

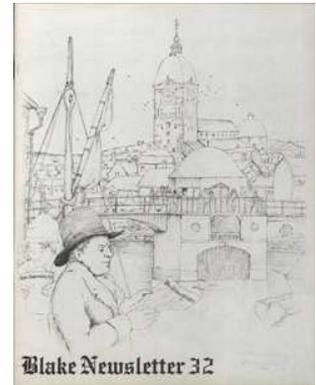
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R E V I E W

On Reflection: Adrian Mitchell on William Blake,
a film produced by London Weekend Television;
Catharine Hughes, ed., *The Clouded Hills:*
Selections from William Blake

Morris Eaves

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On Reflection: Adrian Mitchell on William Blake. A film produced by London Weekend Television. Directed by John Reardon, graphics by John Tribe. U.S. rental agent: Richard Price Television Associates Ltd., 145 W. 58 St., New York, N.Y. 10019. Date of first showing: not known. Price of rental: not known.

Catharine Hughes, editor. *The Clouded Hills: Selections from William Blake.* Mysticism and Modern Man Series. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1973. \$2.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Morris Eaves

If I could choose one Blake film to show to a class, this would be it. In no way does it approach the best that could be done, but in comparison to the other things that have been done, *Adrian Mitchell on William Blake* is the best of the lot.

The film was made a few years ago for *On Reflection*, a London Weekend Television series of personal television "essays" by reflectors of various names and kinds. Adrian Mitchell is a poet with a fairly standard but still lively view of Blake as a gadfly who liked to say disturbing things about art, sex, and the state of the culture that are as pertinent now as in 1800.

As a format Mitchell chose to blend elements of a happening (as we used to say in 1963) in the style of *Long Days Night*, with narration, a series of Blake pictures, and readings of poems and prose to shots of modern London. The assembly has the weight and coherence of a typical highbrow one-man TV show, which is to say, pretty light and pretty baggy. But compared to the inert, heavy, and dull sado-masochistic coagulations that have flowed down to etherize us in our seats, *Mitchell on Blake* is electrical magic.

The film opens in the Tate Gallery, moves to Mitchell on camera first emphasizing Blake's modernness, then reading *London* to shots of the modern city and the print itself, and ending with a little moral lesson based on William Blake House, flats for old people, on the site of one of Blake's residences.

Then we move to the workshop of artist and craftsman Ken Sprague, which becomes the base for the rest of the program. Here Mitchell misses the chance to build a parallel between Sprague's workshop and Blake's, and thus the chance to show how Blake did what he did as watercolorist and printmaker. Television is the perfect medium for a good close look at printmaking, not to demonstrate the technology for itself, but to build a strong image of Blake as a craftsman. But Mitchell's idea of the artist--including himself as poet and graffitist and Sprague as graphic artist--seems to be mainly sociological, which is interesting enough but not complete enough or big enough, and consequently the rest of the film is thinner than it had to be.

After a narrative sketch of Blake's radicalism in religion, politics, and sex, followed by a reading of *The Garden of Love* with modern photographic images of chapel, graveyard, and boy--which sounds more embarrassing than it turns out to be--the film reaches its high point in a hilarious supermarket scene. Mitchell reads from the Preface to *Milton* and *Public Address* over the public-address system of the supermarket, with "Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings!" replacing Musak and "William Bell to cash register number 4, please" for five minutes with the total result of two half-second surprised looks signaled by two raised heads, and two dozen dumb expressions fixed firmly on the canned peas--"Suffer not the fashionable Fools to depress your powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible works or the expensive advertizing boasts that they make of such works." It was a tuned-out crowd that day down at the supermarket, with other prices and expensive advertizing boasts to worry about and no time to spare for freaked-out dead artists being resurrected over the PA system. But it was a marvelous scene.

The rest is anti-climax, really. Standing by Blake's life mask, Mitchell tacks on to his supermarket scene a few of Blake's epigrams and jingles on Reynolds, Hayley, and Fuseli, with the intention, I suppose, of reinforcing the impression of Blake as forceful, righteous personality. Then we pick up the next theme with a series of Blake prints emphasizing sensuality and sexual love, but soon we move to what I'm sure Mitchell thought was to be the climax of his "reflection," and the big Happening of the piece, when he carries paintcans and paintbrushes to the wall of a London building and makes it into a work of streetart by filling it up with slogans from the Proverbs of Hell, capped by his own invention--"Blake Lives!"--over the door. The level of interest in the film drops to a low point here. Housepainting is a slower and duller business than Mitchell probably figured it would be. The supermarket scene was fun because there were people in the supermarket to react to the PA system, and nonreactions were even funnier. But here it's just Mitchell and his brush and the wall, and the only dynamism in the episode comes from our sense of what might happen if there were some spectators. This source of interest is tapped at the end of the episode, with the predictable appearance of a couple of bobbies who don't take much more interest in a fouled wall than the shoppers did in the loss of their shopping music. The point is made, all right, but for the second time; and if it had to be made twice, the order of the two happenings should have been reversed.

