

Introduction: 50 years of A Clockwork Orange (1971)

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50 years of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)

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This special issue of the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* is timed to commemorate 50 years of Stanley Kubrick's 1971 adaptation of Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). In the 50 years since its release, the film has become a cultural phenomenon that has been adopted and adapted by musicians and artists from David Bowie to Blur and The Fall (to name but a few), with homages across film and television (memorably in *The Simpsons*' episode 'Treehouse of Horror XXV' (2014), in a segment titled 'A Clockwork Yellow'). It is also testament to the endurance of Kubrick's film that it remains also a focus of critical study. This publication hopes to reveal and illustrate some of the most recent historical research around the film, considering its cultural position, legacy, marketing strategies, production and more.

Much has already been written about *A Clockwork Orange* (and about the work of Stanley Kubrick more generally). For much of its fifty-year lifespan, scholarly attention has primarily focused on the film's textual properties and its reception. But with the opening of the Stanley Kubrick Archive (SKA), housed at the University of the Arts London, scholars within Kubrick Studies (and beyond) have begun to uncover new perspectives about its development, production, promotion, reception, and ongoing legacy.¹ Indeed, the SKA has presented scholars with a wealth of new material with which to reconsider and to understand anew one of Kubrick's most controversial films. Kubrick's involvement in all aspects of production is evident, with material ranging from the earliest phases of development to ideas for commercial exploitation.

The continual and ongoing critical research and interest into *A Clockwork Orange* is reflected in the fact that its archival material is among the most accessed in the SKA. Requests for material from this film outnumber requests for all Kubrick's early films combined. Material is accessed not only by Kubrick researchers but also by undergraduate and post graduate fine arts students employing its design files in their own practice-based work. In contrast to the archival series for other films, the largest section of material relating to *A Clockwork Orange* is that relating to the critical response to the film. Kubrick kept and filed hundreds of press cuttings (far more than for any of his other films) and the archive has retained the titles and arrangement he assigned them: 'Hostile - UK'; 'Violence - UK'; 'Aversion Therapy UK/USA.'¹ That he kept so many reviews and filed them in such detail suggests that Kubrick was unusually preoccupied with the publicity generated by the film.

¹ Exploitation and Publicity files, SK/13/6/29, Stanley Kubrick Archive, University of the Arts London (SKA)

Notes on Contributors

There have also been multiple academic outputs and conferences concerning *A Clockwork Orange*, including the forthcoming (at the time of writing) edited collection *Anthony Burgess, Stanley Kubrick and A Clockwork Orange* (Palgrave Macmillan). That collection engages with the combined authorship of both Burgess and Kubrick and, alongside this journal issue (the two are in some ways companion pieces as well as independent studies), emerged out of the international conference *A Clockwork Symposium: A Clockwork Orange, New Perspectives*, hosted by the University of the Arts London in November 2018 in collaboration with Kingston University and with the assistance of the International Anthony Burgess Foundation (Manchester). Although emerging out of the same event, the two publications take two very different approaches to understanding the film. Whereas the Palgrave collection focuses on the dual authorship of Burgess and Kubrick (commemorating not only 50 years of the film, but 60 years of the novel), the articles in this special issue focus on the film, its paratexts (in this we include Burgess's stage musical, which sardonically references Kubrick and its film in its staging), its influences and more.

The criterion for this journal is, of course, that all the contributions must be a) driven by archival research and b) that the research be situated within a historical (rather than a textual) framework. Given that the journal was produced during the COVID 19 pandemic of

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2020-21 it has not been possible for all contributors to have accessed the UK archives of Kubrick and Burgess as originally envisaged, especially those contributors based outside of the UK. Many archives remained closed to external researchers for many months and are only now, in late 2021, beginning to open their doors to researchers once more, and even then, in a limited capacity. The SKA, for example, only allowed one researcher into the reading room up to mid-autumn 2021. Nevertheless, where possible the articles intersect directly with a body of archival research carried out primarily at SKA.

