

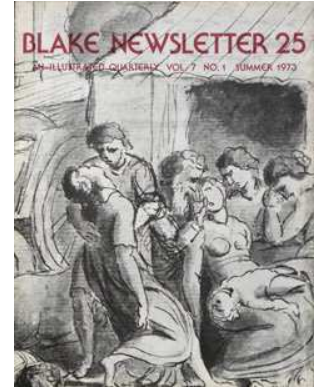
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

The York University videotapes about America and  
Visions of the Daughters of Albion produced and  
directed by Janet Warner, John Sutherland, and  
Robert Wallace

Morris Eaves

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Janet Warner, John Sutherland, and Robert Wallace, producers and directors. *Blake's "America."* Toronto: York University, 1970. Videotape, 50 minutes.

Janet Warner, John Sutherland, and Robert Wallace, producers and directors. *Blake's "Visions of the Daughters of Albion."* Toronto: York University, 1971. Videotape, 50 minutes.

*In the United States both videotapes are distributed in all popular formats by Great Plains National Instructional Television Library, University of Nebraska, P. O. Box 80669, Lincoln, Nebraska 68501, and in Canada and elsewhere by the Department of Instructional Aid Resources, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Downsview, Ontario.*

Reviewed by Morris Eaves

At least in Blake studies, the two videotapes that have issued from York University in Toronto are pioneer efforts to make audiovisual aids for the classroom where Blake is being taught. In my opinion the results of these two experiments are mixed, but my review is written on the assumptions that television has a place in the classroom, and that Blake could be well served by it. Nothing that I have seen in the Warner-Sutherland-Wallace videotapes has given me reason to doubt my assumptions. When the tapes were shown in 1971 at the Blake Festival (Illinois State University) and at the MLA Annual Meeting in Chicago, I heard two kinds of objections that struck me as being of little use in evaluating the tapes. The first was theoretical and asked unanswerable questions, as for instance, whether Blake's infinite vision is reduced to finitude by television. The second was critical and queried the tapes as though they were articles in a scholarly journal. In this review I have tried to be relentlessly practical, and, while looking at the tapes only as what I am sure they are designed to be, classroom tools, I have asked the same question over and over: how useful will they be in a classroom?

I have seen each tape four times, twice outside the classroom, twice inside. I have shown the tapes to two different kinds of undergraduate classes: a class in Blake only, and a class in Romantic literature, in which Blake was one of six or seven writers read. The reactions in each class were essentially the same, though more emphatic in the Blake class. I state the opinions below as mine, but they were corroborated in every case (without prompting, of course) by the students who saw the tapes. Each class was intellectually mixed, both in abilities and interests (the Blake class, for instance, was not weighed down with English majors), and temperamentally sunny--not at all disposed to grumble and pass harsh judgments on things presented to them for evaluation.

The first effort of the Warner-Sutherland-Wallace group was a videotape on *America* produced in 1970. I am sure that by now they regard their early work as inferior to their later work. But since many of the characteristics of the *America* tape carry over into the second tape, on *Visions of the*

*Daughters of Albion*, it is convenient to start at the starting-place and describe the tape and its problems.

The first thing that you notice is the stiffness that characterizes the movement of the tape. The camera seems to have a severely limited range of movement, and thus, for instance, the plates of *America* are consistently shown from awkward distances. When the producers try to compensate for a general lack of movement by using modern documentary techniques, the result is usually a flurry of still photos that unfortunately happens to create a stasis of its own. In fact, a difficult problem in making a moving-picture about a work that doesn't move, such as *America*, or about an age that precedes cinema, such as the eighteenth century, is that you are forced to find movement somewhere besides the subject of the film being made. With enough resources you can make the whole business move by dramatizing it, and get a BBC *Forsyte Saga*. But otherwise you are left with a fairly small repertory of documentary techniques invented and used by professionals on small budgets. The techniques are based largely on precise and complicated film-editing, and videotapes are notoriously difficult to edit. That, I assume, was the corner the trio at York University was in when they started working on Blake's "America."

So the tapes are, both of them, always tending to grind to an everyday halt or wind up to a wild fury of static dynamism, equally monotonous.

Finally the *America* tape falls back on the basic, time-proven and time-worn technique of all educational film-making, still photos with voice-over narration. But with that comes another problem: the suave, fatuous voice of the narrator whose professional unction has greased our sleepy way through a thousand newsreels and travelogues. The voice has the facile competence that can read Mrs. Browning one minute, Shakespeare the next, and Blake the next, but none of them with character, and always with the condescending tone of a lecturer. The script alternates explanatory narration with readings from *America*, and they become another obstruction, since the verse has a way of tricking a reader into his worst performance. The reader's voice rises immediately to its highest, most intense, and most melodramatic pitch, never to fall again.

The method of the tape is to use the plates of *America* and readings from them as a basic structure to depart from and return to after intervals of explanation. The plan sounds orderly, but the effect in practice is not so lucid for several reasons.

