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"What's It Going to Be Then, Eh?"

Questioning Kubrick's *Clockwork*

On March 7, 1999, Stanley Kubrick died at his home outside of London after nearly completing the editing of his final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*.[1] He was seventy years old and had lived a rather reclusive existence in England since 1974. *Eyes Wide Shut*, starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, was his first film in over a decade. Following several years of planning, the actual filming had occupied Kubrick and his stars for more than 15 months. Much fanfare accompanied its release in the summer of 1999 (Cruise and Kidman were on the July 5th cover of *Time* magazine), but the critical response was decidedly mixed, with some critics viewing it as a "haunting, final masterpiece" and others as a disappointment. Although Kubrick had prepared a final cut of the film before his death, the studio redefined the meaning of "final cut" by adding digitalized figures optically to obscure the explicit sexual activity of one of the film's central scenes before releasing the film in America. Kubrick's brilliant career ended with controversy and debate – characteristics that had marked his output at least since the release of *Lolita* (1962). Why did Kubrick's films – so varied and diverse – engender such heated discussion? Few directors of his stature have produced films that have consistently provoked so much controversy.

Stanley Kubrick began as a staff photographer for *Look* magazine at the age of seventeen. In part because of an indifferent high school record, Kubrick chose not to attend college. But it was a high school English teacher – Aaron Traister, whom he immortalized in a *Look* magazine photo spread in April 1946 – who ignited his interest

in literature and drama. An immersion in films at the Museum of Modern Art inspired Kubrick to shift his focus from still photography to moving pictures. After making several documentaries and a low-budget feature financed by his family, Kubrick began to achieve recognition with his second feature, *Killer's Kiss* (1955), and his third, *The Killing* (1956). With *Paths of Glory* (1957), starring Kirk Douglas, he entered the ranks of America's most promising young filmmakers. His association with Kirk Douglas on *Paths of Glory* was to prove fruitful, for two years later, Kirk Douglas, by then the star and executive producer of the epic film *Spartacus*, hired Kubrick to replace Stanley Mann as director. This paved the way for an extraordinary outburst of creative work beginning with *Lolita* (1962). Kubrick moved into high gear with *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *2001* (1968), and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), three films later listed by the American Film Institute as among the top one hundred American films of cinema's first century. Each of these films provoked heated debate and each was a box-office success.

At the time of Kubrick's death, the most controversial of these films – *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) – was still unavailable in England, having been withdrawn from distribution by Kubrick in 1974. The novel, by Anthony Burgess, on which it was based, remained in print and in wide circulation. For Anthony Burgess, it seems in retrospect, Kubrick's movie was only the beginning of his obsession with this project. Unlike many novelists, who cash their checks and cease to ponder the fate of their work once it reaches the screen, Burgess continued to discuss his novel endlessly in essays, interviews, and letters to editors before reworking the material for two distinctly different musical dramatizations. The first of these, published in 1987 as *A Clockwork Orange: A Play With Music*, concludes with a character dressed like Stanley Kubrick coming out onto the stage with a trumpet, playing "Singin' in the Rain" until he is "kicked off the stage." A few years later, Burgess brought out yet another musical version, *A Clockwork Orange 2004*, this one produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in London at the Barbican Theatre and featuring the music of Bono and the Edge. It too received very mixed reviews. For over a quarter of a century, then, Anthony Burgess reworked *A Clockwork Orange*, an obsession matched by few creative artists in this century. During this same period, audiences were unable to view the film in the country where it had been made. Why?

In the opening fifteen minutes of *A Clockwork Orange*, Kubrick confronts the viewer with a series of violent and sexually explicit scenes. In this respect, the film resembles the novel. But in the novel this material is narrated in a language of Burgess's invention. This language proves baffling to most readers and shields them somewhat from the sex and violence. No such distance is available to the film viewer. Although the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) had rejected an earlier version of the script written by Terry Southern and Michael Cooper, they approved Kubrick's film and gave it an X rating on the grounds that the controversial materials were justified by the story. The film had already received this rating by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) prior to its New York premier on December 20, 1971. Controversy did not end with the rating, however. In both England and America, conservative forces protested the showing of the film. A number of newspapers in America refused to take advertising for the film, prompting Stanley Kubrick to write the *Detroit News* a letter protesting the action and stating that "for any newspaper to deliberately attempt to suppress another equally important communications medium seems especially ugly and shortsighted."[2] In Britain, the Festival of Light, a conservative group promoting film censorship, organized a campaign to prevent *A Clockwork Orange* from being shown. The BBFC was forced to defend its decision to allow the film to be screened. The tabloids responded with attacks on the movie. In spite of the fact that *A Clockwork Orange* was receiving awards at festivals in Europe and America (Best Foreign Film at the Venice Film Festival, Best Film and Best Director by the New York Film Critics, and nominations for Best Film, Direction, Writing, and Editing at the Academy Awards), its distribution remained limited in both countries. Throughout 1972, *A Clockwork Orange* was shown at only one theater in London. In the United States, the X rating restricted distribution as well. Kubrick regrouped and took stock of the situation like a general planning for a long campaign. In August 1972, he announced that he was withdrawing the film in America for 60 days in order to reedit the work before resubmitting it to the MPAA. In October, Kubrick declared that he had replaced thirty seconds of film with less explicit material from the same scenes. His efforts resulted in a new rating (R) from the MPAA for this version. Both the R and X rated versions of the film continued to circulate in America as the controversy died down. In Great Britain the debates

