

### Psychoanalytic Theory and *A Clockwork Orange*

*A Clockwork Orange* (1971) is a film which delights in its examination of the baser human emotions, from those expressed by its characters to those evoked from its audience. Stanley Kubrick sets his film in a world defined by exaggeration; also a world seemingly dictated by primal instincts, one where murder and rape are commonplace and sexuality manages to penetrate even the deepest facets of society, appearing everywhere from clothing to home furnishings. Our protagonist Alex is clearly a product of this environment from his infatuation with both the “ultraviolence” and the “in-n-out.” However, his character undergoes a mental transformation when subjected to the Ludovico experiment which alters his disposition towards the immoral pleasure-seeking activities that had previously entertained him. His pre- and post-treatment selves are best understood through psychoanalytic theory, specifically through applying the concepts of the id, ego, and super-ego. By substituting moral or behavioral inhibitions with physical pain, the Ludovico treatment creates an illusory super-ego to mediate the simple passions of the id, but in doing so it sacrifices Alex’s freedom of choice and thus invalidates its own results.

The different forms of Alex that we see before and after the Ludovico technique can be understood in the context of the three-part structural model of the psyche conceived by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. That is, the id, ego, and super-ego. Freud relates the id to basic human drives and impulses, describing it as “a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle” (New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud p. 105-106). If the id acts according to the “pleasure principle,” the ego acts subject to the “reality principle” by attempting to reconcile the basic passions of the id with the constraints of reality. Finally, the super-ego is the psychic agency which acts in opposition to the id by representing higher moral values and punishing socially unacceptable behavior with feelings of guilt or remorse.

In *A Clockwork Orange* Kubrick creates a world seemingly dominated by anarchy, chaos, and primitive human drives (all projections of the id). In the scenes where Alex sadistically beats an old homeless man to death with his droogs and has orgiastic sex with two women, the audience is introduced to his obsession with violence and sex. Given his licentious and hedonistic lifestyle, it could be said that Alex is a personification of the id. That is, until he undergoes a transformation of character induced by the Ludovico treatment, a government-sponsored form of “aversion therapy”

with the purpose of curing Alex of his lawlessness and immorality by linking criminal and sexual stimuli to symptoms of physical sickness. The therapy is essentially a forced reconstruction of moral values, imposing societal norms and socially-accepted behavior. The result is a man with a complete physical aversion to sexuality and violence, which lies in absolute contrast to the Alex we know from the beginning of the film. Arthur Reber qualifies the super-ego as “a type of conscience that punishes misbehavior” (The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology by Arthur S. Reber), so in this sense, the therapy which Alex undergoes acts as a surrogate super-ego. The Ludovico experiment can be understood as an unnatural, artificial imposition of a super-ego where one previously did not exist. Hence, after Alex is “cured,” any instinctual impulses driven by the pleasure principle (sex, violence, and sadly even music) are met with a fierce repressive response. The most overt example of this is during the prison governor’s demonstration of the treatment’s results. When a naked woman appears on stage before Alex, his pleasure-seeking id reacts instinctively but is quickly subdued by his new aversion to sexuality. “The first thing that flashed into my gulliver was that I would like to have her right down there on the floor with the old in-out, real savage. But quick as a shot came the sickness.” In fact, this visceral inner-conflict between his natural id and artificial super-ego is reflected physically as Alex writhes on the floor in a heap of gags and convulsions.

Alex’s treatment-induced transformation elicits concerns about freedom of choice. It asks the audience which we should value more: the moral behavior of a civilized person or the independent decision which prompts it? Upon seeing the governor’s demonstration, the prison chaplain exclaims, “Choice! The boy has no real choice, has he? Self interest, the fear of physical pain drove him to that grotesque act of self-abasement... He ceases... to be a creature capable of moral choice,” and the priest continues on to declare, “There’s no morality without choice.” In response, the governor expresses that they are not concerned with morality, but only with “the means to prevent violence.” The exchange between these two characters raises the question that is an overarching theme in the film; in the case of the Ludovico experiment, is the cure worse than the illness? Kubrick’s choice of ending for the film suggests that this is the statement he wished to make. By effectively depriving the man of his free will, the government’s manipulation of Alex robs him of his life as an autonomous agent and transforms him into a puppet of the Ludovico treatment. From the first-person narration, the audience develops sympathy for Alex as he is victimized, and they rejoice when he is restored to his original character though a kind of re-birth following his failed suicide attempt. While the super-ego can be thought of as the individual’s conscience, the inherent problem of the Ludovico treatment is that it merely produces the *projection* of a super-ego. The subject of the experiment is shackled to a moral code which society deems acceptable, but the most this can amount to for Alex is the *illusion*

of a conscience. So, it seems the chaplain's concerns were valid; since morality is exercised through choice, it is meaningless in its absence.

Alex spends the majority of his life catering to the simple impulses of the id, engaging in countless disdainful and lecherous acts. However, after a painful metamorphosis which ends where it began, the audience even sympathizes with Alex when he tells the minister, "I've suffered the tortures of the damned, sir, tortures of the damned." Despite the fact that Alex's success in the end is also a victory for a convicted murderer, a relapse back to the id, and a failure of the super-ego, the spectator still celebrates because his success represents a triumph of free will. With this film, Kubrick conveys the message that higher moral values cannot simply be imposed upon an individual through some haphazard regiment of physical pain therapy because it perverts the role that free choice plays in morality. The Ludovico treatment is one case where the cure is worse than the illness. Its ultimate failure echoes in the voice of our hero as he delivers his final line in the film: "I was cured alright..."

### Works Cited

Arthur S. Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, Penguin, 1985.

Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Freud Library 2, p. 105-106.