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The last theme is poverty, developed with prints from *Europe* alternated with photographs of starving children, accompanied by a reading of the "It is an easy thing to speak of patience to the afflicted" speech from *The Four Zoas*.

The final section of the film is the most useful in the classroom. In good color and detail, there is an ample selection from all of Blake's original graphic work except the paintings: drawings and prints from the Job and Dante series, and prints from the *Songs*, *The Marriage*, *Europe*, *America*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, mostly to inoffensive music, but with a little reading of passages from *Jerusalem*. Altogether, in selection, arrangement, and quality of reproduction, this is the best showing of Blake's work on any film, and it makes a fine introduction to Blake's books in illuminated printing for students who have seen only black and white (or no) reproductions.

Information for would-be consumers: the print of the film that RPTV sent for viewing was a good one: intensity and hue were accurate, the print was relatively free of scratches and splices, and sound was clear with ample volume. Mailing from RPTV was on time, but the company has not answered my inquiries about the year of the film's first appearance on London Weekend Television or the price of rental.

This is another production by the folks who bring us *Dreams and Regrets: Selections from the Russian Mystics*, *Leaves in the Dust: Selections from the Jewish Mystics*, and *The Weeping Sky: Selections from American Indian Mysticism* (Indian translation of Psalm 23: "The Great Father above a Shepherd Chief is, I am His and with Him I want not. . . . and afterward I will go to live in the 'Big Teepee' and sit down with the Shepherd Chief forever"--indeed, the very same Shepherd Chief who spends most of his time in Blake tromping the shit out of us, but all's fair in love, war, and mysticism), *Darkness and Light: Selections from St. John of the Cross*, and *The Prison of Love: Selections from St. Teresa of Avila*.

The eye and head of Catharine Hughes spend most of their time lost back in the late 50's when there was *The Family of Man*, *Motive* magazine, Tillich, and lingering interests in Christian theology, the small church-related liberal arts college, and the arts as manifestations of Christian Witness. The rest of their time she spends figuring out how to get all that brotherhood, universalism, and concern together with the masscult mysticism of the 60's. The Lord bless her soul, Ms. Hughes may have harvested every good intention planted by every brotherly-love poem and picture of the last two decades, but she is still deaf and blind. I will forgive her what I don't approve--which is all of this stuff--but I'll have to beg her to get on with the exertion of her talents in some other area. If Jeffrey and his *Edinburgh Review* were still around, the old acid-throated buzzard could spit some of his Wordsworth juice this way with a lot more justice. "This," he could say again with the stiff-spined moral force I wish I had a little of, "will never do."

The religious columnists in hometown weeklies have more talent for Catharine Hughes' sort of thing than she does, and they produce as much light, or as little, if not as much sweetness. Hughes has cultivated her skills and tastes in the direction of the facile juxtaposition ("Beautifully produced . . . juxtaposing modern photographs with brief selections from the words of the saint," says *Publishers Weekly*; "One medium complements and illuminates the other," says Msgr. John S. Kennedy in *Our Sunday Visitor*) and the obscure juxtaposition ("powerful, provided that one does not just flip through them. One should pause over each combination, allowing words and pictures to interact and do their work of inspiration," Msgr. Kennedy), with some help from the Big Point and the Bitter Truth, all offered with the feeling for significance displayed by the American poetesses in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The Hughes wit is chuzzled in the style and on the scale of Eeyore.

Some pithy instances:

"All that can happen to Man in his pilgrimage of seventy years," she selects to bear the Meaning of a photo of a man walking across a concrete mall in the middle of the day.

"If you have form'd a Circle to go into, Go Into It yourself & see how you would do," she chooses to extract the deepest significance from the photo of a hemp rope wound in a spiral.

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand etc." is her choice for a picture of sand with the shadow of a cross on it.

"Think not thou canst sigh a sigh And thy maker is not by" is the companion to a closeup of a crucifix seen from below, with Christ's toes hanging over the foreground, his groin unfocused above.

"For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern"--a closed door and a railway-station tunnel.

"And was Jerusalem builded here"--Manhattan.

"Enough! or Too much"--Catharine Hughes hawking copies of *The Clouded Hills* and *The Weeping Sky* at special discount price of \$2.50 at Seattle World's Fair William Blake and American Indian Pavilion, with Blake life mask in door of teepee, Jewish and Russian mystics chanting around campfire, and in awesome background, the Church of the Whited Sepulchre, the Mormon Tabernacle, the Vatican, the Space Needle, Mt. Ranier, the Angel Moroni, and rainclouds.