over the effects of film violence on viewers continued to rage. A rash of youth crimes was blamed on the maleficent influence of *A Clockwork Orange*. Kubrick was outraged. With little fanfare, he arranged – as owner of the British distribution right – to have *A Clockwork Orange* withdrawn from distribution in England. Although it remained widely available in America – in theaters and on video, laserdisc, and DVD – the film was not shown in England after its initial release. It was not until a year after the death of Kubrick that *A Clockwork Orange* received a major 250-print rerelease in Great Britain.

What did the forces of censorship object to in Kubrick's film? Even thirty years after its initial release, *A Clockwork Orange* continues to shock viewers, especially in its opening sequences. The film begins with the striking image of Alex de Large (Malcolm McDowell) seated on a banquette in the Korova Milkbar surrounded by his three "droogs" and enjoying some "moloko" spiked with "vellocet or synthemesc or drencrom" (milk mixed with drugs). The camera pulls back to reveal the Milkbar in all its splendor [Fig. 1]. This is one of the few sets created for the film (the others were found through a detailed study of recent issues of British architectural magazines) and the sculptures of nude women forming tables and milk dispensers

1. The Korova Milkbar in all its splendor.

establish an extremely disturbing tone for the film. After a few drinks, Alex and his droogs are ready for a "bit of the ultraviolence." What occurs in rapid succession is the brutal beating of a homeless man, an attempted gang rape that Alex and his droogs interrupt, and the pitched battle with the rival gang that follows. The sounds of a police siren bring this to an end, and Alex and his droogs quickly leave the scene, steal a car, and rush out of town, forcing other cars off the road as they race through the night. An illuminated sign, "HOME," catches Alex's eye and they stop before a modern structure. Once inside, Alex and his droogs brutally beat the aging writer and rape his wife while he looks helplessly on. Then it's back to the Milkbar for a nightcap before calling it a night. After returning to the bleak apartment block where he shares a flat with his parents, Alex calms his nerves by masturbating to "a bit of the old Ludwig van," a tape of the Ninth Symphony played at top volume in his small bedroom.

The next morning Alex skips school and is visited by his "postcorrective advisor," P. R. Deltoid (Aubrey Morris), who makes unsuccessful homosexual advances while Alex is getting dressed. Later, after a sexual interlude with two "little sisters" he meets at a music store, Alex joins his droogs at the Milkbar for another evening of fun. But the fun turns sour for Alex, as his authority is challenged by the gang, and he viciously attacks the three of them. Having reasserted his authority, Alex leads his droogs to another milkbar to prepare for what will be their last "bit of the ultraviolence" as a group.

At Georgie's suggestion, they drop in on "a very rich ptitsa" who lives alone at a "Health Farm" with her cats. Alex enters through a window and finds the middle-aged woman dressed in a leotard standing defiantly before him in a large room with sexually explicit paintings on the walls and a large sculpture of a phallus on the table. A battle ensues and Alex knocks her unconscious. (She dies later in the hospital.) The sounds of a police siren alert him to danger. As he leaves the house, he is confronted by his rebellious droogs. Dim smashes a bottle of milk on Alex's nose, and Alex falls to the ground screaming, "I'm blind, you bastards! I'm blind!!!" His companions flee and Alex is captured by the police.

I have described the first act of Kubrick's film (Chapters 1–7 in the novel) in some detail because the depiction of sex and violence

here is responsible for most of the controversy surrounding the film. Critics have noted that Kubrick has changed the victims of Alex's crimes from Burgess's depictions, so that the crimes are somewhat less offensive to the viewer. Thus, while the violence directed against the homeless beggar in the film remains horrifying, it is less so than the encounter with the "doddery starry schoolmaster type veck" of Burgess's novel, a character who is encountered carrying "books under his arm" and "coming round the corner from the Public Biblio." Similarly, the intended victim of Billyboy and his droogs – "a weepy young devotchka. . . not more than ten" – has been transformed into a young woman in her late teens or early twenties. The two teenagers who willingly frolic with Alex after meeting him at the record store are – in the novel – younger girls whom he intoxicates and drugs before raping. And finally, the cat lady of the novel is an elderly woman "very gray in the voloss," living alone in a decaying house with her pets. In each instance, Kubrick has muted the horror by changing the nature of Alex's victims. More significant, however, are the ways Kubrick manages to distance the viewer from these horrendous crimes by choreographing many of these acts using music and/or slow motion photography. The effect of these techniques is to make the violence less real and easier for the viewer to follow on the screen.

