

## 2 The Cultural Productions of *A Clockwork Orange*

This is Stanley Kubrick. He produced, wrote the screenplay for and directed *A Clockwork Orange*. I'm not sure that Kubrick sees himself as a practitioner of the Ludovico Technique, but I think he comes very close. Has it occurred to anyone that, after having our eyes metaphorically clamped open to witness the horrors that Kubrick parades across the screen, like Alex and his adored 9th, none of us will ever again be able to hear "Singin' in the Rain" without a vague feeling of nausea?<sup>1</sup>

– Susan Rice

What precisely might be the effects of watching *A Clockwork Orange* has preoccupied several decades of film scholars. Does the film romanticize and then excuse violence? Could it create a questioning of authorities? Is its effect more devastating, as Susan Rice suggests: the unsettling of a pure pleasure in watching Gene Kelly dance? And why did *A Clockwork Orange* become such a favorite among the cult audiences of the 1970s and later?

This essay will not answer any of these questions. What it will attempt is to place the U.S. public critical reception of *A Clockwork Orange* in parts of its cultural context with the hope that understanding some of the dynamics and tensions existing within the moment of the film's release will provide a description of some associations available to a film viewer of the era. These contextual associations would have a bearing on eventually answering questions about effect.

The critical reception of *A Clockwork Orange* has been studied with rather more detail than most other films. This is undoubtedly because of the public debates it generated within weeks of its U.S. release with an X rating and its actual censoring in Britain. A particularly good synopsis of the U.S. reaction occurs in Ernest Parmentier's summary of the criticism of *A Clockwork Orange*. Parmentier describes the initial laudatory praise of the director Stanley Kubrick and the film, followed by denunciations of both by Andrew Sarris, Stanley Kauffmann, Pauline Kael, Gary Arnold (of the *Washington Post*), and Roger Ebert. A series of letters in the *New York Times* also debated merits and deficits of *A Clockwork Orange*.<sup>2</sup> I will return to these public arguments below.

In Britain, where self-regulation and state regulation differ from that in the United States, government review of films occurred, with some films being considered by the regulators as unsuitable viewing fare and then prohibited from public screening. Guy Phelps explains that a conservative turn in the voting of 1970 encouraged a retightening of recent more liberal decisions. Thus, when *A Clockwork Orange* appeared, amid several other taboo-testing films such as Ken Russell's *The Devils* and Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs*, the censoring board had a peculiar problem. Since the film itself criticized government attempts to control or condition youth behavior with the proposition that interference by authorities was more immoral than Alex's original behavior, it might look too self-serving of the Board to question the film. More importantly, however, demands by conservative commentators, requesting that the Board act against the increasing number and brutality of representations of violence on the screen, pushed the Board in the opposite direction toward acting against the film in some way.

Because the controversy seemed potentially damaging in the long-run, Kubrick convinced his British distributors to select a narrow release: the film was shown for over a year in only one West End London theater (although to large audiences).<sup>3</sup> When the distributors attempted a wider release at the end of that period, local activities of censoring had intensified. In February 1973, Hastings banned *A Clockwork Orange* on grounds that "it was 'violence for its own sake' and had 'no moral.'"<sup>4</sup> Other local authorities followed the Hastings' decision despite controversy in the public discussions.

The views that *A Clockwork Orange* presented “violence for its own sake” and “had no moral” were also major themes in the U.S. controversy and in that order. The first negative remarks were about the representations of violence. Sarris’s review in *The Village Voice* in December 1971 describes *A Clockwork Orange* as a “painless, bloodless and ultimately pointless futuristic fantasy.” Kauffmann, Kael, and Richard Schickel also attack the film for its representations of violence, warning that watching so much brutality could desensitize viewers to violence.<sup>5</sup> Thus, ad hoc theories of effects of representation became one line of argumentation, and *A Clockwork Orange* entered the strands of discussion that had operated for centuries about obscenity and audience effect.

The debates in the *New York Times* operated in philosophical and political discourses. What was the moral of this film? Was it moral? What were the politics of those praising or condemning the film? What are the responsibilities of a filmmaker? Kubrick and actor Malcolm McDowell participated in these discussions claiming that “liberals” did not like the film because it was forcing them to face reality.<sup>6</sup> Kubrick was particularly reacting to Fred M. Hechinger, who had charged that an “alert liberal . . . should recognize the voice of fascism” in the film.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the first year of its release, a third line of attack opened on *A Clockwork Orange*. The film was accused of misogyny. Beverly Walker, writing in an early feminist film journal, charged the film adaptation with “an attitude that is ugly, lewd and brutal toward the female human being: all of the women are portrayed as caricatures; the violence committed upon them is treated comically; the most startling aspects of the decor relate to the female form.”<sup>8</sup>

Within the context of the U.S. cultural scene of 1971–1972, that these three discursive themes – effects of the representation of violence, morality and politics, and gender relations – would come forth to be debated is easy to explain.<sup>9</sup> That they would be the staging grounds for a cult viewer’s attraction to the film is also apparent. Precisely how these themes organized themselves in the debates is important to examine, however, for they take on a flavor peculiar to the circumstances of the era. The arguments in each of the three discourses were crossed by discourses related to (1) changing definitions of obscenity and pornography as a consequence of the sexual politics

of the 1960s, (2) theories of audience effect, and (3) intertextual comparisons – interpreting the ideology of a film in relation to its source material.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the cultural productions of *A Clockwork Orange* were contextually derived but contradictory, and the consequence of the lack of an easy open and shut case about the meaning or effect or value of the film has been part of the explanation for the film's availability to so many people in so many ways.

