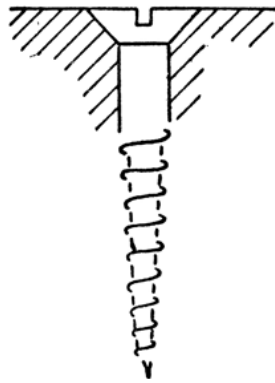


The Silver Archive #6

**THE STRANGE WORLD OF
GURNEY SLADE**



By Andrew Hickey

THE SILVER ARCHIVE

THE STRANGE WORLD OF GURNEY SLADE

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Biography

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 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 preempts 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

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.

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...

Chapter 1 - Anthony Newley

Anthony Newley is one of the strangest figures in British popular culture – someone who seemed determined to make personal, important art, while working in the most frivolous and ephemeral of media, and for a giant popular audience. Given those constraints, his career is a remarkable one, and taking a broad look at his body of work, Newley was something of a renaissance man.

He had started as an actor, appearing as a child star in David Lean's 1948 version of *Oliver Twist* as the Artful Dodger, before becoming one of Britain's most popular leading men in his early adulthood. He'd then made a sudden side-swerve into pop stardom, more or less by chance, after being cast in the 1959 film *Idol on Parade* as an Elvis-like pop star who had been drafted into the army (as the real Elvis had at the time).

Newley had sung the songs for the film, and had unexpected chart success – suddenly, he was something of a teen idol, competing with the likes of Tommy Steele and Marty Wilde for the affections of teenage girls across the UK. He became a pop star, and one of the first pop stars to sing with a British accent rather than affecting a pseudo-American one. On hearing Newley's early pop singles now, one is immediately struck by how much of an influence he was on David Bowie, whose early work amounted to vocal clones of Newley's style². But Bowie isn't the only musician to be influenced by Newley – Bowie's namesake Davy Jones (of the Monkees), the Kinks, Madness, Blur, all owed a great deal to Newley's particular Cockney theatricalism.

But Newley, unlike most of the pop stars of the day, wasn't content merely to be a singer. He became one of Britain's great singer-songwriters, collaborating with Leslie Bricusse on a variety of songs that became standards and are known by everyone, usually without them even realising that they were written by Newley.

And when I say known by everyone, I mean known by everyone. There's 'Feeling Good', the song that was a hit for Nina Simone and later for Muse. There's 'Gonna Build a Mountain', which became a success for Sammy Davis Jr. And then there's his songs for films, like all the songs for *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, or the theme from *Goldfinger*.

Newley was more successful in his *third* most successful career than almost anyone is even in a career they put their life into.

During his time, Newley was a maker of experimental music ('Moogies Bloogies', with Delia Derbyshire of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, is a particularly interesting example of early-60s electronica), a star of stage and screen, an award-winning screenwriter, a director, and a songwriter. Yet he's probably best known now for having been a regular on **Hollywood Squares** in the US for much of the 70s, and for his performance in **EastEnders** during the last years of his life.

But we're not looking at those last years right now. We're looking at 1960, when Newley was a film star who had also become a pop star and a successful TV variety performer. At this point in his career, he had given no indication of being any more interesting a figure than, say, Jim Dale or Tommy Steele, other light-entertainment figures who worked in multiple media.

And one of the media Newley worked in was, of course, TV. In particular, in early 1960 he worked on a TV show called **Saturday Spectacular**. That show, which ran from 1956 to 1961, was one of ATV's most popular shows. This series gave popular entertainers their own episodes (and so Newley's episodes were titled *Saturday Spectacular Presents The Anthony Newley Show*, for example) but working with a regular production team. These were variety shows involving songs, sketches, and general all-round entertainment.

Among the people who regularly worked on **Saturday Spectacular** were scriptwriters Dick Hills and Sid Green, who were until 1959 the writers for comedian Dave King, but who were also jobbing comedy writers. Their work on **Saturday Spectacular** was later to lead them to their greatest fame, as writers (and occasional on-screen stooges) on Morecambe and Wise's first hit TV series, **Two of a Kind**, which was to debut the next year, also on ATV, after the double-act also appeared on **Saturday Spectacular**.

