

‘Movies that make people sick’: Audience Responses to Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* in 1971/72

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Abstract

Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) was a big commercial and critical hit in the US and also the focus of a major controversy. Many of the film’s detractors were worried about the possibility that it could stimulate violent behaviour in the audience. This essay explores the actual responses of viewers to *A Clockwork Orange*, drawing on letters that cinemagoers wrote to Kubrick soon after the film’s release. It outlines the expectations they brought to the film, the cultural context in which they encountered it, and the viewing strategies they employed to make sense of, and to take pleasure in, the film. It also raises questions about gender specific responses.

Key words: Controversies, audience research, *A Clockwork Orange*

In December 1971, only a few days after the release of *A Clockwork Orange*, the film’s writer, director and producer Stanley Kubrick received a letter from a disappointed Californian cinemagoer, demanding the return of the money he had spent on his ticket with the following explanation: ‘I felt like the main character in the movie when I left the theatre. Stanley, do you think it’s cool to go around and make movies that make people sick? I mean, people are sick enough without you adding to general misery.’¹ As is well known, the correspondent’s sentiments were shared by many commentators in the early 1970s. While *A Clockwork Orange* became a major box office hit in the US and won many critical accolades, it also encountered a lot of criticism for its explicit depiction of violence and sex and for what was perceived to be at best the absence of a moral framework for these depictions, and at worst a celebration of the film’s amoral protagonist (cp. Staiger 2003 and Krämer 2011, pp. 31-3, 87-108). Criticisms of the film often implied, or stated explicitly, that the film could have a negative impact on its viewers. Whereas, according to their statements, the critics themselves were merely shocked or disgusted, they suggested that other viewers might well be influenced more severely, perhaps even seeing it as an invitation to indulge in fantasies or actual behaviour modelled on the film (Krämer 2011, pp.

30-3, 97). In the UK, such criticisms led to accusations that *A Clockwork Orange* inspired a series of copycat crimes (pp. 100-107).

Fears and public debates about the negative influence of films on their audiences, in particular about the possibility that violent films might stimulate violent behaviour in viewers, have a long and on-going history (on the beginnings of these debates in the early 1900s, see Grieveson 2004), as has the academic study of so-called 'media effects', much of which tries to measure changes in people's attitudes and behaviour after exposure to violent entertainment (cp. Grieveson 2008 on the early twentieth century origins of such work and Potter 1999 for a recent overview). At the same time, the assumptions and methodologies of the academic media effects tradition have been the target of long-standing critiques (cp. Barker and Petley 1997 and Butsch 2008), and public debates about such (presumed) effects, including the controversies surrounding individual films, have themselves been the subject of critical analyses (sometimes under the rubric 'moral panics', e.g. Biltereyst 2005). Furthermore, especially in recent years, there have been a few qualitative studies (usually set up in opposition to media effects research) investigating how people engage with violent films (e.g. Hill 1997 as well as Barker and Brooks 1998). In their book *The Crash Controversy: Censorship Campaigns and Film Reception*, Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs and Ramaswami Harindranath have integrated the analysis of the public debate about David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) in the UK with qualitative audience research and a strong challenge to the media effects tradition (Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath 2001). Among other questions, they asked about the cultural, social and political context in which the controversy surrounding the film arose, how this controversy helped shape viewers' expectations about the film, and '[w]hat different viewing strategies among ordinary viewers went along with liking and approving of the film, and disliking and disapproving of it' (p. 9).

In this essay, I want to pose similar questions about the people who saw *A Clockwork Orange* in 1971/72, drawing on the letters that Kubrick received from cinemagoers at that time. These letters are accessible at the Stanley Kubrick Archive at the University of the Arts London, and I have previously made use of them for a study of audience responses to *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). While the number of letters sent to Kubrick after the release of *A Clockwork Orange* is nowhere near the many dozens he received about *2001*, the *Clockwork Orange* letters nevertheless indicate a range of responses to this controversial film. It is important to note at the outset that the story, dialogue and imagery of *A Clockwork Orange* foreground, and comment on, the very act of viewing violence and its impact on spectators. This self-reflexive dimension raises the possibility that audience members may be more inclined than they would otherwise be to reflect on their own responses to, and their viewing strategies vis a vis, *A Clockwork Orange*. Indeed, for better or for worse, correspondents – such as the one quoted earlier – stated explicitly that in some respects the film had made them 'feel like' its protagonist. Alex DeLarge is an extremely violent young

criminal who, while in prison, volunteers for a new treatment, an aversion therapy which combines the screening of violent films with the injection of drugs. After the treatment Alex is unable even to contemplate violent acts (or sex or his favourite music, Beethoven's ninth symphony) without getting violently sick. Kubrick's Californian correspondent appears to say that he left the theatre feeling as sick as Alex does after he has seen violent films during his treatment. This would imply that *A Clockwork Orange* is in itself part of an aversion therapy against violent thoughts and behaviour for the audience, which one might consider to be a good thing - although the correspondent obviously does not see it this way.

