth in North Wales and nestled on the cliffs of the estuary of the River Dwyryd, it is a 5-hour drive from London. From abroad, the most direct route entails a 5-hour train ride from the Birmingham airport to the Minffordd station approximately a mile away, and then a wander or courtesy car through a residential area before entering the estate’s woodlands and descending to the Village proper. Separated from the more populated areas of Great Britain and the small Welsh towns surrounding it, it is a place that must be known about to be found. Once it is entered, it feels like another world entirely.

Despite its isolation, fans of *The Prisoner* (1967–1968), a surrealistic British spy thriller with elements of science fiction, have been visiting Portmeirion since its first reveal in 1968 as the show’s primary filming location: the mysterious Village where the unnamed protagonist, shown resigning his governmental position in the opening credits, is held as he is interrogated by a series of unidentified antagonists about his resignation, and attempts (unsuccessfully) to escape. Its longevity is remarkable because, compared to contemporaries such as *Dr. Who* or *Star Trek*, which have turned into large multimedia franchises with continual updates, *The Prisoner* consists of only 17 episodes and few of the spinoffs associated with other long-running cult fandoms (outside of a poorly received 2009 remake). Yet fan visits support a *Prisoner*-themed shop and a fan-run yearly convention. Some fans visit Portmeirion regularly, incorporating it into both their fan

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practices and lives. Being able to not only visit Portmeirion, but continually return, has had an influence on not only individual fans but also the forms and practices of organized *Prisoner* fandom as a whole.

It is that influence that we investigate here. While most studies on place and fandom focus on eye-catching, once-in-a-lifetime experiences, we emphatically focus on the long range, by asking what the potential role and significance of place is in long-term fandom, through a case study of *The Prisoner* and Portmeirion. We take an ethnographic approach, based primarily on interviews with 16 fans who have visited Portmeirion multiple times and supplemented by participatory observation. This approach provides an in-depth investigation of the way in which the relationship between these fans of *The Prisoner* and Portmeirion has been built over the years and Portmeirion's role in the fandom today, expanding the way in which the role of place in fandom is understood.

Place and fandom

Fandom occupies an increasingly important place in contemporary media. Fans are the “indicator species” of our media ecology, marking out potential ways to relate to media texts and objects. As early adopters of technologies, they indicate ways in which these they can be used that give broader audiences a path to go down. As the most visible members of the audience, their relationships with the media industries show how audiences in general are understood by them. And as those who are particularly passionate about an object or text, their actions toward them indicate, in some ways, the way that we all relate to the stories and texts that have made up our media lives.

Objects of fandom matter to fans—as Sandvoss (2005) suggests, “the object of fandom, whether it be a sports team, a television programme, a film or pop star, is intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self, with who we are, would like to be, and think we are” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 96). In essence, this means that fans identify who they are by objects of fandom—that they possess traits considered important, and in being a fan of them, identify themselves with those traits. Williams (2015) builds on this, discussing how being a fan can give a sense of “ontological security” (Giddens, 1991) by providing a stable sense of self-identity not only through the object of fandom itself, but through the community of other fans. The object and the community make up a part of the fan's life, providing tools to create a self-narrative and a stable sense of who they are. While this, like other examples of identity formation, is often talked about as part of childhood, adolescence, and/or early adulthood, as Harrington and Bielby (2010a, 2010b) and Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo (2011) explain, it can also be an important resource to draw on as fans age. Fandom can provide a continuing structure throughout the fan's life, providing a framework to navigate different life stages while maintaining a stable sense of self.

Likewise, visiting locations associated with the object of fandom can be a powerful emotional experience, frequently compared in both academic and popular discourse to a pilgrimage. Beeton (2016, p. 51) notes that there are considerable similarities in form between a fandom-related trip and a traditional pilgrimage, due to the “sacred” sense of these locations and the emotional charge they carry, of being at the place where something deeply important “actually” happened. As Hills (2002) and Reijnders (2011) discuss, visiting such “places of the imagination,” sites where the “real” and “imagined” worlds meet, allows an interplay between the two. From a place of fantasy and imagination, it

becomes a part of the fan's physical life—something “real.” This can come up quite quickly—as with filming locations around newly popular television shows—but can also endure for years, decades, or even longer. When the place and the object of fandom have a long-term affiliation, the place provides the fandom with a “stable, highly visible, *physical* anchor in the real world” (Rodman, 1996, p. 99). Structures and locations provide a tangible, enduring stability to something that would otherwise be potentially disposable.

