

Dystopian fantasy

What does a dystopia „look like“?

A Clockwork Orange on the screen

This essay is about Stanley Kubrick's film called *A Clockwork Orange*. I try to focus on the strange duality of the film, being both a genre and an artistic film. I try to show how Kubrick's artistic vision appears in this movie, and how the audio-visual additions of the film augment the story it is based on. I also try to compare the film and the original novel it is based on, including the differences that are based on the different narrative tools of the two different media, the book and the film.

Stanley Kubrick and his movies

Stanley Kubrick (26 July 1928 – 7 March 1999) was an American director, writer, producer and photographer. He started as a photographer at *Look* magazine first, and then he moved on to directing. At first he made documentaries for *The March of Time*, that was a provider of newsreels to movie theaters. At that time he made *Day of the Fight* (1951) and *Flying Padre* (1951), after which he switched to create feature-length films. He made 13 films (in *Spartacus* (1960) he was only a replacement director in a full prepared film, that was already in production)[1][2]. His most important movies are *Lolita* (1962), *Dr. Strangelove, or how I stopped worrying and love the bomb* (1964), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). To shoot the *Lolita* he moved to England (and stayed there for the rest of his career) because of its lesser censorship laws, as the original novel, which written by Vladimir Nabokov, dealt with an older man falling in love with his twelve year old stepdaughter. The censorship was still harsh, so the screenplay needed a lot of editing, like raising the age of Lolita to fourteen. *Dr. Strangelove* was the first film where he made the screenplay depart greatly from the original novel by hiring an American satirist, Terry Southern. (In spite of this, the screenplay was co-written by Kubrick and the original author of the novel: Peter George too). The original novel had a very serious tone, but the film became highly satirical, even to the extent to display the nuclear war as a “game”. By the *2001: A Space Odyssey* the screenplay and the novel were written parallel to each other for this movie. The novel and the screenplay became different, and although there was a novel, the story of the film became actually the canonical one (on which the sequels of the novel were

based). Although the critics panned it at first, it became a great success, and one of the sci-fi classics of filmmaking. This is also the first movie where Kubrick uses classical music instead of an original soundtrack. *A Clockwork Orange* is based on a novel by Anthony Burgess, set in near-future England. The main character is Alex, who narrates the whole movie from his point of view. He is an intelligent, manipulative youngster who, like his friends (called “droogs” in Nadsat, Burgess’ russified slang), likes sex, raping, and “ultra-violence”. The film was very controversial, even to the extent of copycat crimes being committed and Kubrick and his family getting death threats. Kubrick answered this by banning the film in England (it could be still seen in mainland Europe and the other parts of the world). He even sued (which led to the closure of) Scala, one of the few independent cinemas in London, because it dared to screen the film in the early 90’s. Kubrick’s artistic impressions can be seen very clearly in this film, which is one of the gems in the director’s filmography.

A Clockwork Orange

Duality of genre and art

In most of Kubrick’s film, there is a duality, as they are both genre and artistic films. This is true for *A Clockwork Orange* too. This movie can be considered a soft science-fiction film, as it describes a possible society of the future with some dystopian elements in it. Genres have usually some conventions based on their themes and visuals. With case of a dystopia we usually see the future of mankind in a negative way, showing the deterioration of society. These are true in the case of this film. The differences from a pure genre film can be seen not in the theme, but in the style of the film, for example in the way how the camera shows us this world. In the case of genre film most of the other films (of other directors) are a supertext of the film, but in case of an artistic film, the supertext is actually the filmography of the director[7]. In the first case the directors usually tell the same story over and over again, only by twisting some of the elements of the genre, but in the second case it is actually the life of the director that appears on the screen, with signature elements from the director himself or herself, containing original stylistic points. The two ways of directing is usually in contrast to each other, most films that are both genre and artistic become either an esoteric incomprehensible structure, or an artistic film that has actually torn down the elements of the genre. Kubrick, however, doesn’t use the genre for his own artistic impressions, like for example

Tarantino, but augments the stylistic force of the genre with his own artistic impressions[7].

A Clockwork Orange shows a dystopia, still in its infancy, where the society is being torn apart by anarchistic, brutal youngsters, like Alex and his droogs or Billyboy. The inhabitants of this world are defenseless against them. The police is actually only the mirror of the government, at first by mirroring its inability to deal with the situation, later showing how the government became totalitarian, corrupt and unfair. Apart from this the dystopical elements can also be found in the visuals of the film, and even in the way the music is used.

It is debatable whether this film is a dystopia, a counter-utopia, or neither of them. The fact that the minister of internal affairs tries to “cure” criminals can be seen as counter-utopian, as it can be considered as something good, that becomes bad (a usual theme in counter-utopias), but in the film the cause of the need of this cure (to gain place for state prisoners), is actually something that shows how a possible totalitarian dystopia is formed. This, and the fact that both “cures” of the film (when Alex is treated against crime, and later when he is treated against the treatment), are actually used for sinister political purposes will make this government, and society a dystopian one.

