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Rover the Nanny/Rover the Enforcer

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Abstract: The automated balloon entity “Rover” from the iconic 1960s British television series *The Prisoner* represents a complex visual metaphor that may be understood via the work of cognitive theorists such as Mark Turner, George Lakoff, and Gilles Fauconnier, and especially via the work of the French theorist Gaston Bachelard. The key to the employment of a white spherical balloon as an enforcement device is its bifurcated inside-outside construction, which means that Rover is best understood as an amalgam of nurturing and control, but at the same time undermines any effort to differentiate between the two. In sum, Rover is a viable metaphor for a television series that explores the question of whether individual freedom is even possible in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Mark Turner, Gilles Fauconnier, George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Gaston Bachelard, *The Prisoner*.

The Prisoner was an innovative British television series originally telecast in the late 1960s in which a former secret agent (portrayed by Patrick McGeehan) is kidnapped and imprisoned in a surreal place known as “the Village.” The secret agent is referred to only as “No. 6,” and the 17 episodes all involve his attempting to regain his freedom.

His most eerie and surreal adversary is a white plastic balloon entity that possesses cyborg powers and is launched into action whenever the Village leadership calls it up out of a primordial soup in the depths of the ocean. “Rover,” as the entity is referred to on one occasion, is available for routine patrols as well as for “orange alerts” that occur when the managers of the Village are confronted with a challenge from an inmate. Immediately, Rover buoyantly pops to the surface to perform its function. Its only task, it would seem, is either to tow the recalcitrant to the “protective” cocoon of the Village if the infraction occurs at sea, or else to choke the hapless offender into submission, although on at least one occasion Rover strangles someone to death.

The purpose of this essay is to argue that Rover is a visual metaphor, but an ambiguous one due to its inherent hybridity. Moreover, this ambiguity is particularly suited to the Cold War mentality of the 1960s, and continues

to be so today. Of course, 2026 is not 1967, but we are still confronted with the confusion and indeterminacy that I maintain is at the very heart of both the series and its most memorable visual metaphor. To demonstrate the dynamics of the Rover metaphor, I begin by building on the work of theorists such as Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier, whose work on metaphoric hybridity is especially pertinent to my argument, and also invoke the theory of the French philosopher and cultural critic Gaston Bachelard.

The symbolism of the white balloon entity has been a source of speculation since *The Prisoner* was first telecast.¹ The key to my own interpretation is the double-function that Rover serves. In fact, the word “tow” is not coincidentally employed here because the balloon entity not only tows or nudges a recalcitrant such as No. 6, but also forces conformity, if only by persuading the recalcitrant to acquiesce to the desires of the Village leadership by “toeing the line.” Because the nurturing of a recalcitrant into the proper path and/or physically punishing his or her reluctance is a two-faced coin, Rover may be analysed via the conceptual blending concept popularised by Mark Turner in *The Origin of Ideas*, and by Turner and Gilles Fauconnier in *The Way We Think*. Also, one may further that the visual metaphor of the balloon creature is a blending of necessity due to the very nature of the Cold War mentality, which, after all, is an oxymoron that literally means “war/no war.” And finally, as a hybrid image, Rover is akin to the concept of the image cluster introduced by Gaston Bachelard in his seminal 1963 text *The Poetics of Space*.

The notion of conceptual blending is succinctly stated by Turner in *The Origin of Ideas* when he recounts the anecdote of the monk who journeys up a mountain one day and returns to the mountain base the next. The logical conundrum presented by the monk’s journey is best preceded by a few additional details: the monk takes the same route each day, can rest whenever he wishes, and can climb or descend at whatever rate he chooses. The question to be resolved is whether the monk is ever in the same spot at exactly the same time of day.