A Clockwork Orange was released in the USA in December 1971 and in the UK in January 1972. In the UK, the film was shown in cinemas for over a year until Kubrick withdrew the film on account of alleged personal threats to the safety of his family. It was received with praise and admiration from critics – especially Kubrick’s champion the evening standard film critic Alexander Walker who maintained its strength lay both in its stylisation and the way it held a mirror to society. It was, however, received less warmly by local councils under pressure from right wing Christian groups like the Nationwide Festival of Light and campaigners like Mary Whitehouse who were horrified by its violence and transgression. Anthony Burgess himself had initially supported the film, but as time went on his attitude changed dramatically especially after Kubrick’s withdrawal of the film in the wake of a spate of copycat violence and alleged threats to the safety of his own family. Part of Burgess’s contention was that it had been left to him and Malcom McDowell who were contractually obliged to publicise the film in TV interviews to defend the film and with it his own novel. This is a situation that Manca Perko deals with in her article ‘Marketing A Clockwork Orange’.²

With reference to Kubrick’s withdrawal of the film, Peter Krämer has previously dispelled the myth that the film’s distribution and time in cinemas was cut short, and that in fact it had a more than average stay in theatres and would have come naturally to the end of

its run had Kubrick not pulled the film himself. The film's graphic depiction of violence and rape led to accusations within the British and American press, and by conservative religious groups, that it was inspiring gangs of youths to imitate the on-screen assaults. Indeed, the controversy and reaction to *A Clockwork Orange* since its release has been the key focus of academic research, from Charles Barr's and Robert Kolker's initial critical interventions in support of the film in the early 1970s through to Julian Petley's and Peter Krämer's re-assessment of the media hyperbole decades later.³ Still, *A Clockwork Orange*'s reputation as violent, dangerous and controversial precedes it, furthered in the UK by the film's unavailability to audiences for nearly thirty-years. It was only in 2000, the year after Kubrick's death that the film was given a theatrical re-release. Since then, it has had numerous releases on home distribution and has been released again twice between 2019 and 2021 (one by the British Film Institute and in 2021 with a new 4k digital transfer).

This special issue will not just focus on the reaction to, and media hype surrounding, *A Clockwork Orange* given the extent of scholarly research that already exists on this issue. Instead, we argue that it is also important to understand *A Clockwork Orange*'s place within Kubrick's canon of work, its relationship to wider film culture, and the scholarly potential offered by the abundance of archival material available in the SKA. Released in the wake of Kubrick's science fiction epic *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *A Clockwork Orange* is noticeable for three key reasons: the speed of the production, which was remarkably swift (just under a year) by Kubrick's standards – *2001* had taken the better part of four years; the fact it is Kubrick's discernibly British film (alongside *Barry Lyndon* [1975]); and its use of location shooting, with Kubrick not making use of the studio environment, something that was rare for him given the many uncontrollable variables of filming outdoors. Yet despite the low-budget, location shooting nature of the production – or arguably because of it – pre-production material in the SKA shows *A Clockwork Orange* to have been a meticulously

prepared film (as were all of Kubrick's films) with hundreds of location research photographs, cast notes, and design research. As Matthew Melia, co-editor of this special issue, has previously argued, *A Clockwork Orange* was Kubrick's most design-led film.⁴

The articles in this special issue all make use of historical and archival approaches, primarily drawing upon the SKA or the International Anthony Burgess Foundation. Matthew Melia's article considers *A Clockwork Orange*'s position amid a milieu of controversial and transgressive British cinema in the early 1970s and focuses on the hitherto unrecorded overlaps with Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971). These two films have become standard bearers for the cultural shift reflected in British film at the end of the 1960s, towards a more nihilistic tenor of film making apposite to the beginning of that decade and the fallout of the utopianism of the previous one. The article draws on a set of archival evidence from the SKA, the British Board of Film Classification and at the British film institute in order to illustrate the historical interplay between these text and to demonstrate Kubrick's awareness of Russell's film and considers how the interplay between the two films is mediated by the conflicting reception given to them by leading contemporary British film critic, Alexander Walker.

James Fenwick's article makes extensive use of production documents in the SKA to consider the working conditions of below-the-workers on *A Clockwork Orange*. Taking a production studies approach, Fenwick argues that the SKA presents the opportunity to deconstruct the authorial myth that Kubrick and his team instigated, and which side-lined all other media labourers. Fenwick builds on previous research that aims to overcome the myths of Kubrick through systematic empirical research.⁵ Framing *A Clockwork Orange* as a media object that required the labour of a vast network of technicians, administrators, creative talent, executives, publicists, archivists, and manual labourers in order for it to be successfully produced, distributed, exhibited, and preserved, Fenwick argues that archival

research can restore hidden, overlooked, or marginalised figures and workers to the history of the film's production.

