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Humanity as a Cultured Beast Through the Lens of Music in Burgess' and Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*

In the twisted realm of Anthony Burgess' literary masterpiece, *A Clockwork Orange*, the reader is invited into a dystopian world that echoes the discordant melody of a not-so-distant future. Published in 1962, this provocative novel immerses the reader in a world where the boundaries between morality and madness blur, and violence wreaks havoc on society at large. In 1971, the novel was adapted into a film directed by Stanley Kubrick, who was at that point already known for not shying away from controversial subject matters in his previous works such as *Lolita (1962)* and *Dr. Strangelove (1964)*. The release of the film propelled the novel to the mainstream and procured it with a new audience. With a surge in popularity, the discussion around the novel's meaning and symbolism became ever so present. Both the novel and its film adaptation contain a plethora of philosophical and cultural commentary embedded in a veneer of irony and shock factor. Some of the implicit themes the narrative explores are the question of free will and determinism, the tension between individualism and state control, the psychology of evil, and, as it will be argued in this paper, the perennial struggle between the civilized, cultured and spiritual aspects of human nature on the one hand, and its bestial aspects on the other hand. The last of the aforementioned themes, and the one this paper maintains is a central leitmotif of both the novel and the film adaptation, is coincidentally one of the least present ones in contemporary criticism of the novel and its adaptation. The appropriateness of using the term *leitmotif* in describing the topic becomes manifest in that the main source of its symbolism is articulated through the choice of music the narrative's atypical

protagonist Alex identifies with – classical music; namely, Ludwig van Beethoven and his *Ninth*, as it is referred to throughout the novel.

The use of music in *A Clockwork Orange* is exceptionally unique, but even more so unsettling for the audience, in both the novel and the film. According to David J. Code, Burgess' use of classical music in the novel falls into three categories. He refers to the first category as "pieces by composers [Burgess] simply invented" (Code 3). The second category is described as including composers of the Austro-Hungarian canon such as "J. S. Bach's *Wachet auf Choral Prelude*" and "'the Mozart'[...] Symphony Number Forty in G minor", while the third category predictably includes Ludwig van Beethoven's musical opus (Code 3-4). Unlike Burgess, Kubrick almost exclusively focuses on the *Ninth*, but introduces some additional pieces such as Purcell's *Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary* and Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra*. The combination of classical music, which is principally associated with intelligence, order, impulse control and culture (Rideout and Laubach), with acts of unadulterated violence, chaos and brutality perpetrated by Alex and his droogs turn the audience's expectations on their head. Creating the association between classical music and pure brutality is meant to shock and unsettle, but there is much more to it than that. As Galia Hanoch-Roe notes,

> [Kubrick] utilizes the mythical status that Beethoven's *Ninth* has achieved in order to shock the spectator by the association between this work and extreme violence on the one hand; while being assisted, on the other hand, by the symbolism it contains, including all the textual and musical elements, in order

> to raise essential questions concerning music and western culture in general. (Hanoch-Roe 2)

There is no doubt that Burgess uses classical music and its connotations to illustrate the troubling relationship between brutality and culture. However, Alex's obsession with the *Ninth* in particular is very deliberate. The textual elements Hanoch-Roe mentions refer to Schiller's poem "Ode to Joy", which Beethoven largely appropriated in the text for the fourth movement of his *Ninth Symphony* in an attempt to express Schiller's vision of the unity of humanity. Schiller's poem, brimming with the spirit of Romanticism, solidarity and the sublime, contains verses such as "all people become brothers / where thy gentle wing abides" (Schiller, lines 7-8). On account of its promotion of brotherhood and unity, in 1985 the European Union adopted the *Ninth* as its official anthem. The relationship between its patently humanist message and the misanthropic actions it inspires Alex to execute demonstrates a seemingly incongruous yet strikingly compatible bond, as my discussion will show.

Accordingly, Hanoch-Roe further remarks on the shocking synthesis of the aforementioned phenomena, with reference to the "integration between culture and violence interwoven throughout history" (Hanoch-Roe 6). Ironically, the *Ninth* represents a merging of culture and violence that has been an inevitable coalescence throughout the history of mankind, with Alex being a personification of this seemingly contradictory, but very real, relationship. Humanity has been able to create majestic civilizations and cultural values such as the ones espoused by Schiller, while simultaneously being capable of violence of epic proportions. Besides the message it

clearly states, the *Ninth*, and other compositions of the classical genre, are deeply embedded in the Western cultural *mores* as representations of European civilizational heritage. With that in mind, classical music and violence being the two things Alex enjoys most is not as unthinkable and contradictory as it appears at first glance.