Turner’s advice for thinking through the solution is simply to imagine two monks making the same trip simultaneously (or, alternately, the same monk somehow becoming two separate entities). In this scenario, most people can clearly see that the monk will not only pass the other monk (or pass himself) at some point, but will

¹ Providing a complete documentation would not only swamp this essay but would probably be impossible. Nevertheless, a good example of discussion about the symbolism of the series may be viewed in a video titled “The Prisoner: Symbolism” on Youtube. The URL is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCa_AeC-zh4.

do so at a given instant.² Thus, the answer is that, yes, the monk is at exactly the same spot at the same time on the two consecutive days. By extension, the blending of visual concepts might be easier in the case of Rover if we think of “Rover the Nanny” as the giant white ball that returns the stray prisoners to the fold as a good shepherd would round up his wayward sheep, while “Rover the Enforcer” is the suffocating plastic membrane that would eliminate the incorrigibles, or at least bend them into conformity.

However, the actual visual image of a white ball as employed throughout *The Prisoner* is rather more complicated and nuanced than the simple binary opposition of a “good Rover” and a “bad Rover.” For one thing, the question of how the white ball was originally conceived may very well have been inspired by the 19th-century statue of Hercules that was moved to *Portmeirion*³ in the early 1960s. Indeed, the producers recount a different inspiration for their eventual use of weather balloons to depict Rover⁴, but one can’t help but explore the implied symbolism of Hercules holding a world that, to him, is roughly in the same scale as that of Rover to a normal human being. What precisely does the statue seem to be saying? Is Hercules holding up the world in the sense of keeping it in running order, or is he oppressed by its weight and trying to avoid being crushed by it? Of course, an exploration of the mythology will yield potential answers, and further by considering the relevance of the Parmenides fragment that Gaston Bachelard discusses in *The Poetics of Space*⁵. but the question is precisely what the visual image of the state represents if one views it without any mythological preparation. My own view is that the Hercules statue is a bifurcated image in that he is both holding up the world and being overwhelmed by it.

The similarity between Rover and the world that is most apparent in the episode “Free for All,” in which No. 6 is invited to participate in a “democratic” election to select the new No. 2. Obviously, the

² Additional details about the provenance of the anecdote are irrelevant here, but may be found in Turner’s book.

³ Portmeirion is a resort village in North Wales where the series was filmed.

⁴ The creators had originally wished to use a motorized vehicle with a white dome as the enforcer, according to Andrew Pixley’s 2007 book *The Prisoner: A Complete Production Guide* (page 37). The motorized vehicle proved to be unreliable, so the creators then settled on using conventional white plastic weather balloons that were readily available in quantity.

⁵ The enigmatic fragment by the pre-Socratic philosopher of ancient times concerns a message from a goddess that the sphere is an ideal physical dimension. According to Bachelard, “Parmenides’ ‘sphere’ has played too important a role for his image to have retained its primitivity. Consequently, it could not be the tool required for our research on the subject of the primitivity of images of being. It would be hard to resist the temptation to enrich the image of Parmenidian being by means of the perfection of the geometric being of the sphere” (*Poetics* 235).

cinematographers were playing on the similarity between Rover and the globe of Hercules, for the juxtaposition of the two is carefully framed at approximately 15:00 into the episode⁶. Whether or not the makers are explicitly inviting an exploration of the fragility of democracy, the framing invites the question of whether individuals are truly in charge of their own destiny – which ostensibly is the longstanding promise of the form of government disparaged by Hercules’s real-world cultural contemporary Plato.

Therefore, precisely what is physically blended in the image of Rover? The answer is that Rover represents the physical views from both inside and outside, as evidenced by the invariable shot of the victim being suffocated when the white plastic surface covers his or her face. This image can only be viewed from the interior of the balloon, which means that the point of view is within the balloon in all instances in which the victim is in immediate threat, but his or her neutralization is imminent, whether temporary or not. Otherwise, the view is always from the outside, where Rover is always a threatening presence that bounces along while making a terrifyingly eerie electronic sound coupled by a ferocious animal roar. Rover is very pliable and is entirely immune to gunshots, as seen in the episode “The Chimes of Big Ben” -- assuming that the partisan with the rifle is actually attempting to shoot the balloon and not merely a part of the Village’s game. Moreover, Rover is immune to futile defensive measures such as No. 6’s attempt to punch it with his fists in “Arrival.”⁷ In all cases, Rover overwhelms the victims by spreading its surface over their faces, but the view from the inside only comes with the ultimate defeat of the victim.

