

50 Years of A Clockwork Orange

Paper for the Anthony Burgess conference, 28th June, 2012.

The Demise of the Droog

We are here today, and for the rest of the conference, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of a book whose cultural significance and impact has been, by any standards, extraordinary. My concern in this talk is largely with the novel – or, more properly, novella, as Burgess suggested, and I want to argue that at least some of that significance is mis-placed. To me, and to Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* does not represent the pinnacle of his achievement, and I will try to explore the paradox of how a minor work became the major focus for Burgess studies over the last fifty years.

There's another 50 year anniversary this year – the Rolling Stones celebrate that landmark. When a film of *A Clockwork Orange* was first envisaged, the part of Alex was earmarked for Mick Jagger, the leader of the Stones, with the other members of the group as the droogs. At the time, I suppose this made sense – the Stones were seen in popular culture as symbols of youthful rebellion, and were often associated with violence either through their songs, -Street Fighting Man, for instance, or by events at concerts, such as the slaying of a crowd member at Altamont. That all seems a very long time ago, and the symbol of youthful rebellion is now Sir Michael Jagger, pillar of the establishment, and the Stones have become little more than the best Rolling Stones tribute band in the world.

The popular media of the time saw the Rolling Stones as anarchic challengers of the status quo, and as Burgess himself suggests in “Juice from A Clockwork Orange”, it was a figure much like Jagger that he saw in his mind's eye when

he created Alex: “somebody with the physical appearance and mercurial temperament of Jagger”ⁱ The *Daily Mirror* saw the Stones as threats to the English way of life, describing them as “The dirtiest group in Britain.” Another editorial asked the presumably rhetorical question “Would You Let Your Daughter Go With A Rolling Stone?”

As for *A Clockwork Orange*, as we all know and bear witness today, the novel has developed a life outside of its context as one of Burgess’s terminal year texts, written quickly to provide an income for his wife after his imminent – but in the end, much delayed – death. And of course, the extra-textual life is owed almost entirely to Stanley Kubrick’s film version of forty years ago.

Burgess had come back to a Britain in the throes of a moral panic as youth culture developed, as he reminds us in his

review of Kubrick's film, entitled "Clockwork Marmalade." and published in *The Listener*. His book, then, written quickly, was as opportunistic in its way as *Nothing Like The Sun* – a much more considerable achievement, in my view – published in 1964, of course, to coincide with the 400th anniversary celebrations of Shakespeare's birth. It aimed to use the current public concern about youthful violence as a vehicle for a story exploring familiar Burgess territory about the nature of evil and the possibility of redemption, this time set in a dystopian future dominated by a brutal state apparatus which embraced the fashionable (in the early sixties) behaviour management techniques of BF Skinner.

So, I would argue that, were it not for the Kubrick film, *A Clockwork Orange* would be seen by Burgess scholars as an early experimental work, certainly of interest, but not to be compared with his mature work, such as *Earthly Powers* or *Napoleon Symphony*. To develop that theme, let's look first at Burgess's own estimation.

Burgess, understandably, has written more about this text than any other in his canon, most of it on the back of Kubrick's film. As Andrew Biswell points out in *The Real Life of AB*, he detailed his progress with the novel in letters to friends "in a tone of anxious pessimism". Here he anticipates the end of the writing process:

I just plod on and this week hope to bring *A Clockwork Orange* to its bitter end – about 70,000 words only or even less. I don't think readers will be able to take all that much of it. I'm not at all satisfied, but I can't scrap it now.ⁱⁱ

Burgess, not a man noted for false modesty, does not seem to have any great affection for this book, and that opinion does not seem to change with the passing of the years. In "*A Clockwork Orange Resucked*", written as an introduction to

the first American publication to feature the contentious final chapter, in 1986, Burgess has this to say:

