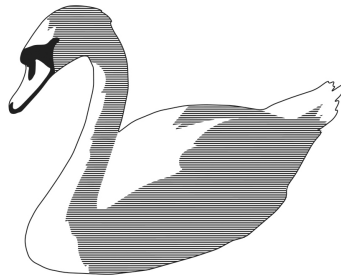


The Silver Archive #2
SAPPHIRE & STEEL
Assignments Three and Four



By Cody Schell

THE SILVER ARCHIVE

SAPPHIRE AND STEEL - ASSIGNMENTS THREE AND FOUR

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For Rebecca Sugar, who knows the secret lives of Gems.

CONTENTS

Introduction

1. 'Will you come back to the table?'
2. 'My orders ... were most specific.'
3. 'Pictures! I saw pictures!'
4. 'I have very positive origins.'
5. 'It's like something that's been designed.'
6. 'Where there is Life.'
7. 'Same man, different background.'

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIOGRAPHY

OVERVIEW — Assignment Three

Serial Title: Assignment Three

Writer: P.J. Hammond

Director: Shaun O'Riordan

Original UK Transmission Dates: 6 January 1981
8 January 1981
13 January 1981
15 January 1981
20 January 1981
22 January 1981

Running Times: Episode 1: 24m 10s
Episode 2: 23m 50s
Episode 3: 24m 20s
Episode 4: 24m 00s
Episode 5: 25m 20s
Episode 6: 25m 40s

UK Viewing Figures: Episode 1: 22%
Episode 2: 24%
Episode 3: 19%
Episode 4: 20%
Episode 5: 16%
Episode 6: 21%

[As a percentage of the viewing audience]

Regular cast: Joanna Lumley (Sapphire), David McCallum (Steel), David Collings (Silver)

Guest Cast: Catherine Hall (Rothwyn), David Gant (Eldred), Russell Wootton (Changeling)

Antagonist: The resentful collective subconscious of animal-kind from an animal-free future.

Critical Responses:

'Major plus points ... remain the oppressive atmosphere of dread and the introduction of David Collings as Silver. Atmosphere is everything in **SAPPHIRE & STEEL** and this show continues to rely upon it.'

[Darren Humphries, 'Assignment 3', SciFiFreakSite.com]

'It ... lacks the essential elements of tragedy and melancholy that made the first two stories so effective, and it resorts to some rather silly, sentimental emotionally manipulative ideas.'

['Sapphire and Steel, Assignments One to Four', Cult TV Lounge]

OVERVIEW — Assignment Four

Serial Title: Assignment Four

Writer: P.J. Hammond

Director: Shaun O'Riordan

Original UK Transmission Dates: 27 January 1981
29 January 1981
3 February 1981
5 February 1981

Running Times: Episode 1: 23m 20s
Episode 2: 24m 00s
Episode 3: 24m 00s
Episode 4: 25m 20s

UK Viewing Figures: Episode 1: 16%
Episode 2: 19%
Episode 3: 15%
Episode 4: 20%

[As a percentage of the viewing audience]

Regular cast: Joanna Lumley (Sapphire), David McCallum (Steel)

Guest Cast: Alyson Spiro (Liz), Philip Bird (Shape), Bob Ornerly (Shape), Natalie Hedges (Parasol Girl), Shelagh Stephenson (Ruth)

Antagonists: Shape.

Critical Responses:

'Impressive in narrative and awe-inspiring in visualization, Sapphire and Steel's fourth serial is a perfect little horror gem. One setting. A few characters. A terrible menace. The Unseen lurks in the shadows, in photographs...'

[John Kenneth Muir, 'From the Archive: Sapphire and Steel Assignment 4 (1980)']

'The best story by far, or at least the most comfortable in its own skin, containing the appropriate degree of creepiness and just enough clarity to be on the right side of confusing.'

[Jez Strickley, 'Adventure Four', The Sapphire and Steel Omnibus]

Introduction

A campfire roars and flickers, some parts too intense to look at directly, while other dark embers glow threateningly. The flames keep your fingertips toasty and warm while the nape of your neck is still exposed to the cold. Your eyes adjust to the brightness of the flame and become unable to see the subtleties of the darkness. You're surrounded by absolute black, a void to be utterly disregarded – as if your ignorance of what's around you will somehow protect you from anything lurking in the trees. Then you tell stories...

Stories with ghosts.

A really good story, told well, shuts everything else out. The words are just enough to make your own imagination do the work for the storyteller. The images in your own mind flicker in front of you and all else merges with the darkness. You drift away from the fire, but at the same time not away from it. You move in a direction that is somehow further away, and yet deeper within. The wood burns and glows like molten rock, deep within the Earth. And yet the fire is insubstantial and constantly in motion. Like the centre of a star.

Stars are much larger and much hotter and yet, they too are a spot of brightness in the middle of a dark void. All the planets gather around their star, like campers around a fire and a much older story is told.

The story of the Big Bang, the collapse of higher dimensions down to the three of space and one of time, and the cooling of the universe. Stars and galaxies form, made mostly of hydrogen and helium. Ages pass and heavier elements are formed in the hearts of supernovas – things that just aren't created inside of normal stars.