As I will show, other correspondents wrote about sharing different aspects of Alex's experience during the film, notably his enjoyment of violence, but also his being abused and humiliated in front of an uncaring audience after the completion of his treatment. There was also widespread agreement among letter writers that the society depicted in the movie was not that far removed from the world that they knew, a world characterised by an abundance of misery and sickness. Unlike the Californian correspondent quoted earlier, however, many letter writers stated that being forced by the film to confront their own violent impulses and the problems in the world around them was a productive, rather than a damaging experience.

Before exploring this in more detail, I first of all want to say a little bit about Kubrick's status in the early 1970s, about the marketing of *A Clockwork Orange* (especially the implications of its 'X' rating) and about the kinds of expectations people may have brought to the cinema when buying a ticket for this film. In the second section I then explore the grounds on which correspondents rejected the film, while the third section examines positive responses to *A Clockwork Orange*. I end by discussing in some detail the most thoughtful and complex responses to the film which I have found in the letters sent to Kubrick.

1. Kubrick, *A Clockwork Orange* and the 'X'-Rating

When *A Clockwork Orange* was released in December 1971, Stanley Kubrick was best known as the man behind *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which had initially been released in April 1968 and had stayed in theatres almost continuously ever since, in the process becoming one of the highest grossing movies in American film history while also being regarded as one of the best films of the 1960s (indeed from 1972 onwards, it came to be widely regarded as one of the best films of all time; Krämer 2010, pp. 90-3). From early on the trade press and film critics had emphasised the presence of countercultural youth in the audience, and the film's 70mm re-release in 1970 took a psychedelic approach (featuring a picture of the Star Child with the tagline 'The Ultimate Trip'; Krämer 2010, p. 92). However, *2001* was successful with a cross section of the American population, including many pre-teen children and young teenagers (Krämer 2010 pp. 90-3; Krämer 2009). Indeed, when *2001* was belatedly rated by the Code and Rating Administration it received a 'G' which signalled that it was 'acceptable

for all audiences, without consideration of age' (Steinberg 1980, p. 405); in particular, a 'G' rating indicated that a film was suitable for children.

In sharp contrast, *A Clockwork Orange* was initially rated 'X',² which meant that no-one under 17 should be admitted. Young fans of Kubrick's previous work, who had been looking forward to his latest film, were disappointed. One boy wrote: 'I have been unable to see ... *A Clockwork Orange* due to lack of age. How could you do this to me? I have seen five of your films and loved every one of them.'³ Based on his admiration for *2001*, another boy concluded that *A Clockwork Orange* must be 'a really cool movie', although 'I haven't seen it yet', because he was too young.⁴ A 15-year-old male fan of Kubrick's films complained more generally about 'the illogical way they rate films in this country'.⁵ Yet, there were ways to get around the rating. A 16-year-old male, who had been an 'admirer of yours' ever since he had seen *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), remarked that '[i]t is a shame the film recieved [sic] an X rating; luckily I was admitted' anyway; he concluded that *A Clockwork Orange* was 'one of the finest films ever made'.⁶ Another boy, who wanted to write 'a term paper for English' comparing the film to the 1962 Anthony Burgess novel on which it was based, noted that, despite the fact that 'I am not old enough ... with my parents' help, I was able to see it, even though we traveled [sic] some forty miles to get there. It was great.'⁷