Despite this potential, most investigations of even long-term fan-affiliated places looks at these visits as single trips. Yet as fandom is a lifelong pursuit, it is likely that many fans visit these locations more often. This creates a different sort of relationship between the fans and the place than that of a single visit. As Tuan (1977) discusses, a “sense” of a place is made up of repetition—of revisiting enough to know and understand it, and to imbue it with meaning built over time. Tuan discusses this in terms of familiar paths taken in the home, stating that “as a result of habitual use the path itself acquires a density of meaning and a stability that are characteristic traits of place” (1977, p. 182). This idea is further elaborated by Seamon (1979) in his concept of the “place ballet,” the interaction of multiple people's habitual, frequently non-cognitive movements in time and space, which creates a “climate of familiarity which grows and to which they become attached” (p. 57).

For Tuan and Seamon, the sense of a place, of understanding it as a distinct area with meaning, is based in repetition, in doing things over and over again in the space and becoming familiar with it and the others who do the same. While Tuan does note that some seemingly fleeting experiences with place can make as large or larger impression on a person's life as a long-term residency (1977, p. 185), deep knowledge of a place requires repetition and reoccurrence. The importance of such repetition and its resulting familiarity returns in most discussions of place attachment (Low & Altman, 1992; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Therefore, while a single pilgrimage might be powerful, a repeated engagement with a media-related location would give the fan a different emotional experience. Fans of *The Prisoner* who are regular and long-term visitors to Portmeirion are therefore likely to have a different sense of it than those who visit only once.

For this reason, we propose the concept of the “fan homecoming” to describe such visits, as an alternative to the more frequently studied “pilgrimage.” A “fan homecoming” is here defined as a return visit to a familiar fandom-related place. Compared to a single visit, a homecoming involves visiting a place that the fan has come to know, where the fan has made pathways and place ballets that give it a climate of familiarity and comfort. Through continued visitation, a special location is made into a true place—an area with deeply felt meaning, one that the fan can feel truly attached to. As Sandvoss suggests, the object of fandom itself already functions as a sort of *Heimat* or emotional home for many fans (2005, p. 64), and via the fan homecoming, this emotional home gains a physical counterpart.

Like the “second home” of a rural cabin or beach house (Garvey, 2008; Halfacree, 2011), this fandom home operates as a familiar retreat from “everyday life,” a way to “disengage” from the mainstream and connect to a more genuine self while still being in a comfortable, familiar environment. Much of the discourse around second homes is built around a dichotomy of urban and rural, with the urban representing the stressful and inauthentic “everyday life” and the rural as the more emotionally authentic “escape.” We can map this dichotomy onto the concept of fandom as an “alternative social community” (Jenkins, 1992), built around interests, attachments, and enthusiasms that those in the

fan's "mainstream" life don't share or understand. The fan homecoming gives this alternative community a specific place, one that the fan can travel to bodily in order to feel both included and free. Given a regular return, the place potentially takes on significant memories for this community, becoming an integral part of its sense of cohesion.

It is this experience that we believe is at the heart of the relationship that fans of *The Prisoner* have with Portmeirion. This is not to say that every *Prisoner* fan who visits Portmeirion does so as a homecoming—undoubtedly, many go as a "pilgrimage"—but that the potential for such a relationship is there. The pilgrimage and the homecoming function as a spectrum, showing the different ways in which place can be part of fandom.

Following an overview of the study's methodology, we investigate how this works in practice, analyzing how fans of *The Prisoner* become attached to Portmeirion, and what the significance of its role as "home" of the fandom is for the fans and fan community that has created it. In doing so, we further develop the ways in which the relationship between fandom and place can be conceptualized.

Methodology

We utilize an ethnographic approach in this article, one that allows a better focus on the fans themselves and their actions, interpretations, and narrativizations of their relationship with Portmeirion. It is done in the spirit of grounded theory as defined by Charmaz (2006), beginning from an initial interest in the longevity of the *Prisoner* connection to Portmeirion and undergoing theoretical refinement throughout the course of the research process.

Primarily, this is an interview study, in order to focus on the ways in which fans define their relationship with Portmeirion. It is based on 16 semistructured interviews with fans of *The Prisoner* who have visited Portmeirion multiple times. Interviewees were recruited from the Facebook group "The Prisoner and Portmeirion", the Prisoner fansite "The Unmutual," and the 2016 edition of the fan-run convention PortmeiriCon, which resulted in a mix of volunteered and solicited interviews with long-term fans who have a range of relationships to Portmeirion and the broader fandom. However, the majority of these interviewees are either current or former members of Six of One, the official *Prisoner* appreciation society, with one interviewee having never participated in the group and two more having only limited association with it. This was not an intentional design, but it became clear during the research process that organized fandom played an important role for many long-term *Prisoner* fans and that Portmeirion itself was an integral aspect of this. While therefore not representative of all *Prisoner* fandom, that its organized fandom has such an association with Portmeirion makes it an intriguing case study of the potential role that place can play for such groups. Six women and 10 men were interviewed. The youngest interviewee was 33 years and the oldest 71 years old. Interviews lasted from 30 to 80 minutes and were conducted either on site in Portmeirion, via telephone, via Skype, or in one case over Facebook Messenger. This range of settings was based on the availability and desires of the interviewees, with the goal of making the process as comfortable for the interviewees as possible and to make sure that there was time available to fully explore the topic. Interviewees were asked about their fandom of *The Prisoner* and how it has developed, their experiences, past and present, in Portmeirion, their feelings about Portmeirion, and the role they feel Portmeirion plays in both their fandom and *Prisoner*

fandom as a whole. Interviews were transcribed and read several times before coding in Atlas.ti, and were then reread in light of this coding to develop the thematic analysis.

