

Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*: Humanity inside a US women's prison

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Some 2.4 million people in the United States, more than one percent of the adult population, are presently incarcerated. By the end of 2011, some 7 million Americans (one out of every 34 adults) were either in federal, state and local prisons and jails or on probation and parole. If that unhappy "population" were a state, it would be the thirteenth largest in the US, just ahead of Washington and Massachusetts.

The US has the highest incarceration rate on the planet. As a proportion of the population, American authorities imprison 17 times as many people as Iceland's, 12 times as many as Japan's and almost five times as many as authorities in England and Wales. With less than five percent of the world's population, the US has 23.5 percent of the global prison and jail population. Since 1980 the American prison population has quadrupled.

The ruling elite in the US, unable or unwilling to offer any progressive answer to the problems of poverty, homelessness and social inequality, finds a "solution," in its typically stupid, cruel and shortsighted manner, by locking people up in record numbers.

The so-called "correctional system," this national disgrace, unquestionably represents an essential feature of American life, and as such is bound to find expression in popular culture in one form or another. However, with few exceptions, that culture, especially television and film, depicts prisoners as dangerous wild animals, and the guards, police and prosecutors as the righteous protectors of normal, law-abiding citizens.

(One can hardly keep track of the number of television shows featuring police, federal agents, detectives and prosecutors as heroes, not infrequently placed in a positive light for playing fast and loose with civil liberties, beating confessions out of suspects etc.)

Standing in sharp and creditable contrast to this is the Netflix original drama *Orange is the New Black*, based on a memoir by former inmate Piper Kerman, who acts as an executive consultant for the show. The show was created by Jenji Kohan (born 1969), best known previously as the

creator of *Weeds* (2005-2012), featuring Mary-Louise Parker as a middle-class, suburban housewife who becomes a marijuana dealer to maintain her lifestyle.

The protagonist in *Orange is the New Black* is a fictionalized version of Kerman, one Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling), a thirty-something, upper-middle-class free spirit who, ten years ago, in her "after college looking-for-adventure phase," dated and assisted international drug runner Alex Vause (Laura Prepon, best known for her role in *That Seventies Show*). Vause has been picked up by police, and snitches on Chapman in return for a lesser sentence. Chapman pleads to a lesser charge in exchange for a 14-month sentence. Chapman is preparing to report for her sentence as Season One begins, savoring the last hours of freedom.

Since her breakup with Vause, Chapman has attempted to settle into a life more typical for her social class, with some complications. She is trying to set up a boutique bath soap business with her best friend. She gets engaged to her understanding and likable boyfriend, an aspiring writer, played by Jason Biggs (*American Pie*).

Without recounting too many details, Season One of *Orange* had many characters and subplots portrayed in a generally realistic way.

A recovering heroin addict befriends Alex Vause, the former heroin trafficker. A transgender individual, who engaged in identity theft to pay for a sex-change operation, goes to jail only to be denied the hormones she needs to remain outwardly female. Her struggle to stay sane is genuine and heartfelt. A yoga instructor, we learn, carries enormous guilt, fighting for some peace of mind knowing that she accidentally shot and killed a young child years before. The stories may appear farfetched at times or perhaps even clichéd in some cases, but *Orange* wins the viewer over: these are real people living in a cage. The series deals with them as human beings in difficult circumstances.

Certain parts of Season One are memorable, such as when the protagonist confesses, "I consider myself to be more of a secular humanist," as she refuses to be baptized by a

methamphetamine addict turned abortion-clinic-shooting fundamentalist. The overtly critical approach to religion, alongside a sympathetic treatment of secularism, is as unique in America television as it is refreshing.

In short, season one was an achievement.

By the beginning of Season Two, Chapman has been sent for her second stint in solitary because of a fight with another inmate. The first episode of Season Two is remarkable for the sense of terror and uncertainty around solitary confinement and Chapman's subsequent transport to a maximum-security facility. The plane ride makes a chilling reference to the US government's practice of extraordinary rendition, i.e., flying supposed terrorism suspects to CIA-run "black sites" where they will be tortured or perhaps killed.