The 'X'-rating was important not only for young viewers who felt unfairly excluded from the experience of the film (and sometimes managed to overcome this obstacle), but also for adults. Some, no doubt, felt dubious about watching 'X'-rated films due to the taboo subject matter they might be dealing with and the graphic depictions of sex and violence they might include (cp. Wyatt 2000). Thus, one man wrote that *A Clockwork Orange* was 'the first "X" rated movie I have ever seen', noting that nudity was 'used artistically and creatively' in it, quite unlike what happened in the R-rated drama *The Last Picture Show*, which he described as being a 'disgusting' 'perversion', like a 'stag film'.⁸ In addition, some adults were concerned about movie ratings more generally. One woman wrote: 'I ... have bad feelings about the X rating [for *A Clockwork Orange*], or any of our "ratings" for that matter.'⁹ In particular there were strong objections to the policy of many newspapers not to carry advertisements for 'X'-rated films, which, several correspondents felt, was tantamount to censorship insofar as a film that could not be advertised in newspapers might not find an audience (cp. Krämer 2011, pp. 94-6). In this context, watching *A Clockwork Orange* meant defending free speech. Thus, one woman told Kubrick: 'Even if I didn't intend to see *A Clockwork Orange*, I'd go to see it now that the [Cleveland] P[lain] D[ealer] has banned it'.¹⁰

Both juvenile and adult correspondents, then, rejected the 'X'-rating for *A Clockwork Orange*, even before they had seen the film. Their concern for free speech and their interest in the latest film of one of the most highly regarded American filmmakers overrode any concerns they might have had about the kinds of material usually presented in 'X'-rated films. Several teenagers who were nominally excluded from screenings of the film got

around this barrier, sometimes with their parents' help. This was possible, one may conclude from these letters, because Kubrick's name raised high expectations about the film's quality and the weightiness of its themes; unlike other 'X'-rated films, therefore, *A Clockwork Orange* was best approached with seriousness and the willingness to confront artistic and intellectual challenges. However, irrespective of their expectations, some correspondents appeared to experience *A Clockwork Orange* as just another 'X'-rated movie, or indeed as a particularly extreme example of the type. For them the 'X'-rating was not enough, and they wanted the film to be withdrawn altogether. One woman informed Kubrick that, on behalf of the Junior Woman's Club of Allegheny Valley, she was sending letters to theatre managers in the area: 'As an organization of interested citizens and parents, we are expressing our opposition to and disgust with the motion picture *A Clockwork Orange*. ... we are asking that you not show this film in your theater.'¹¹ So why did some people object to the film so strongly?

2. Rejection

A letter from a Methodist minister indicates how various factors might come together to make watching the film an all too disturbing experience. It notes the high expectations he had for *A Clockwork Orange* after having seen 'your classic' previous film.¹² As I have argued elsewhere, despite its formal and thematic challenges, *2001* was widely perceived as an extension of, rather than as a break with, Hollywood's traditional blockbuster entertainment (Krämer 2010, pp. 33-40, 86-90; Krämer 2009). By contrast, the minister notes, the story and imagery of *A Clockwork Orange* put him 'in a mild state of shock'. While watching the film, he waited for 'some moral justification' for what he was seeing, some lesson that might be learnt from it, but '[t]he satirical end wiped out any semblance of that'. This was, in his view, not only a problem for this particular film, but for American cinema in general: 'Hollywood has capitulated to the utter obscene, violent, and morally bankrupt type of fare'. In other words, he felt that traditional Hollywood entertainment had been displaced by a new kind of cinematic experience, which is not an unreasonable claim because in the years since 1967 many of Hollywood's most commercially and critically successful films had been characterised by the breaking of long-standing taboos (Krämer 2005, Chs. 1-2). For this correspondent, changes in film culture in turn were both an expression of, and an addition to, the general moral decline of American society. The minister concluded by criticising Kubrick for 'the remarkable contribution you are making to the moral degradation of our society'.

A letter from a woman writing on behalf of a group of six friends in their twenties who had seen the film together also linked the expression of personal dissatisfaction with this particular cinematic experience to comments on the perceived general decline of American film culture.¹³ She noted that the film was 'miserable and repulsive', not only because of the presence of violent actions and imagery, but because she and her friends could not see any valid point that the film might be making through them: 'The brutality is just terrible with no

sense to it.’ She also noted that the film was praised by critics, ‘who must be really perverted people’ and, like Kubrick, were at odds with the majority of Americans for whom the writer claimed to speak, a majority which, unfortunately, did not complain often enough: ‘Americans do not really want the cheap trash you are feeding us. Most people are just to [sic] busy to complain.’