The interviews were supplemented by participatory observation at Portmeirion over two visits, including one during the 2016 PortmeiriCon. During this visit the researcher participated in the PortmeiriCon activities, including attending discussion sessions, a tour of Portmeirion, and social events, and participating in the larger scale reenactments on site. The researcher disclosed her status as a researcher and received permission to attend in that role from the convention organizers. Observations were recorded in a notebook.

Through these methods, we have developed this picture of the role that Portmeirion plays for the fandom of *The Prisoner*.

Ritual and repetition in Portmeirion

For nearly 50 years, fans of *The Prisoner* have been visiting its primary filming location of Portmeirion, a holiday village in North Wales, despite the lack of prominent new content since the series ended with its 17th episode in 1968. This puts it in stark relief to contemporaries such as *Star Trek* or *Dr. Who*, which have produced films, hundreds of episodes, and a wide range of associated media since the 1960s. Previous research has shown that filming locations such as Portmeirion have a particular importance as sites of “fan pilgrimage”—they are the place where the text actually happened, where the actors stood and the scenes objectively took place, and therefore provide a strong physical link between the world of the text and our own (Beeton, 2016; Brooker, 2005; Buchmann, Moore, & Fisher, 2010; Couldry, 2000; Hills, 2002; Peaslee, 2011; Reijnders, 2011; Roesch, 2009). Likewise, many fans interviewed here wish to experience the place that was both the setting and part of the inspiration for *The Prisoner* for themselves. However, after the first visit, they ended up returning, often on a regular basis. It is a place that many have grown to love quite deeply:

I do feel that I do have this very, very strong relationship with the Village, you know, I have sat on every bench, I've walked in every bit of it, I've stayed in most of the buildings ... I know it really well. (Katy, 33, English)

That fans like Katy visit Portmeirion fairly frequently means that they have developed familiar routines within and around it. In returning to see these familiar faces and places, fans also establish practices around Portmeirion that create the sort of pathways that Tuan (1977) and Seamon (1979) see as the foundation of a sense of place. These practices create a sense of familiarity and attachment to Portmeirion beyond, but not entirely apart from, its depiction on screen, giving it continuity as a site of *Prisoner* fandom and a meaningful location of the fans' lives.

For most of the fans interviewed, the yearly convention PortmeiriCon has been important for this relationship. Fan conventions are one of the oldest of fan traditions (Booth & Kelly, 2013; Geraghty, 2014; Porter, 2004; Zubernis & Larsen, 2018), drawing fans to specific locations to socialize and celebrate their objects of fandom. Ranging from large, multi-fandom events like San Diego Comic-Con to smaller, more focused events like PortmeiriCon, they have long provided a way for fans to meet others interested in the same things and to provide a physicality to what would otherwise be ephemeral relationships, either with the objects of fandom themselves or other fans.

As places, however, fan conventions are seen differently than more auratic “pilgrimage” locations. Conventions are typically held in what Augé (2008) refers to as “non-places,” hotel rooms or convention centers that can accommodate crowds but without distinctiveness on their own, as generally, places that have a stronger association with particular fan texts do not also have the capacity to host conventions. Rodman stresses the difference between the archetypal pilgrimage site of Graceland and convention spaces in terms of the way in which the community feels a sense of belonging to the space, stating that “the space occupied by that community isn’t theirs in any sense other than that they’ve rented it for the occasion” (Rodman, 1996, p. 124). Auratic pilgrimage sites have an enduring connection to the object of fandom that can’t be displaced.

This assertion is challenged by Hills, who stresses that “over time, specific hotels may come to take on their own histories of convention-hosting such that the contingency and alien-ness of the hotel space may actually become a necessary part of a given convention’s identity” (2002, p. 155), something demonstrated in Geraghty’s (2014) discussion of the San Diego Comic-Con. Additionally, as Porter (2004) discusses, the “non-place” quality of the convention site also promotes a focus on the texts themselves. The very genericness of a hotel or convention center means that it is not the place itself that holds the most meaning, but those in it, and this community can be reproduced seemingly anywhere.