### **EFFECTS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE: TESTING DEFINITIONS OF OBSCENITY**

At the time of the release of *A Clockwork Orange* in December 1971, a wave of films with scenes of violence were splashing across U.S. screens. In a preview article for the film, *Time* magazine had pointed to Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*, *Dirty Harry*, and the recent Bond film *Diamonds Are Forever* as part of a trend in which *A Clockwork Orange* was also participating.<sup>11</sup> Although some arguments could be made that these films were fictional responses to the nightly news images of Vietnam, two other, very salient, causal factors for the increasingly violent material were the previous twenty-year history of U.S. film exhibition and the changing laws of obscenity and pornography.

Since the end of World War II, foreign films were appearing with regularity on screens in larger U.S. cities; they were winning best film awards from U.S. and foreign critics and film festivals. Often, foreign films presented more sexually explicit images or dealt with seamier aspects of modern life, creating a stronger sense of verisimilitude (read as "realism"). Finally, broaching the boundaries of subject matter that had been considered off-limits by the Hollywood film industry was thus a competitive move by U.S. filmmakers against the foreign cinema. It was also a move of product differentiation against U.S. television, which had taken up the role of the family entertainer. During the twenty years up to 1971, Hollywood films had steadily penetrated earlier limits on sexual and violent materials. It had finally given up on the old production code's binary system of okay/not-okay, and in 1968 moved to a rating system organized by ages.<sup>12</sup> The G-GP-R-X system opened up possibilities of competition through subject matter in ways hitherto undreamed of. The possibility of such a system, however, required that previous definitions of

obscenity and liability be changed before Hollywood could believe itself safe from criminal prosecution.

The representation of sexually explicit materials is not to be equated with the representation of violently explicit materials nor is either to be assumed obscene. However, the confusion of these notions was part of public protests of the 1960s. Those protests had to do with what counted as obscenity, and laws and discourses were in transition on this matter. In his excellent study of the history of pornography, Walter Kendrick traces the distinctions, and then confusions, between the terms "obscenity" and "pornography."<sup>13</sup> Kendrick argues that until the 1800s, Western tradition generally divided literature into serious literature and comedy. Serious literature had decorum, high status, and a public availability; comedy was abusive, low, and, if obscene, segregated into a nonpublic space. Obscenity could occur through use of both sexual and scatological materials.

It was not until the mid-1800s that "pornography" appeared, and at first it meant "a description of prostitutes or of prostitution," but also a "description of the life, manners, etc. of prostitutes and their patrons: hence, the expression or suggestion of obscene or unchaste subjects in literature or art."<sup>14</sup> Obviously, chaste versus lascivious representations of prostitutes could occur, and distinguishing between the two became important.

Now I would note here that although Kendrick suggests that obscenity had traditionally been located within the realm of comedy (and outside the field of serious literature), obviously images of eroticism have not always been deployed for a comedic effect; we would be naive to think that the nineteenth century invented representations designed for sexual arousal. What seems to be happening, I think, is that the term "obscenity" is being focused in its scope toward the sexual (and scatological), and its semantic field is redistributed in its scope to include not only sexually explicit materials for comedic effects but also erotic ones which did not, however, fit into traditional norms of serious literature. The project of categorization was confronted by ambiguous materials.

Moreover, soon theorists of law began to try to make distinctions between intent and effect when asked to rule on the categorization of instances of reputed obscenity or pornography. Here theories of audience effect entered. The distinctions made are, in legal

discourse, “tests,” and legal tests began to be made on presumptions that images could have audience effects. Kendrick notes that Lord Chief Justice Cockburn concluded an important mid-1800s British decision, *Regina v. Hicklin* (1868), on obscenity with the test being whether there existed in the materials “the tendency to corrupt the minds and morals of those into whose hands it might come.”<sup>15</sup> If the conclusion of the “Hicklin Test” was positive, then one could infer that the author’s intentions had been obscene and the author would be judged guilty.

Now two obvious observations are apparent: one is that the materials are being assumed to be naturally readable as obscene or not; the second is that intent is being determined from presumed effect. The various gaps in reasoning in these two propositions are immense.

Although both British and U.S. law generally operated under the Hicklin Test during the 1800s, by the later years of the century, U.S. courts were increasingly sympathetic to claims that if the questionable item were “art,” then it was excluded from judgments of obscenity.<sup>16</sup> In other words, U.S. law began to rewrite the traditional binary categories of serious literature and comedy, with the opposition becoming serious literature/art versus nonserious (e.g., cheap) literature/not-art, and obscenity was only possible in the instance of the latter. In 1913, Judge Learned Hand undermined the “transparent-reading-of-effect-proves-intent” assumptions of the Hicklin Test by separating audiences: a possible effect on underage individuals should not necessitate the general prohibition of an item. It could be available privately, if not publicly, to mature readers. The effects of the troublesome representation were not universal or necessarily degenerate. In some sense, Judge Hand creates a “Selected-Effect Test.”