And space is full of strange things. Nebula, black holes, worm holes, dark matter, pulsars and other space-time irregularities. Whether you're in open space or back down on Earth, dark things can sneak up on you while you're looking at the bright things. And you can't ignore these problems. They have to be handled.

Sapphire and Steel have been assigned.

Just as base chemical elements cannot be broken down into a more simple form, **Sapphire & Steel** tells mythological stories that focus on the bare core of storytelling, created in a raw, almost improvised way, combining story elements to discover what will happen.

From ancient times, mankind has explored the world around them. To make sense of nature, we name things, and further categorize them. There are the basic categories: home, food, family. There's the people in our family, who all have names but also fit into further categories. Mother, father, son, daughter, grandmother, grandfather, stranger, enemy. Then there are other, more mysterious things. The earth, the sky, the sun, the moon. We try to make sense of why they exist, or how they work.

Primitive woman surely wondered why the sun rose every day, and why does the moon chase across the sky? If she is looking for reasons, or motivations, then maybe she can get an answer by wondering if the moon is like a person. If the moon is a god of night, then maybe there's a god for everything. A god of the distant mountain or a goddess of the snow. Maybe there's a god of cold metal, or a beautiful goddess hiding in the depths of a beautiful stone.

Fast forward thousands of years and man has refined his observations into scientific fact.

Sapphire and Steel fill those same roles, though in a modern age the details of those roles have changed. Instead of being gods of lightning or the ocean, they represent the fundamental forces of the universe. They are agents of stability that fight against chaotic irregularities that would disrupt reality as we know it. Why specifically Sapphire and Steel, though?

6. 'Where there is Life.'

Once we have a sense of what we know and can deduce about Steel and Sapphire and the authority that they work for, we might want to investigate why they do what they do for humanity. On screen, humanity is to blame for enabling the Irregularities to occur, after all.

Assignments Three and *Four* have a common theme: humanity's culture (including its assorted technologies) is the cause of ruptures in time through which a malignant force attempts to enter.

Assignment Three

From the window of a flat at the top of a tower block, a stranger watches the goings on of the world below, while food mysteriously ages as though passing too quickly through time. Meanwhile, three colleagues with unusual powers attempt to uncover a threat to everyone's safety.

This is a television story by Peter Hammond, but it's not *Assignment Three* of **Sapphire & Steel**.

In 1971, Hammond made his breakthrough in scripting for children's genre drama, with the three-part serial *Joker* for Thames' **Ace of Wands**. An ITV series viewed by many as just another attempt by commercial television to mimic the success of the BBC's **Doctor Who**, **Ace of Wands** starred Michael MacKenzie as Tarot, a stage magician who also had certain occult powers. Together with a changing cast of assistants, Tarot investigated often supernatural goings on in London and its surrounding areas to mixed success. *Joker* apparently concerns itself with the activities of a troupe of travelling entertainers and berserk children¹ and was sufficiently successful that Hammond was invited back for the following season, for which he penned the three part *The Meddlers*.

The Meddlers tells the story of a London marketplace plagued by a mysterious group of wandering musicians, and the investigations by Tarot and his two friends into a series of inexplicable fires and other unusual events in the area, caused, it is rumoured, by an ancient curse. Food in the market rots overnight while the gang of minstrels, led by the menacing figure of Mockers, terrorise the stall holders, in an attempt to drive them from the market.

Of most interest in relation to **Sapphire & Steel**, however, is the property developer, Mr. Dove, who stands in his top floor (and curiously empty) office, surveying the marketplace below him through a telescope. Clearly, this is not the same sort of story as *Assignment Three*, nor is Mr. Dove a historian from the future, or anything like, but the structure is similar and it is entirely possible that the writer, remembering this earlier, well received set-up chose to make use of it again in his third **Sapphire & Steel** script².

Assignment Three is a change in direction for the series, after the more folky horror of *Assignments One* and *Two*. A far more science fictional tale than its predecessors, it takes a despairing look at Man's effect on the environment. Not only does future Mankind hold dominion over nature, animals, and the planet Earth itself, they have also begun to manipulate time and, having eradicated all animal life, now risk destroying all human life too.

As with most **Sapphire & Steel** stories, the real interest lies not in the mechanics of the plot itself, but in everything else: the easily over-looked and often almost tangential detail. In simple terms, the serial involves Sapphire, Steel and Silver wandering about an abandoned flat for several episodes, a run of disappearing and

¹ The whole serial was wiped by Thames soon after transmission and no longer exists.

² Another possible inspiration for this pair of observers might be the various figures in Brian Aldiss' controversial novel *Report on Probability A*, which caused more than a ripple of debate in the science fiction community on publication in 1967 (in *New Worlds* magazine, no. 171) and 1968 (in novel format from Faber and Faber). Described as both 'perhaps his most brilliant work to date' (in the *New Worlds* introduction) and as 'sheer self-indulgence' (Joanna Russ, 'Books', *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, July 1970, p.45), it begins with three observers watching a suburban couple via the naked eye, a telescope and a periscope respectively, before spiralling out into a series of never-ending nested observers, each watching the iteration before them.

returning cast members, and a couple of resolutions essentially plucked from the air. But to concentrate on the bare bones in **Sapphire & Steel** is to miss the point, rather.