It is interesting to note that these letters are concerned more about violence than about sex, and they are *not* fixated on filmic actions and imagery in their own right, but discuss them in relation to the narrative framework within which such actions and imagery are presented. They complain that this framework fails to make sense of the violence, to draw any lesson from it, which in turn could justify showing violence in the first place. It is also worth emphasising that such responses to *A Clockwork Orange* were informed by a general sense of alienation, whereby correspondents who saw themselves as representative of the American mainstream felt that they were at odds with Hollywood, film critics and cinema managers, that the latter were no longer catering to them or even caring much about what they might feel or say. Once again, this is not an unfounded perception; audience surveys did indeed indicate that in the late 1960s and early 1970s Hollywood’s output was out of touch with the film preferences, values and expectations of large segments of the American population (Krämer 2005, pp. 80-82). Hence the rejection of the film by certain correspondents, and also by many professional media commentators, needs to be understood in the context of rapid changes in American cinema during the late 1960s and early 1970s; these in turn were connected to broader changes in American culture, politics and society which, many people felt, had left them behind (cp. Krämer 2005, Ch. 3). But, as I have said, among the letters Kubrick received, negative responses were a minority. What did the majority who liked the film have to say, then?

3. Embrace

There are only two letters in the Kubrick archive which could be seen to confirm the worries of the film’s detractors about the moral degradation that *A Clockwork Orange* might be expressive of, or contributing to. A male correspondent from London writes: ‘I get awfully horny about the girl who plays in the rape scene Can you please give me her address?’ Here one might be worried about the fact that a viewer was apparently sexually aroused by a fictional rape, so much so that he is now trying to establish a real-life connection with the film’s rape victim. Conceivably, he might intend to restage the filmic rape for real, or perhaps he merely imagines consensual sex with the actress. In any case, it appears unlikely that the correspondent seriously expected to get her address from Kubrick. The letter seems more like a provocation than an attempt to get information.

Similarly, a letter from two male students at Yale plays on the idea that the sexual arousal they experienced during screenings of *A Clockwork Orange* could be extended into their everyday lives. Describing themselves as ‘sex-crazed’, they ask Kubrick about the nude

female sculptures used as furniture in the Korova Milk Bar: 'we could give one of them a good home here in the New Haven Home for the Sexually Perverse.'¹⁴ Once again, one might well worry about how the extreme objectification of women in the film links up with what is going on in university dormitories. Yet it is unclear whether the letter's references to craziness and perversity indicate that the writers recognise what kinds of sexual behaviour are clearly out of bounds, or whether they should be understood as evidence of the acceptability of sexual exploitation, even rape, by certain groups of people such as male students. I am inclined to interpret this letter, just as the one discussed earlier, as verbal grandstanding, a self-conscious and, in this case, intentionally comical attempt to project an Alex-like persona.

Even beyond such play-acting, strong sensual and emotional responses (not just to sexual and violent scenes) play a role in a wide range of letters. Some correspondents merely highlight the fact that they found the film to be aesthetically pleasing. 'The music and prop design were superb', writes one man, while another states: 'The props, costumes, music etc. were great!'¹⁵ Interestingly, whereas the first of these correspondents found the film to be a meaningful experience, the second wrote: 'I hated it'. He was 'really confused', partly because the dialogue was 'hard to follow'; he concluded that since 'I really got lost at the end', '[m]ay be I better see the film again.' The divergence of these two responses had a lot to do with the writers' ability to ascribe a deeper meaning to the film's aesthetic pleasures. For the correspondent enjoying the film it was as 'a beautiful statement of where the world might be going in the future.'

Indeed, for many of the people who experienced *A Clockwork Orange* as meaningful, it served as a kind of warning, a terrifying vision of what the future might hold if people did not change their ways. Thus, one correspondent took away from the film 'an awareness of a future where the only freedoms left were those of violence and barbaric terror.'¹⁶ Such emphasis on the futuristic dimension of the film often went hand in hand with references back to *2001*. For example, a librarian and member of the Great Books Foundation, forwarded a letter to Kubrick which he had originally sent to friends: 'Nine months after Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* we were watching the moon landings. I hope that the timetable for *Clockwork* is not as imminent.'¹⁷ Another correspondent linked *A Clockwork Orange* to both *2001* and *Dr. Strangelove* and encouraged Kubrick to continue his work in the field of 'speculative fiction (science fiction)', because 'education into the future is one of the best insurances that it will be a future the whole human race can live with.'¹⁸ More specifically, one letter writer identified a thematic continuity between Kubrick's last two films: 'This dehumanizing spectra [sic] of mechanization which was hinted at in ... *2001*, has been brought poignantly to the screen in *A Clockwork Orange*.'¹⁹