By and large, Season Two continues to underscore the same themes in a revealing, critical manner. With few exceptions, the characters—guards, inmates and those on the outside who are missing them—come across as real people. Season Two does not obsess over the protagonist, but uses her as a means of exploring the penal system and the lower tiers of the social ladder. *Orange* is not a show about one person's miserable, terrifying experience. It is a show that brings prison to life, with all the good, the bad and the ugly.

Prison conditions feature prominently once again, highlighting the inescapable cruelty of a system obsessed with retribution and at best indifferent to human problems. One inmate, a cancer patient, dies because the prison system will not pay for her to have a double salpingo-oophorectomy (removal of the fallopian tubes and ovaries). A guidance counselor explains to her that the prison administration is convinced that chemotherapy is sufficient.

Shower drains repeatedly back up, sending sewage into shower stalls and bathrooms. In one episode, heavy rains flood the basement and first floor of the prison. Everyone is forced to sleep on the floor in a large room on one of the upper stories. In a humanizing moment, one inmate begins singing the 1990s pop music hit "Stay" by Lisa Loeb, and all the other inmates join in. Two prisoners rush to save the books in the library from ruin. In the vast majority of these women, and collectively too, there is a spark of life than won't be snuffed out so easily, even in dreadful conditions.

In one of the more touching subplots in Season Two, a group of older inmates tries to protect one of their friends from becoming a victim of "compassionate release," which is a euphemism for letting an older, mentally ill inmate onto the streets to beg and, sooner or later, die. "I give it a week," one of the older women concludes as the friend is forced into a van and driven away, screaming.

Season Two of *Orange* continues to use flashbacks to explain the inmates' lives and reveal the circumstances that shaped them. As before, these back-stories tend to be the

best portions of the show, making the inmates believable and sympathetic. The mentally ill "Crazy Eyes" (Uzo Aduba) is merely Suzanne, a little girl who was adopted, whose parents subsequently had the biological child they always wanted, and placed enormous pressure on her to be normal. It proved too much for Suzanne, despite her parents' best intentions.

In the case of another inmate, Lorna (Yael Stone), the back-story reveals a young girl who was in fact never engaged, as she claimed, but rather obsessed with a man whom she stalked. In a convincing manner, *Orange* shows how Lorna was a victim of romantic comedies and other pop culture nonsense, which led her to obsess about the perfect love, perfect first date, marriage etc. As her friend succinctly puts it, Lorna is a victim of "the wedding-industrial complex." To anyone familiar with American pop culture—perhaps the reader is aware of such "reality" shows as "Say Yes to the Dress"—Lorna's plight rings painfully true.

To be sure, Season Two of *Orange* is not a dramatic masterpiece. At times the dialogue feels contrived, if not stereotyped. Worse, there are elements of the plot that strike one as altogether implausible. It sometimes feels as though the show's producers were trying to trick audience members into watching the following episode, prodding them to wonder, "What's going to happen next!?" The cliffhanger-driven parts of the plot are unnecessary and detrimental.

Still more problematic is the tendency to portray a central character in Season Two as a purely evil figure. The character, known as Vee (Lorraine Toussaint), is a career criminal who strives for power at the top of the inmates' pecking order, a disgusting and pathetic undertaking. In her climb to the top, Vee exacerbates racial divisions, sows discontent among erstwhile friends and takes advantage of the weak, as seen in the case of the mentally ill Suzanne. For all her wretchedness, Vee has no back-story in Season Two, as opposed to the other characters, who by and large seem three-dimensional and lifelike.

The great strength of *Orange* is its willingness to humanize a large segment of society that is written off by both official society and the media. The show's success lies in representing these cast-off women, their imperfections, their instances of compassion and genuineness. In this regard, *Orange* represents a healthy trend. One hopes for more probing of the characters' situations, and less banalities, in Season Three, now in production.



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