

A Clockwork Orange

Peter Krämer

CONTROVERSIES

A Clockwork Orange

X Controversies

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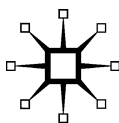
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Kim Newman, novelist, critic and broadcaster

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For Joe, Norbert and the Cinnamon Girl

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✕ Introduction

On 21 January 1972, the *New York Times* reported that ‘several dozen families in a plush, wooded section of Riverdale’ in the Bronx had organised private security for their neighbourhood in response to the ‘invasion of a neighbor’s home by three armed, masked robbers who sexually assaulted a woman and her daughter’ (Blumenthal, 1972, p. 48). The article noted that ‘[t]he attack ... resembles somewhat the assaults by a band of hoodlums depicted in the film *A Clockwork Orange*’. This casual reference to the film (the only one in the article) indicates that, only four weeks after its initial release in the US, *A Clockwork Orange* had infiltrated public consciousness. Based on a British novel, and written, directed and produced in England by Stanley Kubrick, one of Hollywood’s most critically acclaimed and most commercially successful filmmakers at that time, *A Clockwork Orange* had been declared one of the best films of 1971, while also performing well at the box office both in the US and in the UK where it had been released in mid-January. From the outset, it had been the target of vigorous attacks by some film reviewers and by other commentators. In subsequent months and years, the film’s commercial performance would live up to the promise of the early weeks of its release, and the controversy it caused would further escalate, especially in the UK where the film was accused of being responsible for copycat crimes and banned by several local authorities. Indeed, Kubrick, who had been living in this country since the mid-1960s, was so troubled by the British controversy that, after *A Clockwork Orange* had completed its extremely long run in British cinemas, he asked the film’s distributor, Warner Bros., not to show it again in the UK in his lifetime.

The *New York Times* article quoted above contains some clues as to how *A Clockwork Orange*, which featured two home invasions and rape as well as

assorted other crimes, could have such an enormous impact. The article not only established a link between horrendous real-life crimes and particular film scenes, a link that would be explored in complex and contradictory ways in future debates about *A Clockwork Orange*, but also revealed a strong fascination with the nature of the crime itself and with the comprehensive threat posed by crimes of this kind. On the basis of an interview with the mother, the *New York Times* report described the attack on the Riverdale family in some detail: 'the doorbell rang at 8:45 P.M. When her 19-year-old son opened the door a crack to see who it was, a sawed-off shotgun was poked through.' Three men 'pushed their way into the 11-room house' and tied up both sons as well as '[a] sister of the mother who is paralyzed'. They 'were eager to establish' that '[t]he father was not yet home'. Holding a gun to her daughter's head, they forced the mother 'to guide them through the house', and grabbed 'pieces of jewelry and furs': 'Afterwards, the assailants ordered the mother and her daughter to an upstairs bedroom where the[y] abused them sexually.' Having tied up the women, they then took 'television sets and other property' out of the house. Police investigators observed that '[t]he family's description of the assailants tallied with descriptions of men involved in several other similar recent attacks near the city'. However, the mistakes the criminals made (such as leaving precious loot behind) suggested 'that they were more thrill-seekers than professional robbers'. The article concluded by noting that the police commissioner had 'sought to assure' Riverdale residents with the statement that 'arrests there for robbery and burglary were sharply up in 1971 over the preceding year'.

Here is America's newspaper of record assuming that its readers will want – or need – to know the details of this horrific attack, leaving only the precise nature of the sexual abuse of the two women to the imagination, but otherwise bringing the story to life with vivid descriptions. What is more, the events that readers are invited to participate in vicariously (mainly from the perspective of one of the victims) are not safely contained and distanced; instead readers are reminded that such attacks take place with some regularity all over the New York metropolitan area. Indeed, the police commissioner's

assurance that arrest rates are up is double-edged: Perhaps they have increased not because of greater police efforts but because more robberies and burglaries are being committed. This would appear to be the interpretation favoured by Riverdale residents who do not feel protected sufficiently by the police and instead organise their own security. In this way the article suggests a potential threat to everyone. Even the majority of readers who do not live in huge houses in 'plush' neighbourhoods, with all the trappings of affluence, are not safe, because the home invaders do not appear to be professionals mainly interested in material goods, but thrill-seekers who enjoy threatening people and exerting power over them, culminating in sexual abuse. Everyone, irrespective of their wealth, could be the next target for such a gang, women especially.