But at this point in their career, Hills and Green were no better known than any other writers. Their main strength was an ability to write material in a comedian's established voice – a useful talent when coming up with sketches and routines at short notice for many different acts.

Newley, however, was not content with them merely providing him material to perform – he wanted to collaborate with them, at least on the ideas if not on the complete scripts, and so the three worked together on the material that became Newley's TV show. And one of the ideas that the three came up with went down surprisingly well – they wrote a simple sketch, in which Newley and other performers would talk together, but at

² "I was the world's worst mimic...I was Anthony Newley for a year." (Bowie, NME, 1973)

the same time, the audience would hear a pre-recorded tape of the characters' thoughts, which would provide an amusing juxtaposition with the words they actually said.

The audience loved it, and the popularity of the idea inspired Hills, Green, and Newley to come up with a new series, in which you would be able to hear the main character's thoughts all the time.

And that's where we come in.

Chapter 2 - What is The Strange World of Gurney Slade?

It might seem unusual for a book about a specific TV series to contain an explanation as to what that TV series actually is, but **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** is an unusual TV series. If nothing else, very few people under the age of sixty can have any memory at all of seeing it on TV. It was broadcast in 1960, repeated in 1963, and then (other than one 1992 repeat of a single episode) never shown again, so only those who have bought the 2011 Network DVD of the series on the basis of its cult reputation will have any idea what the series actually involves. Given that this book is part of a series on different TV shows, it must be presumed that at least some of this book's readers are people who are buying the whole **Silver Archive** series and don't necessarily have any awareness of the programme. This chapter is aimed, mostly, at those readers.

So, to sum up, **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** was a six-episode series, a star vehicle for Anthony Newley. It was broadcast in late 1960, starting off in a prime-time slot but quickly moving to a late-night one as the ratings fell off a cliff-edge and the complaints started to come in. It details the thoughts of a character, the eponymous Gurney Slade, as he wanders around and encounters an increasingly fantastical set of situations and environments.

The Strange World of Gurney Slade is a sitcom. Or at least, it was billed as a sitcom, and in its first few minutes it even looked like being one, but it's not a series that goes for jokes first and foremost, as opposed to being a witty exploration of ideas, and it has far more in common with *Alice in Wonderland* (especially Jonathan Miller's 1966 adaptation) than anything normally termed a sitcom.

Earlier in 1960, in a variety TV special, Anthony Newley had performed in sketches in which people would have conversations while their inner monologues would be heard by the audience as voiceover, contradicting or putting a different spin on the things they were saying.

This was an unusual level of trickery for the time period (a period, remember, in which very few TV shows were made anything other than as live, and in which many were indeed broadcast live rather than pre-recorded), and the sketches proved immensely popular – so popular that it was thought it would be worth putting together a TV series based around the concept.

And, indeed, the first three episodes of **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** are dominated by Newley's voiceover as Gurney Slade's inner monologue – and episode one even has a scene which comes directly from those sketches, in which Gurney and a businessman share a car, with Gurney wondering what impressive thoughts must be going through the other man's head as he makes momentous decisions, while the businessman is merely having sexual fantasies about his mistress. (There is also a smaller echo of this in the second episode's courtship-ritual scenes).

But the series quickly evolved into something very different, and very much more interesting. This became apparent from the very first scene in episode one, where what looks like a typical family sitcom starts to unravel as Newley first doesn't say his lines, prompting confusion from the cast (again, a kind of confusion that would happen on occasion in this time period, and would usually be handled in much the same way that it's handled in the show) before just walking off the sets and into the street.

From this point on, the series gets further and further away from sitcom, and indeed from any recognisable genre at all. The first three episodes are spent watching the character Gurney Slade explore three different environments (the streets of London, an airfield and some areas of suburbia, and a farm in the countryside) and interacting with people, many of whom appear to exist only in his imagination, as we hear his thoughts about society in voiceover.