Portmeirion, however, does have both a lasting association with *The Prisoner* and the capacity to host groups. To its organizers, having a convention anywhere but Portmeirion was unthinkable:

It was a logical thing to do. You know. If you start a Society for anything, you want to have a meeting. We had a film set! We could come to the film set! Where else do you want to go? You know. If you’re a fan of *Star Trek* or *Dr. Who*, you don’t do anything. (Roy, 69, English)

Despite being less accessible than the hotels and convention centers that are common spaces for fan conventions, its symbolic power as “the place” of the show meant that other locations were not options. While *Star Trek* is placeless, set in outer space in the far future and filmed in inaccessible studios, *The Prisoner* is distinctly placed in Portmeirion. Therefore, the organized fandom must be placed there as well. This is as true for the convention organizers today as it was in 1977:

There was one year when, I remember now, we couldn’t do a convention in Portmeirion for some reason. And there were talks about perhaps in the future we should have them somewhere else, and everybody said, well no! You can’t do that! Portmeirion is *The Prisoner*. If you’re going to have a convention, it’s got to be in Portmeirion. (Angie, 55, English)

Having the convention elsewhere was never a serious option, even as different groups of fans took over the organization of the convention and the relationship with Portmeirion management fluctuated. Portmeirion combines the main ways in which fandom relates to place—it is where the show “actually” happened, where fans can momentarily bridge the gap between imagination and reality, and where they can gather to discuss *The Prisoner* and meet friends who are also enthusiastic about the series.

As a long-running fan convention, the activities and practices of PortmeiriCon are particularly visible as ritualized and repeated practices within Portmeirion. The common elements of fan conventions—quizzes, discussions, talks with special guests involved with the production, episode screenings, and social events—are all present. PortmeiriCon also

features a number of reenactments from *The Prisoner*. Reenactments and dressing in media-related costumes are standard practices at both film tourism sites and conventions (Booth & Kelly, 2013; Kim, 2010; Lamerichs, 2010; Reijnders, 2011), but performing scenes from *The Prisoner* in Portmeirion with the accompaniment of fellow fans has a particular resonance that has made them cornerstones of the PortmeiriCon experience. Each convention features a number of smaller scene reenactments, as well as large, public reenactments of two iconic scenes—the “human chess game” from the episode “Checkmate” and the “election parade” from the episode “Free for All.” These have been performed at the spot of their filming at least once in every convention since the 1980s, with the 2016 PortmeiriCon holding each twice. Participants make jokes as they go through the scenes, and there is a sense of comfortable familiarity and playfulness to the proceedings. They are seen as a way to celebrate the show and the convention through participation, rather than solemnity.

This does not, however, mean that they are not taken seriously. This is clear both in the amount of effort put into their organization, with speaking roles assigned well ahead of time, scripts sent out, and rehearsals done, and in the feelings of those who are trusted to carry out these roles. Liza was proud of how she worked herself into a position at a previous edition of PortmeiriCon in which she could fulfill a dream—performing in the election parade as Number 6:

And it was just like this whole feeling of, of all of us together felt this synergy. This whole kind of “here we are creating it, recreating it, respecting it!” We are walking in their footsteps and kind of, not in a way to say ... just to say “this is a moment that we are acknowledging it and doing it together.” (Liza, 40, English)

Performing the role in its setting and having it acknowledged by her fellow fans gave her a sense of powerful connection with a character she had long identified with. Doing these reenactments in the environment of their filming, in a clearly organized way, sets the reenactments at Portmeirion apart from others. That fans have been doing these reenactments for a long time also gives them a sense of continuity. Liza not only got to experience “being” McGoohan, but she did so in the footsteps of fans who came before. Maintaining this connection with the past is important for the fans who go to PortmeiriCon.

This is not to say that every fan who revisits Portmeirion wishes to be involved with the reenactments. Some fans, particularly those that no longer attend PortmeiriCon, find the reenactments to be uninteresting or ludicrous and much prefer other activities, such as discussion of the show’s themes and spending time with friends, which they consider more authentic *Prisoner* activities, alongside enjoying Portmeirion’s qualities as visual reminder of *The Prisoner* and a holiday destination in its own right. Some fans interviewed left Six of One after a disagreement with its leadership in the early 2000s but continue to visit Portmeirion regularly, maintaining their relationship with it. While nonconvention activities are less formalized, that they are done on a regular basis still contribute to the sense of continuity with their fandom and with Portmeirion. As Geoff, who left Six of One but now lives in the Portmeirion area and visits frequently, describes his visits:

Me and my wife go there just the two of us a few times a year, there are little places we like to go and sit down and have a think and just sit and chat or whatever. We have our favorite little spots in the village. (Geoff, 42, English)

As a frequent visitor he has established his own activities and pathways, ones that are repeated as he continues to visit and think about Portmeirion. Seamon states that “regularity and variety mark the place ballet” (Seamon, 1979, p. 151), and this is what Geoff demonstrates in his interactions with Portmeirion—he has established regular rhythms within Portmeirion, while still treating it as something special. Other fans who visit outside of the convention express similar habits. Wandering, seeing familiar but spectacular views, and meeting with friends at places where they have long met with friends creates a strong relationship with Portmeirion.