***'It's some kind of future'*³**

In *Assignment Three*, the future world of 1,500 years to come is a case in point. The society itself is never seen or even described, and on the surface there seems to be little discussion of it at all, and yet there is enough there for a reasonable picture of its composition to be teased out.

In a general sense, people from the future seem to be prone to a form of willing self-delusion, preferring where possible to remain unaware of anything negative. Eldred, the male future traveller encountered by the time agents, follows instructions from his superiors, but is apparently capable of little else, including curiosity. He consoles himself with empty platitudes that everything will be fine because the idea that they won't be is almost literally unthinkable to him. He (and his wife, Rothwyn) fear the outside natural world and seal themselves away from it. He is physically cowardly, technically inept, and obsessed with social convention, seemingly caring more about the propriety of looking into the bedroom of the family in the Rural capsule than the fact that he has been told that they are all dead. Each of these facts can be combined with others to build a reasonably detailed picture of the year 3480.

Most obviously, at the very end of the story, we learn all animals have been destroyed in the future and now exist only as 'pieces' in the laboratory. This is a world where Mankind dismisses the well-being of any animal they see as being less than themselves, where they cannot even conceive of a *need* for their continued existence, and where the irony of labelling animals as 'cruel' is entirely lost.

ELDRED

We've no further use for them ... they were unclean. They were cruel.

The feet of a sprinting ostrich, the dilating pupil of a panther, the tails of squirming tadpoles – irrelevant and useless⁴.

Future worlds in which explicitly there are few or no animals are not common. Most famously, Philip K Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*⁵ posits a near future (1992, in the original 1968 novel) in which radiation poisoning has killed off most animals, leaving those few which remain as status symbols for the very rich.

Societies in which all animal – and even plant – life has been allowed to die off due, not to some catastrophic event but rather sheer indifference or the desire to be without them, are even rarer. There are however one or two examples which might conceivably have influenced Hammond in presenting the fragments and clues that he does.

One promising possibility – and one which Hammond, who admits that his 'first love is SF'⁶, is bound to have known – is E.M. Forster's short story 'The Machine Stops' Though the story was originally published as far back as 1909 it was heavily anthologised, and Hammond may well have seen the extremely well-received BBC adaptation, shown as part of the **Out of the Unknown** anthology series on 6 October 1966, and remembered it when considering the need for an unseen future society for his new series.

The protagonist of 'The Machine Stops' is a young man, Kuno, who wishes to visit Vashti, his mother, in person, rather than via the Machine, an omnipotent apparatus which governs every element in the lives of a human race which has retreated into individual, sterile subterranean capsules. Almost all human contact is carried out

³ Sapphire, *Assignment Three*.

⁴ To the adults at least. It's telling that the child's toy which Sapphire finds in the Rural capsule is a stuffed animal.

⁵ Filmed as *Blade Runner* (1982).

⁶ <https://guyhaley.wordpress.com/interviews-2/pj-hammond-2007/>

electronically, via view-screens and pneumatic post, and to wish to have more personal contact, even with immediate family members, is seen as 'contrary to the spirit of the age'.

In this future, too, nature is regarded with revulsion and fear, as Vashti makes clear when speaking to Kuno about the possibility of travel.

I dislike seeing the horrible brown earth, and the sea, and the stars when it is dark. I get no ideas in an air-ship.⁷

There are no animals in the world of the Machine, and little plant life.

Ferns and a little grass may survive, but all higher forms have perished.

Technology, though of vital importance, is a double-edged sword in 'The Machine Stops', as in **Sapphire & Steel**. The Machine, increasingly utilised by Mankind without an understanding of its nature, comes to be worshipped, with disastrous consequences for humanity.

'The Machine,' they exclaimed, 'feeds us and clothes us and houses us; through it we speak to one another, through it we see one another, in it we have our being. The Machine is the friend of ideas and the enemy of superstition: the Machine is omnipotent, eternal; blessed is the Machine.' And before long this allocution was printed on the first page of the Book, and in subsequent editions the ritual swelled into a complicated system of praise and prayer. The word 'religion' was sedulously avoided, and in theory the Machine was still the creation and the implement of man. But in practice all, save a few retrogrades, worshipped it as divine.⁸

Even the rational intellectual Vashti is taken up by this new religion.

Vashti was afraid. 'O Machine!' she murmured, and caressed her Book, and was comforted.⁹

In the future society of **Sapphire & Steel**, matters have perhaps not gone quite so far, but Rothwyn and Eldred have no idea how, technically speaking, they were brought back in time and, in their complacent lack of interest, are little better than Vashti in her prayers.

STEEL

What's behind there?

ROTHWYN

We don't know. Why should we know?

STEEL

Because you belong in this thing, that's why.

ROTHWYN

But we're not....

STEEL

What?