Beyond the new, legal categorical separations of art versus not-art and universal versus select (and, hence, public versus private), U.S. law added a third new binary: the Part-Versus-Whole Test. The courts decided a 1922 case by the argument that although parts of a book might be lewd, the “whole” book was not; the “whole” book was art. If the whole book were art, then the power of art would override the effects of the segments of obscenity. Again, audience effects were significant in the test but refinements in assumptions of effects were occurring.<sup>17</sup>

These U.S. trends in regulating sexual materials explain why the U.S. ruled *Ulysses* (and *The Well of Loneliness*) could be published far earlier than Britain did. It is also the fact that, as a consequence of these tests, U.S. courts delegated pornography to the category of not-art. In 1957 the Roth Test became the new statement of the evolving semantics and theory of effect: “to the average person using community standards” would the dominant theme of the item appeal to prurient interests? In this test, the work is judged as a whole, and the United States as a whole is the community doing the judging. Moreover, obscenity is reduced to sexual content although not all sexual content is obscene (it is not obscene if it is in art). Obscenity is not protected by free speech, but obscenity is now “material which deals with sex in a manner appealing to prurient interests.”<sup>18</sup> While the Roth Test opened up some types of material – the U.S. Supreme Court cleared physique magazines (which were often used as erotic material by gay men) of obscenity charges in the early 1960s<sup>19</sup> – the test also tacitly reduced obscenity to sexual content (although likely scatological material would also be considered). The 1973 refinement of the Roth Test by the Miller Test included not only the Whole-Item Test, but added the query of whether sexual conduct was represented in a “patently offensive” way.<sup>20</sup>

In this stream of shifting semantics about obscenity were the cultural, political, and sexual debates of the 1960s: the anti-Vietnam War crisis pitted free-love flower children against gun-toting war militants. “Make love not war” introduced a binary contrast that paralleled the question addressing why it was that sexuality was deemed by authority figures as offensive enough to be prohibited from view, whereas violence was not. Wasn’t violence and its representations equally or probably more obscene? If sexual content might have harmful effects by appealing to susceptible minds, so might violent images.

Thus, at a time of increasing leniency toward (or means to justify) the representation of sexuality, political differences turned attention toward other subject matter that had only recently also been increasingly portrayed in public sites. Alongside the debates on what constituted obscene materials grew the arguments that representations of dominance by one person over another (rapes, objectification of individuals, and so forth) fit the category of “patently offensive” and

had a potential to produce harmful effects (a continuation of the Hicklin Test).<sup>21</sup> Thus, anti-pornography feminists were not objecting to sexual content but content representing violence and arguing for its categorization as obscenity and for its removal from the public sphere.

*A Clockwork Orange* entered into the late 1960s debates over re-defining obscenity to include not only hard-core pornography but also violence. While ultimately legally protected as a work of art, *A Clockwork Orange* was not protected in the sphere of public discourse. Thus, the discussion about the representations of violence in the film echoes the centuries-long debates over sexual obscenity.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the film's violence was not isolated as in the case of other violent films being released at about the same time: *A Clockwork Orange* had sexual content completely intertwined within its violence.

One of the major themes of the attackers of the representations of violence in *A Clockwork Orange* was that it, indeed, was not art but exploitation. It failed Judge Hand's Whole-Item Test. "Exploitation" was a film-specific term for cheap, prurient, patently offensive, and – a sure sign it was not art – commercially driven. Examples of these criticisms include remarks such as in *Films in Review* that the film "sinks to the depths of buck-chasing (sex scribblings on walls; total nudity; sight-gags for perverts)."<sup>23</sup> Schickel agrees, defining the film as "commercial cynicism," and David Denby calls it a "grotesque extension of the youth movie" (also not art in 1971). Kael points out that in one scene the film opens on the rival gang's attempt to gang-rape a young girl so that, she underlines, more of the stripping can be shown: "it's the purest exploitation."<sup>24</sup>

In these attacks over to which category the film belongs – art or not-art – operate not only discourses concerned with the changing definitions of obscenity and theories of audience effect but also discourses of intertextual comparison. In the criticisms of its representations of violence (and in the ones on the film's morality and its gender politics), a major strategy of both attackers and defenders is to compare and contrast the source material with the film. Here the source material is Anthony Burgess's novel, *A Clockwork Orange*. With the development of auteurist criticism in the 1960s, the film *A Clockwork Orange* also becomes Stanley Kubrick's film. Thus, attributions of authorship and intent in these comparisons reduce to how

Kubrick changed (or did not change) Burgess's work. In the claim that the film's representations of violence classified it as exploitation not-art, attackers used the intertextual-comparison strategy. For example, Kauffmann notes that Kubrick changes the woman whom Alex assaults with one of her favorite art objects from "an old woman to a sexy broad [sic] and [kills] her with a giant ceramic phallus (thus changing sheer heartlessness into sex sensation)."<sup>25</sup> With the tacit proposition that the original novel is art, evidence of Kubrick's sexualization of the content proves that Kubrick's film is exploitation and not-art [Fig. 6].