It is precisely such a comprehensive threat that is staged in a sexually explicit and graphically violent, but also highly stylised and in places sickly comical fashion in *A Clockwork Orange*. The film portrays a society of the near future, in which the nights appear to be dominated by roving gangs of teenage males who beat people up in the streets and in the houses they invade, while also engaging in vicious fights with each other; who steal whatever they can lay their hands on, rape women both in their homes and outside of them, and also kill people. Unlike the above article, on the whole the film invites – one might even say forces – viewers to experience all of this criminal behaviour mainly from the perspective of the perpetrators, rather than from that of their victims. The film starts with a tight close-up of the leader of one of the gangs, Alex, who is also speaking the voiceover narration – using a very peculiar slang – and who appears in every scene, indeed in most shots; first and foremost this is *his* story, and not that of his victims.

Interestingly, though, in the film's two home-invasion scenes – both of which involve grand houses, surrounded by trees, far away from the city centre – there are moments which foreground the experiences and perspectives of those at the receiving end of the violence. In the first home-invasion scene, it is the point of view of the male victim that is foregrounded. Alex and the other three masked members of his gang first beat him up, and then make him

watch while his wife is sexually assaulted by Alex, the film cutting back and forth between shots of the husband's horrified face and reverse shots showing the attack on his wife as seen from his perspective. The second scene features a middle-aged woman who gets suspicious when Alex tries to talk her into opening her door because she has heard the news about the previous night's attack. During her phone call to the police, Alex is off screen for much longer than is usual in this film, and when he finally appears and gets into a fight with the woman, there are several shots reproducing her movements and perspective, right up to the moment when he rams the sculpture of a giant phallus in her face (figs. 1–2).

Thus there are numerous parallels between the film scenes and the *New York Times* crime report in which they are referenced: the 'wooded' location of the houses being invaded, the apparent wealth of their inhabitants, the small group of masked intruders, the emphasis on sex and violence rather than theft (it remains unclear what the gang steals during the film's first home invasion, and Alex definitely does not take anything during the second). In terms of perspective, the fact that the article is based on an interview with the mother – including a direct quotation from her – strangely echoes the film's emphasis on the dialogue and experiences of the middle-aged woman in the second home-invasion scene. Even more intriguingly, the *New York Times* article foregrounds the fact that the invaders were 'eager' to ascertain that the father was not at home, which implies that his presence might have been enough to deter them, and also, perhaps, raises the question of how *he* might feel about what happened to his family, in particular about his failure to prevent the assault. The first home-invasion scene in *A Clockwork Orange* certainly focuses on the husband's experience in this way and in later scenes, the film returns to the devastating effect the attack itself and the subsequent death of his wife have had on him.

When the *New York Times* reporter referred to *A Clockwork Orange*, he undoubtedly did not have such close comparative analysis in mind. Instead, it would appear that he merely wanted to evoke the two home-invasion scenes so that those readers who had seen the film could replay them in their minds



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while reading the account of the attack in Riverdale. In particular, memory of the film's highly sexualised attacks on women could fill the blank the article left. Two days after the *New York Times* article used *A Clockwork Orange* in this merely illustrative fashion, a popular and more downmarket British paper, the *Sunday People*, foregrounded the film in its report about the Riverdale incident. Under the title 'Hunt for *Clockwork Orange* Sex Gang', the article opened with the claim that the Riverdale criminals 'have modelled themselves

on the rape-and-robbery hoodlums in the film *A Clockwork Orange*' (Blyth, 1972). A list of several details shared by the real-life crime and the filmic crime followed, among them the following: Before the home invaders 'forced their way' into the house, '[l]ike the teenage "Droogs" in Stanley Kubrick's controversial picture they pretend there has been an accident' and ask whether they can come in "to phone for an ambulance"; and before they 'raped' mother and daughter, '[a]s in the picture they first cut off their victims' clothes'. The report concluded with a quotation from a police officer: 'The similarities with the *Clockwork Orange* gang are uncanny.' Although nothing was in fact known about the attackers, the article invited its readers to conclude that they must have seen the film and then copied some of the crimes depicted in it.