There are four kinds of explanatory material interspersed with *America* itself: images and words from the period of the Revolutionary War; images

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and words from recent history; works of graphic art from various periods; and interpretive commentary on *America*.

The effect of the modern material--the hippies, war protesters, rioters, and starving Biafrans--is to date the film rather than to establish a solid point of comparison between the 1770's and the 1970's. Contemporary events are not contemporary for long, and five-year-old history is not quite history either, and therefore an unstable gray area is what we get in the videotape. Judging from the reactions of my students, some of whom were just entering high school when the modern film footage in the *America* tape was being shot, the effect is like seeing reruns of the television news.

The other kind of history used in the tape is more effective, at least when used to illuminate the iconography of *America*, which is to say, when history becomes a part of art history. This sort of lesson in image-making is novel to students and instructive. But the rest of the historical material, the drummer boys and the Don't-Tread-on-Me's, are left to fend mostly for themselves as the unresurrected clichés of elementary-school American history. Even the most interesting parts of the historical graphics, the American emblems and portraits of Revolutionary-War soldiers, become almost ludicrous when they are shown to the tune of Blake's *America*. The wild gnashing and groaning of the verse simply cannot be easily combined with those tame materials.

The best part of both tapes is the lesson in iconography that they try to teach with comparative graphics. When they are clear, as they sometimes are, they are striking. Most of the comparisons are left implicit rather than made explicit, and many sound, implicit comparisons are woven into the tape, as, for instance, between the postures of crouching and rising figures. But often the point of the comparisons is not clear, as it is not in a series of statues shown while lines are being read about an eagle in Mexico and a lion in Peru. Moreover, when a plate from *America* is compared to other works by Blake, say a plate from *The Marriage*, many students would be hard put to say where one begins and the other leaves off. After it appears several times in the course of the tape, you might think that "Albion rises" is a plate from *America*. Finally, the comparisons are sometimes so loose that they seem gratuitous, as in the use made of Goya's *Disasters of War* series.

The narrator's interpretive commentary on *America* is mostly psychoanalytical. Orc is defined as the representative of adolescent sexual energies, usually repressed, and plate 5 is called a diagram of the psyche, with the superego at the top, ego in the middle, and id at bottom. But the tack of the commentary doesn't matter much because it gets lost in the other kinds of material on the tape. The narrator says at one point, for instance, that the designs in *America* repeat motifs of the four elements, but this observation is never followed up in the commentary on any of the plates.

Many of the amateurish excesses in the first

tape--such as the portraits of Blake that keep appearing for no apparent reason--are cut away in the second tape, on *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* ("an interpretation by Janet Warner and John Sutherland"), and with them goes at least one source of unnecessary confusion. Overall the second tape is a giant step ahead of the first. The camera and hence the camerawork are more flexible, the comparative graphics are clearer, and because more weight is given to significance than to pizzazz, a lot of fat is turned to lean.

The historical documents are still present, but they are fewer, more interesting, and further from cliché, at least for the American viewer. Excerpts from Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* are read over pictures of eighteenth-century women in costume, and *The Harlot's Progress* is used as a graphic depiction of the exploitation of women--not wildly original, but not "The Star-Spangled Banner" and the Spirit of '76 either.

There is a much firmer sense of direction in the comparative graphics. The comparative principle on which the tape is constructed is explicitly stated and explained, and the comparisons are more often solid and direct than merely suggestive. Clear use is made, for instance, of Stedman's *Narrative*. There is less reading from the text of the work, which is a relief, the music is usually more appropriate, and there is more sense of the presence of a controlling interpretation.

But there are also several large problems left over from the *America* tape, and a couple of new ones. The offensive male voice of the narrator off camera in *America* has been replaced by a slinky female who occasionally appears on camera. Her voice is slightly less offensive than the male's, but somehow the appearance of a would-be twentieth-century Oothoon whose clothes and furniture seem to be *Vogue*'s vision of life rather than her own loses her more points than the bit of character in her voice can gain for her. The losses are doubled by a weak chorus that tries to imitate the Daughters of Albion.

The comparative graphics begin to lose their force when we are shown a series of very slickly executed modern nudes in Oothoon poses that take us back to *Vogue*, *Mademoiselle*, and matching narrator. Moreover, the producers seem to have noticed the preponderance of still pictures in their *America* tape, and one of the attempted remedies in the *Visions* tape comes off as silly. The attempt to animate still pictures by moving them in front of the camera almost never works for anyone except the professional's professional. Here it makes even slicker the slick *Vogue* nudes, and makes ridiculous the line "Bromion rent her" while a statue pulses in front of the camera. The *Visions* tape wants to move--something that can't be said of the *America* tape--but attempts to make still photos move only remind the viewer of the limitations of the tape. This is also true of sound effects. In the *America* tape the rising wind and the puny trumpets playing the charge to the voice of Albion's Angel shouting "Play, play my war trumpets" were jarring, and so