ROTHWYN

⁷ 'The Machine Stops', p79.

⁸ 'The Machine Stops', p109.

⁹ 'The Machine Stops', p87.

Well, we're not engineers.

SAPPHIRE

Well what are you, then? Historians? Researchers?

ROTHWYN

We're both.

STEEL

You don't know what it is that brought you here.

ROTHWYN

This did.

STEEL

But not how it did. You don't know that?

ROTHWYN

No.

Eldred's lack of physical courage (and the acquiescence of the rural family to death rather than physical struggle to overcome their difficulties) also find an echo in Forster's story.

By these days it was a demerit to be muscular. Each infant was examined at birth, and all who promised undue strength were destroyed. Humanitarians may protest, but it would have been no true kindness to let an athlete live; he would never have been happy in that state of life to which the Machine had called him; he would have yearned for trees to climb, rivers to bathe in, meadows and hills against which he might measure his body. Man must be adapted to his surroundings, must he not?¹⁰

Vashti visits her son, against her better judgement, but finds the journey repellent. Privacy and lack of personal interaction have become so codified in the world of the Machine that the simplest touch, even if it occurs in order to prevent injury, can be the cause of great affront.

People were almost exactly alike all over the world, but the attendant of the air-ship, perhaps owing to her exceptional duties, had grown a little out of the common. She had often to address passengers with direct speech, and this had given her a certain roughness and originality of manner. When Vashti swerved away from the sunbeams with a cry, she behaved barbarically – she put out her hand to steady her.

'How dare you!' exclaimed the passenger. 'You forget yourself!'

The woman was confused, and apologized for not having let her fall. People never touched one another. The custom had become obsolete, owing to the Machine¹¹.

In the end, Kuno visits the outside and finds it is not the poisonous wasteland he had been led to believe, and that there are people living there. It is surely too much of a co-incidence that the historical country into which he emerges is one in which the names Eldred and Rothwyn would fit perfectly¹².

¹⁰ The Machine Stops', p94.

¹¹ The Machine Stops', p89.

¹² Wessex was an Anglo-Saxon kingdom situated in the south-west of England from 519CE to 925CE, when it was absorbed into the unified Kingdom of England under King Æthelstan. Eldred (or Ealdred) is an Anglo-Saxon name, rarely used after the Norman Conquest of 1066. Rothwyn, or more properly Hroðwynn, is similarly a name little employed since the Conquest.

Wessex lies above the room in which we are talking now. It was once an important state. Its kings held all the southern coast from the Andredswald to Cornwall, while the Wansdyke protected them on the north¹³.

Vashti and Kuno do meet in person as the story concludes, dying alongside one another in the dark as the Machine stops and their civilisation comes to an end. It is difficult not to read this and remember Steel's warning to Sapphire about sending the capsule back to the future, and Sapphire's callous dismissal of his fears. Perhaps this is the point at which this future civilisation meets its end?

There is, however, another, even closer, fit for Hammond's future society, and one which is a yet more plausible inspiration for this *Assignment* — Isaac Asimov's seminal science fiction novel, *The Caves of Steel*¹⁴ and its various sequels¹⁵.

In that series, the detective Elijah Baley lives in a future version of New York City, a giant over-populated metropolis enclosed in a steel dome from which nobody ever ventures¹⁶. In such cramped conditions, privacy and a strict adherence to established social mores are of paramount importance, to the extent that a breach of them is a cause for huge offence.

Baley paused before the large double door on which there glowed in large letters PERSONAL-MEN. In smaller letters were written SUBSECTIONS 1A-1E. In still smaller letters, just above the key slit, it stated:

'In case of loss of key, communicate at once with 27-101-51.'

A man inched past them, inserted an aluminum sliver into the key slit, and walked in. He closed the door behind him, making no attempt to hold it open for Baley. Had he done so, Baley would have been seriously offended. By strong custom men disregarded one another's presence entirely either within or just outside the Personals¹⁷.

Compare this to Eldred's exchange with Steel and Sapphire in *Assignment Three*.

STEEL

Show me that room. Look, if it's a question of secrecy, then forget it! There'll be no secrets!

ELDRED

It's not exactly a question of secrecy.

STEEL

Then what is it?

ELDRED

If you must know, it's more a question of privacy! Of decency!

STEEL

Privacy?

¹³ *The Machine Stops*, p100

¹⁴ First serialised in *Galaxy* magazine in 1953, before book publication by Doubleday in 1954. A BBC adaptation was shown as part of the **Story Parade** anthology series on BBC2 on 5 June 1954, with Peter Cushing as Bailey.

¹⁵ The **Elijah Baley** series (in itself sometimes described as part of the larger **Robot** series) consists of *The Caves of Steel*, *The Naked Sun* (1955), *Robots of Dawn* (1983) and *Robots and Empire* (1985) and feature the detective work of Baley and his robotic partner R. Daneel Olivaw.

¹⁶ Co-incidentally, the same series also adapted the sequel to *Caves of Steel*, *The Naked Sun*, in February 1969. The Spacer society on the planet Solaria seen in *The Naked Sun* has the same, though even stricter, taboo against personal interaction as 'The Machine Stops', though with a different cause.

