A Clockwork Orange: The First 25 Years

By Yvonne Ng

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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER ITS FIRST RELEASE in New York on 20th December 1971, Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, adapted from the 1962 novel by Anthony Burgess, has acquired a prominent place in the history of cinema. However, at the time of its release, it generated much controversy and was heavily criticised in its artistic, political and social dimensions. A *New York Times* reviewer called it "a marvelously executed, sensationalist, confused and finally corrupt piece of pop trivia, signifying nothing."(1) Next, Fred M. Hechinger, an American liberal, accused the film of promoting fascist ideology.(2) In March 1972, the *Detroit News* refused to give advertising and publicity space to X-rated films, judging them to be of "pornographic nature" and instituted its policy with *A Clockwork Orange*.(3) On the other hand, the film was also nominated for four 1971 Academy Awards and it received the 1971 New York Film Critics' Awards for Best Film and Best Director of the Year.(4) At the time, Kubrick remarked in an interview that "I'm very pleased with *A Clockwork Orange*. I think it's the most skillful movie I've made. I can see almost nothing wrong with it."(5) Coming from a director who had created films in the calibre of *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), that was high praise indeed for a film, even if it was one of his own. Over the years, *A Clockwork Orange* has been revalued, its significance recognised and reaffirmed. It is a film whose meaningful complex of images, sound, and themes are as relevant today as it was when it was first seen. For this reason, the film deserves a revisit in the form of an appreciation of the unity of style and substance in the film.

A Clockwork Orange is a rare instance of a thought-provoking film that poses fundamental questions of morality wrapped in a deceptively frivolous cloak of sex and violence. It presents the perennial problems of crime and corruption which are instrinsically linked to the human condition. Set in England in an unspecific future, Kubrick depicts a socially and politically degenerate environment inhabited by fearful citizens, reckless young outlaws, and an authoritarian government which is unable to control the country's flood of violence. Such a scenario is not only plausible but distinctly real. The citizens are more than usually suspicious of strangers, especially after dark, and not without good reason. Street gangs have taken to terrorising the streets at night. The ordinary, integrated members of society, exemplified by the protagonist's middle-class parents, are depicted as apathetic, self-centred and depressingly banal. It is mostly the young, the teenaged gangs who are seen to be the most alive, gleefully robbing, raping and killing. According to Kubrick, they represent uncivilized, natural man, not yet restrained by society.(6) One inevitably questions how and why the society comes to be the way it is and where the delicate and elusive balance between control and freedom lies.

Kubrick's modern parable is narrated in first-person by the fourteen-year-old antihero with an allegorical name, Alex Delarge (played to perfection by Malcolm McDowell). Divided into three parts, the picaresque plot follows the dialectic process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. In the first part of the film, Alex and his three "droogs", Dim, Pete and Georgie (respectively Warren Clarke, Michael Tarn, James Marcus), stimulated by a nightly beverage of "milk-plus" at the Korova Milkbar, prowl the streets and countryside under the cover of darkness in search of "the old ultraviolence." Their exploits include beating up a tramp, engaging in a gang fight, raping one woman while forcing her husband to watch and killing another woman with a big white sculpture of a phallus.

Alex is finally caught and sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment. After two years in prison, he is chosen for an experimental crime-aversion therapy known as the Ludovico Treatment. This involves the conditioning of his responses through the viewing of films on violent sex and a variety of atrocities. At the end of two weeks, Alex becomes a free man but finds himself a prisoner of his own conditioned reflexes. Situations involving lust and aggression render him physically ill. Alex has effectively been turned into a clockwork orange -- a mechanical being that only appears to be organic. Herein lies the essential moral of the story voiced by the prison chaplain (played by Godfrey Quigley): "When a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man." The premise of the film's title is the humane belief that "it is far better for an individual to possess

free will, even if it is exclusively the will to sin, than for him to be made over into a clockwork paradigm of virtue."[7] One fundamental question raised in the film is whether a man really becomes good if he does not have the choice to be evil. In an interview with Philip Strick and Penelope Houston, Kubrick quotes a Catholic critic John E. Fitzgerald:

> The film seems to say that to take away a man's choice is not to redeem but merely restrain him... Such brainwashing, "organic and psychological," is a weapon that totalitarians in state, church or society might wish for an easier good even at the cost of individual rights and dignity. Redemption is a complicated thing and change must be motivated from within rather than imposed from without if moral values are to be upheld.[8]

Related to the question of moral choice posed in Burgess' book is the Kubrickian concern with the ambiguous nature of science and technology "whose capacity to enhance life is contrasted with the misuse men make of it to circumscribe freedom and even extinguish existence."[9] In Alex's case, his dehumanization and recuperation via science is ruthlessly manipulated by the government's political motives.