Apart from the concluding quotation and the remarkable – indeed rather unlikely – similarities between crime and film, the information presented in this article is the same as that in the *New York Times* report, and it is doubtful that the *Sunday People* writer did conduct much, or indeed any, additional research; in other words, the new information provided in this article would appear to be the result of wishful thinking. What is not in doubt, however, is that the *Sunday People* first of all judged the news value of the film, which had been released in the UK ten days earlier, to be very high, and was also confident that, even without any but the most indirect evidence, readers would accept the claim that such a film could in effect cause people to commit certain kinds of crimes. Perhaps it was the disturbing nature of the crime and the absence of detailed information about the criminals that opened up a space for this claim. The home invaders were not simply pursuing material gain, but were – in the words of both the *New York Times* and the *Sunday People* – 'thrill-seekers' who are stimulated by danger and power as well as physical and sexual violence. Indeed by describing the criminals as a 'sex gang' in its headline, the *Sunday People* article suggested that ultimately some kind of sexual stimulation and release was their main objective.

Explaining why people pursue such stimulation and release through brutal crimes is in many ways more difficult than accounting for crimes

motivated by material needs or greed, or by emotions such as jealousy and anger erupting in a particular situation. Hence, it is tempting for anyone confronted with such crimes to speculate about more unorthodox causes. Given the popularity of and public debate about *A Clockwork Orange* at the time of the report about the Riverdale incident, it is understandable that the thrill-seeking behaviour of the film's young criminals would have entered the reporter's thoughts, as well as the thrills that the film might provide an audience. There is a certain logic if one then speculates that, having experienced the protagonist's pleasures vicariously, criminal viewers might well be encouraged to adjust their crimes along the lines suggested by the film; indeed, it would be possible to conclude that even viewers without a criminal history might be tempted to replicate – and intensify – their experience in the cinema by acting out the film's fictional scenarios for real. This is the kind of reasoning underpinning the *Sunday People* article; indeed it is the kind of reasoning that readers might apply to the report in the *New York Times*, which in itself does not mention a causal link between the film and the crime, but contains all the elements, which could invite such a conclusion.

In different ways, then, the articles in the *New York Times* and the *Sunday People* indicate that the high-profile release of *A Clockwork Orange* in the US and the UK made the film a natural reference point in press reports and public debates about crime waves and thrill-seeking behaviour, whereby it could be used for illustrative or for explanatory purposes. Such usage in turn gave the film an ever-higher profile, generating increased interest on the part of movie audiences and film critics and drawing ever more people into the continuing discussion about *A Clockwork Orange*. Importantly, these people included British author Anthony Burgess on whose 1962 novel of the same title the film was based. On 28 January 1972, only five days after the *Sunday People* article and directly referencing its headline, the London *Evening News* featured an article based on an interview with Burgess, entitled '*Clockwork Orange* Gang Killed My Wife' (Hall, 1972, p. 10). The novelist revealed that *A Clockwork Orange* had been inspired by a wartime incident, in which four American deserters had attacked his first wife, then pregnant, in London; she

subsequently 'had to have an abortion because of shock', never fully recovered from the trauma and died at the age of forty in 1968. This revelation placed the couple whose house is invaded in both novel and film at the centre of the story, rather than Alex and his gang. In this perspective, the story is about the victims' suffering rather than the perpetrators' thrills, and, for the author, it was meant to be a way to replay and thus, hopefully, to work through personal trauma: 'I had to get this damn thing out of my system. I wrote the scene where a writer and his wife are attacked. ... the house they live in is called "home". That's how strongly I felt.'

When asked whether the film could 'incite teenage louts into orgies of rape and destruction', Burgess responded: 'I don't think anyone will go out and beat up little old ladies after seeing it unless they are going to do so anyway.' He also stated that '[m]an is basically evil, anyway ... we are all essentially aggressive and will never be anything different'. Yet, he pointed out, '[t]he whole point of the book and the film is: It's better to do wrong of your own free will than to do right because the state ordains it.' Here he referred to what happens to Alex in the story once he is captured by the police (after about a third of the film's running time). In prison he volunteers for an innovative medical treatment that can get him out early because it will prevent him from committing further violent crimes; it is an aversion therapy which combines the injection of drugs with the screening of violent films. After the treatment he is set free, unable to defend himself when he encounters his former victims who want to take revenge and eventually drive him to a suicide attempt. He ends up in hospital where he realises that the aversion therapy is no longer effective; he is able to return to his old way of life.