Rather than concentrating on the projection and prevention of future developments, another group of correspondents saw the primary meaning and value of the film in what it

revealed about the present. For example, a psychology student discussed viewing the film as being like a psychoanalytical therapy session, which can bring '[t]hat dark, morbid, cruel aspect of our unconscious ... out into the open'; here the audience had to trust that Kubrick – like a 'therapist' – 'will be leading us in the right direction' so that they would be enabled better to deal with their unconscious impulses, especially violent ones.²⁰ The student compared the film's therapeutic treatment of the audience with Alex's treatment in the film: 'your film did to us ... what the psychologists did to Alex, except we ... had free-will. We had the choice of leaving or staying, of closing our eyes and ears.' Whereas Alex, once he had agreed to the treatment, was *programmed* to suppress his violent impulses, an audience willingly participating in all that *A Clockwork Orange* had to offer could purge itself of such impulses. And whereas both the film's Ludovico treatment and regular psychoanalysis were applied to individuals, Kubrick's film constituted 'mass psychotherapy', which was 'the most wonderful, creative, even religious use of the media I can think of'. Along similar lines, a recent high school graduate noted that the film had allowed him to realise something about himself and about other people: 'When I left the theatre I was actually aroused by the latent violent instincts within me', thus sharing Alex's 'point of view: *Violence could be fun!*'²¹ By bringing the temptations of violent behaviour to the fore, the film could serve an educational function, and might indeed be used in classes on 'psychology, philosophy, theology, criminology, etc.'²²

Some correspondents reflected critically on the film's very power to make an impression on them, assuming that this critical reflection on the film – and, within the film, on the Ludovico treatment's power to control Alex – was exactly what Kubrick had intended in the first place. One woman, who had 'never been as impressed with a film in my life', wrote: 'I have never enjoyed the feeling of being manipulated but when I walked out of the theatre and realized that you had tampered with my brain real "horrorshow" I had a good laugh and then was frightened.'²³ Rather than objecting to what the film had done to her 'brain', she took the position that it must have been Kubrick's intention for her to become aware of this manipulation and to be able to consider the implications of her being manipulated that easily.

Thus, people could find meaning in the film by exploring the parallels between themselves and Alex, either emphasising the human potential for violence (so vividly acted out by Alex, so strongly aroused in the viewers) or the media's potential for mind control (exemplified both by the Ludovico treatment's impact on Alex and by the film's impact on themselves). Their critical exploration of such parallels was, they assumed, precisely what Kubrick had intended. In other words, it would appear that a productive engagement with *A Clockwork Orange* depended to a certain degree on the letter writer's recognition, and celebration, of Kubrick's status as a highly acclaimed filmmaker, also perhaps on a basic familiarity with some of his previous films. Kubrick's status encouraged viewers to look for deeper meanings in what they often acknowledged was a disturbing film, when, just as easily, they could have

rejected this film altogether. (Indeed, the correspondents rejecting the film also may have recognised Kubrick's status, yet rather than celebrating it, they seem to have perceived Kubrick as a high ranking member of a corrupt and decadent establishment.)

Interestingly, despite this dependence on recognising Kubrick's role as the film's author, what he actually had to say about his intentions for the film in interviews did not necessarily enter into people's engagement with *A Clockwork Orange*. Most notably, Kubrick's many interview statements to the effect that he intended the audience to be confronted with a choice - between letting criminals like Alex run rampant and employing extremely repressive measures such as the Ludovico treatment, between accepting free will even if it led to horrific violence and state-sponsored mind control enforcing 'good' behaviour – were not taken up in these letters.²⁴ Only one letter writer foregrounded the issue of choice: '[*A Clockwork Orange*] confronts its audience, demanding a personal value judgment. The viewer is placed in the center between violence and nonviolence and asked the question: WHICH.'²⁵ It is not clear, however, what this refers to: the state's choice between giving Alex free rein and controlling him, or the ability to make a choice between violent and nonviolent behaviour which Alex recovers at the end of the film. One might go as far as saying that most correspondents did not perceive the film as posing questions; instead they assumed that it was providing answers. Yet, the answers they detected were not the same for everyone. In sharp contrast to the people who wrote to Kubrick about *2001*, expressing their sense of mystery, asking him questions about the film's possible meanings, tentatively offering their own answers (Krämer 2009), in the case of *A Clockwork Orange* Kubrick's correspondents, with few exceptions, perceived no great mystery and felt certain about the meanings they found in the film.