Yet, Rover possesses its limitations. No. 6 on a couple of occasions manages to evade the balloon, and there is even speculation from No. 2 that the fatal suffocation of the No. 6 lookalike in “Schizoid Man” was a malfunction. Moreover, Rover is often set into action when No. 2 punches a button on the control panel at central command, and words are occasionally voiced by No. 2 to other operatives that have to do with Rover’s functions. And finally, the actions of No. 6 in the final episode “Fall Out” suggest that Rover can be neutralized, because No. 6’s madcap manipulation of the control buttons of No. 1’s instrument panel unleashes Village-wide mayhem, including the apparent devolution of Rover as he/she/it sinks into the primordial slime.

⁶ An expedient way to view all 17 episodes is to look at those posted on Youtube by Greg E. The URL for the “Free for All” episode (listed as 04) is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCDEku-O2nc&list=PLFR78Uf6Xh3hdTxbd2rFIUSOJt1TaKzMw&index=4>

⁷ This is 01 of Greg E’s Youtube submissions, which may be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dcq2Ape4DTw&list=PLFR78Uf6Xh3hdTxbd2rFIUSOJt1TaKzMw&index=1>.

In sum, Rover poses an existential threat if he/she/it is poised to confront the individual victim very directly, but can be sidestepped or even negated if the individual victim is in the right frame of mind. The “inside” of Rover invariably spells defeat, while the “outside” poses looming threat that can be avoided. The aforementioned is the answer to the question of what Rover represents physically, but the follow-up question is what precisely this all means politically if not existentially. To bridge this gap, I turn to the work of Bachelard, whose *Poetics of Space* is especially enlightening in the analysis of visual metaphors, as is his “*Metaphysics of Dust*,” from which the following is taken:

For it is quite remarkable that, as principles of explanation, clear and flagrant exceptions carry the same quotient of conviction as do general characteristics—a strange dialectic this, one that thrives on oppositions yet rejects from the bases of its explanation only those elements that are mixed and mingled! (“*Metaphysics*” 20)

What Bachelard is getting at is the notion that our intuition precedes our detailed scientific understanding. We simply do not need precise information to carry on functions such as reproduction, for example, which we humans have been carrying on successfully for some three million years, give or take. Nor do we need to resign ourselves that Rover’s threat is existential if indeed his/her/its enforcement purpose may be confounded by a simple knowledge of physical spaces. As the editors write in the introduction to the special issue of the journal *Parrhesia* devoted to Bachelard, the French theorist “does not connect these elements to nature itself, but to nature as it is imagined and experienced in literary text involving natural phenomena, or in daydreams” (Simons et al, 5)

If Bachelard is interested in “a new approach to epistemology that encompasses a psychoanalysis of objective knowledge,” as the *Parrhesia* editors write on page 4 of their introduction, then what insights may we derive that may be helpful in interpreting the global image of Rover? The answer is best assimilated directly from Bachelard himself, who writes that our ability to understand such a world is limited in its very dimensionality because “we could shatter but we could not analyze” (“*Metaphysics*” 18). By extension, one might argue that Rover represents a duality that is summed up in the state of being inside the balloon and outside of it. The former is the most perilous and the one No. 6 most desires to avoid because, for the individual consciousness, it assumes not only acquiescence but also at least passive participation in the system. Those who

encounter Rover the Enforcer have either been suppressed entirely or have given up – with the specificity of which mattering little to Rover and those he/she/it represents.