I first published the novella *A Clockwork Orange* in 1962, which ought to be far enough in the past for it to be erased from the world's literary memory. It refuses to be erased, however, however, and for this the film version of the book made by Stanley Kubrick may be held chiefly responsible. I should myself be glad to disown it for various reasons, but this is not permitted. I receive mail from students who try to write theses about it, or requests from Japanese dramaturges to turn it into a sort of Noh play. It seems likely to survive, while other works of mine that I value more bite the dust.... I have to go on living with *A Clockwork Orange*, and this means I have a sort of authorial duty to it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Burgess rather fastidiously uses the word novella to describe the text, in itself a rather deprecatory term, and

wishes he could disown it. This is mere rhetoric, to be sure, but he doesn't use this sort of language about any of his other works. This text had clearly become problematic thanks to the ongoing – and it's still ongoing – furore associated with the film. And whilst it's difficult to believe that someone as ardent a self-publicist as Burgess did not welcome the attention, the uncomfortable fact remains that this was a brief piece, produced quickly with the hope of catching a particular wave of interest, and which was not, in the author's estimation, a worthy piece of work. Later, in his introduction to his own stage adaptation, he refers to it as “my nasty little shocker” and “my little book”.^{iv} In the introduction to *1985*, Burgess again disparages his own achievement, describing *A Clockwork Orange* as “not very good” and “too didactic, too linguistically exhibitionist”.^v

Whether the film version can bear the weight of critical scrutiny is one matter, but evidently Burgess felt that the novel could not. Perhaps the heart of the matter is the fact

that *A Clockwork Orange* achieved its status via Kubrick rather than Burgess. As Burgess said in an interview, “I don’t like being beholden to a mere film maker. I want to prevail through pure literature. Impossible of course”^{vi}

If we judge *A Clockwork Orange* as “pure literature”, then it could be argued that it has certain failings. To begin with the ending, which is the most problematic area. The dispute about the status of the last chapter is instructive. Burgess maintained at several points that it was the decision of the American publisher to excise the short final chapter, but, as a version of the manuscript held here at the IABF suggests, it may well have been a case of Burgess having second thoughts, and deciding that the chilling irony of “I was cured all right” was a better ending than what the American publishers referred to as the “Pollyanna ending”^{vii} in which Alex looks forward to a “tomorrow of like sweet flowers”. This will apparently ensue because he has achieved maturity, in a blinding flash of recognition when he meets

his reformed former droog, Pete, now a respectable man in a suit with a job in a state insurance company and a wife. After the *Sturm und Drang* of the preceding narrative, this episode strikes most readers as rather flat, and contradicts the thrust of what has gone before. Burgess's marginal note in the manuscript, "Should we end here? An optional 'epilogue' follows" captures the tentativeness with which he presented the final section. And surely, the American publisher was right. The twenty-first chapter, which restores what Burgess calls the arithmological structure, with 21 symbolising the age of maturity – though Alex is, of course, as he states in that final chapter, only 18.

Burgess suggested that the two versions of the novel might be characterised as a British Pelagian version, where the possibility of redemption, and an Augustinian American version, where unregenerable evil was the dominant note. As he puts it in "*A Clockwork Orange Resucked*",

My book was Kennedyan and accepted the notion of moral progress. What was really wanted was a Nixonian book with no shred of optimism in it. Let us have evil prancing on the page, and up to the very last line, sneering in the face of all the inherited beliefs, Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Holy Roller, about people being able to make themselves better^{viii}.

“A Clockwork Orange Resucked” is an extended plea for the supremacy of the Pelagian belief in the exercise of free will over the Augustinian view of original sin. The position of free will is central to the novel, in a way not seen in the film, The novel and the film most noticeably diverge in this crucial emphasis, an emphasis somewhat improbably philosophised upon by Alex in an early passage:

But, brothers, this biting of their toe-nails over what is the *cause* of badness is what turns me into a fine laughing malchick. They don't go into the cause of

goodness, so why the other shop? If lewdies are good that's because they like it, and I wouldn't ever interfere with their pleasures, and so of the other shop. And I was patronising the other shop. More, badness is of the self, the one, the you and me on our own oddy knockies, and that self is made by the old Bog or God and is his great pride and radosty. But the not-self cannot have the bad, meaning they of the government and the judges and the schools cannot allow the bad because they cannot allow the self.^{ix}

Alex's musings, delivered after a visit from his "Post-Corrective Adviser", are at the centre of the novel's concern with the nature of human will. It is difficult to reconcile the cocky Alex of the early sections with the soft-centred Alex of chapter 21.

