

A HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971)

Stanley Kubrick

OVERVIEW Adapted from Anthony Burgess' novel of the same name, *A Clockwork Orange* is both a disturbing and a thought-provoking film. Telling the story of a young man addicted to violence and sexual abuse, it explores the debate about how to deal with criminality and anti-social impulses more generally. Should they be suppressed by the deterrent of prison? Or should they be 'cured' by more radical psychological reprogramming? Although the film satirises such reprogramming as neo-fascist authoritarianism and exposes the flaws of the prison system, it does not support the advocates of free-will, either. Instead, with theatrical aplomb, pop-culture aesthetics, inventive dialogue, and dazzling sets, the film shows us why we want neither robots nor anarchists. Despite its gratuitous sex and senseless violence, the film was passed by the censors. But after public outrage at the crime wave it supposedly unleashed, it was withdrawn in 1973, a move encouraged by Kubrick himself. One noteworthy difference between source novel and film is that the novel has a final chapter in which Alex appears to have truly changed, while the film ends with the previous chapter, in which he is still a sociopath. Although the film did not win any Academy Awards, it secured prizes for both Best Director and Best Film from the New York Film Critics Circle.

SYNOPSIS Alex leads a group of young middle-class thugs who get their kicks from bashing people's heads in and sexually abusing women. When Alex is finally arrested and put in prison, he volunteers for an experimental therapy designed to 'cure' his criminal instincts. The prison chaplain believes the program is wrong as it will deprive Alex of his ability to choose between good and evil, but Alex views it as his escape route. And Alex is right. Reformed and seemingly non-violent, he goes back home only to find that his parents no longer want him; turned out of his home, he wanders about, getting comeuppance from the people he had earlier abused. After attempting to kill himself by jumping out a window, he lands up in hospital, where he is visited by a government minister in charge of a new rehabilitation scheme for criminals. He reveals that Alex's enemies have been 'put away' and that he, Alex, will now work for the government. Listening to his favourite Beethoven symphony, Alex has sexual fantasies. 'I was cured, all right,' he says in a voiceover.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Alex	Alex DeLarge is the main character and narrator.
Dim	Dim is a member of Alex's gang.
Georgie	Georgie is another member of the gang.
Peter	Peter is the third member.
Minister	The minister is a member of the government.
Writer	The writer (Mr Alexander) is a leftist opposed to the government.
Deltoid	Mr Deltoid is Alex's probation officer.
Chaplain	The prison chaplain is unnamed.

STORY

The gang Alex DeLarge introduces himself and his friends, Georgie, Dim and Peter. Known as the 'droogs', they are lounging about in a milk bar, with naked female mannequins strewn about them. They drink milk laced with drugs, which gets them ready for 'ultra violence.'

Violence Strolling about, they see a drunk old man and beat him almost to death. Seeking more thrills, they enter a deserted theatre where another gang of youths is attempting a rape. Alex and his friends beat them within an inch of their life, until scared off by the cops. Now, they race off in a car, down dark country roads, forcing other cars to crash into trees. They enter an ultra-modern house of a writer, beat him up and rape his wife, all the time performing like a circus act and singing 'Singing in the Rain.' Feeling a bit exhausted after all their fun, they return to the milk bar

Homelife Alex is at home, listening to Beethoven while looking at the images of sex and violence that decorate his room. His mother is concerned that he is skipping school and so is his probation

officer, Mr Deltoid, who warns him that he'll end up in prison if he doesn't stop his nocturnal escapades. Alex responds by picking up two girls and inviting him back to his room, where the trio enjoy a bit of love-making to loud music.

Mutiny Cracks appear when Alex's friends express discontent with his theatrics and suggest that they go after 'big money.' Smelling disloyalty, Alex shows them who's in charge by attacking them violently. On their next caper, Alex goes into a rich woman's house and fells her with a sculpted phallus. But when he opens the door to let his friends in, one hits him with a bottle, knocking him to the ground. They flee and leave him to be arrested by the police.

Prison In police custody, Alex is given the kind of brutality he had dished out to others. It turns out that the lady he hit has died and he is sent to prison. He helps the prison chaplain during church services and begins to read the Bible, imagining himself in the role of the Romans who whipped Christ, nailed him to the cross and then had wild sex. Alex tells the chaplain he wants to participate in a new rehabilitation programme for criminals. 'I want the rest of my life to be one act of goodness,' he says.

Treatment Alex gets his wish when he impresses a government minister on a prison visit. He is exactly the kind of 'vicious criminal' that the programme is intended to reform by aversion therapy. Alex is taken to the treatment centre and settles into a comfortable room with good food. Later, he is injected with drugs, put in a straight jacket, strapped to a chair and forced to watch violent films with his eyes taped open. After the sixth film, he begins to feel ill and wants to stop. The next day, during the same treatment, he cracks when he hears his beloved Beethoven as background music. He says he realises that violence is wrong and that he is cured, but the doctors tell him he must undergo more treatment.