Regular visitors like Geoff show considerable familiarity with Portmeirion. They know and discuss the names of each building and area among themselves and debate changes, both actual and potential, with considerable investment. Some check the webcams that the Portmeirion administration has set up daily, in order to virtually return to Portmeirion and see their favorite places when they are physically unable to. It is a place that matters to them. Through the activities of frequent visitation, whether they are formal or informal, directly connected to *The Prisoner* or not, their affective involvement with Portmeirion deepens. As Roy, one of Six of One’s founders and a frequent visitor to Portmeirion, states:

I’m walking around, and constantly in my mind going “yeah, that happened. That scene happened there.” I ... in my ideal world, when I die, I would like to be buried in a shallow grave in the flowerbed just below Number 6’s house. That is where I would like to spend eternity. Gazing across the amphitheater. (Roy, 69, English)

Roy demonstrates a clear love of both Portmeirion and the program that brought him there, both of which are an important part of his life. His wish would be to dwell there permanently, both in this life and after.

Both Tuan and Seamon saw place-making through repetitive movement as occurring through everyday activity, but as these fans show, it can also be accomplished through more extraordinary movement—that of continually returning to a special place, removed from everyday activity. Indeed, the isolation of Portmeirion was often brought up as a positive factor. Visiting is seen as a time to get away from ordinary concerns and reconnect to the fantasy space. The fans remove themselves from everyday life, but into a familiar and welcoming environment, one that allows them rest, contemplation, and meaningful connections.

Moving in familiar ways is therefore an important part of the relationship that *Prisoner* fans have with Portmeirion, and an important aspect of the homecoming. Through reenacting scenes at the place of their filming, fans not only immerse themselves in and pay tribute to the show that has mattered so much to them, but do the same to the fandom. Informally, continually revisiting and moving around in familiar locations in Portmeirion creates a sense of attachment, adding a personal connection to the symbolic power of being in “the place” where *The Prisoner* happened.

Portmeirion as meeting place

Returns to Portmeirion are not only frequent, but usually scheduled. This creates a sense of stability for *Prisoner* fans that provides a strong basis for a community. This idea of a “gathering place” for a fandom around a particular site is not unique to *The Prisoner*. Rodman (1996), Aden (1999), and Sandvoss (2014) stress the importance of a form of

“communitas” around Graceland, the *Field of Dreams* filming site, and Ibiza, respectively, as these locations will always have at least some other fans present. This is seen as a feature of pilgrimages more generally, which create a “temporary fellowship” (Digance, 2006, p. 40) of those who are attracted to the site.

For these returning fan-visitors to Portmeirion, it is not only the general sense of a broader community that is important, but the relationships with specific other fans. The friendships made via *Prisoner* fandom were considered very important by nearly every interviewee. Compared to the looser communitas described by Aden, Rodman, and Sandvoss, the goal is not to be around an abstract sense of community, but to talk with people who share an interest in *The Prisoner*. Meeting other fans was a frequently given response as to why *Prisoner* fans not only visited, but returned to Portmeirion. For example, Liza had found it difficult to find others in her everyday life to discuss the show with. In visiting Portmeirion and the convention, she addressed this lack:

To be there, years after, and there I was, and the sun was shining, with people who were friendly, people who got me. They got me! When I said to them “I don’t ... I’ve got all these questions and there’s all these symbols and meanings that I can read into it and I want to disagree with you ...” And it’s that whole, to have that fellow feeling of *arriving*, in a place. It transformed the place for me. (Liza, 40, English)

Compared to other media “cults,” the fandom around *The Prisoner* was and is smaller. While it might be possible to find other fans of Elvis or *Star Trek* in one’s general vicinity, it was rarer to find a fan of *The Prisoner*, especially before the Internet was commonplace. Portmeirion was one of the few places to connect.

Going to Portmeirion to meet fellow fans is expressed as a desire to have deeper engagement with the program than they could find in their everyday lives. *The Prisoner* is seen by its fans as a particularly innovative, quality program, one that challenges viewers and requires a higher level of intellectual engagement to appreciate:

I like television that stimulates the mind and makes you think. And I also was taken an awful lot as a child by the idea of the individual against sort of convention, normality. In fact, all the ideas that *The Prisoner* invokes, I was interested in. (Harry, 54, English)

To its fans, the show not only asks questions in terms of plot—who is Number 6, what is the Village—but also about society, culture, and life in general. Many fans wanted to find others who felt the same way about it. This was not only to discuss *The Prisoner* itself, although that was important, but because they felt that other fans were likely to be interesting people worth meeting. As discussed earlier, fans often identify their object of fandom with important parts of themselves. This can then be extended to others—that similar interest in *The Prisoner* means that they are likely to be compatible in more ways. While Sandvoss insisted that most fan texts are polysemic, allowing “not only for a multiplicity of meaning, but for any meaning” (2005, p. 126), within the interviews and the fan-produced texts there is a reasonably clear sense of what traits *The Prisoner* represents—intelligence, a questioning of authority and power structures, individualism, an interest in strange and challenging media—which fans expect to see reflected in themselves as well as others.

