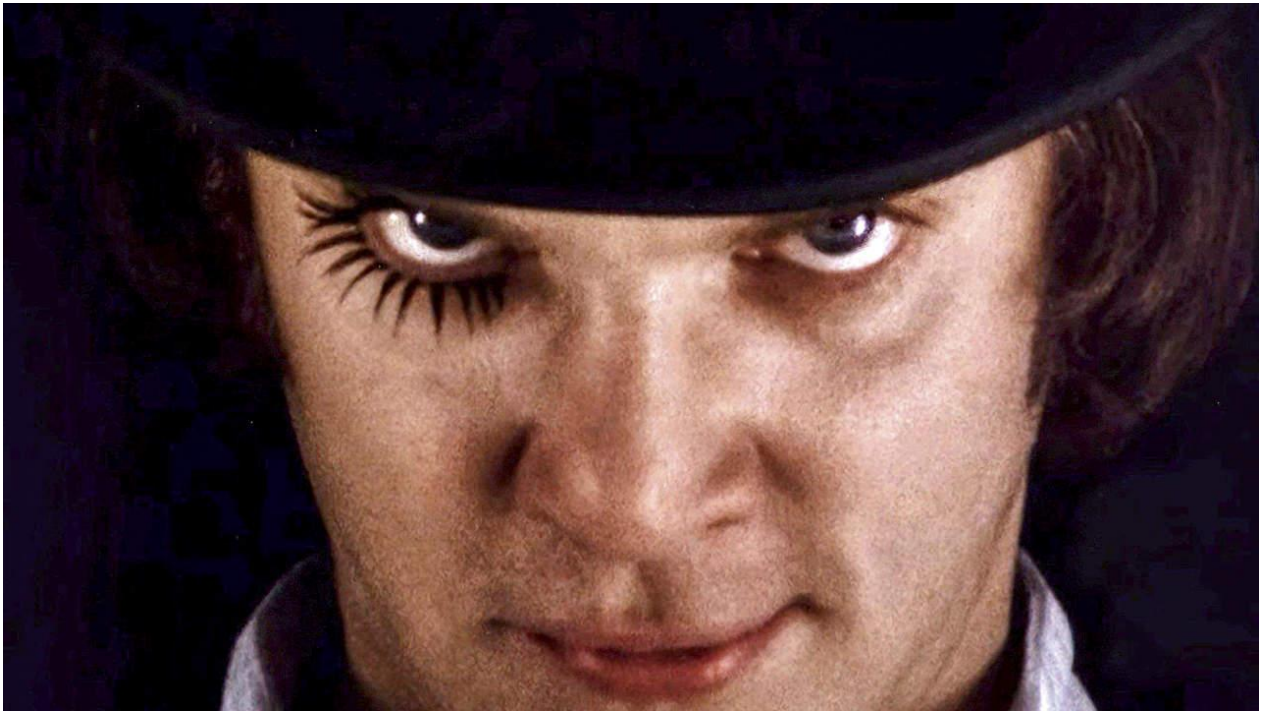


## “A Clockwork Orange”: Stanley Kubrick’s Biggest, Boldest Provocation [C2]

L’adattamento del romanzo di Anthony Burgess nel 1971 da parte del regista inglese è pari all’originale in termini di innovazione stilistica, estetica e polemica morale. Un capolavoro del cinema che è un punto di riferimento della cultura popolare.



---

Throughout his career, Stanley Kubrick never cared much about [ingratiating himself](#) to the audience, so it’s an achievement that *A Clockwork Orange*, his controversial adaptation of Anthony Burgess’ 1962 novel, is the most repellent film of his career. That’s not to say it isn’t an audacious and frequently brilliant film, but watching it can feel like getting into a 136-minute [argument](#) — with Kubrick, with yourself, and with a society that [wrestles](#) imperfectly (and often unjustly and tragically) with issues of law-and-order and individual rights. There’s something here to infuriate people on both ends of the political spectrum, and even if you accept it as a satire that has no ideological [allegiances](#), that can be infuriating, too. And this is to say nothing of its extreme unpleasantness. Yet we should neither run from difficult [arguments](#) nor hide from art that confronts us as seriously as Kubrick always did, and while *A Clockwork*

