

Art vs. Violence in *A Clockwork Orange*

DAVID GOULDSTONE

Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Anthony Burgess's novel received the New York Film Critics award for the best film of 1971. It was acclaimed as much for its aesthetic qualities as for the moral questions that it raised. Kubrick incorporated music from various classical compositions at critical moments in the film to highlight the tensions and ambiguities that he wanted to illustrate. He used the music of Rossini and Beethoven (which inspires Alex's dreams of mayhem and destruction) as a background for the senseless violence that Alex and his friends commit.

When Alex and his clique fight a rival gang, the violence of both groups is given a perverse beauty through stylish choreography and music from Rossini's "Thieving Magpie." Consequently, the audience is torn between the viciousness of the fight and the beauty of its visualization, experiencing a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity. This is intentional on Kubrick's part; it is his attempt to estrange the audience from the victims of the encounters. Perhaps he is using this tension to illustrate the variety and contradictions of human nature. While society may condemn acts of violence, there is, nevertheless, an innately aggressive aspect of human nature. Kubrick's use of music, therefore, retrieves this tendency from the audience's unconscious, thereby causing moral uncertainty.

Thus, we don't know whether to sing along with Alex to the music of "Singin' in the Rain," kicking our feet in time with his, or to be repelled by his brutality. Kubrick even has the kindness to remind us of our uncertainty at the end, leaving "Singin' in the Rain" resonating in our ears and forcing us to choose between memories of the fleet-footed Gene Kelly dancing across the puddles and of Alex's cruel feet stomping his victim.

Interestingly, Kubrick plays with our attitude toward Alex in a similar way. First he incites our contempt as we witness Alex's relentless cruelty; then our sympathy as he is betrayed and spiritually crucified; and, finally, our uncertainty as he "rises" again. We can detest his adoration of "ultraviolence," yet the undeniable charm of his Elizabethan dialect and his love of "Ludwig van" prevent us from rejecting him completely. Alex is, paradoxi-

cally, a cultured barbarian, which is, perhaps, what Kubrick is accusing us all of being.

The film exudes aesthetic appeal. As one critic wrote, “Mr. Kubrick constantly uses . . . a wide-angle lens to distort space relationships within scenes,” contending that the director intends to separate people and images from the environment and emphasize their distinctions (Canby 193).

Kubrick creates a surreal, dreamlike atmosphere from the start. First, we are greeted by the face of Alex (one eye ringed with fake lashes); then we take in his environment. Kubrick may have used this surreal technique to represent the drug-induced vision of Alex and his gang when they are at the milk bar. Kubrick reverts to a realistic style when they are not high—for example, during the day or when Alex is sent to prison.

On the surface, the film is futuristic, but, in truth, it is a critique of contemporary society. The clothes and the setting have a futuristic look, but Kubrick refuses to comfort the audience by implying that the events are in the distant future.

Alex’s final line, “I was cured, all right!” mocks the therapy that society prescribed for him. Alex has returned to his old self with the help of the very people who tried to destroy his soul and his freedom of choice. It is an ironic redemption for Alex, who has risen, fallen, and risen again in a world that is no less sick than he is. Consequently, it is impossible for such a society to offer Alex any salvation. Therefore, when he once again dreams of rape and violence to the music of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, we accept the fact that he is back to “normal.” Quite simply, it was futile to expect that the cause of his condition—society—could also be his cure.

Works Cited

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