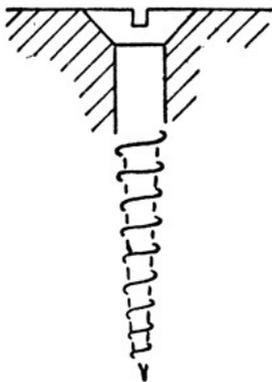


The Silver Archive #6

**THE STRANGE
WORLD OF
GURNEY SLADE**



By Andrew Hickey

THE SILVER ARCHIVE

THE STRANGE WORLD OF GURNEY SLADE

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Overview

Title: The Strange World of Gurney Slade

Writers: Dick Hills, Sid Green, Anthony Newley (uncredited)

Directors: Alan Tarrant, Anthony Newley

Original UK Transmission Dates: 22 October 1960, 8.35pm
 29 October 1960, 8.35pm
 5 November 1960, 11.10pm
 12 November 1960, 11.10pm
 19 November 1960, 11.10pm
 26 November 1960, 11.10pm

Running Times: Six episodes of 30 minutes.

Regular Cast: Anthony Newley (Gurney Slade)

Guest Cast: John Bosh (Frank's Son), Margaret Cox (Frank's Daughter), Ann Lancaster (Dog), Charles Lloyd Pack (Tinker), Edwin Richfield (Husband), Keith Smith (Policeman), Joy Stewart (Wife), Una Stubbs (Girl in Park), Anneke Wills (Girl on Airfield), Douglas Wilmer (Prosecuting Counsel), Bernie Winters (Albert).

Critical Responses:

'One of television's genuine oddities, **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** was a whimsical 'comedy of thought' following one ex- (or so he thinks) actor's meandering journey through a fantasy world.'

[Catriona Wright, 'The Strange World of Gurney Slade', BFI Screenonline]

'While I can admire the gall of it, the pioneering spirit which created it and the bloody-mindedness of both Newley and his writers

creating something so wildly off-centre, I'm really not sure whether watching it is an enjoyable experience or an utterly pointless one.'

[Paul Mount, 'DVD Review: The Strange World of Gurney Slade', Starburst Magazine]

Synopsis

After breaking the fourth wall of a mundane sitcom, **Gurney Slade** walks off stage and out of the television studio, preferring instead to spend six weeks wandering around London and its environs in a series of increasingly surreal adventures, all backgrounded by the sound of his own thoughts.

Introduction

The Silver Archive series exists primarily to discuss science fiction and fantasy series, but those genres can be very broad indeed. In this series we are going to look at obvious candidates like **Buffy the Vampire Slayer**, which are firmly in the centre of the genre as most people understand it, but we'll also be examining work which many might not immediately consider as being part of those genres, but which on closer examination can be seen to fit into them, albeit not always especially comfortably.

The Strange World of Gurney Slade is one such. It's a series which few would think of when asked to name fantasy TV, and which has few of the typical markings of genre TV even when judged by the somewhat broader stylistic range that vintage British telefantasy allows, but which is still undoubtedly fantastical and taking place in an unreal world. It might be considered magical realism rather than fantasy per se, but the dividing line between those two genres is more to do with intention of acceptance within the literary canon than with techniques or subject matter. Similarly, one can consider it absurdism, but **The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy** is also absurdist, and there are few who would claim that that series was not science fiction as well¹.

But no matter what genre one chooses to assign it to, **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** is one of the most interesting pieces of television ever created. Appearing right at the start of the postmodern era, before the term had even been applied to anything outside architecture, it subverts the expectations of genre, deconstructs the sitcom, acknowledges the existence of an author separate from the world the characters live in who can manipulate

¹ For those who are not familiar with the series, incidentally, perhaps best to turn to the chapter 'What Is The Strange World of Gurney Slade?', which explains in more detail what the series is about, and the basics of what, if any, genre the series belongs to. For the rest of this introduction, we shall be assuming that the reader has at least a passing familiarity with the series.

events within the story, and talks about the commercial realities that limit and shape the form of the story.

Nearly sixty years on from its first broadcast, **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** still looks extraordinarily advanced. At the original time of broadcast – when it was shown on ITV in prime time to a family audience (at least at first, before being unceremoniously moved to a late-night slot once the programme controllers realised what it actually was) – it must have seemed like something from another planet.

Because **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** is a series which has its roots in 1950s popular culture, but which pre-empted much of what was considered innovative in the later 1960s. Watching it now, it is easy to see elements of *A Hard Day's Night*, of **The Prisoner**, of **Q5** and **Monty Python's Flying Circus**, of **Doctor Who** stories like *The Mind Robber...* in short, it's easy to see much of what is distinctive about the TV and cinema of the 1960s making its first appearance here.