The question, however, is to what extent this duality is inevitable. As Bachelard writes in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, the fact that a phenomenon with physical dimensionality and metaphorical import can indeed “contradict itself” means that it is “one of the principles of universal explanation” (*Fire* 7). The question of “finding how unconscious values affect the very basis of empirical and scientific knowledge,” if applied to *The Prisoner*, transforms Rover as a metaphor from a symbol of death to a symbol of death-in-life (*Fire* 7). Literally, Rover always poses the threat of suffocation and apparently little else, but a threat that is also warm and embracing in an eerie way. After all, the human fetus begins in a womb, where there is no need or even possibility of normal respiration. Thus, does Rover represent a looming threat, or else a sort of Freudian “death wish” to return to the point at which conflict is thereafter resolved? If both, then the nature of the physical metaphor transforms seamlessly from “balloon as threat of death” to “balloon as nest,” as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson might suggest. *Metaphors We Live By* argues that metaphors make sense because they are actually grounded in the physical world rather than existing solely as rhetorical devices contrived by the artist to suggest an analogy. “Good is up,” for example, because we humans are generally more potent when we are on our feet, or conversely, able to run from an existential threat. In this sense, the “Rover is a nest” analogy likens the balloon entity to the warm and protective place from which we all begin our life journey.

Or is Rover a shell, to borrow another of Bachelard’s metaphors from *The Poetics of Space*? A nest is associated with protection but also with birth, while the shell is both a place of refuge and an appurtenance. True, we customarily refer to the membrane around a bird egg as a shell, but the isolate word “shell” usually invokes the image of a sea creature either with a clamping hinge or else with its house literally on its back. More importantly, the seashell (which is what Bachelard primarily has in mind in his chapter “Shells”) may invoke birth in the more general form of “coming out,” but is also a place where swallowing can take place. In this sense, Rover may invoke a “coming out,” but more typically and avoidance of being swallowed. It is this latter fate that No. 6 in particular wishes to avoid.

Last but not least, we must ask how Bachelard’s “Phenomenology of Roundness” is relevant to the image of Rover. The spherical nature of Rover conforms to Bachelard’s perception of entities that “blot out the world”

because they “have no past” (*Poetics* 234). His actual metaphor is “being is round,” which will “allow us to recognize the primitivity of certain images of being...to collect ourselves, permit us to confer an initial constitution on ourselves, and to confirm our being intimately, inside” (*Poetics* 235). Likewise, roundness presupposes the possibility that it represents the sphere of Parmenides. But at the same time, it may invoke the aforementioned sphere of the Earth sitting atop the shoulder of Hercules in the statue at Portmeirion. Is Hercules holding up the world, or is it weighing him down? Is the Parmenidian sphere a metaphor physical reality, or is it a myth that emerges from the nonscientific origins from which we humans inevitably emerged before science was even possible, as Bachelard suggest in the text quoted in Note 7? Similar questions may be asked about the function of Rover as a metaphor.

However, the very fact that Rover can be both a threatening presence analogous to the mollusk in the ocean waiting for a victim to float by, but at the same time a nest of protection, means that the answer of which he/she/it really represents is indeterminate. Therefore, the very metaphor is itself unstable, just as so many other elements of the Prisoner series are indeterminate and unstable.

For example, the possibility is preserved that the Village is indeed located somewhere in Continental Europe, as proposed but not definitely proved in “The Chimes of Big Ben.” True, the opening credits of the final episode “Fall Out” locate the filming in Portmeirion, but the wording is important in determining whether we should concede that the Village was indeed itself located in North Wales. The caption reads as follows:

In the grounds of the Hotel Portmeirion, Penhyndeudraeth, North Wales by courtesy of Mr. Cloug Williams-Ellis (“Fall Out”)

In other words, the producers are merely informing the audience that the surreal village they have been viewing for 17 episodes is filmed at an actual place in Wales, but not necessarily that the Village itself must be understood to be located in Wales. Maybe it is, but maybe it isn’t, and this sort of indeterminacy is at the heart of the entire series.