Orange has settled into the pop-culture firmament — multiple references in classic episodes of The Simpsons will do that to a film — it still feels dangerous and vital fifty years later. As his previous work, 2001: A Space Odyssey, has settled appropriately as the great monolith of screen science fiction, A Clockwork Orange continues to be a [moving target](#), [liable](#) not only to provoke you differently at different points in your life, but also from scene to scene. [In broad strokes](#), A Clockwork Orange continued Kubrick's career-long worries about power and the morally bankrupt people who are corrupted by it, from the decadent Romans of Spartacus to the careerist French military brass in [Paths of Glory](#) to [deranged stewards](#) of our nuclear arsenal in [Dr Strangelove](#). Set in near-future Britain, the film [warns](#) of a society lost to authoritarian [rule](#), where an experimental campaign [to curb](#) criminal behavior leads to a deplorable form of social engineering. But Kubrick doesn't limit himself to that issue alone, and as his agenda expands, so do the possible [sticking points](#) for an audience. The [backdrop](#) for A Clockwork Orange is loaded with the interior [bric-a-brac](#) of its own period, like projecting the [hippest](#), least comfortable living rooms of the early 70s would [gain a permanent foothold](#). But there's a key tension here between technological advancement and societal [decay](#): for the elite, there are sports cars and modern homes, but for everyone else, apartment buildings and other public spaces [crumble](#) from [neglect](#), leaving packs of young [marauders](#) to [scavenge](#) sick pleasures from "a bit of ultra-violence" and "a little of the old in-out, in-out". Kubrick does not need to press much to suggest the root of their destructive impulses. One of these [marauders](#) is Alex DeLarge, the only charismatic and fully human character in the film, played by Malcolm McDowell, whose role three years earlier in Lindsay Anderson's If.... had codified him as Britain's rebel without a cause. In Burgess' made-up slang — which translates here beautifully in context, no glossary required — "droogs" like Alex, drunk on the intoxicating liquor of a "milk bar," seek out opportunities for rape, robbery, and assault, or some combination of the three. Alex's one concession to high culture is his love of "Ludwig Van", the ninth symphony especially, and his passion leads to a [rift](#) between him and his fellow droogs that [widens](#). The gang is shown beating up an intellectual (Patrick Magee) and raping his wife, but one night, when Alex murders a "cat lady", they smash him in the head and leave him for the

police to find. From there, A Clockwork Orange shifts into the [punishment](#) phase, where Alex, sentenced to fourteen years for murder, has a chance to go free if he participates in an experimental rehabilitation program. This “Ludovico technique”, [touted](#) by the interior minister, trains Alex to have a severely negative physical response to his violent impulses — and, by accident, it makes his beloved Ludwig Van repulsive to him as well. It renders him a docile animal, incapable even of defending himself, and when he reemerges as the model of a reformed man, he becomes a target for old victims and adversaries, and a [lightning rod](#) for political controversy. Of the prominent criticism against A Clockwork Orange, Pauline Kael had the most compelling, asserting that Kubrick [rigs](#) his [argument](#) in favor of Alex’s essential humanity by making his victims repulsive, thus [blunting](#) the full horror of his crimes. This is a difficult point to deny — though Alex’s [debasement](#) of Singin’ in the Rain is an unpardonable act of violence in itself — but the “clockwork” of Kubrick’s grand design requires Alex’s own dehumanization [to sync](#) with that of society [at large](#). The solution to the crime problem is a reflection of the times, and Kubrick is asking the audience to consider what happens when authoritarian institutions are themselves machines. But even that’s not close to the limit of what Kubrick is exploring here. One fascinating [sliver](#) of A Clockwork Orange is how it comments on the nature of rehabilitation itself, and what people expect of it. Turning Alex into a machine or a symbol is offensive to some because it feels like an injustice for him not to be punished for his crime — those he had [wronged](#), including two droogs who have now become cops (perfect touch, that), don’t care if he’s “cured”. They want him to suffer, and the Ludovico technique [spoils](#) the punitive aspect of being in prison. His sadistic [warden](#), for one, is absolutely incensed by the Ludovico program until he sees a demonstration of its results, and leaves secure in the knowledge the Alex will suffer forever. Every [layer](#) of A Clockwork Orange is its own nasty provocation, including the dispute Kubrick had with Burgess himself over a [redemptive](#) final chapter of the novel that wasn’t included in either the film or the American edition. No other director was as skilled as making films as texts to be examined and re-examined through myriad lenses for as long as the medium exists. His reputation as a perfectionist, on full display in every decision he makes here, [belies](#) the fact that his films exist [to scramble](#) your orientation

and question your responses to them. They're machines that expose our [messy](#) humanity. Published in The Guardian on December 19, 2021.  
Reprinted with permission.

---

# Glossary

- **marauders** = saccheggiatori
- **to sync** = sincronizzare
- **redemptive** = redentore
- **moving target** = bersaglio mobile
- **rule** = autorità
- **crumble** = sgretolarsi
- **spoils** = rovinare
- **warns** = mettere in guardia
- **gain a permanent foothold** = posizionarsi
- **rigs** = manipolare
- **messy** = caotica
- **Paths of Glory** = "Orizzonti di gloria"
- **Dr Strangelove** = "Il dottor Stranamore"
- **rift** = dissenso
- **argument** = discussione
- **wronged** = pregiudicare
- **belies** = nascondere
- **to curb** = frenare
- **debasement** = degradazione
- **layer** = strato
- **to scramble** = scombinare
- **ingratiating himself** = ingraziarsi
- **wrestles** = lottare
- **liable** = soggetto a
- **punishment** = punizione
- **lightning rod** = parafulmine
- **blunting** = smussare
- **at large** = in generale
- **sliver** = scheggia
- **sticking points** = intoppi
- **backdrop** = scenario
- **decay** = declino
- **warden** = direttore di prigione

- **bric-a-brac** = cianfrusaglie
- **hippest** = di tendenza
- **scavenge** = ricavare
- **allegiances** = vincoli, legami
- **In broad strokes** = a grandi linee
- **deranged** = squilibrati
- **touted** = promuovere
- **stewards** = amministratori
- **neglect** = abbandono
- **widens** = ampliare