The antithesis of the film is the reverse image of the first segment. Alex, now reduced to a mere bag of conditioned reflexes against violence, is in turn tortured by each of his former victims before finally being restored into his former violent self. Alex painfully learns the validity of the old adage that violence breeds violence. In *A Clockwork Orange*, the perpetrators of violence include members from every strata of society; not only are those who desire vengeance involved in violence, but also those who are the traditional keepers of law and order, and those who are considered the pillars of society. Thus the accomplices in violence include the police, the intellectuals, the scientists, the doctors, and the government which has promised to wipe out crime.

The film's ironic synthesis emerges at the end of the film. Here, Kubrick presents a powerful satirical image of corrupt authority; the urbane Minister of the Interior is shown feeding the bandage-wrapped Alex in his hospital bed while promising him "a good job and a good salary" on condition that Alex becomes a co-operative agent in bolstering and securing the government's popularity. Alex's future criminal activities will presumably be sanctioned by the state for as long as it is mutually beneficial.

Kubrick's vision of human nature is relentlessly pessimistic, yet *A Clockwork Orange* is hardly depressing to watch. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The continuing success of the film is due not only to what Vincent Canby accurately describes as "a tour de force of extraordinary images, music, words and feelings"[10], but more specifically, to the director's ability to sustain the viewer's interest through the balance and tension derived from the use of opposing forces. Kubrick contrasts and blends realism with surrealism, comedy with tragedy, violent action with lyrical music, identification with alienation, freedom with imprisonment, appearance with actuality.

Although the origin and the meaning of the film title are never explained in the film, the title's thematic contradiction underscoring the blurred distinction between the organic and the mechanical is already evident in the opening scene. As the heavily accented chords of the electronic music arranged by Walter Carlos resound, the audience is confronted by a close-up of Alex staring mockingly into the camera, one eye dramatically ringed with false lashes. For a moment, we are not sure who or what to make of this menacing, doll-like creature. Slowly the camera pulls back to reveal the long, black, narrow interior of the Korova Milkbar in which Alex and his three droogs sit in perfect stillness with feet propped up on white tables moulded in the sinuous form of naked women. The futuristic ambience of the Milkbar owes its bizarre symmetry to the cold, white female statues crowned with purple, white and orange wigs on both sides of the room. Arranged in positions of sexual submissiveness, they serve as decorative tables and milk-dispensers. Alongside these functional statues, expressionless men in white uniforms stand like robots to guard the bar.

The embodiment of the mechanical man is parodied in the caricature of the chief prison guard (Michael Bates) who just happens to sport a Hitler moustache. Rigidly formal, he rules the prison with military precision, barks out words instead of talks, marches instead of walks, and shows some signs of emotion only when faced with a semi-nude female on stage.

The actual transformation of a human being into something less than human is graphically portrayed in the Ludovico Treatment performed on Alex to turn him into "as decent a lad as you would meet on a May

Figure 1: *Clockwork Orange* (dir Stanley Kubrick, 1971)

morning." Alex's spiritual crucifixion is manifested physically by a crown of electrodes, a straitjacket binding him to a chair and lidlocks which force his eyes to stay open as he views ultraviolent films in the darkened "sinny." The result is a surreal image of a helpless young Frankenstein who, despite his evil nature, arouses the viewer's sympathy at the hands of this inhuman experiment. It is to Kubrick's credit that, despite showing the audience Alex's atrocious acts of violence, he is able to convince us of the government's equally great evil in rendering him incapable of moral choice in order to make him good. More recently, a similar credit can be given to Krzystof Kielowski, who made an extraordinarily salient statement against capital punishment in *A Short Film about Killing* (1988). Like Kubrick, Kielowski depicts a ruthless murderer who in turn becomes the victim of an inhuman punishment, consequently evoking the audience's sympathy for him. In *A Clockwork Orange,* not only has Alex been conditioned against acts of violence, but in the process, he has also become aversed to his beloved Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the musical score of one of the films in the "sinny." This unintentional side effect is the cause of Alex's attempted suicide and is a didactic reminder of the unforseen dangers that human beings face by trying to play God.