¹⁷ *Caves of Steel*, p38.

ELDRED

Yes!

STEEL

Decency? What is he talking about?

ELDRED

I'm talking about the fact that unlike these times, we have acquired – or rather gained – certain standards!

SAPPHIRE

What kind of standards?

ELDRED

If you like, moral standards!

Then, later on,

ELDRED

This is our sleeping room! Our private room! We don't expect to be disturbed!

There is little or no space for animals in *The Caves of Steel*, and the only ones that survive are dogs and cats and small birds, which are kept in zoos¹⁸. Food is largely artificial – zymoveal with protoveg is a common meal in New York City – and, just as in the future of Rothwyn and Eldred, nature is either abhorred or disregarded as without merit.

Early in the book, for instance, Baley watches rain through a sealed window, and comments on the fact to his superior.

In his forty-two years he had rarely seen rain, or any of the phenomena at nature, for that matter.

He said, 'It always seems a waste for all that water to come down on the city. It should restrict itself to the reservoirs¹⁹.

For Baley and his compatriots, the world outside the domes might as well not exist. They are places to be feared and viewed with horror. Similarly, Rothwyn, examining the world of 1980s Britain through one of the capsule's hermetically sealed windows, considers it a terrible, dangerous place.

ROTHWYN

It's brutal, it's cruel! People like us would never survive!

Eldred too, once he has been returned from wherever his son sent him, and in spite of what has just happened to him, seems most shocked and made most fearful by the mere presence of the three agents, who he assumes are natives of 1980s England in the capsule.

ELDRED

It's impossible! ... No-one can enter this place! No-one can get in!

There is also a counterpart in *The Caves of Steel* for Eldred and Rothwyn's belief that the Earth of 1980 is more primitive and more 'brutal' than their own.

¹⁸ Sapphire does mention zoos to Rothwyn and Eldred, but they have moved beyond even the world of Elijah Baley. 'That's the past. The atomic age,' Eldred remarks.

¹⁹ *The Caves of Steel*, p9.

Baley and his robotic partner, R. Daneel Olivaw, are investigating the murder of a Spacer, one of the descendants of the groups of Earthlings who left their home world and then colonized several nearby planets in centuries past. These spacers are physically more imposing than native Earth men like Baley (who considers them, with a hint of sarcasm, 'regal' in stature) and considerably more technologically advanced. Like Rothwyn inspecting and rejecting the world outside the capsule, Spacers consider Earth men and their society to be brutish and dirty, beneath them in every important respect, a source of infection and death.

Spacers had bred disease out of their societies ... the care with which they avoided, as far as possible, contact with disease-ridden Earthmen was [well known]²⁰.

Depending on how we consider the various societies in the book, Rothwyn and Eldred are both Baley and the very people who despise him. It's a paradox one imagines P.J. Hammond would have enjoyed.

Finally, and in passing, the fact that the novel has as its protagonists a pair of apparently mis-matched, but in fact ideally suited, detectives is probably entirely co-incidental.

***'What were they surveying?'*²¹**

Briefly leaving *The Caves of Steel* behind and returning to 1980, however, there is a further linked question raised by the future inhabitants of the capsule. Just what is the intent of Experimental Project ES stroke 5 stroke treble 7? What is being tested by Eldred, Rothwyn and their compatriots in the other capsules?

For one thing, why have three capsules at all? On the surface, it appears simple enough. Each capsule is located in a different environment, meaning that each has a slightly different experience. But the other two capsules – one Rural version and one Provincial – not only have the same layout as the main capsule, which is itself identical to the 1980 flat below it, but they are all hermetically sealed, and cannot be breached from the outside. Crucially, although it is suggested that it is possible for the inhabitants to venture outside, they never do so, nor do they intend to.

ROTHWYN

Eldred and I seem to be adjusting quite well to the cold weather. So is the baby. Our temperatures are normal. That's living inside, of course. With a comparatively civilised system of heating. Outside ... I'd hate to imagine how we'd survive outside. I only have to look out to feel ... threatened by it.

There is no weather inside the capsule, obviously, so what is it that Rothwyn expects to have to adjust to? There are presumably no germs (have Rothwyn's people, like Asimov's Spacers, 'bred disease out of their societies?'), so why should their temperature have changed?

In light of the lack of interaction with the outside world, the only actual impact the settings could have would therefore be psychological, effectively giving undue influence to the view from the window. Is the project in part actually a psychological experiment? Could it be that the people ostensibly carrying out the experiment have been misled as to their role, and do not actually know what it is that they are really researching?

What exactly have Rothwyn and Eldred been doing for the past twenty-six days?

Rothwyn says that she is responsible for the 'domestic side of the experiment' and there is a leg of lamb in the fridge, which suggests that their intention is exactly as Steel accuses them of later – 'you came here hoping to play happy families in the twentieth century' – but the failure to be supplied with nutrition from the future is the first sign of trouble, so plainly the meat is not intended to be consumed (nor, given she does nothing with it, even cooked).