Visual style of the film

To achieve the visual style of this film, Kubrick used an old Newman Sinclair camera. The film presents a dystopian state in its infancy: lot of abandoned places, alleys, full of low-down hobos and gangsters like the main characters of the film. This can clearly be seen in the abandoned theatre where Billyboy and his band are camping, or when the camera is following Alex through a heap of garbage on his way home in the shadows of an old block of flats, which are decorated with obscene pictures. If the story alone cannot be considered as part of the soft science-fiction genre, the visuals clearly put this film inside it. (This is not unique, as there are other movies where it's up to the visuals to put a movie in a different genre different from that of the story[9].) Although the exterior is run-down, gray, the inside of the apartments are actually modern, with quality (and strange-looking, pop art style) furniture, and other novelties. The dull streets are also highly contrasted with the people wearing vivid, colorful clothes and wigs, like the wig of the nurse or Alex's mom.

Artistic elements of the movie include experimental camera usage usually used in independent films as in the mainstream, Hollywood based filmmaking the camera tries to remain silent and not trying to dislocate the viewer. For example the first scene, where we can see a close-up on Alex's face, while the camera is slowly widening its angle, to enumerate the other people inside the bar is far from conventional enumeration shots. Or when the writer recognizes Alex, as the guy who raped his wife, he is shown from a very unlikely angle, increasing the tension the scene provides. Kubrick also liked to play with perspective. *A Clockwork Orange* contains both ultra wide angle shots, and close ups (with the one at the film's start, showing Alex's face being famous) too. Showing people their head nodded while looking up is actually present in most of his other films too, for example in *2001: Space Odyssey*, when Dave wanted to come back on the board and in *Dr. Strangelove*, when Strangelove made a speech about function of women after the nuclear war. Kubrick's films usually are shown from the point-of-view of one, or multiple characters. In this film the whole story is narrated and shown from Alex's point of view. The narration can not only be seen in the spoken form, but also in the visuals, as the camera handling (and so the picture the viewer sees) is also very subjective towards Alex's mind. Because of these two the viewer inadvertently begins to sympathize with Alex, although he is not exactly a guy who we usually sympathize with. This trick, however, was also used in other movies, like in Sam Peckinpach's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), where the audience inadvertently supports the band murdering the people, despite this not being something socially acceptable. Nowadays this trick is actually more commonly used in filmmaking, as there are more and more films which are actually about the "bad guys".

Music

Music plays a central part of the film. It has a lot of diegetic (part of the events inside a scene) music, mainly when Beethoven is played in the movie. Non-diegetic electronic music, which was composed by Wendy Carlos, is also used, mainly between scenes. Alex's connection with classical music is put in the center of the movie, mainly showing how Alex feels when presented with Beethoven. This particular classical music can be heard during Alex's more brutal acts, exposing the Platonic philosophy of the naïve viewers, and diminishing the reflective connection between "good" and "nice" [3]. With the inclusion of classical music he continues the style he started with *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which was actually not a conscious choice, as classical music was only put there

temporarily until the score was completed, but Kubrick became to like it that way, and so kept it there. Music also plays a role in the events of the film, as Alex is conditioned against his favourite classical song: the 9th symphony of Beethoven.

Differences between the book and the film

It is usually useless to expect films to be close to the novels they are based on, which is ultimately true for this movie. Despite the fact that the film is based on Burgess' novel, they are separate creations, and both have to be measured within their own media, as a simple comparison between the stories will leave out a lot of facts, that cannot be actually considered inside that specific medium[12]. Despite this I try to show some of the differences between the stories, and try to explain why these differences actually exist.

There are numerous differences between the movie and the film. These differences can be dealt with at two stages: the first stage is the absolute, objective, factual differences in the story and storytelling, the second is the subjective differences the previous stage causes. I try to describe each of the differences both from the objective and subjective standpoints, the latter mainly showing my point-of-view. I collect here some of the most important differences.

The first is that the 21th chapter is missing from the film. Many consider the last chapter out-of-order, like both Kubrick, and Eric Swenson, the original American publisher of the book. It is debatable whether Kubrick knew about the last chapter or not, as the American version of the book was actually published without the last chapter in 1963 (one year after the first publication in England), so there were actually books that did not contain the last chapter. However, he was already living in England at that time, where the full story was published. Actually it doesn't really matter, as even Burgess had thrown away the last chapter (by allowing the American version to be published that way). This debate is actually only important from the literature- and film-history viewpoint.