Alex on stage Two weeks later, Alex is paraded in front of officials as proof of the efficacy of the experimental therapy. He is the answer to the social problem of criminality. On stage, Alex is taunted by an actor but does not respond to the provocation. Next, he is tempted by a beautiful naked woman and almost succumbs, but he becomes ill and doesn't touch her. The minister declares his performance a success, but the prison chaplain says the method is flawed because Alex has no freedom to choose.

Alex rejected Alex leaves prison but receives a cold welcome from his parents. His possessions have been taken by the police and his room has been let to someone. The lodger taunts Alex, who raises his hand to strike but becomes ill and stops. Alex feels disowned and miserable.

Revenge Turned out of his parents' home, a tearful Alex runs into a destitute man, who recognises him as the youth who beat him up. A gang of homeless men attack Alex who is saved when the police show up, but they turn out to his old friends, Dim and Georgie. They drive him into the countryside, beat him and abandon him.

Refuge Alex staggers to the home of the writer whom he had nearly killed and is now in a wheelchair. The writer recognises Alex from his photographs in the paper (but not from the earlier attack). Feeling sorry for him as a 'victim' of the reform therapy, he offers him refuge. As an advocate of libertarianism, the writer seeks to use Alex to discredit the government's much-trumpeted criminal reform policy. But when he hears Alex in the bath signing 'Singing in the Rain,' he remembers the vicious attack.

More revenge The writer invites journalists to interview Alex, who explains how he was 'conditioned' to dislike violence and Beethoven music, which was playing inadvertently in the background. He also says he feels suicidal at times. Having drugged Alex, the writer now locks him in a room and plays Beethoven at a high volume, causing Alex to throw himself out a window in a suicide attempt.

Hospital Alex lies in a hospital with terrible injuries, while the government is criticised in the press for its 'inhumane' treatment that led to Alex's suicide attempt. His repentant parents visit and tell him he is welcome at home, but Alex isn't moved. He is given psychological tests, in which he again displays his violent and sexual tendencies.

Cured One evening he is visited by the government minister who selected him for the reform programme. He expresses condolences and admits that his crime reduction policy was a mistake. He also says that the writer who had induced his suicide attempt has been 'put away'. Finally, he tells Alex that the government will look after him and that he, Alex, will help them win back popular support for its policies. The minister ushers in a horde of journalists and photographers to witness the happy moment. While a stereo plays Beethoven, Alex looks dazed and has visions of wild sex. 'I was cured all right,' he says with a laugh.

THEMES

Society : Freedom and Order The story of Alex's life is an exploration of the debate between the competing needs for individual liberty, on the one hand, and social order, on the other. From the beginning, Alex and his gang represent untrammelled freedom to act free of moral and social restraints, to indulge their desires without consequence. The first voice to speak against this is that of the old drunk (whom they beat up), when he says he doesn't care if they kill him because he doesn't want to live in a world without 'law and order. His call for discipline is embodied in various official figures, especially the government minister but also the police and the doctors. They all argue that social cohesion and peace are more important than individual liberty, which is why we have prisons to store away criminals. The opposite view, that nothing is more sacred than freedom, even the freedom to act badly, is articulated by the writer and by the prison chaplain. The latter puts it clearly when he explains to Alex his misgivings about the new reform therapy. 'When a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man,' he says. The therapy may work in a social sense, but it fails in a moral sense since it will deprive Alex of his freedom to choose good over evil. Alex experiences both conditions. He begins as a libertine who kills and rapes. He is then 'trained' to avoid such behaviours by aversion therapy. At the end, lying in the hospital and seemingly reborn after his near-death from suicide, he once again is stimulated by thoughts of violence and sex. As in all Kubrick's work, the film does not take a side in this fundamental debate. Instead, it presents the harm that can result from both arguments. Pure freedom includes the freedom to do what Alex and his gang do. That seems obvious. But the film also shows that state control can damage people, whether through prison or some miracle therapy that treats humans as guinea pigs. For instance, the inadvertent playing of classical music during Alex's treatment causes him to reject his love of Beethoven, which was arguably his only redeeming feature. The potential danger of extreme order is also highlighted by historical footage of a Nazi meeting and by the exaggerated salutes and clipping of heels by officials. The parallels with Germany in the 1930s—treatment centres, brainwashing and eugenics—are not always subtle, but they are necessary to counterbalance the equally immoral actions of Alex and his gang. In the end, neither version of Alex is positive, neither the free nor the suppressed Alex. This is the paradox of the film's title, which (according to the novelist Burgess) refers to a person who is as lively as an orange yet as dull as a clock.