The second and third acts of the film deal respectively with Alex's incarceration, treatment, release, suicide attempt, and "cure." There is relatively little sex and violence in these parts of the film and it occurs either in Alex's fantasies or in the movies he is forced to watch as part of his treatment. For many viewers, the incarceration and treatment of Alex by the state constitute the most dangerous violence in the film. In Kubrick's film, the Ludovico treatment becomes a metafictional moment that forces us to reflect on our own activity as film viewers. (This is not true of the novel, of course.) Alex too must become a film viewer, as part of his treatment, without the aestheticizing effects that Kubrick provides for his viewers in the first part of the film. In the fascistic world Alex has entered, he is forced to watch films as a way of programming him to find sex and violence nauseating in the extreme. The Ludovico treatment deprives him of any choice. This treatment, however, is presented in a cerebral manner, unlike the sex and violence that confront the viewer in the opening of the film.[3]

Anthony Burgess's novel reads like the report of a time-traveler who has landed on once-familiar terrain to find everything irrevocably changed. So must Anthony Burgess have felt when he moved back to London in 1960, after living abroad for a number of years in Singapore. With the Teddyboys in decline, Mods and Rockers were beginning to battle over turf and colonizers and subalterns alike were pouring into what had once been the capital of the empire, producing signs of the strains of immigration. Burgess had been diagnosed (incorrectly) by doctors as terminally ill and so – faced with what he thought was his imminent death and confronted by social decay and cataclysmic change – he wrote up a storm. By the time of his death thirty-five years later, he had authored over fifty books, including several studies of language. *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) is set in the Britain of the near-future and the work reflects the troubled state of England to which Burgess had returned.

The novel appeared to considerable critical acclaim, and the work's cinematic potential was readily apparent to many. Terry Southern, one of the screenwriters on *Dr. Strangelove*, personally optioned *A Clockwork Orange* for around $1,000 for a six-month period. He showed the novel to Stanley Kubrick who, according to Southern, was initially put off by the strange language. Southern renewed his option for another six months, wrote a screenplay with photographer Michael Cooper, and shopped it around. But he encountered problems with the British film censor, who returned the screenplay unread, with the comment that "there is no point reading this script, because it involves youthful defiance of authority, and we're not doing that."[4] When his option lapsed a second time, Southern didn't have the money to renew, so his lawyer, Si Litvinoff, picked it up and commissioned a new screenplay by Anthony Burgess. Litvinoff attempted to interest the Rolling Stones in the project, with the idea of Mick Jagger playing Alex and the Stones playing his sidekicks, the droogs. But the Stones were too busy to make a film and the project died, although Litvinoff and his partner, Max Raab, retained the rights to the novel.

At the time, however, Kubrick himself was occupied with other projects. After *Paths of Glory*, he turned to a book as controversial as *A Clockwork Orange*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. This was followed by *Dr. Strangelove* and then *2001*. Each of Kubrick's subsequent films

would be based on a work of literature and each of these works would present an entirely different challenge to the filmmaker. As Kubrick noted to Michel Ciment, "There is no deliberate pattern to the stories that I have chosen to make into films. About the only factor at work each time is that I try not to repeat myself."[5] With the enormous success of *2001*, Kubrick hoped to finance a film based on the life of Napoleon. He was obsessed with the project and extensively researched all aspects of Napoleon's military and political career, as well as his personal life. Kubrick discussed the project at length with Jack Nicholson, who began to share his enthusiasm and for whom the part of Napoleon would have been his first starring role. But in 1970 Sergei Bondarchuk's epic film *Waterloo* appeared, with Rod Steiger as Napoleon. Timing is everything, and with one film on Napoleon in the theaters already, financiers were reluctant to back another. Kubrick was forced to put his own ambitious project aside. He remembered the book Terry Southern had recommended to him earlier. He read it in one sitting and quickly decided that *A Clockwork Orange* would be his next film. According to Vincent LoBrutto, Litvinoff and Raab were happy to sell him the rights for around $200,000, which represented a nice profit for them, but no profit whatsoever for the author, Anthony Burgess.[6] Warner Brothers optioned the novel and Kubrick personally began to write the script. But the novel Warner Brothers optioned was the American edition of *A Clockwork Orange*, an edition that lacked the final chapter of the British edition.