*The Sports of Cruelty: Fairies, Folk-songs, Charms, and Other Country Matters in the Work of William Blake* by John Adlard. London: Cecil and Amelia Woolf, 1972. £3.15

Reviewed by Katharine M. Briggs

John Adlard has written several articles on folklore beliefs underlying some of Blake's references, as, for instance, "Mr. Blake's English Fairies" in *The Bulletin of the Modern Language Society* 2, LXV (Helsinki, 1964). He has now written at greater length about Blake's attitude to folklore generally, and in particular to the fairies, by whom Blake appears, sometimes at least, to symbolize the cool provocativeness of a flirtatious woman, who titillates desire without fulfilling it. This interpretation, as John Adlard points out, is a development of Pope's treatment of the sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock*. One passage, "A fairy leapt

upon my knee" (p. 188 of the Keynes edition), is almost a quotation.

The fairy element is not the only feature of the book in which every folklore reference by Blake is minutely examined by a scholar who shows a wide and far-ranging knowledge of his subject. Blake's journals, letters, and conversation are analyzed to provide a clue to cryptic passages. For instance the germ of that passage in *America*--about the

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are the reverberation effects used in the *Visions* tape. These kinds of effects require caution to keep them from being laughable. Reverberation is used more skillfully in soap operas.

But finally, about halfway through *Visions* we slip back into the unfortunate groove of the *America* tape--a drone of readings accompanied by an endless stream of pictures, one more or less like another in unexplained juxtaposition and sequence. The lesson in iconography that I assume is intended is lost, and the graphics at last seem to function like the music, as a merely "appropriate" background.

Something I learned from showing the York videotapes to students is that, despite McLuhan, television in the classroom is not an attention-getter. Rooms are large, television screens are small, and students are restless. And he who will have television will also have its technical distractions--hum, hiss, click, roll, and wave. The videotape reel will be warped, or the machine will be on the blink. Hence the videotape must be aggressive. Long stretches of monologue, even the noisy hysterical kind in the *America* tape, shouted over pictures of battles, engravings from here, statues from there, and reclining nudes, all accompanied by routine music, only encourage the viewer to tune in to the TV hum and drift away in a

semitrance.

The only way to keep that from happening is to make the tape as lucid and substantial as possible. The only way to get that to happen is to have an absolutely firm sense of purpose. The York tapes get lost in their search for an audience. Sometimes they seem intended to teach students how to read poetry as well as how to read *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and yet other times they seem aimed at a much higher level. The level must be sought, found, and kept. Then continuity must be established and maintained without fail. The method of the York tapes in practice is too often interruptive and disruptive. Comparative material from art and history must be used with maximum efficiency. Otherwise the effect of these audiovisual "aids" is to display Blake's work in a diminutive context. As the use of comparative material is decreased, the use of Blake material should be increased. One of the ways to make *America* more interesting is to look more closely at it; the way of the York tapes is often to shift attention from *America* to other things. By "look more closely" I mean, for example, explore Blake's use of his medium more closely, the graphic and literary movement of the narrative, the music (in the serious, large sense) of his verse, the techniques of relief etching and watercoloring. And finally, the tapes



mysterious palace built in Atlantean hills by Ariston for his stolen bride--might well have sprung from Cumberland's meeting with Thomas Johnes of Haford, who had built among the Welsh Hills a castle, almost a palace, for his wife Jane, where they founded an idyllic community to surround a house and gardens embellished with every beauty which his imagination could conceive. The ruin of the house is still left, and in a recent article in *Country Life* the place was described.

John Adlard further explores Blake's references to dragons, folk customs and beliefs, folk songs, and dialect. The book should be of great use to Blake scholars, but the scattered and diffused matter on which it works has made it difficult to draw the whole subject into a unity, so that it reads rather like a series of excursions into literary detective work than a finished book. This, however, will not deter the specialist.

should be shorter, not only because that would make them more effective, but also because they are now too long for the average classroom "hour." Forty-five minutes is the outer limit, and forty would be better. Nothing ever goes quite right when you use a videotape in a classroom, and if you use one as seldom as I do, the time sacrificed to technological logistics will astound and amaze you.

Warner, Sutherland, and Wallace have been extraordinarily brave, I think, to experiment with the teaching of Blake in a difficult new medium. And usually, I think, that is the way teaching improves: not with elephantine grants from government agencies whose support will be snatched away just as you start to get somewhere, but with small reserves of money and large reserves of talent and energy. The York University team will have to go further before we can tell how much talent they have, but they obviously have large reserves of energy to support whatever talent their work in videotape production eventually shows. I regard their first two tapes as a pair of instructive failures. Since the second is less a failure than the first, I am encouraged, and I hope they are, too, and will try yet again. If they just can't rouse themselves for another go, then I hope someone else will pick up where they left off after a slow but still promising start.