For many, this led to both Portmeirion and the Prisoner Appreciation Society, Six of One. The establishment of groups such as Six of One was not uncommon in the media culture of the 1970s and 1980s (Jenkins, 1992), and the group found its footing among

fans wishing to devote more attention to the program and its ideas. As with other fandoms, this was fostered through the aforementioned convention PortmeiriCon, first held in 1977 and repeating nearly every year since. This scheduled reason to revisit meant that Portmeirion provided a stable platform to construct a community out of what might have otherwise been a more fluid communitas. Fans of *The Prisoner* who got involved with Six of One and the convention knew that the people they met there would be likely to return. As time has passed, many of these friendships have become quite close:

I've still got friends from that very first convention [in 1982] that I'm still friends with now. And as I said, I think that's one thing that links all of us, we've got this love of Portmeirion, *The Prisoner*, Patrick, etc., but we've also got great friendships out of it as well. (Anabel, 54, Hertfordshire)

Anabel is far from the only fan to have made important friendships through the society and the convention, and several have met partners through their attendance. Fans expect to see specific others at Portmeirion that they consider good friends. Returning is therefore important on two levels: It reconnects the fan with her fandom of *The Prisoner* and with the relationships she has made through this fandom.

While this is true of fan conventions more generally (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Baym, 2010; Booth & Kelly, 2013; Zubernis & Larsen, 2018), with Booth and Kelly (2013) highlighting the “familial” relationships that many long-term attendees of the Chicago *Tardis Dr. Who* conventions have, the significance of Portmeirion as the filming location as well as the long-term site of the convention means that for these fans, meeting in Portmeirion itself is necessary. For them, *Prisoner* fandom is considered most authentically expressed in Portmeirion, as discussed by Angie when asked about local *Prisoner* meetups in the 1990s:

No comparison! All we did was sort of sit there and talk about, they would reminisce about conventions they had been to, they'd be telling me all about it, and then we'd be sitting there swapping Prisoner in-jokes and just drinking and having fun, really. Having a few beers and saying a few silly things. Which doesn't at all compare to a convention of course, which is a completely different thing. (Angie, 55, English)

These local meetups, while facilitating the friendships made through *The Prisoner*, were not the same as the convention, which, as discussed earlier, is considered legitimate only if held in Portmeirion.

The significance of Portmeirion itself as an integral part of the community of *Prisoner* fandom becomes clear when we look at those who no longer attend PortmeiriCon. A serious schism in Six of One in the early 2000s led to many leaving the group and giving up the convention. However, they often continued to meet up in Portmeirion:

We have this almost called NonCon, non convention, there's a group of friends who go every August. (Michael, 52, Northern Irish)

There is not another place like it, so if you want to spend some time with your friends, which is a great thing to do anyway, I don't know anyone who doesn't like spending time with their friends, what better place to spend it at than Portmeirion? (Geoff, 42, English)

While neither Michael nor Geoff wants anything to do with Six of One, they still wish to visit Portmeirion and spend time there with friends they've made on previous visits. Both men were fairly young when they started attending *Prisoner* events, and being a fan, while

not their only interest, as they were both keen to stress, is nonetheless a key part of their self-conception that they do not wish to lose. In continuing to visit Portmeirion with their friends, and in continuing to think of Portmeirion as a special place, this connection is maintained even without the structures of organized fandom.

For those who have continued to visit Portmeirion over the decades, this sense of fan community is maintained as much in the relationships with others as it is in continuing to watch and discuss *The Prisoner* (and for some, more so), both of which are tied to Portmeirion. As Massey suggests, places can be “conceptualized in terms of the social interactions they tie together.” (1994, p. 155) Portmeirion is indeed conceptualized for fans as the tying together of their own personal interactions with the text, described by Williams (2015) as a “pure relationship” (Giddens, 1991) that the fan builds out of the satisfaction the text gives him or her, and the fans’ interactions with fellow fans, both of which combine to make Portmeirion the special place that it is.

Portmeirion as permanence

That these fans can expect to be able to return to Portmeirion on a yearly—or more—basis also points to the importance of the longevity of Portmeirion itself. One of the more striking features of *The Prisoner* fandom is that it has almost always been what Williams (2015) refers to as “post-object”: a fandom that exists after the object (the television show) has ended. Williams discusses how being a fan can give a sense of “ontological security” (Giddens, 1991) by providing a stable sense of self-identity through both the text itself and the fan community. The text and the fandom make up a part of the fan’s life, providing tools in order to create a self-narrative and a stable sense of self.