Crime A separate element within the debate between freedom and order is the nature of evil. Is it innate and natural in human beings, or is it a corruption of our fundamental instinct to act with kindness? Are criminals born or are they created, for example, by a broken home? As in many other Kubrick's films, *A Clockwork Orange* suggests that human beings do carry a deep streak of evil within them. In the beginning, Alex gets pleasure from beating a defenceless old man and raping a man's wife. But Alex is not the victim of any social or emotional deprivation. Instead, he is simply a fun-loving young man, with a taste for violence. And his violence is unprovoked. There is no motive, no backstory, no sociological explanation. He simply enjoys it. Indeed, when his evil impulses have been programmed out of him, he appears less lively, morose and ultimately suicidal. That induced state of virtue, however, is short-lived and he is miserable when his parents reject him. After his near-death, he seems to revert back to his original mentality, which is to lust after women and want to inflict harm on others. This is where the debate about social and legal restraints come into play: if evil is innate, how far should we go to suppress it?

Society : Art Another theme, not entirely distinct from the first two but played out on another level, is the power of art. If we strip away all the violence and sex from the film, we have a story that celebrates the creativity of human beings. From the very start, the milk bar (despite its misogynistic imagery) resembles an art gallery, featuring stylish figures with colourful patterns. Then, there is the language, an argot used by Alex and his friends, which is difficult to describe here. Full of rhyme and slang, and borrowing from Russian and Cockney, it was invented by Anthony Burgess when he wrote the novel from which the film is adapted. It is crucial to the story because it illustrates the creative

energy of Alex, who uses it throughout the film. In addition, Alex and his gang dress like vaudeville actors and carry out their actions in an exaggerated theatrical manner, often singing and dancing. It is all staged and operatic. Even Alex's moment before the press, when he is wheeled out as proof of the success of the new therapy, is staged as theatre, with actors and bows. Art is also part of the plot when Alex maims the writer while singing 'Singing in the Rain' and when he (accidentally) kills the cat-lady by hitting her with a sculpture. Beethoven is Alex's first love, although it later turns out to destroy him. Art, the film seems to say, is an impulse, not so very different to the violent and sadistic ones on display.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Alex As the main character and narrator, Alex dominates the film. There are two versions of him, the one before his treatment and the one after. The first is a hip young hoodlum who gets his kicks from anti-social behaviour and satisfying his appetite for sadism and sex. He is exuberant, theatrical, stylish, likes Beethoven a lot and keeps a pet snake. After his treatment, Alex appears tamed, muted and sluggish. He clearly wants to do 'good' and please his masters, but he later reverts to his old, sociopathic self.

Hedonistic The entire first section of the film illustrates Alex's hedonism, but the most revealing scene is the attack on the writer and his wife. Having lied his way in, Alex leads his gang in a vicious beating of the man and then rape of his wife. All the while, Alex performs a version of Gene Kelly's 'Singing in the Rain,' dancing with a thick pole as an umbrella and punctuating every line with a kick to the man or a further stripping of the woman. He also joyfully pulls down bookshelves and overturns desks. The theatricality of the scene—the costumes, singing and dancing—disguises the viciousness while also rendering it even more despicable. This is the essence of Alex, a menacing mixture of play and violence. He is a hedonist, a pleasure-seeker who will do anything if it makes him feel good.

Manipulative As the leader of the 'droogs,' Alex has qualities lacking in his underlings. They might resent his authority, but he knows how to manipulate them and regain his power. This aspect of his character is displayed in a scene when the three members of his gang turn up unexpectedly outside his parents' flat. His friends begin to speak with an edge of mockery and hint that he is a bit of a control-freak. With a menacing smile, Alex says, 'Let's get things nice and sparkling clear.' Then he beats them and treats them to a drink in a pub. 'Now they knew who was master and leader,' he says as the narrator. 'But a real leader knows when to give and be generous to his underlings.' So, Alex pretends to listen to their ideas. This is Alex the manipulator: beat someone and then treat them nicely. Bad cop and good cop, all rolled into one.

Obedient Alex, the free-wheeling narcissist, also has another, more palatable side to him. Once he is in prison, he adapts to the extreme discipline of the institution without much trouble. In his first scene as a prisoner, he is brought before a prison officer who tells him his number and reads the regulations. Alex, dressed in a nice blue suit, seems to enjoy this reversal of roles, being powerless and ordered about by someone, even being stripped naked. He follows orders, says 'sir' with relish and (literally) toes the line. A little masochism to go along with his sadism. But he is still the old Alex. When asked why he is in prison, he gives a little smirk and says, 'Murder, sir.'

