

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Kubrick's Films

SOCIETY

Overview Although Kubrick's films are often perceived as highbrow, art-house productions with esoteric themes, many of them do, in fact, address fundamental social problems. The director kept abreast of current affairs and, while his storytelling was subtle and his cinematography was distinctive, he used cinema to critique social practices and political policies. He had a near-constant focus on the common man, with all his flaws and undesirable impulses, and was attuned to the ways that he was mistreated by authority and institutions. Social hierarchy and class divisions breed inequalities. Kubrick would accept that social institutions are necessary to curb man's violent and sexual impulses, but he wondered if the price we paid for social order was an equally undesirable suppression of individual freedom.

Spartacus Nowhere is social inequality more apparent than in *Spartacus*, the film set in ancient Rome. Based on an historical figure of the same name (and adapted from a similarly titled novel), the film tells the story of a slave who became a gladiator and led a slave rebellion against Rome. From the opening scene, we are made aware of the harsh conditions of slavery, when Spartacus is whipped for helping a fellow slave. Later, when he is training as a gladiator, but still a slave, his conditions improve, but he is still treated as a body to be bought and sold. Spartacus, however, dedicates his life to achieving freedom, not only for himself but for all the many slave of Rome. At one point, he says he would die fighting for freedom because 'when a free man dies, he loses the pleasure of life; a slave loses his pain. Death is the only freedom a slave knows. We remember this statement when we watch the final scene, with Spartacus tied to a cross, awaiting crucifixion. Inequality is the defining feature of slavery.

Barry Lyndon Social inequality is also the driving force behind the rambling plot of this film set in eighteenth-century Ireland. Now, however, the divisions are finer. Not slaves and masters, but the Irish peasantry up against upper class Englishmen, a conflict dramatised in the characters of Barry Redmond and John Quin. Quin has all the assets of status and wealth to win the hand of Nora, Barry's cousin who has previously flirted with him. Smarting from the humiliation of losing her hand to a 'foreigner,' Barry sets himself the goal of climbing the ladder up through the English class system. Lacking any of the factors that help to define a gentleman—ethnicity, money, land and ancestry—he buys his way into the system by marrying a wealthy widow (Lady Lyndon) and becomes Barry Lyndon. The upstart Irish lad almost achieves his aim of earning a title (becoming a peer, a status conferred by the government), but he is halted by his own profligacy and then his grief at the death of his young and only son. Now, his enemy and step-son, Lord Bullingdon steps in to bring him down. Bullingdon is less a man than poor Barry, but he uses his affluence and status to pension off his rival. IN the end, Barry Redmon/Lyndon strove hard but could not escape his class origins.

A Clockwork Orange The social issues in *A Clockwork Orange* are on a different plane altogether. Rather than inequality and social hierarchy, the film explores the debate between individual liberty and social order. Alex and his gang represent the unrestrained freedom to act free of moral and social restraints. The case for individual freedom is articulated by the writer and by the prison chaplain. The chaplain explains his position to Alex, when the latter wants to participated in a new therapy to curb criminality. Rather than be programmed to avoid criminal activity, people should be allowed to chose virtue or evil. Ironically, Alex wants to undergo the treatment to gain his freedom from prison. At first, Alex appears to be cured and avoids violent and sexual impulses. At the end, however, he has slipped back to his old habits and imagines himself in sadistic sexual behavior. As with all Kubrick's work, the film does not take a side in the debate between freedom and social order. Instead, it presents the harm that can result from both arguments. Alex's depraved actions speak for themselves, but the discipline enforced by social institutions are equally undesirable. In the end, neither the libertine Alex nor the suppressed Alex appears desirable. This is the paradox hidden in the film's title, which refers to a person who is as lively as an orange yet as dull as a clock.