

“Viddy Well”

by

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The film *A Clockwork Orange* is considered by many to be a classic. Although released in 1971, this Stanley Kubrick film continues to attract new audiences, and often disgusts them with its graphic violence and rape scenes. It offers a disturbing insight into the mind of a perverted criminal, and also raises questions about the future of mankind, including the possible use of mind control to suppress unwanted criminal behaviors.

The film, which is based on a 1962 Anthony Burgess novel, takes place in a future where teenage gangs roam the streets and spend their nights partaking in “ultra violence,” which includes stealing, beating, and raping. The story follows Alex, the leader of one such gang, who is sent to prison after being arrested and convicted for the murder of a woman. While in prison, Alex volunteers to undergo a new treatment that is said will cure him of his violent tendencies and turn him into a model citizen. This “cure” is behavior modification training that paralyzes Alex anytime he has the urge to commit a violent or sexual act. Upon completion of the treatment Alex is released back into society, where he encounters many problems arising from the fact that he can no longer protect himself.

The important underlying message of the film is easily overshadowed by the fact that Kubrick has made Alex out to be a victim of society; that society has forced him to lead a life of violence. As described by famous film critic Roger Ebert, “(Kubrick) actually seems to be implying...in a world where society is criminal, the citizen might as well be criminal, Too” (Ebert). The actual message, however, is less obvious, and is best summarized by Alex's pastor while he is in prison: “When a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man” (Kubrick). The choices we make, although not always right or good natured, are what make us who we are. True, the violent acts Alex participates in before being sent to prison are both

unnecessary and grotesque, but, after he is released from prison some violence on Alex's part is almost necessary in order to preserve his own life. The argument could even be made that Alex deserves what he gets because he has caused so many others to suffer. This may also be true, but it still remains, however, that when he no longer has the ability to choose (to be violent in this case) he is reduced to nothing more than a “moral robot” (Kael), and not a human at all.

In actuality, Alex almost seems to be totally inhuman in the first place, except for Kubrick's inclusion of Alex's love for Beethoven. Without this insight into his character, it would be nearly impossible to relate to Alex in any way, and relating to the main character is important when trying to get an audience involved in a story. Alex views Beethoven as a source of mental clarity, and it also seems to be the only thing he truly cares about. This is reinforced in the movie when Alex scolds one of his “droogs” for interrupting a woman singing Beethoven in their favorite bar, as well as when Alex calls it a “sin” when Beethoven is used in a negative way during his treatment. In the latter example, Alex accuses the doctors by saying, “This is sin! This is sin. . .! Using Ludwig van like that. He did no harm to anyone” (Kubrick). This accusation is somewhat ironic, because Alex often uses Beethoven to feed his own sadistic fantasies. With the inclusion of this passion for Beethoven, the character of Alex is given depth, and without it, would possibly be unbelievable as a person.

This believability of the character, although important, is worthless without a good actor to use it. In this case, Malcolm McDowell's portrayal of Alex definitely gets the job done. McDowell makes it hard not to believe that Alex is feeling great joy in the suffering he causes others. This especially holds true in the instances where there are close-ups of Alex, and the only insight you have to his feelings are through reading his eyes and facial expressions. McDowell also does an excellent job of giving Alex the intelligence, cockiness,

and charisma the leader of a gang inherently needs, and he keeps these traits with Alex throughout the movie, adding consistency to his character.

In many ways, the dialog of the movie helps McDowell to maintain this consistency, and strengthens Alex's characteristic traits. Alex and the other characters speak using a mixture of old and current English, with the addition of many new slang words and phrases. The charisma and cockiness of Alex, as well as the difference in the film's dialog compared with today's, is illustrated very well when Alex picks up a couple of women in a record store by saying, "What you got back home, little sister, to play your fuzzy warbles on? I bet you got, say, little save pitiful portable picnic players. Come with uncle and hear all proper, Hear angels' trumpets and devils' trombones. You are invited!" (Kubrick). The dialog can be hard to follow at times, but this negative aspect is offset by the facts that it strengthens Alex's personality, helps to give the movie a "futuristic" feel, and is just plain entertaining to hear.

A Clockwork Orange gives the audience a look into the mind of a violent rapist; a mindset that, although not normal, is still human. This is a concept that many cannot comprehend, and makes the movie as intriguing and entertaining today as it was when it came out nearly 35 years ago, and what will make it stick around for at least 35 more.

Works Cited

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