Those criticizing the film for its representations of violence not only tried to define it as not-art but also argued that the representations had harmful effects and passed the Hicklin Test. Kael probably is relying on contemporary social science theses that proposed that individual experiences with violent images were not specifically harmful but repeated exposure to such images would eventually be bad



6. Auteur Kubrick and sexual violence.

when she rejected the idea that violent images were only reflecting reality; instead, she claimed they were “desensitizing us.”<sup>26</sup> Vincent Canby somewhat responded to Kael by writing that although he was not disturbed by the violence, he could believe that this might not be the case for “immature audiences” (the Selected-Effect Test).<sup>27</sup>

Some people, of course, disagreed with those criticizing the film on the basis of its representations of violence. In these cases, the writers were attempting to establish *A Clockwork Orange* within the category of art and, consequently, not degenerate or obscene in its depictions of violence. If it was art, then the overall effect of the film was an art effect, which de facto would not harm its viewers.

The ways to defend the film as art were similar to the ways to attack it. Kubrick himself defended the film via the intertextual-comparison strategy; he claimed, “It’s all in the plot.”<sup>28</sup> Others argued that the violence was justified realistically. Hollis Alpert points to the film’s realistic connections among “the growth in youthful violence, the drug cultures, and the extraordinary increase in eroticism.” Others took what Paul D. Zimmerman aptly describes as a “mythic realism” approach: the characters are caricatures, but of “some more basic essence.”<sup>29</sup>

A third strategy to make the film art, beyond the intertextual-comparison approach and the realism argument, was the aesthetically motivated thesis. If a critic examined the images of violence in the film, the critic could discern formal and stylistic patterns, a sure sign of “art” and not exploitation. Canby writes, “the movie shows a lot of aimless violence – the exercise of aimless choice – but it is as formally structured as the music of Alex’s ‘lovely lovely Ludwig van,’ which inspires in Alex sado-masochistic dreams of hangings, volcanic eruptions and other disasters.” Cocks in *Time* claims the violence is “totally stylized, dreamlike, absurd.” Alpert believes, “in lesser hands, this kind of thing could be disgusting or hateful, but curiously, as Kubrick handles it, it isn’t. For one thing, the stylization throughout is constant.” Mythic realism becomes universality: “Imagery, the kind that mythologizes and endures, is the nucleus of the film experience,” claims *Playboy*’s reviewer.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, in the debates about the representations of violence in *A Clockwork Orange*, both sides of the discussion assumed several points: (1) Defining the film as art or not-art was important and

(2) determining the effects of the representations of violence had pertinence. Like the legal establishment of the era, these tests would determine how to categorize the film and evaluation would follow.

### **MORALITY AND POLITICS: READING THE IDEOLOGY OF A FILM**

Although for years U.S. marxist critics had overtly been reading the ideology of texts and liberal reviewers had tacitly practiced this, numerous events of the 1960s increased tendencies to include these questions of content in evaluations of movie fare. These 1960s events included all those factors involved with the issues of representing sexuality and violence discussed above, but they also incorporated the implications of auteurist criticism and the move of film criticism into universities and colleges.

Within Western traditions of criticism, a debate has been waged between advocates who believe that human agency accounts for causality and those who stress the importance of social structures. This is often described as the humanist – structuralist debate. For most conservative and liberal commentators, the more prominent cause of events is human decision making; hence, Western literary tradition has so often stressed determining who created a work of art. This practice occurred in film criticism almost immediately at the start of the movies, but it certainly accelerated during the 1960s with the advent of auteurist criticism. Causes for auteurism include the influences of foreign art cinema and foreign film criticism, but defining films as art also permitted the wide introduction of film courses into colleges and universities. Moreover, studying contemporary culture as art (or at least as a reflection of culture) had relevance at a time when young radicals decried the staleness of the status quo institutions, which were often blamed for the public's lackadaisical attitude toward racism and the ever-deepening U.S. commitment in Vietnam.<sup>31</sup>

Trying to determine the authorship of a film, however, had consequences. Once agency can be pinpointed, so can blame. And, thus, locating in Kubrick (or Burgess) responsibility for representations raised philosophical and political issues of morality. Just what was the ideology the author(s) had presented? What were the implications of that ideology?

Both attackers and defenders of the film spent some space in the project of defining the meaning of the film. Burgess himself thought the meaning of the novel was about “the power of choice.” Kael said the film’s point was that “the punk was a free human being,” while Schickel summarized the thesis as the “loss of the capacity to do evil is a minor tragedy, for it implies a loss also of the creative capacity to do good.” Rice described it as “free choice must prevail/man’s nature is perverse.”<sup>32</sup>

No matter what the movie’s thesis, one major strategy to absolve or blame Kubrick of responsibility for any potentially morally corrupt subject matter was the intertextual-comparison tactic. Critics who wanted to rescue the film argued that the novel was morally worse or that what Kubrick put in the film was already subtextually in the novel.<sup>33</sup> Critics who disliked the film, of course, found the differences from the novel proof of Kubrick’s agency and his ideology. So both camps accepted Kubrick as author, used intertextual comparison to determine Kubrick’s authorship, and then evaluated what they believed they had discovered.