Sympathetic After his aversion therapy treatment, Alex changes. Trained like a zoo animal, he has learned to curb his violent tendencies. He returns to his parents' flat with a happy smile and announces that he is 'completely reformed.' But a lodger occupies his old room and his parents do not welcome him. When the lodger accuses him of ruining his parents' lives, Alex goes to hit him. But the aversion therapy kicks in, he withdraws his fist and begins to feel ill. Still reeling, he is told by his father that they've sold all his old things and that his pet snake Basil 'met with an accident.' Now, Alex is weeping. He has been disowned by his parents, turned out with nowhere to sleep. We can almost sympathise with poor Alex, the ex-con who cannot live down his past.

Minister The minister represents the government's desire to solve the criminality problem by 'curing' the criminals. Grey-haired and grey-suited, he is a suave persuader, confident of his ideas and his ability to win friends. Beneath that smooth surface lies a devious and callous character who has no concern for the guinea pigs he recruits for his much-publicised policy of aversion therapy. It is also revealed that he supports a sinister dark state that 'puts away' anyone who dissents from the government. He seeks success and power, at any costs.

Sinister We first see the minister when he makes a visit to the prison, scouting for a suitable prisoner to subject to the experimental therapy. As he inspects a line-up of men, he articulates his idea that prisons don't reform criminals and that the cells should be freed up for political offenders. The solution is to 'cure' criminals not punish them. Punishment doesn't work, he explains, because 'they enjoy their so-called punishment.' Alex blurts out, 'You're absolutely right, sir,' causing the minister to stop and speak to him. After two questions, the minister rubs his hands with glee. 'Excellent,' he says. 'He's aggressive, outgoing, bold. Vicious.' When another official suggests that they might look at other prisoners, the minister shakes his head. 'No, he's perfect. This vicious young hoodlum will be transformed out of all recognition.' The suave minister believes in a technique, not unlike other methods of personality alteration (electric shock, brainwashing, etc.) that will solve the crime problem. He has scant concern for the welfare of the 'patients', only for the success of his own policy. The minister is sinister.

Smug Two weeks later, the minister introduces a reformed Alex to a group of journalists and specialists. 'Here he is,' he says. 'Well-nourished and straight from a good night's sleep. Undrugged, un hypnotized...As decent a lad as you would meet on a May morning.' He goes on to criticise the ineffective prison system, which merely deepened his vices and taught him a few new ones, as well. Then he lauds his party for promising to make the 'streets safe again.' That promise is now a reality and the 'criminal violence is soon to be a thing of the past.' A drum roll introduces the specimen, Alex, who demonstrates his aversion to sex and violence. But it is the minister who steals the show. He is not just proud of his success, he is smug.

Sly The full extent of the minister's cunning is exposed in the final scene. Still wearing his self-satisfied smile, plus a gold-coloured tie, he visits Alex in hospital. He says he is 'deeply sorry' about his unfortunate accident and that an enquiry will determine who was responsible. Then, addressing Alex as 'my boy' and feeding him with his own hands, he goes on to explain that he wants Alex to 'help' him in the struggle against their common enemy. There are certain people, such as the 'subversive writer', who would undermine social cohesion with their silly ideas about individual freedoms. The writer, he says, wanted revenge, but 'you're safe from him now. We've put him away.' Finally, he tells Alex that he will work for the government, helping to improve its public image. This is the conclusion of the minister's subversive plan, to use Alex for his own political ambitions.

The writer The writer, a Mr Alexander, appears as an introspective, liberal, white-haired intellectual. He shows compassion when strange men knock at his door at night and request help for an accident. Later, after being traumatised by an attack and the death of his raped wife, he displays less desirable traits. To get his revenge, he tortures Alex into a suicide attempt and then tries to use him to undermine the government's crime policy.

Kind When we first meet the writer, he is at his typewriter, working late at night. Then comes the knock at the door and the plea to use his telephone because there's been an accident. His wife is suspicious and tells Alex to go to the nearby pub, but when the writer hears that it's 'a matter of life and death,' he is concerned and tells her to let them in. The result is that he ends up a widower confined to a wheelchair, but his first reaction was to help, a sense of compassion that we see on his furrowed brow when he hears about the 'accident.'

Traumatised The writer never fully recovers from that horrendous experience, including being forced to watch his wife being sexually abused. In his next scene, he again opens the door to Alex, whom he doesn't recognise as his attacker because in that scene he wore a mask. Listening now to Alex's story about being beaten by the police, the writer's face is contorted in pain, as if reliving the horror of that first scene. His lips tremble and his eyes show fear, but he recognises Alex as the 'victim' of the experimental therapy (the story has been in the papers). Again, he offers him refuge and tells him to take a bath. But when he hears Alex sing the Gene Kelly song, he knows he is the man who attacked him and his wife. He goes into a fit, eyes bulging and hands gripping his trousers. When his trauma cools, he turns to revenge and causes Alex to attempt suicide. The writer has been transformed from a kind person into a murderous one, incidentally supporting the theory that criminals are created by their social experiences.



(Alex, leader of the droogs)



(Alex disciplining the members of his gang)



(Alex disowned by his parents)