Burgess insisted not only that novel and film were meant to show that the treatment was worse than the crimes Alex had committed, but that the 'aggressive urge' was 'curiously cognate with the creative urge', thus suggesting that the state's suppression of violence would also kill art, perhaps even that there was something of an artist in Alex. This is surely a remarkable stance to take for a writer who said that he had created Alex in order to work through the impact of the devastating attack on his wife by people much like Alex; in

fact, Burgess's remark would seem to establish a close connection between his own 'creative urge' and Alex's 'aggressive urge'. In an article Burgess published in the *Los Angeles Times* two weeks later, he put his argument in an explicitly religious framework, stating that the novel 'was intended to be a sort of tract, even a sermon'; and its message was: 'The wish to diminish free will is ... [a] sin against the Holy Ghost' (Burgess, 1972, pp. 1, 18). With regards to the attack on his wife and what he admitted to be the surprisingly appealing characterisation of Alex in the story, he wrote: 'The point is that, if we are going to love mankind, we will have to love Alex as a not unrepresentative member of it' (p. 19); this also implied that he himself – through the creative act of writing a novel – learnt to love his late wife's attackers.

Burgess's provocative statements about *A Clockwork Orange* at the time of the film's initial release suggest that it is worth taking a closer look at the origins as well as the style and content of his novel, which – in addition to situating the film in Stanley Kubrick's career and examining the adaptation process – I do in Part 3 of this book, before exploring the marketing and reception of *A Clockwork Orange* in the US and the UK (in Part 4) as well as the film's legacy (in Part 5). Before conducting this examination of the film's production and reception contexts, I analyse the film's main themes (in Part 1) and key scenes (in Part 2), including the first home invasion. In the remainder of this Introduction, I want to preface my discussion of *A Clockwork Orange* with some remarks on my personal engagement with the film as well as on academic debates and historical developments, which are relevant for this study.

I first saw *A Clockwork Orange* as a teenager in Germany in the late 1970s, and without knowing much – or indeed anything – about the controversy surrounding the film, I was so excited and intrigued that I also read Burgess's novel, which in turn became the focus of what was probably the first extended critical essay that I ever wrote in my life (as an assignment for my German class). I was mainly interested in the criminal violence so central to the story, and how its representation in novel and film had such different effects on me. Frankly, in addition to being shocked and disturbed, I had

found the first third of the film very exhilarating, which was probably the main reason for my repeat viewings of *A Clockwork Orange* over the next few years. By contrast, when reading the novel, which is a first-person narrative told in Alex's peculiar slang, I found it very difficult to make out what exactly was happening; indeed, the inventiveness of the language was more exciting than the action that was being relayed with it. In my school essay, I argued that the book's language not only distances the reader from Alex's brutality, thus making identification with him less objectionable, but also both expresses and enhances Alex's distance from his own actions, in particular from their impact on his victims. The language Alex speaks and thinks in allows him to disregard the suffering of others (and also, later in the novel, his own suffering at the hands of others) while simultaneously intensifying his enjoyment of his mocking, abusive, violent behaviour. At the heart of my initial encounters with *A Clockwork Orange*, novel and film, then, was the question of how people like Alex were able to behave the way they did, and a concern about my own willingness, indeed eagerness, to enjoy such behaviour vicariously in the cinema.

There is, of course, a richly diverse literature, in the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, sociology, criminology, philosophy and biology, on the kind of excessive violence exemplified by Alex's crimes in the film and, to a lesser extent, by those of the home invaders in Riverdale: apparently unmotivated (at least as far as familiar motives such as greed, self-defence, revenge etc. are concerned), remorseless, extreme in its execution, intended both physically to damage and to humiliate victims, whereby such damage and humiliation serve no other end than to provide the perpetrator with sensual thrills and a sense of power.¹ It might be a productive exercise to compare the film's depiction of Alex's crimes, and the explanations for his behaviour which the film could be said to imply, with the scholarly literature on this topic, to determine whether the film offers an adequate or a heavily mythologised account, but also perhaps to explore whether it has something original to say about the matter. But this is not one of the objectives of this book.

Nevertheless, I think it is worth noting that, if we disregard the excessiveness of the young criminals' behaviour, the opening third of