Then, just as the series seems to have established this as a style, everything changes again. The last three episodes of the series are all studio-bound, and in some ways seem closer to conventional sitcom – they're all based on dialogue, and many of the characters are recognisable types who would have been familiar from other sitcoms (and indeed Gurney himself seems to be based on one of those types, as we discuss later). But while those episodes are based on character interaction, they're also about the exploration of fantastical spaces and ideas, whether that be the Gurneyland inside Gurney's own mind or the grotesque, Kafkaesque, courtroom in which all of episode four takes place.

All of this is shot in ways that go against sitcom convention – there's no studio audience, it's shot on film rather than on videotape, and while there are definitely laugh-out-loud funny moments, there's rather more which is just about exploration of ideas and riffing, in ways which may seem surprisingly modern to those who don't have a firm grasp on the history of comedy. The discussion of ants carrying grand pianos in their mandibles

in episode three, for example, is pure Eddie Izzard, in content if not in delivery, although it owes a great deal to the house style of Associated London Scripts³.

The series was massively influential – David Bowie cited it in interviews as an influence on him (as Newley more generally influenced him, of course), and one can see its fingerprints all over shows as diverse as **The Prisoner** (especially the famous final episode, which is spookily similar to the final episode of *Gurney*), **Monty Python's Flying Circus** (Eric Idle has listed 'Anthony Newley in The Small [sic]World of Gurney Slade' in a list of his influences⁴), and even arguably **Hancock** – but it remained almost entirely unknown, because the public reception of the series was so bad.

Looking at it now, it's clear just how much of the innovative TV and film of the late 1960s was presaged here. Episode one of *Gurney Slade* contains some shots which are almost identical to sequences in *A Hard Day's Night*, whose director wasn't even to make his first feature film (the less-celebrated *It's Trad, Dad!*) for another two years (although it's fair to point out that that director, Richard Lester, had worked with Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers on projects such as *The Running, Jumping, and Standing Still Film*, which may well itself have exerted more than a little influence on **Gurney Slade**, especially on episode two).

What we have in **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** is, essentially, the moment when many strands that had been present in 1950s British culture – in **Hancock's Half Hour** and the *Molesworth* books, **The Goon Show** and *Absolute Beginners*, John Osborne plays and Colin Wilson books – all started to come together and flower into the 1960s of **Python**, the Beatles, **Doctor Who** and **The Prisoner**. But it's not just a series that's interesting as a missing link in cultural evolution. This is still a series with a lot to say, and whose last episode, in particular, is an example of conceptual horror that has rarely, if ever, been bettered on British TV.

But this is a sitcom with no fixed situation and with little emphasis on comedy. Over the course of this book we will look at what the series is actually doing, and why sitcom is not perhaps the best label for it, but that was how it was initially promoted, and when people sat down to watch the first episode that's what they were expecting.

³ A writers' cooperative that produced much of the most influential comedy of the late 50s and early sixties. As far as I know no-one involved in *Gurney Slade* worked with ALS, but ALS' writers were responsible for so much comedy at that time, and in particular so much of the comedy that other writers admired, that it's possible to see the ALS style even in works like *Gurney Slade* which had no formal connection to them.

⁴ Idle, Eric, 'Influences', <http://www.ericidle.com/blog/2016/04>

Chapter 3 – Episode One

Episode one is in some ways the odd episode out for **Gurney Slade** – because it was broadcast as part of *TV Heaven* in 1992, for nearly twenty years it was the only episode of the series to which most people had any access, thanks to off-air tapes of that broadcast. As a result, it was the episode which, up until the Network DVD release of the series in 2011, shaped the perception of the series, at least among that small number of people who thought about it at all.

Luckily, it doesn't give as much of an incorrect impression as most first episodes of series – it clearly sets out most of the themes and preoccupations which will dominate the other five episodes of the series. Indeed, had episode two or three been the episodes broadcast in the 90s, the series would likely have had a much less accurate public memory, as they have far fewer of the series' characteristic attributes.

We start with what seems to be a fairly standard sitcom of the time. Mrs Padgett is doing the ironing and complaining to her husband Albert about his laziness. Little Alfie is trying to study for his eleven-plus, Albert's mother lives with them, and there's a pedantic lodger (coded as someone who's possibly autistic⁵, and who is certainly prim and proper) and a comedy fat Northern neighbour, Mr Ramsbotham. The jokes are the usual predictable sort of thing for the kind of series this appears to be:

MRS PADGETT

He's training to be an insanitary spectre.