Building on Barker et al's discussion of viewing strategies which allowed for a positive response to *Crash* (cp. Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath 2001, Ch. 5, esp. pp. 90-1), with regards to *A Clockwork Orange* we can tentatively conclude that correspondents who responded positively were willing and able:

- to recognise Kubrick as a great filmmaker which in turn made it possible to approach the film with curiosity and trust;
- to distinguish between the film displaying and endorsing deeply problematic behaviour;
- to allow strong emotional and sensual responses to the film, including responses which may be uncomfortable or even guilt-inducing (such as being aroused by filmic sex and violence);
- to separate one's own vicarious experience of desires and pleasures during the screening from how one perceives oneself in everyday life;
- to reflect on one's sensual and emotional responses to the film so as to draw out their implications for understanding oneself and others;

- to relate to the film simultaneously as an aesthetic object, a story and an intellectual exercise, the latter having to do with an exploration of human psychology and/or a warning about possible future socio-political developments;
- to arrive at some conclusions about what the film has to say about human nature and the future.

Interestingly, in many cases such conclusions were only arrived after what appeared to have been an extended period of reflection, and the answers that some correspondents came up with were of considerable complexity. Let's look at two particularly striking examples.

4. Complexity

The Kubrick archive contains the copy of a letter that had originally been sent to the editor of a newspaper or magazine. The female correspondent had obviously thought about all aspects of the film in some detail, and drawing on her familiarity with interview statements both by Kubrick and by Anthony Burgess she had arrived at the conclusion that 'perhaps Kubrick has inadvertently delivered a valuable message to the public.'²⁶ Whatever Kubrick may have intended, in her view the film itself had this to say: 'we can't stuff sex and violence down kids [sic] throats and not expect a reaction' (referring to the abundance of sexually explicit art and design and the consumption of violent entertainment in the world of the film); 'you can't expect the young to seek high goals if there is no example put before them ... [authority figures] can't expect to get respect if they don't earn it' (referring to the shortcomings of all the adults in the film); 'not all violence is physical or observable ... we must be aware of the various levels and causes of violence if we are to check its spread' (referring to the Ludovico treatment and all it stands for); Alex is 'no worse' than the adults in the film, '[t]he only difference is that his crimes are "visible" whereas the others are committed under the guise of the "do gooder"' (referring to the behaviour of the policemen, social workers, doctors, politicians and activists in the film).

The writer presents these insights in the form of rhetorical questions and admits that her final conclusion may 'stretch a point', but she seems confident when she declares: The film suggests that 'we must bring back God ... into society because the world needs an authority that transcends both adults and children alike', whereby, she argues, God is represented in the film by Beethoven's music. The 'quick solution[s]' of politics and science, represented in the film by the Ludovico treatment, try to remove 'God (Ludwig)' from people's experience, when, in fact, 'Love is the answer – and isn't this what our protesting young have been trying to tell us?' Here she links the social reality of youth protest to the youth gangs in the film, and at the same time re-frames countercultural slogans in religious terms: Like Alex's love for Beethoven's music, young people should love God, and in turn feel his love. In this way, according to this respondent, Kubrick had 'inadvertently' made a deeply religious movie.

An equally complex, yet very different approach was taken by another woman who wrote to Kubrick about her two viewings of *A Clockwork Orange*. She first saw the film at a 'private showing for ... a select audience', which she characterises as 'the intelligentsia'.²⁷ While 'I usually don't like violent movies', in the case of *A Clockwork Orange* the music helped her enjoy the film, and in any case 'I didn't mind the violence because it seemed so much like fantasy that I couldn't be brought into it'. However, during her second viewing of the film, the scene in which Alex, after the completion of the Ludovico treatment, is presented as a reformed individual on a stage to an audience of dignitaries and reporters had unpleasant echoes of the very situation in which she had first seen the film: 'a select audience gathered together to coolly [sic] observe violence and sex and graciously applauded.... They were divorced from the human interplay on the stage, just as I was from the violent interactions of the movie.' The parallels between the film scene and the reality of the viewing situation alerted her to the fact that the film was no 'futuristic' 'fantasy', but had to do with the 'here and now' of her own life, telling her: 'You have been desensitized to humans so terribly that you no longer believe what you see to be real. Other people appear only to be mere objects. Alex did not feel for his victims, but then neither did you.' In other words, this woman was concerned about the fact that it had been all too easy for her to be like Alex and like the audience to whom he is displayed on stage in the film, that is, it was all too easy not to care for the suffering of characters in the film; after all they are not real. Yet, she went further by suspecting that, for whatever reason, it had become commonplace to play down, or doubt, the reality of other people's lives *outside* the cinema, and thus to disregard *real* suffering. As a result of her reflections on viewing *A Clockwork Orange* she hoped to be able to inoculate herself against the dangerous perception that life is 'like a play and other people are merely actors.'