While some of the interviewees watched *The Prisoner* in its first run in the late 1960s, most of them came to the show when it was already a finished, completed work, either through rescreenings or through home media consumption. *Prisoner* fandom has mostly existed as a fandom without new texts. After the failure of the 2009 remake, fans of the series tend to see the potential of it more of a threat to the ontological security of their fandom than a promise of the continuation of it, as it would challenge their conception of themselves as fans of a truly great television show. This puts it in contrast to other prominent cult texts, which have frequent injections of new material that keep it from fading away from public and fan consciousness.

What it does have is Portmeirion. The ability to gather there on a regular basis gives continuity to meeting up and discussing the program in a way that many other post-object fandoms lack. Some even suggest that without Portmeirion, the fandom would not still exist:

I think it’s essential. Absolutely essential. It’s really essential for the Prisoner group. I think it keeps it all together, because it’s a meeting point where we come to, and it’s beautiful in its own right. There’s plenty of time to talk and go off, so everyone enjoys it. It’s better than meeting in some place totally devoid of it. (Lily, 71, English)

For some fans, without the ability to visit Portmeirion and reconnect with their fandom by doing so, they would undoubtedly drift away from it in favor of more visible fandoms and activities. Additionally, the schism in *Six of One* was very personal and continues to be painful, and could have destroyed the organized fandom of *The Prisoner*. Yet the appeal of Portmeirion itself, the regular cycle of conventions or other gatherings, and the enjoyment

that fans have in attending these keep some form of the fandom and the identity of being a *Prisoner* fan secure despite serious disagreements and the passage of time.

However, this does not mean that these long-term fans see Portmeirion as strictly theirs. Rather, Portmeirion is considered such an integral part of *The Prisoner* (Waysdorf, 2018) that all fans should make the visit:

Oh absolutely [new fans should visit Portmeirion]! Yes, they'll make another association with it. And ... I think that ... their actual experience of *The Prisoner* will be, I've got to get the right word, their experience of *The Prisoner* will be raised exponentially by actually visiting Portmeirion. (Paul, 54, English)

While there is some disagreement in the best way to express fandom, there is a general consensus that Portmeirion should be visited by anyone who is interested in *The Prisoner*. Regardless of whether other fans grow as attached to it as they are (although some feel it will happen automatically), the fans interviewed here see visiting Portmeirion as part of the education of other *Prisoner* fans. Visiting would elevate newer or more casual fans, making them better fans of the show by having experienced this important aspect of it.

There is also, however, another important factor regarding Portmeirion. The village is much the same as it was during the filming of *The Prisoner*. While there have been changes in the 50 years since the program's filming, they are not considered significant to the overall look and atmosphere of the village. The important buildings and other locations used in *The Prisoner's* filming are all still there, and largely still look as they did, with no significant alterations or additions. The village is still run by members of the Williams–Ellis family, all buildings have historical listed status, and it is set in a conservation area and owned by a charitable trust that ensures it cannot be bought or sold. These markers of stability create a sense that it will always exist in the way it always has, and indeed did when *The Prisoner* was filmed.

Portmeirion's own stability and sense of permanence contribute an important sense of ontological security to *Prisoner* fans. It is, after all, seen as an incredibly important part of the series:

[Portmeirion is] a character in *The Prisoner*. It is one of the central characters of *The Prisoner*, I'd describe it as that. (Michael, 52, Northern Irish)
The Prisoner and Portmeirion, you can't really separate them. They are bound together. (Angie, 55, English)

Portmeirion is important to *Prisoner* fandom on several levels—that of the inspiration for McGoohan to create the series, its filming location, and the gathering point of the fandom throughout its history. The fans interviewed see Portmeirion as an integral part of *The Prisoner*, without which it would be a very different (and potentially less interesting) show. The link between the two is very strong.

That this connection, and Portmeirion itself, has endured over the years lends a sense of stability to *Prisoner* fans, as summarized well by Paul:

As long as Portmeirion exists, in a sense *The Prisoner* will exist. So you know in that respect everybody [who] is a close fan, wants Portmeirion to sort of remain. In a sense if you lost Portmeirion you'd lose *The Prisoner*. (Paul, 54, English)

Because the association is so strong for fans of *The Prisoner*, the continuing existence of Portmeirion means that, on some level, *The Prisoner* endures. While the general public

may or may not be interested in *The Prisoner*, and new material is not forthcoming, that Portmeirion still exists means that there is still some level of ontological security to their fandom. As Creswell states, “The very materiality of a place means that memory is not abandoned to the vagaries of mental processes and is instead inscribed in the landscape” (2014, loc2816). In its permanence, Portmeirion remains as a sort of “safe vault” of their memories of *The Prisoner* and its fandom.