The more interesting fact is that the discarding of the last chapter actually changes the message (and with this the genre) of the story. The last chapter was mainly an optimistic ending, describing the violence as something "childish". This is in contrast with usual dystopian novels, as the ending in those are usually even more pessimistic than the

entire book. Because of this some critics don't consider Burgess' work as a dystopian novel (they usually see that as a character evolution novel). Without the last chapter, however, the ending is consistent with a dystopian world, as it both shows how the governing, corrupt and anti-democratic party is gaining strength, showing the actual start, and initial steps of creating a dystopian world, and showing how the main character Alex did not change a bit, and still thinking like an actual criminal. In the novel however, the rise of a radical party was diminished by the fact that Alex was actually cured of being a criminal.

How "order" is achieved is also determined by the inclusion or omission of the last chapter. In the film, in the end we can see how chaos and corruption are starting to rule the world, while keeping the different thinkers locked up. Here, Alex is an antagonist and part of this "revolution". In the novel, however, Alex starts to return to the "order," and norms we think is normal, therefore Alex actually becomes a protagonist.

Although this appears as making the novel a complete whole, by putting in an end point, it is also something that makes the novel inconsistent and unmotivational, as we don't know why Alex's change actually occurred. It is hard to accept missing points inside stories, and the fact we don't know why Alex was having fun beating others is one missing point. It is never described whether Alex had any trauma, or does what he does by frustration or something else in either the movie or the novel. Adding to this is the fact we don't really know why Alex starts to think differently makes the whole character evolution unmotivational. From one viewpoint the last chapter is not missing from the film, it is simply not included.

Another important difference is that the movie lacks the mention of "Clockwork Orange". Although this is a highly acclaimed metaphor, describing the dehumanization of human kind, it is in my opinion not missing in the film, as its visual style, describing this dehumanization is on par with the novel's storytelling. This can actually come from the fact that a novel and film are different media, with different means of storytelling as I mentioned already. In the film expressive camera movements, viewpoints and performance of the actors are used instead of the verbliness of the novel. From another viewpoint everything that can be found in the novel, as a verbal communication form is shown as visuals in the film. This is why actually the usage of nadsat is not as string in

the film, as it is in the novel, as its use is replaced by the visuals, which will actually bring the viewers closer to Alex's mind[4].

Another difference in the movie is that Alex is chosen for the Ludovico-trial because he tried to manipulate the minister of internal affairs, while in the novel he commits incidental murder, and that's why he becomes a guinea pig for the Ludivoco-trial. The film also depicts Alex as an intelligent, and very manipulative guy, while in the novel, the main character is actually neither intelligent, nor manipulative. This difference is also shown on other occasions, like when he gets visited by his parents in the hospital. In the novel he gets aggressive, while in the film he is more into manipulating them to be ashamed for them kicking him out of the house.

The next characteristic change in the film is that some scenes were cut from the movie, for example the shop robbery scene and the library scene. This was because of both budget reasons, and the fact that one of the actors, who was involved in the library scene got sick. Ages of the minors in the film are increased (instead of girls being in their early teenage age, the film shows them as being around 18-20). This is mainly to counter censorship laws, the same was as in *Lolita*. The next important difference is that in the novel Alex is conditioned against all kinds of classical music, while in the film only the 9th symphony of Beethoven is mentioned. This choice could have a dramatic function in the film, as connecting a concrete music in the viewers mind to something is crucial for the viewer to realize why Alex has jumped out of the window, so it actually prepares one of the major events in the film. And at the novel the two cops who find Alex are actually one of his old droog, and one from the rival band, while in the film, both of them are his former friends. It could have a dramatic role too, as Billyboy had only a minimal episodic appearance in the film, this change was probably made so the viewer could easily recognize the two cops.

The film's position in Kubrick's filmography

Most of Kubrick's film was panned by critics at first, but acclaimed (and becoming cult films) later on. *A Clockwork Orange* is no exception, mainly because it was actually banned in England by Kubrick himself. Although he was nominated to Academy Awards, he only won it one time, for the special effects of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. *A Clockwork Orange* was also nominated for four Oscars, but won none of them. Apart from the first

two feature-length films, Kubrick always used a novel as a base for his screenplays. Three of the writers of the original novels, including Burgess, were so disappointed by Kubrick's work, and his re-imagination of the story, they let others to re-realize their work. Burgess made a theater play for *Clockwork Orange*, Stephen King a TV Series for *The Shining*, and Nabokov's son a new film for *Lolita*. None of those works were as successful as Kubrick's original films however.

Kubrick had a special situation in film production, he was also one of the few lucky directors who could create films in style of "independent films", but with the backing of a large filming company. It wasn't such a usual thing at that time, because the chefs of the studio system were the producers, not the directors, who were actually only part of the manufacturing process that makes films. *Clockwork Orange* for example was produced by Warner Corporation. Kubrick always liked to be part of the whole process, including the direction of dubbing of the localized versions of film creation, this film being no exception[6].

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