Burgess had structured the novel into three sections of seven chapters each. In discussing the novel later, Burgess commented on the numerical symmetry and the significance of the number twenty-one as (among other things) the age at which one officially becomes an adult in the West. In one of the essays in this collection, Peter Rabinowitz considers the novel's "sonata" form with Chapter 21 as a sort of coda. Apart from questions of symmetry, however, the novel is very different when it ends with Chapter 20, as it did in all American editions prior to 1987. According to Burgess, his American publisher suggested deleting the final chapter and – eager to have the novel published in America – Burgess agreed. The final chapter takes Alex into adulthood and reformation. When asked about his choice of the American edition of the novel, Kubrick replied: "There are two

different versions of the novel. One has an extra chapter. I had not read this version until I had virtually finished the screenplay. This extra chapter depicts the rehabilitation of Alex. But it is, as far as I am concerned, unconvincing and inconsistent with the style and intent of the book.... I certainly never gave any serious consideration to using it."[7]

Burgess's greatest achievement in *A Clockwork Orange* lies not in the story, however, but in the manner of telling it. For his novel, Burgess created a new language – which he calls "nadsat" from the Russian suffix for "teen" – comprised of a mixture of slang, baby talk, Romany, and Russian derivatives to express a reality that is at once near and distant.[8] (Not even Burgess could have predicted the fall of the Berlin Wall and the decline and dissolution of *that* empire. His use of Russian reflected his deep pessimism about the future of Great Britain.) Readers then – as now – recognize the society all too well while at the same time acknowledge its strangeness. This language was shaped by his great admiration for the work of James Joyce, as reflected in his two critical studies, *ReJoyce* (1965), an examination of Joyce's fiction, and *Joysprick: An Introduction to the Language of James Joyce* (1973), as well as in his edition of *A Shorter Finnegans Wake* (1967). In the midst of composing these homages to Joyce, Burgess decided to challenge Joyce's example by fabricating an English of his own. His creation of a credible language in *A Clockwork Orange* is, indeed, one of his greatest accomplishments as a novelist. And that accomplishment posed an extraordinary challenge for Stanley Kubrick.

When Alex is undergoing his Ludovico treatment, Dr. Brodsky, his psychologist, comments on his slang ("the dialect of the tribe") and then asks an associate, Dr. Branom, about its origins. Dr. Branom responds: "Odd bits of old rhyming slang... A bit of gipsy talk, too. But most of the roots are Slav. Propaganda. Subliminal penetration."[9]

Like James Joyce, Burgess wanted to create a new language so that it wouldn't appear dated. But the timeliness of the language is but one of its functions. The novel is related in the first person by Alex, a fifteen-year-old who lives in the indefinite future, with an immediacy and directness that draws the reader into the text. Alex speaks directly to us. His extraordinary command of language endears him

to the reader as well.[10] In addition, the repeated use of "my brother" when addressing the reader (a variant of Baudelaire's famous line "Hypocrite lecteur – mon semblable – mon frère" ["Hypocritical reader – my likeness – my brother"]) and the many references to himself as "your humble narrator" together help establish an intimate relationship between Alex and the reader. We experience everything with Alex, and he shapes our perceptions. But Alex's language, like any foreign language, must be learned. Burgess clearly anticipated his reader's difficulties with the language. In the course of the novel, Burgess (through Alex) teaches the reader nadsat in a variety of ways, principally through context (e.g., "making up our rassoodocks [minds] what to do with the evening"), through the use of descriptive modifiers ("horn-rimmed otchkies" [eye glasses]), through the use of synonyms (e.g., "Our pockets were full of deng . . . But, as they say, money isn't everything"), and through repetition. When Alex kicks an enemy in the "gulliver," the meaning is unclear, but when Alex later receives a glass of beer with a "gulliver" on it, the reader understands that it means "head." Gradually the reader's difficulties with the language lessen. In the final chapter of the English edition (Chapter 21), we learn that nadsat has itself become dated, for the wife of one of Alex's former droogs is unable to understand him when he speaks and professes her amazement at its use. Nadsat does in fact intersect with a number of other dialects in the course of the novel, some of which the reader comprehends easily. Others, like the dialect spoken by the drugged customer in the Moloko Bar (Chapter 1), or the "old time real criminal's slang" of one of Alex's prison inmates (Part 2, Chapter 1), remain incomprehensible. To follow the novel, then, the reader must learn nadsat. Everything that happens is mediated through this language.

Nadsat functions in other ways as well. One of its principal uses is to distance the reader from the considerable violence of the novel, to act – in Burgess's words – as "a kind of mist half-hiding the mayhem."[11] The first third of the novel (Chapters 1–7) chronicle the "adventures of a young man who loves violence, rape, and Beethoven" (as the film poster proclaims) and it is no accident that this concentration of violence occurs when the reader is likely to have the most difficulty with the language. Consider Alex's narration of