Manca Perko explores the mythology of the media hype surrounding the release and impact of *A Clockwork Orange* in the 1970s, suggesting that the producers and distributors of the film knowingly played upon and drew upon the film's controversial reception as part of a wider publicity campaign. Utilising a range of archival sources from the SKA, Perko argues that Kubrick and Warner Bros. were complicit, and potential even exacerbated or encouraged, media overreaction to the film, which focused on 'copycat crimes' and the apparent ways in which *A Clockwork Orange* was leading to gangs of youth imitating its scenes of violence. Indeed, correspondence and publicity strategy documents indicate how Kubrick and Warner Bros. did not originally perceive the adverse media reaction to the film as being unwelcome, but rather anticipated that it would drive up audience interest in the film and, as a consequence, box office profits. Yet, neither Kubrick nor Warner Bros. anticipated how the media reaction would spiral out of their control, leading to direction speculation in the press about how the film had impacted on the minds of criminals in the USA and UK and even influenced potential murders.

Vincent Jaunas explores the inherent fascist aesthetics within *A Clockwork Orange*. Through a combination of archival research, again drawing upon sources in the SKA, and textual analysis. Jaunas disputes the long-held belief that Kubrick was fascinated by fascism due to his biographical background (Kubrick was of Eastern European Jewish ancestry, while his wife, Christiane Harlan, and brother-in-law and executive producer, Jan Harlan, were the niece and nephew of Veit Harlan, an anti-Semitic filmmaker in Nazi Germany, appointed by Joseph Goebbels as a leading director of propaganda films in 1937), but rather had a prevailing intellectual concern with propaganda in all its forms, a fascination that transcended any one political ideology. Kubrick's films persistently explored themes of authority and

bureaucratic control, from *Paths of Glory* (1957) through to *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). Jaunas draws upon fascinating archival material to prove this point, including Kubrick's annotated copy of Hannah Arendt's *Crises of the Republic* (1972), noting how he highlighted passages in which the author argued the Vietnam War was an explicit act of American propaganda.

Jean-Francois Baillon's article considers the wider legacy of both *A Clockwork Orange* and the Kubrickian aesthetic on contemporary cinema. Baillon argues that the legacy of *A Clockwork Orange* is contested and that it is frequently referred to by film critics when wanting to make comparisons between films that present graphic scenes of violence or sexual assault. Through analysis of contemporary film reviews, Baillon examines how two prominent filmmakers of the twenty-first century, Thomas Clay and Nicholas Winding Refn, have been compared to Kubrick, specifically to *A Clockwork Orange*. Focusing on Clay's *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* (2005) and Refn's *Bronson* (2009), Baillon shows how the media reaction that surrounded *A Clockwork Orange* in the 1970s initiated a decades-long critical discourse that is frequently revisited with the release of films that are perceived to present gratuitous scenes of rape and violence. In this respect, it is possible to argue that the legacy of *A Clockwork Orange* is in how it has shaped, informed, and skewed media debates about violence in film.

Lawrence Ratna's article considers *A Clockwork Orange* through the prism of the history of psychology and the UK Mental Health Act of 1959. Drawing on this archival source, Ratna explores how the origins of *A Clockwork Orange*, both the novel and book, are rooted in the developments of psychology in the UK and the attitudes towards mental health. Focusing on the idea that the story is about low-functioning psychopaths (Alex and his *droogs*) and high-functioning psychopaths (the various political and authority figures in the story), Ratna argues that Kubrick's film was an exploration of the insanity defence and the concept of freewill.

Mateja Đedović's article considers both Kubrick's film and Burgess's novel against the backdrop of Yugoslavian dissidentism from the 1970s through into the 1980s. Đedović offers a cultural survey of a range of films and other cultural texts stemming from this place and time and considers how *A Clockwork Orange* as a cultural phenomenon filtered through into the anti-authoritarian zeitgeist which emerged as a response to Tito's totalitarian dictatorship. Đedović examines the culture and history of dissidentism in Yugoslavia and maps it according to both Burgess and Kubrick's thematic and aesthetic approaches.