MR HOPKINS'

No, Mrs P, sanitary inspector!

MRS PADGETT

Oh, have you changed your job then?

The social place of each of these characters is set up immediately by their dress, manner of speech, and attitudes. Mr Hopkins the lodger is wearing a turtleneck jumper, while Mr Ramsbotham has trousers pulled up over his large waist and braces. Albert, on the other hand, wears a suit and tie, of a cut that was ultra-fashionable at the time (it looks very similar to the suits the Beatles would wear in their earliest TV appearances, though it has a more obvious collar). Meanwhile Albert's mother is such a recognisable type that the only surprising thing about her is that they didn't get Irene Handl to play her, as it felt that Handl played essentially the same character, or a similar one, in almost every British film or TV series from 1954 to 1970 inclusive.

It becomes apparent relatively quickly that this is deliberate – that these characters are so broadly drawn, and such obvious types, in order to parody the standard tropes of late-50s and early-60s sitcom. But at first, it seems that this is just an example of such a sitcom, and not a particularly interesting example. A modern viewer unaware of what's coming might be tempted to turn off, singularly unimpressed with this weak material, were it not for a couple of odd points.

One is that there's no laugh track, unlike virtually every sitcom of its type. The other is that Albert, Anthony Newley's character, seems as unimpressed with the show he's in as the viewer.

And Albert starts to get more and more annoyed. Were it not for the fact that Albert is played by star of stage, screen, and disc Anthony Newley, we probably wouldn't notice that he doesn't seem to be acting as broadly as everyone else, and that he hasn't yet had any lines.

But we do notice that, and we notice more that when Albert does get a line, he doesn't say it.

This wasn't completely unusual in late fifties and early 1960's television. Actors would occasionally miss a cue and have to be prompted, as most TV series were made as live, even when they were pre-recorded – videotape editing posed massive technical challenges, as well as rendering the tape unusable for future programmes, and so the practice at the time was just to keep going if an actor messed up.

But Newley is prompted, over and over again, with his line 'a boiled egg for me, my love', and says nothing. As the prompter keeps whispering the line, Newley pulls on a coat. The rest of the characters vamp, increasingly desperately, as he gives no sign of wanting to say his line. We start to see boom mics, and then Newley/Albert

⁵ At the time this would not have been how this coding was thought of; but there are recognisable types in fiction with attributes that correspond to ones often seen in autistic people – who have, of course, existed since long before an official diagnosis was possible.

walks off the set. We pull back, seeing the cameras and studio, and the people trying to get him to stay (including a floor manager played by a very young Geoffrey Palmer)

We've also, though, pulled away from the viewpoint we had originally. Everything we've seen so far has been shot multi-camera⁶, but now we're cutting to single-camera film.

"Albert" walks out on to the street, pursued by Palmer, still trying to persuade him to turn back. 'You must be mad! We're on the air!'

"Albert" walks on, unspeaking, though dancing a little jig. The only sound is the theme music for the series, which starts up – and Newley plays air piano to it, as if he knows that even though he's walked off the set he's still on TV. The titles come up – at one point saying "THE WORLD OF STRANGE" before settling into the correct title, and Newley walks on. What he doesn't do is offer any explanation for his decision to walk off the set.

Indeed, it's not until more than five minutes into the episode that we hear Anthony Newley's voice at all. Before we do, we get a scene eerily premonitory of *A Hard Day's Night*, with Newley playing football with a stone he finds on the floor, shot almost identically to the famous scenes of Ringo Starr walking by the canal in the later film. And the stone is the next 'character' to speak, and the first sign that we're into a world that doesn't obey the normal laws of nature, when Newley tries to cast the stone into the river, and the stone shouts 'Oy, you know I can't swim, I'd sink like a stone!'

And only then, after Newley sits down, five minutes and fourteen seconds into the episode, do we hear him speak – or at least, we hear his interior monologue, as he thinks to himself 'A half-hour television show. Half an hour to put the world right. What can you do in half an hour? I need at least forty minutes.'

