

### The Choice of Morality; *A Clockwork Orange*

In the words of Anthony Burgess, the author of the original book, the title *A Clockwork Orange* refers to a person who “has the appearance of an organism lovely with colour and juice but is in fact only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God or the Devil or (since this is increasingly replacing both) the Almighty State.”

The central question the film raises has to do with the idea of ‘free will,’ and to what extent criminals (idealized as Evil) should be corrected for the good of society as a whole. At the outset, the world of *A Clockwork Orange* is eerie. Even with the opening titles, Kubrick decides to display a vibrant, blood-red screen with eerie music beneath it for the first twenty-seven seconds of the film, and the result is a feeling of uneasy dread about what the viewer is in for. Visually, the look of many scenes is high contrast — a lot of black darkness covers the frame, spotlighting small parts of the frame with the negative space (i.e. directing the viewer’s attention) while making characters look two-faced and scary by obscuring faces in harsh



shadows. From an auditory perspective, the film’s non-diegetic score feels most reminiscent of *The Shining*, and is generally dark for most scenes except for, notably, scenes involving sex and rape.

After the harshly-staccato’d title sequence, over his other-worldly narration we see Alex sipping milk, staring down the at camera coldly as the frame pulls out, revealing Alex and two others dressed in clothes that are a visually-stunning all-white (with black accents). This choice of costume does well to separate Alex and his gang of droogs from the scene, whether the surroundings be mostly black or vibrant colors (as monochrome white/black contrasts well with either option). As a character, Alex is at first entirely not relatable to the audience. The exaggerated makeup and

costumes, paired with unpredictable acting devoid of genuine emotion, help to paint Alex and his fellow droogs as Aristotelian evil, inhuman and unsympathetic. Sex, rape, and brutal violence feel like ever-present aspects of the weird dystopian world that is *A Clockwork Orange*. Despite all this violence, it would be entirely untrue to call Alex an unlikable character. In fact, through a combination of his personality and the fact that the audience sees everything through his eyes, Alex is quite likable in spite of his deviant anti-social actions. Alex is funny, intelligent, and sometimes even seems to have normal human emotions. In reality, he has no reverence (nor even understanding of) the ideal of Goodness, because such a concept rooted in a dichotomy of Good and Evil is divorced from Alex's life.



In an interview with Kubrick, he spends time articulating the importance of Alex's apparent guilt, saying it is "absolutely essential that Alex is seen to be guilty of a terrible violence against society" (Kubrick interview) in order to provide sufficiently compelling motivation for the state to take such radical punitive measures. The central question raised by this dilemma can be boiled down to the age-old philosophical query: "do the ends justify the means?" The violence that Alex commits is painfully difficult to watch, brutal, and pornographic. Perhaps the most infamous bit of *ultra-violence* perpetuated by Alex and his droogies is the second scene of the film, in which a couple is brutally attacked in their own home. The chilling scene, often held up by film critics as a paradigmatic example of using a dissonant combination of audio and visuals, is notable for how gleefully the droogies indulge in the attack. While the man and woman are forcibly bound and gagged, Alex skips merrily around the scene with his cane with the zest of a Broadway character performing show tunes as he punctuates a rendition of *Singin' in the Rain* with painful blows to the man, perfectly

on beat. Though this scene, which occurs just ten minutes into the movie, is perhaps the most well-known example attributed to the film, it succeeds two prior attacks on innocent, vulnerable people: a scene where Alex and his droogs beat a old, homeless, alcoholic man — as well as a scene where a nameless woman is raped by a gang of thugs. Perhaps the first time we see a direct look at Alex's perception of morality occurs during the beginning of Alex's jail sentence in conversation with the prison chaplain. Alex, desperate to leave prison, is searching feverishly for a way out until he brings up the experimental treatment (on which the moral dilemma of the film rests) known as The Ludovico Technique.

ALEX

How about putting me in for this new treatment?

FATHER

I take it you are referring to the Ludovico Technique.

ALEX

I don't know what it's called. I just know it gets you out quickly and makes sure you never get back in again.

FATHER

That is not proven. In fact, it is only in the experimental stage at this moment.

ALEX

It is being used, isn't it, Father?

FATHER

It has not been used in this prison yet. The governor has grave doubts about it. And I've heard there are very serious dangers involved.

