

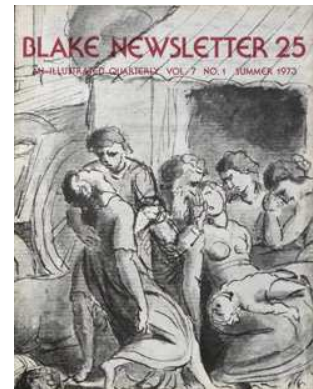
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R E V I E W

BBC Blake: Tyger, Tyger and William Blake

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REVIEWS

BBC Blake

Tyger, Tyger. BBC. Written and directed by Christopher Burstall. Black and white, 50 minutes.

William Blake. BBC. Narrated by Jacob Bronowski. Color, 50 minutes.

Reviewed by Morton D. Paley

Two films about Blake made by the BBC are available in the United States. One, "Tyger, Tyger", written and directed by Christopher Burstall, is a black-and-white film about fifty minutes long; the other, "William Blake," is narrated by Jacob Bronowski, who is virtually the protagonist of the film, which is in color and is also about fifty minutes long. Information about both may be obtained from Time-Life Films, 1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.-Y. 10020.

"Tyger, Tyger" is subtitled "An enquiry into the power of a familiar poem," and it is just that. People of many sorts are asked to discuss their feelings about the poem, with the camera cutting from one to another and back. The results are often delightful, always engaging, sometimes hilarious; and the production has a feeling of authenticity, that indefinable something which does so much to command the viewer's attention. Among those interviewed are Robert Graves, George Goyder, Richard Hoggart, students of various ages including some very young children, a taxidermist (standing in front of an enormous stuffed tiger) who turns out to be George Richmond (great-grandson of the painter), a zoo keeper, Adrien Mitchell, a housewife, a civil servant, the theologian J. G. Davies, a psychiatrist, Stuart Hall, and Kathleen Raine. The views are, as one would expect, various. Richard Hoggart says that "The Tyger" is not an invocation but has "a rapt, trance-like quality"; George Goyder emphasizes its spiritual dimension; Graves says it was "written in a fit of extreme schizophrenia." The zoo keeper points out that tigers are often placid. Kathleen Raine says that the tyger was made by Satan or the demiurge, and she relates a vision of her own in which a hyacinth was transformed before her eyes. A small boy says he believes God must have made the tyger because Blake was a Christian. Now and again a real tiger snarls in a real forest.

For all this, the movement of the film is not haphazard. It proceeds from one stanza to another and raises some particular questions along the way. Why did Blake draw a toy tyger? "I haven't a clue," says Hoggart. Notebook revisions are discussed by school children and by Robert Graves (who makes the interesting suggestion that "what dread feet" may, as revised, refer to the smith who works the bellows with his foot). Graves's simplified version of the poem is read: two stanzas have been eliminated and

all verbs changed to past tense. Cut to a school-room:

Teacher--What's he done to the poem?
Small girl--Ruined it.

J. G. Davies remarks that the "deeps or skies" are not a reference to hell and heaven. Stuart Hall sees the poem as a process in which God moves from the creation of the tyger to the recognition of it as an independent creature, and Adrien Mitchell contrasts the authority of Blake's "daydreams or visions" with the "spurious authority" of drug experiences. A bevy of children's drawings of tygers is seen in juxtaposition to Blake's. In all, the result is highly successful, reminding us of the universality of the poem's appeal and refreshing our own responses to it.

The Bronowski film, produced by Adrien Malone, is sub-titled "As a Man Is--So He Sees." Dr. Bronowski sees molten metal, a great deal of it, pouring through troughs and into cauldrons. The first appearance of this image is striking and apposite, but after frequent repetition it loses its power. When we descend to find Bronowski, hard hat on head, declaiming in the slag heap, it becomes ludicrous. The view of Blake presented contains a partial truth, but through reiteration and repetition the partial truth becomes a positive distortion. Perhaps Blake *was* "the first modern poet," and we may well agree that "The decay of the craftsman in an industrial society was acted out in Blake's own life," but the line between truth and truism is ready to give way with "The young rebel became the old revolutionary and became for us the new man." What can this mean?

Parts of the film re-enact events in Blake's life, with awkward results. The effects are like those of the films about the Washingtons and the Lincolns we had to sit through in grammar school: boring pieties unconvincingly represented. Besides, this Blake really does seem daft--raising his arms in invocation every time he sees some green turf, pushing a plough furiously about an empty field, leaping into the pulpit of Westminster Abbey. Besides the silliness of all this, there is the very real possibility of misinforming the potential audience. This film is unlikely to be shown to audiences familiar with Blake and it is likely to give others the idea that Blake really was given to declaiming the Preface to *Milton* in the Abbey when no one was around. Also, no effort is made to distinguish Blake's own works from the engravings and other prints which are used to illustrate the social conditions of Blake's time. This again seems an invitation to confuse matters. The most valuable thing about this film is the presentation of some of Blake's own work in color. It's a pity more time wasn't spent on this and less on the Bessemer process.

Morton D. Paley (University of California, Berkeley) recently coedited with Michael Phillips *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, published by the Clarendon Press. He is Executive Editor of the Newsletter.