The film’s representation of Alex was one primary site around which this debate over ideology and morality focused. Both in the abstract and via comparison to the novel, reviewers thought Kubrick had created a central protagonist with whom the audience was to side. Alex “has more energy and style and dash – more humanity – than anyone else in the movie”; Alex might be compared with mass-killer Charles Manson, yet Alex is “surprising but undeniably engaging”; Alex is “more alive than anyone else in the movie, and younger and more attractive.”<sup>34</sup> Those who appreciated this protagonist used Alex’s representation to justify their respect for the film and to argue a positive moral message; those who did not appreciate this protagonist could also accuse Kubrick of using audience sympathy to make individuals morally complicit with an amoral message.

Indeed, the claims that the film was corrupt, unfair, and amoral were as many as the criticisms of its representations of violence and sexual attack. Kael was one of the first critics to pursue this line of denunciation. “The trick of making the attacked less human than their attackers, so you feel no sympathy for them, is, I think, symptomatic of a new attitude in movies. This attitude says there’s no moral difference.” The movie makes it too easy to enjoy or even identify with

Alex. He is given too many rationales for his behavior (bad parents, bad friends, bad social workers); he is cleaned up compared with the book's Alex; the victims are "cartoon nasties with upper-class accents a mile wide."<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, many of the criticisms in this range of discourse centered on not only whether Alex was made "too nice" but also whether Alex's victims were set up to be destroyed. Schickel's view is that "We are never for a moment allowed even a fleeting suggestion of sympathy for anyone else, never permitted to glimpse any other character of personal magnetism, wit, or sexual attractiveness comparable to Alex's. As a result, the film, though surprisingly faithful to the plot line of the novel, is entirely faithless to its meaning."<sup>36</sup>

It is in this group of responses that the accusation is made that the film is fascist. Hechinger's criticism derives from the series of propositions that if the theme is saying that humanity is inevitably corrupt, then this is authoritarian ideology. Jackson Burgess furthers that line, by arguing: "the laughter of *Clockwork Orange* is a mean and cynical snigger at the weakness of our own stomachs. . . . A strong stomach is the first requirement of a storm trooper."<sup>37</sup>

Not only was the protagonist too nice in contrast with the victims and the theme amoral or even fascist, but Kubrick's authorial voice was too distant and detached, making him doubly complicit with the theme. Kubrick is described as something of an amoral "god-figure" or a misanthrope. Kauffmann writes, "But the worst flaw in the film is its air of cool intelligence and ruthless moral inquiry because those elements are least fulfilled." Kael believes that the authorial voice is "a leering, portentous style," while Clayton Riley accuses Kubrick of "offer[ing] no cogent or meaningful commentary on [the violence]." Kubrick's authorship could have been redeemed, Denby thinks, had values been articulated by the end of the film, but "the mask of the ironist and savage parodist has fallen off, and behind it is revealed the fact of a thoroughgoing misanthrope." "How bored and destructive Kubrick seemed," concludes Seth Feldman.<sup>38</sup>

The conclusions about authorial view point were largely derived from two aspects of the film. One was the adaptation differences between the novel and the film, charged to Kubrick's decision making; the other was technical style. Part and parcel of auteurist criticism was a careful reading of stylistic choices, for, it was often

claimed, the authorial voice of a director might be traced through style even if the director was compelled by studio or production circumstances to present a specific plot line. Here auteurist criticism provoked reviewers to read non-normative choices in mise-en-scène, camerawork, editing, and sound as from Kubrick's agency and also as meaningful in his expression of his position to the plot line he was, so to speak, given. Examples of such defenses have been provided above in relation to justifying the representations of violence as aesthetically motivated, including the classic auteurist praise of "consistency" of aesthetic design. The distance such an aesthetic choice produced could also be read as a protective device for the audience: the coolness provided for the audience a "resilience" needed to view the "multiple horrors."<sup>39</sup>

Critics of the film, however, connected Kubrick's stylistic choices with exploitation cinema (not-art). Jackson Burgess points out that "the stylization shifts your attention, in a sense, away from the simple physical reality of a rape or a murder and focuses it upon the quality of feeling: cold, mindless, brutality." Kauffmann writes that the camerawork was "banal and reminiscent" of many other recent films. Kael concludes, "Is there anything sadder – and ultimately more repellent – than a clean-minded pornographer? The numerous rapes and beatings have no ferocity and no sensuality; they're frigidly, pedantically calculated. . . ." <sup>40</sup> Kubrick's misanthropy, moreover, was also a misogyny.

### **GENDER RELATIONS: REVEALING SEXUAL POLITICS**

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and the concurrent social and political upheaval had coalesced by the late 1960s. On the national scene feminists were criticizing canonical serious literature from perspectives of gender discrimination: Kate Millet's groundbreaking *Sexual Politics* appeared in 1969, and by the early 1970s, feminist film critics and academics were starting to read films ideologically for not only their moral or political politics but also their sexual representations. Joan Mellen's *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film* was published in 1973, Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies, and the American Dream* also in 1973, Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* in 1974, and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975.

In the second volume (1972) of an early feminist journal, Beverly Walker takes on *A Clockwork Orange*.<sup>41</sup> Her strategy is the same as the traditional auteur critic: she uses intertextual comparison with the novel and stylistic choices to conclude that Kubrick “has made an intellectual’s pornographic film” (p. 4). Such a claim in 1972 needs to be recognized as a very powerful statement, given the debates about pornography and obscenity described above, and the militancy of feminists of the era. It should also, like the charge of “fascism,” be understood as a rhetorical device aggressively arguing for significant social and political change. Its communicative function is not only descriptive but also attention getting.