A unique structural feature of *A Clockwork Orange* lies in its language. Kubrick skilfully adopted Burgess' Nadsat, a fashionable teenage vocabulary compounded of Anglicized Russian, Romany, rhyming slang, and onomatopoeia. The language is not difficult to grasp but its convoluted creativity clearly separates the young from the stultifying adult establishment. Flowing blood is happily described by Alex "the real red vino" or "krovvy." Good is "horrorshow," related to the fun and excitement in finding dirty old men to "tolchock" (hit). An equally entertaining alternative for Alex and his droogs (gang) is to find some frightened "devochka" (girl) for a "malenky" (little) bit of the old in-out in-out.

Although Alex, "Your Humble Narrator," is witty, candid, charming and intelligent, he is also clearly the personification of evil. That the audience can come to accept and identify with Alex to the extent that we view his recovery as a positive development is vaguely disturbing but not surprising. We may disapprove of Alex because we know he is wicked, but at the same time, we empathize with him because we recognize that by being stripped of the human attribute of evil, Alex loses all human dignity.

One scene in which the audience strongly identifies with Alex is the interrogation at the police station. Kubrick uses a subjective camera so that we see from Alex's perspective. The policemen and the social worker, Deltoid, are filmed from a low angle using a wide-angle lens, thus distorting the spatial relationship between the audience and the police. To Alex and to the viewer, the interrogating figures appear ugly and menacing. Our sympathy for the antihero increases as the police kick and punch him, leaving a splatter of vivid red on the white walls, an image which brings to mind Alex's phrase: "It's funny how the colours of the

real world only seem real when you viddy them on a film." To emphasize our identification with Alex even more, Deltoid gloats into the camera with the message, "You are now a murderer, little Alex, a murderer," before spitting into his face.

On the other hand, Kubrick balances audience identification with that of alienation. By using innocuously lyrical and classical music to create an ironic counterpoint to the action, often filmed in slow motion, the violence becomes highly stylized. This Brechtian device distances the viewer from the action which is now reduced in realism. At the same time, it emphasizes the playful cruelty of the images so that the viewer perceives with greater awareness the violence of the scenes.

In the fight scene with Billyboy's gang in the dilapidated Opera House, Kubrick combines Rossini's light-hearted "The Thieving Magpie" with slow-motion photography in filming the violent confrontation. The result is a graceful ballet of athletic prowess as the gang members hurl themselves at each other, slide from one place to another, leap through windows and somersault across the room. Alex and his droogs triumph in this showdown, proving beyond doubt to the audience that they truly enjoy violence and are good at it. Preceding the fight scene, "The Thieving Magpie" is first heard as the camera focuses on a painting of a Rococo vase brimming with flowers. At the same time, a girl's faint screams are heard in the background which grow louder as the camera retreats, showing the guilded head of Zeus at the centre of a proscenium arch. Eventually, we, the invisible audience, see the entire stage on which Billyboy and his gang are attempting to perform violent rape on a well-endowed and naked girl who is saved by the timely arrival of Alex's gang. It is no coincidence that the attempted rape and fight takes place in an abandoned theatre. The spiritual emptiness of the society is also reflected by the decline of art and culture, now divested of any real meaning. They have become mere props to enhance the culture of sex and violence.

In fact, it is the idea of performance which is a key component of the film's structure. Most of the key scenes are a kind of performance or contain strong elements of it. For example, the attempted rape by Billyboy's gang is "performed" onstage; the rape of Mrs Alexander is accompanied by Alex's sadistic rendition of the famous film tune "Singin' in the Rain;" the use of masks and costumes; the female opera singer in the Korova Milkbar whose impromptu performance of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" triggers the dispute between Alex and his droogs; the fire-and-brimstone prison sermon; the film projections of the Ludovico treatment; the staged performance demonstrating the effectiveness of the Ludovico treatment; and Alex's final fantasy.

Figure 2: *Clockwork Orange* (dir Stanley Kubrick, 1971)

Moreover, art and imagination have become limited by the boundaries of sex-obsessed fantasies, most evident in the sex-saturated atmosphere of the Korova Milkbar and in the pictures and paraphernalia which adorn the home of the Cat-lady (Miriam Karlin). The decline of art and the moral corruption of society are

reflected in the bleak, dirty and vandalised landscape of the city. However, before we are tempted to make any simplistic equation between high art and high morals, Kubrick juxtaposes Alex's love of ultraviolence with his passion for Beethoven, especially the "Glorious Ninth," to express the view that cultural or artistic sensitivities are no guarantee of morality ; instead, they are rooted in the same source as Alex's anti-social behaviour -- human nature.(11)