²⁰ Asimov, *The Caves of Steel*, p11.

²¹ Steel, *Assignment Three*.

As for Eldred, if he has a fixed role it is never shown on screen. He assumes responsibility for contacting the other capsules and is in some ways treated as the 'leader' of the couple, but the viewer never sees him taking notes or measurements, as one might expect.

Though what, in fact, could Eldred usefully be expected to measure?

Rothwyn, Eldred and the others are clearly under the impression that they are working as a form of temporal historian, but nothing they might measure and collate could conceivably add to their society's knowledge of twentieth century life. Their names are inappropriate for the era, but that doesn't matter as nobody from the past will ever see them, far less speak to them. Their clothes too are part of the experiment, according to Sapphire, but once more nobody will see them, so why are they obliged to clothe themselves in period dress at all? The only explanation which makes sense of these apparent paradoxes is one which posits that the intent of all of these unrequired layers is to convince the inhabitants of the capsules that they are *carrying out* an experiment and not, as is truly the case, the *subject of it*.

Of course, this begs a very obvious question. What is the true purpose of the experiment?

Three capsules, spacious but enclosed, and each with a view of a different exterior environment. Three families (we only actually see two, but it is not too much of a stretch to suggest a similar set-up in the third) deposited inside these capsules, with a set of mundane, day to day activities to pass the time, designed to mimic normal family life in such an environment. All dressed in such a way that they would not draw attention to themselves if they were ever to leave the capsules and enter 20th century society. Finally, those families to be sent back in time from a society where strict privacy has become so engrained in social conditioning that the very thought of looking inside someone else's bedroom is wholly anathema.

As we see in *The Caves of Steel*, one form of society in which the strictest of privacy is considered essential is that in which over-crowding has become so pressing that every citizen lives cheek by jowl with his neighbours at every moment. The only way to obtain the private time needed for the maintenance of sanity is by pretending that these other people are not present. In such a society, claustrophilia (a love of enclosed spaces) becomes an essential survival characteristic, and agoraphobia (a fear of open spaces) commonplace. This is explicitly the case in *The Caves of Steel* and its sequels²² where Baley is kept sane by the former and suffers from the latter, and where the solution to the Spacer murder involves the inability of Earth men to tolerate open spaces. If we accept that Hammond based the future society of 3580 on that in *The Caves of Steel* (or one similar), then the entirety of the experiment makes perfect sense.

It is a test of humanity's ability to overcome their built-in agoraphobia and, perhaps, the first step in over-coming the problem of over-population. Each capsule looks out at a different level of surrounding building, ranging from the Urban capsule, surrounded by the comfort of other buildings to the Rural, in the solitary countryside. This is the key metric of the experiment; to see how a family from the future adapts to a life divorced from the constant company of other human beings. Again, from *The Caves of Steel*:

Most of all there was the noise that was inseparable from life: the sounds of millions talking, laughing, coughing, calling, humming, breathing.²³

Considered in this light, the actions of the occupants of the other capsule we see and whose diary we hear is thrown into sharp relief. Faced with losing control of their own technology and pressured to escape into the deserted open spaces of the countryside which surrounds their capsule, they are unable to do so and decide that the only possible solution is self-destruction. A rural (and, we assume, a provincial or suburban) setting, therefore, is unsuitable for *settlers* from the future²⁴.

²² *The Naked Sun* and *The Robots of Dawn*.

²³ Asimov, *The Caves of Steel*, p16.

²⁴ An alternative reading is that only the Rural inhabitants have taken this path and Silver – who tells Sapphire and Steel that the other capsules 'don't matter anymore' – has killed the Provincial inhabitants himself prior to meeting up at the Urban capsule.

This is key. The experiment now becomes one not of observation and reporting, but of settlement and quiet invasion. No matter how conditioned the people of a future crowded society may be, there is an absolute limit to the number who can be accommodated in a finite space.

The Cities were good. Everyone ... knew there was no substitute, no reasonable substitute. The only trouble was that they wouldn't stay good. Earth's population was still rising. Some day, with all that the Cities could do, the available calories per person would simply fall below subsistence levels²⁵.

When population growth and lack of living space becomes sufficiently severe, a solution must be found. One way is to limit birth rates, but the presence of a family of five in the Rural capsule demonstrates that that is not the case in this society. The other way is to find an outlet for excess population. Perhaps, for these Earthlings of the thirty-sixth century, that outlet lies 1,500 years in their own past?

But there is an obvious problem inherent in expecting people who have known nothing but over-crowding for generations to settle in an era in which, by their standards, wide open spaces are the norm (the 'open sky which few men could face with equanimity', to quote Elijah Baley²⁶). They will simply be unable to take the step required, to expose themselves to those wide-open spaces. Consider this discussion from *The Caves of Steel*, in which Baley questions the Earth roboticist Dr Gerrigel.

'Suppose you had to leave the City at night and walk for cross country for half a mile or more.'

'I – I don't think I could be persuaded to.'

'No matter how important the necessity?'