I won't continue to describe every detail of the first episode (and will describe the later episodes in less detail as well) – much of the rest of it doesn't need a great deal in the way of description, being a mixture of comedy involving the dissonance between what Gurney is thinking and what other people are thinking, and ruminations on thumbing lifts in long-distance lorries and how he should just make up a new language with words like 'Formansville', 'klapotchk', 'spingleholt' and 'flangewick'.

But the monologue at the end of the episode is worth repeating here – Gurney's thoughts as he walks off into the distance after having seen the rest of the cast from the beginning of the episode all watching his current behaviour on the TV.

'I am a walking television show. I can't get away from them. Big Brother's watching me. And Big Dad and Big Mum. The whole family's watching me, I'm like a goldfish in a bowl. I'm a poor squirming squingle under a microscope. Leave me alone will you? I've got a right to me privacy. I just walked out of all this. I don't want to know. Now leave me alone! Switch me off! I've got a right to me own privacy! I'm gonna live me own life! Switch orf! Will you stop it and leave me alone? Go back! Don't follow me will you? There ought to be a law! This is a free country and I shouldn't have to have this problem! Now leave me alone! I warned you, I'll get the law on you!'

All of this (and other events such as his brief romance with Una Stubbs' character from an advertising poster, and his attempts to get rid of the resulting vacuum cleaner) makes this episode almost a microcosm of the whole series – all the major themes of the series appear here.

So, while the series does go to many more interesting places after this, anyone for whom this was the first exposure to the series, whether in 1960, 1963, 1992, or 2011, will have been able to get a very good idea of what they were in for from this.

But in other ways the episode is slightly out of the ordinary for the series, at least in so far as a series like this can have an 'ordinary'. For a start, there's little of the sense of pushing against sexual convention there that we see in the next few episodes, and indeed in Newley's other works along these lines. Some of the thoughts he overhears hint at this slightly – "If only I'd had my teeth in at the time," and "If I showed her those photographs I've got, perhaps she'd be a little more inclined to..." – but it's not a major theme of the episode in the way it is later. There's more of a boundary between fantasy and reality, as we see that no-one other than Gurney can see Una Stubbs' dancing girl, where in later episodes that boundary is more permeable (for example the children in episode two can see the fairy), and there's a persistent sense that what we're watching here is not the adventures of a character called Gurney Slade, but of an actor called Anthony Newley.

The opening few minutes are what's crucial here – Gurney/Newley breaking the fourth wall, but not completely breaking down the barriers between the audience and the show. Gurney walks off from the TV show he's meant to be doing, but as he walks off he plays air piano which provides the soundtrack for the titles, and at the end of the episode he addresses the audience and acknowledges that he's still part of a TV series. When

⁶ Or at least it is shot *as if* on multi-camera videotape. The picture looks, throughout, as if it were shot on film, but the camera techniques used in these early shots are ones that would usually be used in videotaped studio work. Resolution of TV sets in this period was not high enough that audiences would have noticed the difference in stock.

Gurney walks off the set, he's not walking out of his TV series, but walking *into* it – and indeed, we later see the characters who were part of Gurney's sitcom watching the show on TV. Watching, that is, the show we're watching.

The conventional way of interpreting the opening scene, in other words, is only one of two ways of interpreting it. One is that what we're seeing at the start is a rather bland TV show and the actor playing one of the roles walks off the set and into real life. Another is that we're watching bland *real people*, and that one of them walks off *into a TV show*, which the others later watch.

Of course, in the world of the series, both of these interpretations are absolutely true. The narrative levels in the first episode act as a figure/ground illusion, where neither way of watching the episode is more valid than another. But the latter – that Gurney is entering, not exiting, a TV series – is a far more productive way of watching the episode, as it provides a context in which the rest of the series can be viewed, even if it's not the reading that most people jump to immediately.

Indeed, the world through which Gurney wanders is a televisual one – one where people's thoughts can be heard as voiceover, and even one where, in the middle of the story, an advertisement intrudes on the reality of the story. The most important thing to note about **The Strange World of Gurney Slade** might also be the most obvious – that it is a television show.