And that's not what you'd expect from a series that was meant to be a family sitcom, starring a pop star, and written by the people who are now best known for writing for Morecambe and Wise before Eddie Braben replaced them. It certainly wasn't what the people in charge expected when it was commissioned.

So, in this book we will look at how the most forward-looking piece of TV from a forward-looking age was created by people who one would normally be expecting to be making something far more forgettable, and how that ultimately stems from the unique nature of Anthony Newley as an artist – as well as what the likely contributions of the show's actual writers were.

Normally in sitcom (and **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** is, at least nominally, a sitcom) the auteur, to the extent that there is one, is the writer – sitcom is a writer's medium, and even in the case of shows based around a non-writing lead actor (such as **Hancock**, of which much more later), the tone of the show is set by the writers – **Hancock** was far more about the vaguely melancholic tone that Galton and Simpson brought to the scripts than it was about

anything that Tony Hancock himself did, wonderful as Hancock's performance undoubtedly was (as can be seen by comparing the later work for both writers and actor). Yet in the case of **The Strange World of Gurney Slade**, everything about the series centres on Anthony Newley, and it's to his work that one needs to look to find a context for the series.

Newley is, as we shall see, a strange figure – one who managed to be a massive influence on the culture as a whole while, for the most part, staying on the fringes. He's someone whose songs are known by almost everyone, yet who is rarely thought of as a songwriter. He was a filmmaker who Roger Ebert compared to Fellini and Godard, but that comparison was made about a sex comedy with characters called Polyester Poontang and Filigree Fondle. He was best known for his appearances on game shows and spent his last years working on soap operas, yet he was someone with a serious artistic intent. It's very hard to think of a figure in British popular culture who exemplified and embraced more different and contradictory personae, while integrating them successfully.

And **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** absolutely fits into his work – it's recognisably a creation of the same mind as *Stop The World I Want To Get Off* and *Can Hieronymus Merkin Ever Forget Mercy Humppe And Find True Happiness?* – but it's also very much a product of its time. It has its roots in the pop-existentialism of the late fifties, in the work of people like Colin Wilson, but also in the way that work leached into the broader popular culture. We've already mentioned Tony Hancock (and he will be coming up many more times in this book), but the attitudes shown in Hancock's film *The Rebel* exemplify the way this sense of alienation, combined with a belief in an ill-defined specialness on the part of young and middle-aged British men of the time, had become deeply rooted in the popular culture.

Not everyone was reading Wilson, but everyone was watching Hancock, and the two weren't so far apart.

So, this book will take **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** in its cultural context. We'll look at it as a forerunner of the films of Richard Lester and the comedy of Monty Python, but also as

something inspired by the Angry Young Men and Galton and Simpson. But within that, we'll also look at what it is that makes this still a valuable piece of TV today – at what it does with narrative structure and self-referentiality, at the ideas it uses and the techniques it pioneered. And we'll look in detail at the ways in which it points to a more expansive definition of televised fantasy and science fiction than the one that many people think of – because just as this series is indeed a part of a particular existentialist tradition, and just as it's part of a particular sitcom tradition, it's also part of a tradition that includes **Doctor Who**, **The Box of Delights**, **The Prisoner**, and many more of the greats of British telefantasy over the years.

This is a tradition of metafictional narrative, of the fantastic used to satirise contemporary society. It's a tradition in which the boundaries between the fantastic and the real are blurred, and metaphor abuts mimetic realism often in the same shot. In these stories, which draw as much from Menippean satire as they do from the works that are more normally considered to be science fiction or fantasy, the world is a strange place into which characters and situations from other narratives can intrude, and in which the imagination is reified.

The roots of **Gurney Slade** can be found as much in *Gulliver's Travels* as in any more obvious antecedents – the series is part of a long tradition – but at the same time it's a series that could only have been made in 1960.

Gurney Slade is an individualistic work by a particular individual, and also a work that required many people's input and could only have been made in a particular culture. It's a work that is *sui generis* but which is also part of multiple genres. And over the course of this book we will look at those contradictions and see how – and if – we can resolve them. To start with, let's take a closer look at the man behind Gurney...

Biography

Andrew Hickey is a writer, unsuccessful musician, and perennial third-place political candidate. When not losing elections he writes books on subjects including **Doctor Who**, superhero comics, 1960s harmony pop music, and the tenuous connections that can be found between those subjects if you look hard enough.

His first novel, *Faction Paradox: Head of State*, was published by Obverse Books in 2015, and his **Black Archive** on the **Doctor Who** serial *The Mind Robber* in 2016. He lives in Manchester with a very tolerant wife and a less tolerant Jack Russell.