'If it were to save my life or the lives of my family, I might try...'²⁷

Like Dr. Gerrigel, Rothwyn, Eldred and the others will, in short, never leave their capsules – unless forced by an imminent threat to their lives and those of their families.

On the surface, the idea of leaving the capsule is portrayed as a danger by everyone involved, including Sapphire and Steel, because it will allow the meat creature to escape too – but could it be that there is more to this than meets the eye? We can assume that Sapphire and Steel have been sent to this capsule and not the others because it contains someone strong enough not to weakly capitulate and, therefore, someone who might leave and thus release the creature. This is the threat *they* believe they face.

For Eldred and Rothwyn, however, the threat is more immediate. They believe their own lives and that of their son are in danger from the meat creature. That is the threat *they* believe they face.

But what if they are both right? What if the creature is actually a genuine part of the experiment – another layer unknown to those taking part, and to the two agents? Consider the fact that, as seen on screen, it appears to be a fairly small animal – one with certain esoteric and not well explained capabilities, admittedly – which the Operatives reasonably easily trap. Would that really pose a genuine threat to humanity if released into 1980? Would it not more plausibly quickly be captured and subjected to a range of scientific experiments (or, more prosaically, simply eaten)? The creature seems a terrible threat to the people of the future, who have no terms of reference for animal life beyond its purported cruelty, but for Mankind of 1980?

Perhaps the scientists of the future have purposefully secreted the meat creatures in the capsules, with the express intention of driving the occupants into the world at large? Could the creature in fact be the catalyst

²⁵ Asimov, *The Caves of Steel*, p21.

²⁶ Asimov, *The Caves of Steel*, p20.

²⁷ Asimov, *The Caves of Steel*, p121.

which the unseen future experimenters hope will force their guinea pigs to settle in 20th century Earth? Is this what the Operatives have actually been sent to prevent, albeit unbeknownst to them? Not the escape of a single animated conglomeration of animal flesh, but the first of a wave of potential human invaders. Are Sapphire and Steel being kept as much in the dark by their superiors as Rothwyn and Eldred by theirs? Steel does accuse Silver of knowing more about the assignment than they do, after all.

As to why they have been sent to the Urban Capsule, that is straightforward enough. First, the relatively crowded area around that capsule makes it the most agreeable to any capsule dwellers considering egress. More importantly, Rothwyn is the element which marks the Urban capsule out as different. More than the others (certainly more than Eldred) she has the nerve actively to resist. Either because of her special training, her ability to 'sense things', or due to her role as mother to a newborn baby, she seems the most likely to overcome her upbringing and leave the capsule.

Certainly, her special training gives her insights and strengths not available to her colleagues. It has been established that flesh is no longer eaten, and animals regarded with disgust, which raises the question of why Rothwyn is not *more* repulsed by the leg of lamb she removes from the refrigerator. In the absence of full-grown animals, where does it even come from? Is it fake in some way? Apparently not, for Rothwyn says that it is the leg of a 'dead animal'. But as we have seen there is no suggestion that they are expected to eat it. On one level, of course, it functions well as a prop, like something out of a doll house, decorative but of no utility beyond that. But given that animals still exist as parts in laboratories, what if there is some genuine biological component involved, of which Rothwyn is unaware, but which is intended to trigger her latent sensitivity?

The sensory input of ersatz meat therefore acts as an avatar that creates a reaction in her mind. She mentally reaches out to the consciousnesses of animals in the present, and witnesses their slaughter and suffering in real-time, in the present. This serves both to heighten her anxiety, thus making her more likely to leave the no longer secure capsule, and forces her to experience the food harvesting practice of 1980, to see whether, literally, she can stomach it. In the end, only the intervention of the Operatives, stopping the escape of the meat creature as she believes they are intended to, prevents her leading her family into 1980.

Could Sapphire, Silver and Steel, in preventing an invasion *by* Time, have also prevented an invasion *through* time, from the over-populated future?

***'Humans give answers, machines don't.'*²⁸**

Fan wisdom has it that, much like the *Star Trek* original cast movies, the even numbered stories are best, and the odd are weaker. *Assignment Three* therefore falls on the weaker side of this scale, but to accept that is to ignore some beautiful and poetic moments, and its strong and consistent message. The 1980s was the decade of Earth Day, the growth of Greenpeace and discovery of the hole in the ozone layer, but this was only 1980 – appropriately **Sapphire & Steel** was slightly ahead of its time.

It's clear that technology in the future is partially biological²⁹, even if the inhabitants of that future prefer not to think about that in any detail (much as vegans and vegetarians accuse meat eaters of doing today). The blood of 'all animals' is the oil that keeps the machines of the future running smoothly, after all.

If animal components comprise a part of future technology, and people are repulsed by animals, the people of the future are consequently happy to remain ignorant of how technology works.

But biological technology is not the only thing the future humans prefer not to think about. Eldred and Rothwyn also don't understand where their furniture or clothing comes from, even though they are surrounded by it. Twice, Eldred weakly insists 'they were provided' when Rothwyn questions the provenance of the contents of

²⁸ Silver, *Assignment Three*

²⁹ Consider too the Woman in *Assignment Six*, who is also partially mechanised. The palette of ideas in **Sapphire & Steel** is fascinating, but (perhaps deliberately) restricted.

the flat. Of course, in the end this unwillingness to question works against them explicitly, when pillows made with bird feathers, a fur coat, a box inlaid with ivory and their very food itself attacks them.