ALEX

I don't care about the dangers. I just want to be good. I want for the rest of my life to be one act of goodness.

FATHER

The question is whether or not this technique really makes a man good. Goodness comes from within. Goodness is chosen. When a man cannot choose he ceases to be a man.

ALEX

I don't understand about the whys and wherefores. I only know I want to be good.

Alex is concerned with one thing, and one thing only, which he obscures by conflating other words and concepts — he wants to get out of trouble and avoid his current suffering. This is

complicated by his saying “I only know I want to be *good*,” though it’s not clear that Alex means anything about morality by this. This exchange also provides a good working definition of Good with the chaplain questioning whether such brute psychological



conditioning is achieves its intended goal — the father suggests that Goodness cannot be conditioned, as it comes from within and most importantly, it is a conscious choice. This is to say that though a man may complete actions that could be seen as Good in isolation, the actions are only Good if chosen by a man’s own free will with pure intentions.

For the duration of the film, Alex views himself as blameless. The self-pity he cultivates is evident in his narration, referring to himself as “your friend and long-suffering narrator” (including variations such as “humble narrator” and “faithful friend”) half a dozen times over the course of the film. He feels this sense of self-pity most acutely in situations where Alex finds himself stuck with undesirable consequences for his own actions, like just before he is incarcerated, after he is beaten and found by a victim of his, and after he is recognized and beaten by the old man he beats mercilessly at the beginning of the movie. This beating takes place after Alex is ‘cured’ by the Ludovico Technique, and his stream of consciousness narration does much to reveal how he completes his ‘moral’ calculus (or lack thereof). His disaffected voice plays over a scene where a well-dressed Alex is on the ground, enduring a beating from a group of elderly homeless people:

*Then there was like a sea of dirty, smelly old mentrying to get at your humble with their feeble rookers and horny old claws. It was old age having a go at youth. And I daren't do a single solitary thing, O my brothers. It being better to be hit at like that than want to sick and feel that horrible pain.*

Alex is unambiguous in his thought process; his moral “cure” has no root in a grand concept of Good or in empathy for his fellow man; instead, Alex’s decision-making is transactional, based on avoiding the most amount of pain inflicted on him. It’s also worth noting that Alex characterizes the attack on him as a battle of “old age having a go at youth,” without acknowledging that he perpetuated a very similar beating on the same old man (i.e. he is unable to connect this as a consequence to his previous actions), and he dehumanizes the homeless people by referring to them in the abstract with the sterile and generic term “old age.” Indeed, the concept of consequence seems to escape Alex even when it is explained to him directly. When Alex goes back to his parents home after he is ‘cured’ and finds his parents have found a replacement son, he laments his hardship, saying, “I know how things are now. I’ve suffered and I’ve suffered and I’ve suffered. And everybody wants me to go on suffering.” In response to this myopic and ego-centric perception, the replacement son explains politely (albeit coldly) that Alex has made other suffer so “it’s only right that [he] should suffer proper.” This does not process in Alex’s mind, with him choosing instead to focus on the tragic situation he is in, regardless of the cause.

Thorough the film, Alex views himself as the victim; he does not connect consequences to his actions, and has no moral gage for himself as though it did not apply to him. Alex’s affect and visible emotion are often at odds with his behavior or with what he’s saying — this kind of anti-social behavior is difficult to read and produces a feeling of uneasiness in the audience as they watch Alex and his droogs laugh and shout while perpetuating ultra-violence. This emotional dissonance is reflected in the incredible dissonance between the visuals and the score of the film, as well as the highly contrasting costumes (with reference to the set), and Kubrick’s usage of highly stylized editing techniques (e.g. slow motion, accelerated motion, ultra-wide shots) all help break the fluidity of the narrative and by extension, the illusion of reality. Kubrick himself alludes to Alex as a

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*Henry Dixon*

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representation of a man's Id, and offers, "after he is given the Ludovico 'cure' he has been 'civilized,' and the sickness that follows may be viewed as the neurosis imposed by society."

This effort to break a wall between film and audience offers space for questioning fundamental aspects of human nature, and how humans interact with society. Morality, it would seem, is still open to interpretation.

## Bibliography

Film

A Clockwork Orange

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