In recent years, the Portmeirion management itself is seen to have a renewed interest in *The Prisoner*, offering a *Prisoner*-themed high tea during PortmeiriCon, running *Prisoner* tours, and increasingly using the Number 6 branding. For some fans, this is a welcome acknowledgment of the importance that *The Prisoner* has always had to Portmeirion and their own role in maintaining the link:

I think if they searched their hearts, they'd probably think actually, you know, *The Prisoner* put Portmeirion on the globe, on the map. And it certainly created a global attraction. (Mark, 62, English)

That PortmeiriCon, which Mark helps to run alongside his partner Angie (whom he met through Six of One), and its attendees have kept this connection running throughout the years is a source of pride. They appreciate the good relationship that they now have with the Portmeirion management, and enjoy seeing their once-maligned fandom valued.

For others, though, the renewed interest is less welcome:

I think it's too obvious. I think there is a subtlety about Portmeirion. And that subtlety is sort of diluted by actually making a crude reference to *The Prisoner*. (Paul, 54, English)

For Paul, having too many clear references to *The Prisoner* risks overshadowing this subtlety. He would not like to see Portmeirion crowded out by “tributes” that fail to match the quality and taste level that *The Prisoner* has for him. Portmeirion’s uniqueness is already enough of a fitting reminder of *The Prisoner*.

Essentially, what Portmeirion ultimately provides for many fans of *The Prisoner* is the permanence of place. In its physicality, monumentality, and lack of change, Portmeirion can function as “safe vault” for *The Prisoner* and its fandom. Rather than existing only as ephemeral media or personal memories, it is instead tied to an enduring physical place—Portmeirion.

Conclusion

What is the potential role and significance of place in long-term fandom? In this article we examine this question by exploring fans of *The Prisoner* and their relationship with its filming location of Portmeirion. Many of these fans have been visiting Portmeirion regularly for decades, returning at least once a year in order to reconnect with their friends and their fandom. Compared to the single trips that have been the focus of prior studies on fandom and place, the analysis of these Portmeirion return visits shows a different role for individual fans and wider fan communities. We suggest that these more frequent trips should be understood as a “fan homecoming”—a return to a familiar and beloved place associated with the object of fandom, one that they have gained a strong attachment to over their years of visiting. By exploring how this has been built, this article broadens the current discussion on film and fan tourism and highlights the long-term potential of place in fandom in three ways.

First, through continual movement to and through Portmeirion, sustained through the yearly PortmeiriCon convention and personal visits, Portmeirion has become a deeply felt place. This repetitive character is important for both the individual fans and the fandom as a collective, sustaining their attachment to *The Prisoner* and their fellow fans over time. By continually gathering and repeating certain actions, such as scene reenactments and fan discussions, fans create an attachment to Portmeirion itself not only as the site of *The Prisoner*'s filming, but as a place where they feel “at home”—one where they can escape from everyday concerns, reaffirm the importance that *The Prisoner* has for them, and reconnect with their friends and their memories.

Second, Portmeirion offers a stable place in which a fan community can be constructed and maintained. The yearly schedule of gatherings provides a stable basis to build a more intimate fan community, as it is expected that other fans of *The Prisoner* will be there at the same time. It has become the center of the fandom—to truly connect to it, one must visit Portmeirion, preferably in the company of other fans. Compared to a more “placeless” fandom that can be reproduced everywhere (Porter, 2004), fandom of *The Prisoner* is considered to be most authentically experienced in Portmeirion. That many of the returnees have been going there for decades also creates a somewhat insular community—with tensions erupting every now and then—a community that is as much focused on itself and its history as on *The Prisoner*, centered around the importance of Portmeirion to both. However, it is one that undoubtedly means a great deal to its participants, and one that has kept itself and its vision of the show alive and relevant over the decades.

Finally, we have shown how Portmeirion provides an important sense of ontological security to fans of *The Prisoner*. In its physicality and relative stasis it provides a tangible and durable connection to the show that is expected to endure well into the future. That both the show and the fandom are tied so heavily to Portmeirion means that fans feel that both will endure as well. Compared to other post-object fandoms without such a physical link, it is thus felt that *The Prisoner* will never “really” die. It will always have a permanent memorial in Portmeirion.

The tight link between Portmeirion and *The Prisoner* fandom is perhaps a unique one. Few locations provide the same triple combination of filming location, convention space, and longevity of Portmeirion. However, this more extreme example does illustrate the potential role of place in fandom. The idea of the homecoming developed here draws attention to important aspects of the relationship between fandom and place that have been previously overlooked because of the common focus on single, “extra-ordinary” visits. As media texts increasingly live on in cultural memory via new distribution technologies and fandom is considered part of long-term identity formation, these issues of longevity and sustainability of film tourism are even more pressing. What we do here is show a potential way in which they can be understood.

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