Walker’s essay pinpoints numerous differences between the novel and the film, for the purpose, Walker argues, of making sex and genitalia more central to the film. The changes she describes include ones of *mise-en-scène* and plot. In the film, the outfits worn by Alex’s droogs deemphasize the shoulders (as opposed to the costumes worn by the gang in the novel) and instead call attention to the male genitals, as the action shifts to include not only violence (as in the novel) but much more *sexual* violence. The Korova Bar is not described in the book; hence, the set design is Kubrick’s fantasy. The characteristics of the women are changed from the novel. The novel’s cat woman is older and lives in a house with antiques. When Kubrick introduces his catlady, she is shown in a grotesque yoga position, has a “phony, hard voice,” and is surrounded by phallic and sexual décor – to invite, one might claim, sexual thoughts in the observers of the art objects. Such a décor and woman provide the classic excuse that the victim asked for the rape.

Not only is the cat woman redesigned, but Alex’s mother is visualized. Walker believes that she is not dressed as befitting her age, although Alex’s father seems traditionally clothed. The woman to be raped by the rival gang is clothed in the novel and also only a child (age ten) rather than being stripped naked and well endowed. Walker asks, “Why is it the women change radically in this Orwellian world, but not the men?” (p. 9).

The sexual design of the film does seem to have excited most of the reviewers (or their layout supervisors). The Korova Milkbar and Alex’s close-up headshot are the favorite publicity stills to reproduce in articles about the film [Fig. 7 and Fig. 8]. Another favorite image is the scene of Alex’s rectal examination by the prison guard, featured



7. The sexual mise-en-scène.

on the cover of *Films and Filming* for the issue that reviewed the film <sup>42</sup> [Fig. 9]. That *Films and Filming* took such delight in the film seems to confirm Walker's claim of a "homosexual motif" running through the film since *Films and Filming* had a covert (or not so covert!) address to gay men. Its review and selection of accompanying photos provides



8. The sexual mise-en-scène.

# films and filming

february 1972 35p

PLAYBOY IN A MONASTERY interview with John Boorman □ THE WESTERN HERO  
 PUBLIC MADNESS AND PRIVATE LUNACY □ SHOOT OUT IN DEAN STREET  
 PICTURE PREVIEWS: MACBETH □ DELIVERANCE □ A CLOCKWORK ORANGE  
 GOING HOME □ TCHAIKOVSKY □ THX-1138 □ ONCE AND FOR ALWAYS



## 9. The examination of Alex.

ample evidence of another potential reading of the text, a point to which I will return below.

In conclusion, Walker suggests that the film is “woman-hating.” As mentioned above, she believes it has “an attitude that is ugly, lewd

and brutal toward the female human being: all of the women are portrayed as caricatures; the violence committed upon them is treated comically; the most startling aspects of the decor relate to the female form" (p. 4). The film is, again, exploitation: "all the naked ladies Kubrick has astutely used as commercial window dressing" (p. 4).

My review of the critical response to the film has focused to a large degree on the negative criticism; yet the film has become a cult favorite. Unfortunately, details of the fans' responses to the film could not be found. Still, speculation from the circumstances of the period and what became the focus of the critical response can give us some glimpse into what might have mattered to the early lovers of the movie.

Kubrick's authorial style was viewed by both supporters and critics as an aloof criticism of the social scene. Where one might put that authorial point of view in a range of political categories was debated, but without doubt, that point of view was considered iconoclastic. Such a nontraditional position has been appealing to most subcultural groups, of which cult viewers often align themselves. Kubrick's earlier work had already positioned him as out of the mainstream anyway: *Dr. Strangelove* was critical of every authority figure; *2001* immediately became a head movie. So when Kubrick's next film came out, antiauthoritarian adolescents were ready to take up the film anyway. The movie's flaunting of its representations of violence, sexuality, and sexual violence could be rationalized as realism or mythic realism and also enjoyed for their flaunting of recent obscenity and pornography taboos.

Additionally, in the late 1960s, film viewing audiences were well versed in several nontraditional strategies for watching films. One major viewing strategy had been the mainstream, "disposable" strategy in which seeing a film once is the norm. However, the concept and practice of repeat viewings of some movies had already become normative for two types of audiences: art-house devotees and underground/trash-cinema filmgoers. Both types of audiences rewatched films for several reasons: to find authorial signatures, to seek hidden messages, and to participate in a group audience experience.<sup>43</sup> While art-house and underground audiences often overlapped in terms of the actual people, differences in their makeup did exist and can be used to hypothesize their attraction to

*A Clockwork Orange*. Art-house audiences had been typed as “egg-heads” and were generally an intellectual crowd. Kubrick’s work, with its complicated mise-en-scène and ambiguous message, fits well into the characteristics of an art-house film.