Is Rover a threat of suffocation as he/she/it presses on the face of a victim, or is he/she/it a protective caul that represents a return to the womb of the Freudian death wish where there is no need to worry about achieving individual freedom and resisting the coercive State? It would seem that the individual victim is

typically faced with a choice, but even this bipolarity is evasive. Does No. 6 not typically represent a third region of alternatives? He knows that attempting to fight Rover physically is futile, as he learns when his punches have no effect in the aforementioned scene in “Arrival.” Rather, No. 6 has learned to keep a watchful eye on Rover, but to avoid a direct confrontation if at all possible.

Still, he will not acquiesce in the nurturing side of Rover, which after all is the very menace of any totalitarian government, whether emanating from the political left or right. Even more ominously, it is not at all clear whether a Western Democratic government is controlling both Rover and the entire Village. “Resistance is futile” in the parlance of the Star Trek Borg is not the message because No.6 demonstrates again and again that resistance may possibly result in liberation, or at least a frustration of the jailer. But McGoohan has also stated that ultimate liberation is clearly unlikely, and in fact said in the aforementioned 1977 interview that the automatically-opening door to No. 6’s London apartment in Buckingham Square at the very end of the final episode indicates that “he’s got no freedom; freedom is a myth; there’s no final conclusion” (“The Prisoner Puzzle”).

In fact, I would suggest that the conclusion is even more indeterminate than McGoohan suggests in the 1977 interview. For one, a plausible explanation can easily be proffered for the automatically opening door. The Village management had stated to each other on numerous occasions when No. 6 was not even present that they wished him to assume a leadership role. The No. 2 of “Dance of the Dead,” portrayed by Mary Morris, states that “I don’t want him broken; I want him won over. This man has a future with us.” The “President” of “Fall Out,” portrayed by Kenneth Griffith, states after practically begging No. 6 to assume a leadership role after his pending release from the Village that “you will see that your home is being made ready” while showing him film footage of his London apartment. Thus, it could be that the door was automated so as to reflect the high degree of technology in the Village itself. Assuming that No.6 indeed accepts his new role, he will merely be accommodated to the liking of the Village leadership of which he would now be a part, if not the highest-ranking authority.

Returning to the Borg analogy, the opening of this essay invoked the term “cyborg” to refer to the balloon entity itself and its potential. A cyborg is half human and half machine, and although the analogy with Star Trek Borg is limited, one may nonetheless note the potency of the metaphor of human hybridity in the modern world.

In the case of *The Prisoner*, the threat is clearly one that we can overcome if we simply assert our freedom, but the “inside and outside” hybridity of Rover indicates that we may lose this freedom if we do not assert ourselves.

Granted, No. 6 is an exceptional human being, as clearly indicated by his well-attested sterling performance as a secret agent, his importance to the Village leadership and obviously to the political powers to whom they report, and the very fact that the jury in “Fall Out” drowns out No. 6’s speech with an endless “Aye Aye Aye.” These and many other incidents would indicate that independence and exceptionality may be inextricably linked in the Prisoner universe, though not for the better. It would seem that the exceptional individuals are to be the overseers, while others are given more rough treatment, assuming that they survive at all.

Still, the reality of Rover as an impediment to independence is multifaceted, and ambivalence may well be the reason that we in 2026 have so much difficulty in dealing with the emergence of fascism as a living concept today when many of us thought that it had already been permanently relegated to the round-file of history. I would further argue that the confusion and misdirection so endemic in *The Prisoner* is precisely the focus that may be helpful in avoiding what McGoohan considered to be our impediments to achieving self-determinacy in the aforementioned 1977 interview. The question posed by the global metaphor represented by Rover is whether we can resist such existential forces, or whether it is simply easier to sit at the Cat and Mouse pub and have a conveniently non-alcoholic mocktail. The answer, alas, is indeterminate.

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