Conclusion

In many different ways, people writing to Kubrick after they had seen *A Clockwork Orange* expressed a deep sense of unease about the world they lived in. For those who rejected the film it was a world where the values, opinions and preferences of a 'silent majority' (to use President Nixon's phrase; Perlstein 2008, pp. 277-8, 433-44) were ignored by a morally compromised establishment, exemplified by Hollywood, whereby this establishment was exerting a degrading influence on everyone else. For those who embraced the film, it was a world filled with various forms of violence, which were likely to become ever more dominant in the future, unless people changed their ways, perhaps on the basis of being educated about themselves and their society by films such as *A Clockwork Orange*.

When comparing these responses with the letters Kubrick received about *2001: A Space Odyssey*, one can observe that in both cases the film's supporters far outnumber its detractors. At the same time, the sense of unease so characteristic of responses to *A Clockwork Orange* contrasts sharply with an overwhelming sense of hope underpinning the letters written by people celebrating *2001*, and even some of the letters from people feeling

ambivalent about it, or rejecting it: hope for a better future, hope for a better understanding of the mysteries of the film (Krämer 2009). It is tempting to map the shift from hope to unease onto a general shift in American society between the late 1960s and the early 1970s. And there is indeed some evidence in opinion polls that during this time Americans did not only become ever more critical about major institutions, but also more pessimistic about where the world was heading (Ladd and Bowman 1998, pp. 28, 31, 44-5). However, the letters that Kubrick received about *2001* in the early 1970s continued to be filled with optimism, which suggests that the films themselves were mainly responsible for the different tone in audience responses to them. *2001* continued to provoke hope, while *A Clockwork Orange* promoted unease.

We also have to take into consideration that, while the people writing to Kubrick about *2001* approximated a cross section of American society, the group of *Clockwork Orange* correspondents was heavily biased towards male youth, and also, possibly, towards highly educated people. This is in line with demographic trends among cinema audiences in general and with a statistical survey of the audience for *A Clockwork Orange* in particular. In the early 1970s, cinema attendance levels were at their lowest point in history, and never before or since has cinemagoing been so strongly dominated by educated, urban youth (Krämer 2005, pp. 59-60). At the same time, the audience for *A Clockwork Orange* was highly educated and dominated by male youth (Gilbert Youth Research 1972). Unlike the marketing of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which did not indicate how challenging the film would be and instead highlighted those aspects of the film that fit in with traditional blockbuster entertainment (Krämer 2010, pp. 32-40, 90-2), the trailer and poster for *A Clockwork Orange* foregrounded stylistic innovation, explicit sexuality, graphic violence and sick humour (Krämer 2011, pp. 88-90, 95). In other words, the marketing of *2001* aimed, and managed, to attract a wide range of people to the cinema, whereas the poster, trailer and 'X'-rating of *A Clockwork Orange* were likely to put off many, if not most people. Hence, the people who were most likely to be offended by *A Clockwork Orange* (in order then to complain about it in letters to Kubrick) were unlikely to attend screenings in the first place, which helps to explain why there were so few negative responses among Kubrick's correspondents. This is supported by an audience survey carried out during the film's initial release, which revealed that only 8.5% of all respondents found the film to be 'poor' or 'very poor', and these were mostly female and older than 29 (Gilbert Youth Research 1972).

One is tempted to conclude that the viewing strategy which allowed audiences to respond positively to *A Clockwork Orange* in 1971/72 was more easily available to educated young males, perhaps because they were more likely than other groups to be familiar with Kubrick's work and to be comfortable with graphic displays of sex and violence.²⁸ However, as noted earlier, the two most complex positive responses to *A Clockwork Orange* among all the letters written to Kubrick came from women. This could indicate that some aspects of the viewing strategy outlined earlier (notably the willingness and ability to allow strong

sensual and emotional responses, and to reflect on these responses so as to learn about oneself and others) were more easily available to women. On the other hand, the sheer complexity of these two women's responses could also be a result of the fact that they had to work so much harder than (young) men to find a way of approving of and liking *A Clockwork Orange*.