Underground cinema was more eclectic in terms of its audience, and because of the places and times where underground cinema was shown in the 1960s (run-down, large-city theaters; midnight screenings), underground cinema’s audiences were very much an urban, mostly male, and gay or gay-friendly audience. Out of the rebel underground cinema of the 1960s, the mid-1970s cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* developed, with, at least initially, a strong gay participation. Now, I would not go so far as to suggest that more than a few audience aficionados of *A Clockwork Orange* read the film as camp, but that reading is, I believe, available from the sexual politics of the context and parts of evidence remaining (the *Films and Filmmaking* “reading”). Moreover, the exaggeration of the mise-en-scène has echos to 1960s classic underground films such as *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and *Blonde Cobra* (1963). It is worth noting that Andy Warhol purchased the screenplay rights to Burgess’s novel in the mid-1960s and produced his own adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange*, *Vinyl* (1965). Not surprisingly, *Vinyl* exceeds Kubrick’s film in terms of the explicit sadomasochistic possibilities of the plot, but the general line of development is remarkably close to that of the novel, which suggests more credibility to Walker’s thesis of the availability of a homosexual motif subtending the action.

Whatever the causes for the cult following of *A Clockwork Orange*, the density of reactions has perhaps also provided more avenues for speculating about violence, sexuality, morality, and gender politics. If Kubrick unwittingly participated with the authorities in his own version of the Ludovico technique, perhaps this was not the least valuable set of issues on which to inflict scholars and critics of cinema.

#### NOTES

- 1 Susan Rice, “Stanley Klockwork’s ‘Cubrick’ Orange,” *Media and Methods* 8, no. 7 (March 1972): 39–43.
- 2 Ernest Parmentier, “A Clockwork Orange,” *Filmfacts* 14, no. 24(15 July 1971): 649–55. Also see Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Stanley Kubrick* (New York,

- NY: Grove Press, 1972), p. 182; Robert Philip Kolker, "Oranges, Dogs, and Ultraviolence," *Journal of Popular Film* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1972): 159–72; and Wallace Coyle, *Stanley Kubrick: A Guide to References and Resources*. Boston, MA: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980: 26–27.
- 3 Guy Phelps, *Film Censorship*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1975: 69–87. Also see Charles Barr, "Straw Dogs, A Clockwork Orange and the Critics," *Screen* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 17–31.
  - 4 Phelps, *Film Censorship*, p. 169.
  - 5 Andrew Sarris, "Films in Focus," *Village Voice* 16, no. 52 (30 December 1971): 49; Stanley Kauffmann, "A Clockwork Orange," *The New Republic* (1 and 8 January 1972): 22 and 32; Pauline Kael, "Stanley Strangelove," *The New Yorker* 48 (1 January 1972): 50–53; Richard Schickel, "Future Shock and Family Affairs," *Life* 72, no. 4 (4 February 1972): 14.
  - 6 Tom Burke, "Malcolm McDowell: The Liberals, They Hate 'Clockwork,'" *New York Times*, 30 January 1972: sect. 2, p. 13.
  - 7 Stanley Kubrick, "Now Kubrick Fights Back," *New York Times*, 27 February 1972: sect. 2, p. 1.
  - 8 Beverly Walker, "From Novel to Film: Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*," *Women and Film* 2 (1972): 4.
  - 9 I am restricting this essay to the U.S. reception of the film. Phelps and Barr provide a valuable explanation of part of the British reception although more work could be done.
  - 10 This observation has been stimulated by the recent reading of Walter Metz, *Webs of Significance: Intertextual and Cultural Historical Approaches to Cold War American Film Adaptations*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1996.
  - 11 Jay Cocks, "Season's Greetings: Bang! Kubrick: Degrees of Madness," *Time*, 20 December 1971: 80.
  - 12 A good synopsis of this is in Garth Jowett, "'A Significant Medium for the Communication of Ideas': The *Miracle* Decision and the Decline of Motion Picture Censorship, 1952–1986," in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, Francis G. Couvares, Ed. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996: 258–76.
  - 13 Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*. New York: Viking Press, 1987.
  - 14 Kendrick, *Secret Museum*, p. 2.
  - 15 Kendrick, *Secret Museum*, p. 122.
  - 16 Kendrick, *Secret Museum*, pp. 174–187.
  - 17 The events described here seem part of a larger trend in U.S. culture in dealing with regulating images. It parallels what I earlier observed happening with sexual images in the movies between 1895 and 1915. See Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
  - 18 Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, p. 201.
  - 19 Martin Duberman, *Stonewall*. New York: Plume, 1993: 97. Also see Richard Ellis, "Disseminating Desire: Grove Press and The End[s] of Obscenity," in

