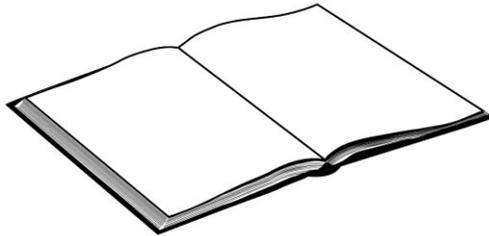


The Silver Archive #1A
SAPPHIRE & STEEL
Assignments One and Two



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THE SILVER ARCHIVE

SAPPHIRE AND STEEL - ASSIGNMENTS ONE AND TWO

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Nowadays audiences are used to shows targeting a range of different audiences by age: toddlers, children, pre-teens, late-teens, tweens, young adults, new adults... There are not just programmes but whole channels, aimed squarely at as many demographics as can be imagined, just as there are in books (of which even the term 'Young Adult' for the crossover between fiction and children's fiction only dates from 1962¹).

In the 1970s, however, things were very different in terms of drama on British TV. There was Drama, there was Educational Broadcasting (TV for Schools), and there was Children's Drama. Age suitabilities were guided by the various watersheds, mainly the 9pm one, seen as the main for-adults borderline.

Children's TV services in Britain began on the BBC in 1946 with **For the Children**, an hour-long live broadcast on Sunday afternoons, for an intended audience of toddlers through to primary-age pupils.

From there, the BBC began to lead the field in magazine and documentary programming for junior viewers. The Arts predictably got a junior strand, but there were also sports programmes, and current affairs shows, and quiz shows. In these fields, ITV somewhat lagged behind, but still managed to produce **Maggie** (1968-1980) as an equivalent to **Blue Peter**, and science and history programming like **How!** (1966-1981).

On the children's drama front, the BBC's larger nationwide budget and reputation allowed it to pull ahead of ITV in terms of quality output, although ratings remained competitive throughout. While the BBC tended to focus on adaptations of books, ITV focused on original screen ideas. This meant that BBC children's drama tended to look better and gain more favourable press, but ITV children's

¹ Dunning, Stephen, 'Criticism and the "Young Adult Novel"' (1962).

drama tended to be more adventurous and action-oriented. ITV shows also often had longer seasons, because they were specially developed rather than drawn from a pre-existing work of a relatively trim word-count.

Assignment One's setting of an old solid house, and the historical angle brought by the Roundheads and plague victims, combine with the short serial format of a six-episode single story to give the show more of a BBC children's drama feel. **Sapphire & Steel** was taking the BBC on in its strongest game rather than the traditional ITV adventure format.

That was a bold and confident move, especially since the show would be entirely studio-bound and shot on video, eschewing the location filming enjoyed by other ITV serials like **Timeslip** (1970) or **Children of The Stones** (1977), both of which featured mind-bending time elements, or ITV's own book adaptations, such as **The Owl Service** (1969).

The closest thing to a Young Adult drama demographic was so-called 'Family Drama' in an evening slot, but this was not a separate department at any of the TV stations. Family drama was simply drama produced by the Drama departments, which happened to be considered not too strong for any audience member likely to be watching. (It was expected that families would watch together over dinner.)

This was a somewhat undefined transitional middle-ground; a liminal slot, in which the first two **Sapphire & Steel** stories – which had been recorded together in one fourteen-episode block – transitioned from childhood to adulthood, both on set and in front of the viewers' eyes.

Assignment One is, as stated previously, a Children's serial. This is clear in many ways, not least the fact that the audience identification figures are both children; Rob, who looks to be

around twelve or fourteen, and his younger sister Helen. The two main characters are a male and female pairing in loco parentis, and Lead is a jovial giant, who encourages the two kids to sing, and probably wouldn't be out of place hosting a Saturday morning show. There are no deaths in the serial, and there's even a clear-cut happy ending.

Assignment Two, however, is a complete reversal. Such audience identification characters as there are comprise of an older man and a ghostly soldier. The closest thing to a children's audience-identification is Sapphire acting as the proxy voice for a young teacher on whom the soldier had a crush at school nearly seventy years earlier. Multiple deaths are re-enacted, jollity is sparse, and the ending is far from a happy one.

What we see in these fourteen episodes is, therefore, a TV drama cross a threshold between two areas of target demographic, passing through the liminal zone of the 'family drama' timeslot. This is very different than the norm, where a series would be commissioned as an adult drama suitable for the 'family drama' timeslot, rather than changing in the middle of the first production block's writing.

On screen, Rob himself also seems to be on the cusp of puberty. Again, this is a transformational border between childhood and adulthood, and simple to recognise as a biological mechanism. It's also, appropriately enough for a drama focusing on the supernatural effects of time going wrong, and which contains ghosts and (in *Assignment Two*) spiritualistic séances with Sapphire acting as a medium² — also something that comes to the fore in

² Another change from the documentation for the commissioning of *Assignment One* as a children's series accepting a requirement that any apparently supernatural activity has a (pseudo)scientific explanation. And they don't try very hard in that story either, as the change had happened before filming. (Network DVD viewing guide)

many Fortean tales of ghosts and poltergeists. Such reports throughout the 20th Century often focused on members of the affected family who had just reached puberty and in the few years after. The Enfield Poltergeist, investigated by Maurice Grosse between 1977 and 1979 (and featured in national and local news programmes during that time), is the seminal British example³. Another famous case includes the Rosenheim Poltergeist in 1967⁴. Pretty much every issue of *Fortean Times* has an example.

And Rob is just the right age.

³ Playfair, Guy Lyon, *This House Is Haunted*, (1980) itself adapted into a British serial, *The Enfield Haunting* by Sky in 2015.

⁴ **Arthur C Clarke's World of Strange Powers** (1985) episode 2, *Things That Go Bump in The Night*.