



## Civilisation (BFI TV Classics)

*Jonathan Conlin*

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A breathtakingly ambitious series that tackled over a thousand years of history, Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* was the first color documentary series broadcast in the UK. Eager to show off its new second channel, the BBC had sent its finest directors and crew on an 80,000-mile odyssey in search of the finest examples of human creativity. The resulting thirteen-episode series became a milestone in television history, pioneering the "Presenter-Hero" model of authored documentary. For its fans the series gave hope for the future at a time of civil and political unrest; for its critics the series elicited only despair at its supposedly elitist values. Meanwhile, in the United States the series had an even deeper impact: a flagship for a new public broadcasting service, and the start of a new transatlantic partnership between the BBC and PBS.

Forty years on *Civilisation* has become synonymous with the golden age of the BBC documentary series, even as many television professionals have come to deride it as patronizing and slow. Drawing on interviews with members of the original crew and extensive archival research, Jonathan Conlin goes beyond the g(u)ilt-edged caricature to reveal a series that combined healthy skepticism towards traditional ideas of progress with a genuinely inclusive approach to its audience. Special chapters contrast the British and American response to *Civilisation* - and consider its legacy to all those interested in putting art and history on the small screen.

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