Alex's penchant for violence and exhibitionism come together in the rape scene at the home of the writer, Mr Alexander (Patrick Magee) and his wife (Adrienne Corri). Just before Alex and his gang arrive, the camera focuses on the mirrored corridor of the house with its checkerboard floor, emphasizing a tense symmetry and a sense of claustrophobia which seems to be a Kubrickian way of announcing that something is going to happen. Alex and his droogs burst into the house with faces masked to prevent identification. Alex wears a ridiculous but sinister phallic mask which leaves no doubt as to his intention. As the gang rushes into the house, with one of them carrying the writer's wife, Alex kicks the writer down the stairs. In the serene white interior of the intellectual's house, Alex and his friends act out their dark sexual fantasies.

To the tune of "Singin' in the Rain" crooned by Alex, and punctuated by painfuk kicks into Alexander's stomach, the rape routine begins. The writer's wife is gagged with hands imprisoned behind her. Her husband, also gagged and bound on the floor, is turned into an impotent voyeuor who is told by Alex to "viddy well." A wide angled lens used in the close-ups of the two Alexes distorts the screen image. On one hand, the visual distortion suggests the twisted reality with which Alex views the world. His perverse delight in singing and raping at the same time without batting an eyelid adds to the horror of this brutal degradation. On the other hand, the distorted image is for Alexander, the reflection of the nightmarish scene taking place before him. The cocky, young Alex begins his performance by cutting away the wife's red bodysuit with artistic flourish, while relishing the heightened sense of terror with each snip of the scissors. Forced into submission, the red-haired Mrs Alexander becomes an animated version of the white female statues at the Korova. The rape takes place in slow motion, protracting each silent scream.

In *A Clockwork Orange*, Kubrick creates a wealth of startling and memorable images including the dizzying dance of death in which Alex, wearing his rubber phallic mask, kills the Cat-lady with a gigantic white sculpture of a penis. This scene, like all the other scenes using a hand-held camera, are photographed by the director himself. Another sequence of surreal images occur in the stage show in which the rehabilitated Alex is proudly introduced by the Minister of the Interior (Anthony Sharp). To illustrate the effectiveness of the cure, Alex is first punched, kicked and then forced by a strange man to lick his shoe. Alex's natural impulse to retaliate is overcome by immeasurably stronger feelings of nausea, the effect of his mental conditioning. Similarly, when he is next confronted by the invitation of a beautiful semi-nude, his initial desire gives way to physical illness. Dwelling on the incongruity of these images, film critic Philip Strick remarks, "[t]he indignities are wildly applauded, his assailants skip off, and a discussion of the ethics of choice begins over Alex's head. Somehow, it works." (12)

Although the film evokes the 1970s through the thick sideburns and bell bottoms, the characteristic furniture design, the absence of computer screens and compact disc players, *A Clockwork Orange* undoubtedly addresses the contemporary viewer. It transcends time and will continue to remain potent because it discusses fundamental problems of existence, including the generation conflict, the sources of violence, corruption and the institutional abuse of power.

Notes

1. Craig McGregor, "Nice Boy from the Bronx?" *The New York Times*, January 1972.

2. *The New York Times*, February 13, 1972.

3. "A Newspaper Says No to 'Orange,'" (Editorial), *Detroit News*, 19 March 1972.

4. In Great Britain, *A Clockwork Orange* was taken out of circulation by Kubrick in 1973. The director

Figure 3: *Clockwork Orange* (dir Stanley Kubrick, 1971)

released the film only recently.

5. Mcgregor, "Nice Boy from the Bronx?"

6. Ibid.

7. Alexander Walker, *Stanley Kubrick Directs* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), p. 41.

8. Philip Strick, Penelope Houston, "Interview with Stanley Kubrick," *Sight And Sound* 41, No.2, Spring 1972, 63-64.

9. Walker, *Kubrick Directs*, p. 42.

10. Vincent Canby, in *The New York Times Film Reviews*, 1971-1972 (New York: The New York Times Co., 1973), p. 193.

11. Thomas Allen Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside A Film Artist's Maze* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 135-136.

12. Philip Strick on "Kubrick's Horrorshow", *Sight And Sound*, Winter 1971/1972, 41, No 1 (London: British Film Institute, 1972), 44.

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Author Information

Yvonne NG is the co-author of *Latent Images: Film in Singapore Second edition* (NUS Press, 2010); *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* (OUP, 2000) and *Latent Images: Film in Singapore CD-ROM* (Singapore, 2003). She has written on Singapore and Asian cinema and contributes to the *International Film Guide.*