I would argue that the debate over free will is better handled elsewhere. Burgess's other dystopian novel of this period,

The Wanting Seed, examines the same dilemma, and explicitly uses the debate between Pelagian and Augustinian world views to characterise the response of society to the question. In the terms used in the earlier novel, Alex's world is one in the Gusphase, where the repressive government of the day seeks to wipe out crime by the use of the social conditioning programme known as Ludovico's technique. In *The Wanting Seed*, the debate between the Augustinian and Pelagian is played out against a backdrop even more darkly dystopian than that of *A Clockwork Orange*. I would argue that the portrait of Tristram Foxe and Beatrice-Joanna dramatises the dilemma of free will much more convincingly than the rather cartoonish black and white world of *A Clockwork Orange*. One early critic of Burgess, Robert Morris, made a case for the moral didacticism of both novels:

However arbitrary the premises of these novels [*A Clockwork Orange* and *The Wanting Seed*], however suspect

their “political science,” their speculations on freedom and free will are frighteningly pertinent. Violently opposing the sterile, mechanical life under totalitarianism, they point no less to the degeneration under anarchy and, further, offer no viable alternative. Freedom stifled is no less opprobrious than freedom unlicensed, but the middle ground- what every liberal imagines is the just and workable compromise- is accounted equally suspect.^x

Morris continues to make a strong case for the didactic power of *A Clockwork Orange*, though his analysis depends to some extent on a reading of the American version of the text. In Morris’s view, that ending of the novel is ambiguous: Burgess has left us with a world “turned clockwork” ^{xi}in

which “love must come from hate, good from evil, peace from violence and redemption from sin.”. This approach, which, whilst accepting that Burgess is not “a prescriptive writer” nevertheless attributes a didactic view of the work. Burgess, of course, asserts that only with the sentimental ending restored is the didactic message complete. In Burgess’s original ending, it is free will which triumphs, whereas, in the American and film version, Alex's state remains the result of his conditioning.

The central debate of *A Clockwork Orange* is revisited throughout Burgess’s writing career, and it is arguably in *Earthly Powers* that it achieves its most complete and subtle expression. Both *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Wanting Seed* dramatise the debate within a schematic framework, with characters who operate as much as embodiments of the different philosophies as realistic figures. *Earthly Powers*, on the other hand, is set in a very carefully constructed version

of the contemporary and recently historical world and uses realistic characters whose attributes are such that the dialectic is played out within their interwoven lives, particularly of course, Kenneth Toomey and Campanati. It is, perhaps, unfair to compare the complexities of an epic, six hundred and fifty page novel, with the 120 page “squib” as Burgess called it, of *A Clockwork Orange*. But nevertheless, it is a significant aspect of Burgess scholarship that this brief novella has attracted the vast majority of criticism of Burgess, and is always the text that is most associated with him. My colleague Dr Biswell will shortly publish a new critical edition, to go with the others – the Norton is a hefty 350 + pages, of which a third is the actual text, in an unintended echo of Burgess’s tripartite plan. As yet, we have no scholarly editions of some of the great work of Burgess’s mature years.

Somewhere in the IABF, there is a film treatment by Burgess of *A Clockwork Orange* in which the material is presented in

a much more straightforward way than the familiar Kubrick film. And in Burgess's evocative recorded readings of *A Clockwork Orange*, where he emphasises his northern accent, it seems to me that the text retains more of its power than it does in the Kubrick version. And maybe it's a shame that Mick and Keef and the rest of the Stones didn't get in ahead of Mr Kubrick to produce a film that would have been more faithful to the spirit of the times in which it was written. It would be a footnote to their career, just as *A Hard Day's Night* is to that of the Beatles. And then, there would be no Kubrick film, and we probably wouldn't be here discussing the novel on which it was based.

ⁱ "Juice from *A Clockwork Orange*, *Rolling Stone* 110, June 8 1972, p.52-53, repr in Norton critical ed p.143.

ⁱⁱ Biswell, p. 258

ⁱⁱⁱ Norton ed. p. 166

^{iv} Norton ed, p.172

^v Norton ed. 161

^{vi} Norton 157

^{vii} Norton 203

^{viii} Norton 168

^{ix} Norton p.29

^x Morris (1971) p.58-59.

^{xi} Morris, (1971) p.74