- Perspectives on Pornography: Sexuality in Film and Literature*, Gary Day and Clive Bloom, Ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988: 26–43.
- 20 Linda Williams, "Second Thoughts on *Hard Core*," in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson, Ed. London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1993: 48.
  - 21 These strands of argumentation reproduce themselves today with the new V-chip and television ratings systems.
  - 22 These criticisms were not solely directed toward *A Clockwork Orange* but against the whole wave of violent movies appearing after 1967. See for example the reception of *Bonnie and Clyde*.
  - 23 In researching the reception of *A Clockwork Orange*, I secured 57 reviews and articles published during the first two years of the film's U.S. release. In these notes, I shall cite only those items from which I quote or significantly paraphrase. H[arry] H[art], "A Clockwork Orange," *Films in Review* 23, no. 1 (January 1972): 51.
  - 24 Richard Schickel, "Future Shock and Family Affairs," *Life* 72, no. 4 (4 February 1972): 14; David Denby, "Pop Nihilism at the Movies," *Atlantic* 229, no. 3 (March 1972): 102; Pauline Kael, "Stanley Strangelove," *The New Yorker* 48 (1 January 1972): 52.
  - 25 Stanley Kauffmann, "A Clockwork Orange," *The New Republic* (1 and 8 January 1972): 22.
  - 26 Pauline Kael, "Stanley Strangelove," *The New Yorker* 48 (1 January 1972): 53.
  - 27 Vincent Canby, "'Orange'—Disorienting But Human Comedy," *New York Times*, 9 January 1972: sect. 2, p. 7.
  - 28 Stanley Kubrick quoted in Craig McGregor, "Nice Boy from the Bronx?" *New York Times*, 30 January 1972: sect. 2, p. 13.
  - 29 Hollis Alpert, "Milk-Plus and Ultra-Violence," *Saturday Review* 54 (25 December 1971): 40; Paul D. Zimmerman, "Kubrick's Brilliant Vision," *Newsweek* 79, no. 1 (3 January 1972): 29; Robert Boyers, "Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*: Some Observations," *Film Heritage* 7, no. 4 (Summer 1972): 3.
  - 30 Vincent Canby, "A *Clockwork Orange* Dazzles the Senses and Mind," *New York Times*, 20 December 1971, p. 44; Jay Cocks, "Season's Greetings: Bang! Kubrick: Degrees of Madness," *Time* (20 December 1971): 80; Hollis Alpert, "Milk-Plus and Ultra-Violence," *Saturday Review* 54 (25 December 1971): 40; "Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*," *Playboy* 19, no. 1 (January 1972): 200.
  - 31 Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 4–23; David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Janet Staiger, "With the Compliments of the Auteur: Art Cinema and the Complexities of its Reading Strategies," in *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992): 178–95 .
  - 32 Anthony Burgess, "Clockwork Marmalade," *Listener* 87, no. 2238 (7 February 1972): 198; Pauline Kael, "Stanley Strangelove," *The New Yorker* 48 (1 January 1972): 50; Richard Schickel, "Future Shock and Family Affairs," *Life* 72 no. 4 (4 February 1972): 14; Susan Rice, "Stanley Klockwork's Cubrick Orange,"

- Media and Methods* 8, no. 7 (March 1972): 40. Ironically, some of the debate over the film's meaning reproduces issues in the humanist-structuralist debates which were, in fact, beginning to rage in academia at that time.
- 33 Arthur Gumenik, "A Clockwork Orange: Novel into Film," *Film Heritage* 7, no. 4 (Summer 1972): 7-18.
- 34 Craig Fisher, "Stanley Kubrick produces, directs 'Clockwork Orange,'" *Hollywood Reporter* (14 December 1971): 10; Jay Cocks, "Season's Greetings: Bang! Kubrick: Degrees of Madness," *Time* (20 December 1971): 80; Pauline Kael, "Stanley Strangelove," *The New Yorker* 48 (1 January 1972): 50.
- 35 Pauline Kael, "Stanley Strangelove," *The New Yorker* 48 (1 January 1972): 50-51.
- 36 Richard Schickel, "Future Shock and Family Affairs," *Life* 72, no. 4 (4 February 1972): 14.
- 37 Hechinger paraphrased in Stanley Kubrick, "Now Kubrick Fights Back," *New York Times*, 27 February 1972, sect. 2, p. 11; Jackson Burgess, "A Clockwork Orange," *Film Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Spring 1972): 35-36.
- 38 Stanley Kauffmann, "A Clockwork Orange," *The New Republic* (1 and 8 January 1972): 22; Pauline Kael, "Stanley Strangelove," *The New Yorker* 48 (1 January 1972): 52; Clayton Riley. "... Or 'A Dangerous, Criminally Irresponsible Horror Show?'" *New York Times*, 9 January 1972: sect. 2, p. 1; David Denby, "Pop Nihilism at the Movies," *Atlantic* 229, no. 3 (March 1972): 102; Seth Feldman, "A Clockwork Orange," *Take One* 3, no. 3 (April 1972): 21.
- 39 Robert Boyers, "Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*: Some Observations," *Film Heritage* 7, no. 4 (Summer 1972): 2. Also see Stephen Mamber, "A Clockwork Orange," *Cinema* [Los Angeles, CA] 7, no. 3 (Winter 1973): 48-57.
- 40 Jackson Burgess, "A Clockwork Orange," *Film Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Spring 1972): 35; Stanley Kauffmann, "A Clockwork Orange," *The New Republic* (1 and 8 January 1972): 32; Pauline Kael, "Stanley Strangelove," *The New Yorker* 48 (1 January 1972): 50.
- 41 Beverly Walker, "From Novel to Film: Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*," *Women and Film* 2 (1972): 4-10.
- 42 *Films and Filming* 18, no. 5 (February 1972).
- 43 Janet Staiger, "With the Compliments of the Auteur," pp. 178-95; Janet Staiger, "Finding Community in the Early 1960s Underground Cinema," in *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, ed. Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 39-74.

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