Will Carr, Deputy Director of the International Anthony Burgess Foundation in Manchester, utilises archival notes, typescripts of plays, draft manuscripts, and correspondence from the Burgess archive to trace the stage play adaptations of Burgess's novel and the lasting impact that Kubrick's film had on these theatrical adaptations. Focusing on John Godber's *A Clockwork Orange* (1976) and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange: A Play with Music* (1987), and the Royal Shakespeare Company's *A Clockwork Orange 2004* (1990) (which featured music composed by U2's Bono and The Edge), Carr explores the history of the staging of these plays, their relationship to Burgess's novel and Kubrick's film, and the popularity of stage performances of *A Clockwork Orange*. Carr's archival research and textual analysis of the plays demonstrates how the central intellectual concerns of *A Clockwork Orange* have persistently reworked and updated for contemporary audiences yet remain universal in their exploration of the human condition.

Of course, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the controversial depiction of rape in Kubrick's film, particularly given the wider contexts (post-#metoo) in which the film now exists. *A Clockwork Orange*, along with much of Kubrick's work, is being re-evaluated through the prisms of race, gender, and sexuality, while archival research is being uncovered that does question the power dynamics at play on Kubrick's films. James Fenwick, for example, has raised questions around Kubrick's casting of women, while issues of the

representation of race have been the focus of a recent series of seminars convened by Joy McEntee.⁶ However, the influence, legacy, and ongoing cult appeal of *A Clockwork Orange* is undeniable. It is a unique media object that continues to resonate and provoke and no doubt will do so for another fifty years to come.

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James Fenwick is senior lecturer in the Department of Media Arts and Communication at Sheffield Hallam University and author of *Stanley Kubrick Produces* (2020).

Notes

¹ See the previous Kubrick special issue in this journal, James Fenwick and Elisa Pezzotta, 'The Stanley Kubrick Archive: A Dossier of New Research', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 37, no. 3 (2017): 367-372. See also James Fenwick and Elisa Pezzotta, 'Stanley Kubrick: A Retrospective', *Cinergie* no. 12 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2280-9481/7341>.

² Filippo Ulivieri also considers the Kubrick / Burgess relationship in detail in *Anthony Burgess, Stanley Kubrick and a Clockwork Orange*, eds. Matthew Melia and Georgina Orgill (London: Palgrave MacMillan, forthcoming 2022).

³ Charles Barr, 'Straw Dogs, *A Clockwork Orange* and the Critics', *Screen* 13, no. 2 (1972): 17-32; Robert P. Kolker, 'Oranges, Dogs and Ultraviolence', *Journal of Popular Film* 1, no. 3 (1972): 159-172; Julian Petley, 'Clockwork Crimes: Chronicle of a *cause célèbre*', *Index on Censorship* 24, no. 6 (1995): 48-52.

⁴ Matthew Melia, 'Kubrick and British Cinema' in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Stanley Kubrick*, ed. Nathan Abrams (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 55-64.

⁵ See James Fenwick, 'The Problems with Kubrick: Reframing Stanley Kubrick through Archival Research', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, forthcoming; James Fenwick, *Stanley Kubrick Produces* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020); James Fenwick, 'The Exploitation of Sue Lyon: *Lolita* (1962), Archival Research, and Questions for Film History', *Feminist Media Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1996422>; and Catriona McAvoy, 'Creating The Shining: Looking Beyond the Myths', in *Stanley Kubrick New Perspectives*, edited by Tatjana Ljujic, Peter Krämer, and Richard Daniels (London: Blackdog Publishing, 2015).

⁶ See James Fenwick, 'Kubrick, Women's Bodies, and Casting in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971): Questions for Film History Research', BAFTSS annual conference, 7 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2nkB_C78E; Joy McEntee, 'Kubrick and Race', 6-20 September 2021, online seminar series.

Notes on Editors

Matthew Melia is a senior lecturer in film, media and literature at Kingston University. He is editor of *ReFocus: The Films of Ken Russell* (EUP – forthcoming 2022); and co-editor of *Anthony Burgess, Stanley Kubrick and A Clockwork Orange* (Palgrave – forthcoming 2022) and *The Jaws Book: New Perspectives on the Classic Summer Blockbuster* (Bloomsbury, 2022). He is currently working on a monograph of Ken Russell's film *Gothic* (1986) for Liverpool University Press/Auteur (Devils Advocates series) and planning a production history of *A Clockwork Orange*.

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