The analogy is unmistakable. A willing blindness is as true of the people of today (or 1980) as of people of the future. There remains a wilful lack of understanding of where the materials which surround us come from. Food and clothing have become pre-created commodities rather than things that have to be prepared and crafted, alone or within a family and community. *Assignment Three* is not only about man's isolation from nature in terms of the natural world, but also isolation from their own nature. Just as the blood of all animals power their machines, people are also the impersonal cogs in the same machine.

The biosphere is a machine of a sort, with people a part of it. People tend to think of themselves as something that can separate from it, but this ability is actually extremely limited. Just like a nucleus, cytoplasm, and mitochondria have their places inside a cell, humans and other animals have their place in the biosphere.

But what happens when parts of the machine take over the functions of the whole? And then what happens when their own technological creations start to do the same? What happens, in short, when Humanity loses its humanity?

The world of 1,500 years in the future – unseen though it (very deliberately) is, provides one answer to that question.

The actions of the two leads simply cements the strength of this message.

In general, in **Sapphire & Steel**, it could be said that what is often interpreted as a coldness in the protagonists is actually a slight contempt for humanity. They resent the danger humans pose to the structure of the universe and the life contained within it. Animals have little concept of the past or future, they live in the present, only instinctually planning for the future. A squirrel will save nuts for food, but he doesn't anachronistically combine nuts from different centuries.

Steel and Sapphire are willing to sacrifice the humans they meet if need be³⁰ because humans are more often than not the cause of troubles, and consequently, the victims of their own recklessness.

Human nursery rhymes, their books, their memories of distant wars, their technology, their art, their parlour games... they are the source of most time-breaches. Human culture gives invading Time a foothold, and so it is a threat to all other life, to all existence and all that's good in the universe of **Sapphire & Steel**. In *Assignment Three*, however, matters are more equivocal.

Steel, seen in the first two *Assignments* as cold and uncaring, undergoes something of a character change at the end of the final episode of *Assignment Three*, when he delivers one of the most passionate and emotional speeches of the entire series. Rothwyn can't understand why their technology would turn on them and Steel says there's a hundred (or a thousand) reasons.

STEEL

Things that once ran wild, but at least free. Things that breathe[d]... and ate and produced their young, things that swam in the sea. Things that managed to survive... once. Reduced to a few living pieces.

These aren't the words of a dispassionate being or someone who has no feelings.

Steel passionately believes in the right of animals not only to exist, but to be free to proliferate and thrive. And they have the right to be angry at what the society of the future has done to them. The implication is clear that Steel would, given the choice, let the creature have its way with the inhabitants of the capsule.

³⁰ Tully in *Assignment Two* being the most obvious example.

Strangely, while this discussion is happening, Sapphire is seemingly unconscious. An illusion has caused Steel to unknowingly strangle Sapphire. We know from this story that Sapphire's body can be cut and she can bleed. Her throat can be constricted and her body will collapse. But her mind seems to continue to function. Is this a glimpse behind the mask, a vision of Sapphire's true nature?

In this story, there's a sense of morality in the motivations of Steel and Sapphire. They do what they do because deep down they care about what happens 'where there is life', though that caring does not always extend to the humans who have caused the problem in the first place.

This contempt is shown most clearly in the way both Sapphire and Steel, along with Silver, turn their backs on the future humans, shaming them for what they – and the society they come from – have done. Even when Steel expresses some concern regarding the fate of Rothwyn and Eldred after the capsule arrives back in the future, with the creature still intact, Sapphire coldly dismisses his question, telling Steel that that is 'their problem... they can solve it'. It's a little bizarre to have this disagreement occurring in a reverse to the usual direction. More commonly Sapphire is the face of compassion (witness the way she sadly murmurs, 'it turned out to be something far from harmless' to herself when considering the dead bodies in the Rural capsule at the beginning of part 4), but on this occasion she is as cold as Steel. Hammond cannot maintain this cold, pragmatic Sapphire for long, however. When Rothwyn is excited to see the bright off-screen future and cries 'That's home!' to her baby there is a beauty in her shining love for her child. Sapphire sees this love and smiles. It's an optimistic, joyful, uplifting moment in a very dark series.

Another moment of hope follows immediately afterwards. Sapphire muses on the idea of a future without animals. Silver gleefully announces that the people from the future had mice (also from the future) in their capsule.

At first viewing, it's easy to groan at this **Scooby Doo** ending. And the presence of mice in the future would seem to undercut the horror of the central conceit that no animals exist there. Read this way, it's a terrible ending. It's a cheap laugh at the expense of the drama.

However, it's a better ending than is initially obvious. No matter how bleak it seems, life will find a way to continue. Man arrogantly thought they could control all animals, and were arrogantly wrong in asserting that they'd eliminated all animals.

Life continues where there is life.