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Notes

¹ Letter contained in folder SK/13/8/6/21 at the Stanley Kubrick Archive (SKA), University of the Arts London. The name of the author is known to me but to protect the anonymity of this and other correspondents, I will identify particular letters with reference to their date and the correspondents' home town; here 28 December 1971, Mill Valley, California. The year is missing from the date given on the letter, but the high ticket price of \$3 mentioned in it (when the average ticket price in 1971 was \$1.65; Finler 2003, p. 379) suggests that the letter writer had gone to an early, more expensive screening rather to a screening a year into the film's release.

² After only very minimal changes had been made, the film's rating was changed to 'R' on 22 August 1972. The Code and Rating Administration certificate for the new rating is contained in folder SK/13/8/5/10, SKA.

³ Undated letter, Olympia, Washington, SK/13/8/6/52, SKA.

⁴ Letter dated 20 August 1972, Sutherlin, Oregon, SK/13/8/6, SKA.

⁵ Undated letter, Upper Montclair, New Jersey, SK/13/8/6, SKA.

⁶ Letter dated 6 January 1972, Cranford, New Jersey, SK/13/8/6/20, SKA.

⁷ Letter dated 28 August 1972, Spartanburg, South Carolina, SK/13/8/6/69, SKA.

⁸ Undated letter, San Jose, SK/13/8/6/64, SKA.

⁹ Letter dated 26 April 1972, Atlanta, SK/13/8/6/4, SKA.

¹⁰ Letter dated 22 April 1972, Mayfield Heights, SK/13/8/6/44, SKA.

¹¹ Letter dated 10 April 1972, Tarentum, Pennsylvania, SK/13/8621, SKA.

¹² Letter dated 1 March 1972, Lakewood, California, SK/13/8/6/14, SKA.

¹³ Letter dated 8 October 1972, Albert Lea, Minnesota. SK/13/8/6/3, SKA.

¹⁴ Letter dated 10 January 1972, New Haven, Connecticut, SK/13/8/6/47.

¹⁵ Both letters dated 3 March 1972, both from Whittier, California, SK/13/8/6/14, SKA. Cp. letter dated 27 January 1972, Pico Rivera, California, SK/13/8/6/54, SKA: 'I think you have surpassed yourself in the brilliance of *Clockwork Orange*. A most startling and effective movie ... excellent lighting technique and photography ... a very stark and frightening portrayal of the near future.'

¹⁶ Letter dated 9 August 1972, New York, SK/13/8/6, SKA.

¹⁷ Letter dated 14 February 1972, San Mateo, California, SK/13/8/6/65, SKA.

¹⁸ Letter dated 16 August 1972, Los Angeles, SK/13/8/6, SKA.

¹⁹ Letter dated 10 January 1972, New York, SK/13/8/6, SKA.

²⁰ Letter dated 30 January 1972, Daly City, California, SK/13/8/6/22, SKA.

²¹ Letter dated 17 June 1972, Columbus, Ohio, SK/13/8/6/18, SKA. Emphasis in the original.

²² It is worth noting that such comments on 'violent instincts' were probably influenced by Kubrick's interview statements about the violent nature of humans, in particular his references to the books of science populariser Robert Ardrey. These did not go unchallenged. There were letters explicitly rejecting Kubrick's – and Ardrey's – claim that humans were inherently violent. Letter dated 11 February 1972, Berkeley; letter dated 4 March 1972, Brooklyn; both in SK/13/8/6/21, SKA.

²³ Letter dated 26 April 1972, Atlanta, SK/13/8/6/4, SKA.

²⁴ Several interviews dealing with *A Clockwork Orange* are reprinted in Phillips 2001, pp. 105-58. For a discussion of Kubrick interviews, see Krämer 2011, pp. 3-19.

²⁵ Letter dated 3 March 1972, Whittier, California, SK/13/8/6/14, SKA.

²⁶ Letter dated 21 February 1972, San Francisco, SK/13/8/6/63, SKA.

²⁷ Letter dated 27 March 1972, Columbus, Ohio, SK/13/8/6/18, SKA.

²⁸ Cp. later research on the responses of British video renters (Cumberbatch 2002) and students (Barker and Mathijs 2005) to *A Clockwork Orange*. Neither of these studies puts much emphasis on gender differences, but Cumberbatch's study contains some suggestive data (pp. 13, 14, 66). On gender specific film preferences in the early 1970s, with specific reference to 'X'-rated films, see Krämer 1999, p. 95, and Klenow and Crane 1977.