But we also have, in microcosm, the whole *thematic* story of the series. The series as a whole is about encouraging people to break out of their social scripts, as Gurney does at the beginning, but those people over and over again find that they're still trapped by a greater script, as Gurney does at the end of the episode, as he walks off ranting and asking for his privacy and for the audience to leave him alone – even though he may have left his TV show, he's still in a TV show. Society is something you can't escape, and even nonconformity is just another way of conforming, just to a different set of expectations.

It's also, very clearly, centred around Gurney/Newley. Some later episodes have Gurney interacting with other characters who drive the plot (such as it is), but here he's basically only interacting with himself and with characters in his imagination who appear and disappear more or less at random. The only character who both affects Gurney's actions and seems to exist in the real world (or at least in the level of reality in which the viewer is meant to be understanding the programme) is the policeman – he makes Gurney pick up the newspaper and carry it, rather than drop it on the floor, and this is literally the closest anyone in Gurney's own level of reality comes to affecting his behaviour.

One might say that this episode of **Gurney Slade** is the ultimate in solipsism, with other people either existing only in his imagination (the girl from the advert, the people in the dustbins, the talking dog) or existing in reality and being irritants (the audience, the other characters in the sitcom at the beginning, the policeman). The one exception is Sir Geoffrey Jerome, who is presented as a real-world figure who Gurney admires. Even he, though, turns out to be a totally different person in his own mind from the one that Gurney perceives him as – thinking only about sex (in much the same terms that Gurney himself would use later in the series) rather than thinking about saving the national economy as Gurney imagines him to be.

So when reality impinges on Gurney's life, it's only as an annoyance – yet at the same time the interpretation one might put on the opening sequence is that Gurney *wants* more reality – and certainly while the actions he takes and the characters he interacts with are surreal (in the literal sense of the term rather than the vernacular one), from the moment he steps foot off the TV studio set every location he enters is a real place – the entire episode is shot on film, on location, rather than being shot in the studio on video.

So Gurney has journeyed into reality, taken a look at it, and essentially said, 'I don't like it, I want something better'. This is where the rest of the series goes, of course, as it picks at assumptions both societal and ontological and tries to look at what that something better might be, yet in the end Gurney always remains confined, and both he and everyone else he tries to help escape from the scripts of society ends up reduced to following them anyway, and if anything even worse off. Gurney at the end of episode one (if, indeed, it is "Gurney") is someone who has escaped from a fiction but knows he's still in a fiction – he's a character who is hemmed in by the format but *knows* he's hemmed in by the format. He's gained gnosis, but that gnosis just means that he's aware of the limits that people who don't have his enlightened state don't see.

We only see much later on just what that means for Gurney in terms of being able, or otherwise, to move between levels of reality more freely, and exactly how aware he is of his own fictional nature (when watching the first episode it's perfectly reasonable to assume that he knows he's on TV but doesn't know he's fictional – he might imagine that he's part of some sort of documentary, for example). But even here, in the first episode, the axioms from which everything in the rest of the series follows are laid down.

The series is, as I mentioned earlier, a series of two parts, but episode one manages to bridge the two parts rather more effectively than one might imagine. Structurally and visually, it's definitely part of the first half – episodes two and three follow the same formula of 'Gurney wanders around on location, impinges slightly if at

all on the experiences of real people, and interacts a little with people who exist only in his imagination' – but thematically its concerns are not picked up again until episodes four, five, and six, the studio-bound episodes which are structurally and visually utterly different to the first half of the series.

The first episode was both a ratings and a critical success. It got an audience of approximately 12.5 million viewers and received rave reviews from the critics. Unfortunately, it did not receive rave reviews from the lay audience. The episode generated a huge number of complaints from viewers who were not comfortable with it.

The writers had clearly anticipated this – we will see, in episodes four and six especially, what they thought the reaction to the series would be (the entire series was filmed before the first episode was broadcast), but they probably hadn't anticipated the extent of the drop in the ratings – it went from around 12.5 million viewers for episode one to only 8.5 million for episode two. After this ratings drop, further episodes were consigned to a late-night slot.