As Hanoch-Roe elaborates:

> Alex himself, who calls himself Alex DeLarge, is in other words Alexander the Great, Greek commander of the Fourth Century B.C., who was one of history's greatest warriors and conquerors on the one hand, and a student of Aristotle, the founder and distributor of Classical Greek culture on the other. This is but one of the many examples of the integration between culture and violence interwoven throughout history. The Nazi era, shown to Alex on film at the Ludovigo [Ludovico] treatment center, accompanied by the Ninth, is another prominent example of such combination. Coincidentally, the Ninth itself was highly regarded by Nazi officials and was played on Hitler's birthday. (Hanoch-Roe 6)

In one of his essays that would later be included in the novel's fully restored fiftieth-anniversary edition, Martin Amis notes a peculiar relationship between the most violent of urges, and the urge for culture and creative expression. Describing the part of the novel in which Alex returns home after a night of *ultraviolence* and starts blaring Mozart, Bach and other major artists from his rather extravagant multispeaker stereo, Amis claims: "Here we feel the power of that enabling throb or whisper – the authorial

insistence that the Beast would be susceptible to Beauty. At a stroke, and without sentimentality, Alex is decisively realigned. He has now been equipped with a soul, and even a suspicion of innocence" (Amis 4).

In a more straightforward sense, both within the scope of the novel, and also in the broader socio-historical context stretching back to the beginnings of human culture, music is seen as a vessel through which the *beast* acquires a soul and becomes *cultured*. Art and violence, therefore, are two aspects of humanity forever tethered together. In this sense, Alex himself is an artist. That is precisely the reason why he is so easy to sympathise with even in the most bloodthirsty and deplorable moments. In Kubrick's film, this merging of a cultured artist and primal beast is articulated on several occasions. Hanoch-Roe accentuates an instance of this, detailing that during his violent visions: "Alex's eyes, and the ultra-violent expression that he takes on, are surprisingly similar to those of Beethoven himself, as reflected in an enormous picture hanging on Alex's wall" (Hanoch-Roe 3). This anthropological perspective on the relation between violence and culture is concomitantly contrasted and enriched with Peter Höyng's view, which individuates and psychologizes it by claiming that "violence can contain an aesthetic quality and aesthetics can be linked to violence. Or, to put it flippantly and narrow this vast topic for our context, violence can be fun to watch while fun can be violent – just as long as one is not oneself a victim" (Höyng 7).

It is worth noting that this explicit agglutinating of violence, youth and dynamism with artistic expression as a form of aesthetics is a defining principle of *Futurism*, a social and artistic movement founded in Italy whose originator Filippo

Tomasso Marinetti was an open supporter of the fascist regime. Incidentally, allusions to fascism and other societal models are present in the description of the not-so-distant dystopia(s), both in the novel and the film. Analysing Cole's observations about the real-life socio-historical context that in a hyperbolized satirical manner underlies the world of *A Clockwork Orange*, a dichotomy of two equally dystopic societal models can be seen – the liberal and the authoritarian model. Quintessentially, the society the audience is introduced to at the very beginning of the novel and the film is a dystopia of a liberal model. To further cite Cole:

> On the surface level of plot and visual design [...] the film clearly confronts topical issues of postwar British modernity. But through its subtextual ties to post-Enlightenment democratic and libertarian ideals the music subtends this surface with more fundamental questions about self and society that have continually arisen across a much broader conception of the 'modern age'. (Cole 39)

The society Alex lives in is a representation of post-war Britain with its 'libertarian'[1] ideals. The values of such a society, and their byproducts, are implicitly criticized throughout the novel, which presents them as chaotic and unstable. The police are absent from the streets and vandalism can be seen from any corner. Alex himself comments on the decaying state of this anarchic society by describing the interior of his flat in Municipal Flatblock 18a: "[...] some of the malchicks living in 18A had, as was to be expected, embellished and decorated the said big painting [...] I went to the lift, but there was no need to press the electric knopka to see if it was working or not,

because it had been tolchocked real horrorshow this night [...]" (Burgess 37). A direct account of the state of this society is articulated by 'the old drunk' that Alex and his droogs terrorize in the second chapter of the first part of the novel, who states, "it's a stinking world because it lets the young get on to the old like you done, and there's no law nor order no more" (Burgess 20). Post-war Britain is equated to an anarchic hellhole catering to violence by being socially and penally lenient. This challenges the dominant Western paradigm of *acultural modernity* defined by Charles Taylor as a paradigm which perceives the decline of traditional society and the ascendance of modernity as a natural and inevitable progression towards advancement (Taylor 24-33). The state of such a society could further be described as lacking in social integration and regulation due to the absence of coherent legal and moral structures, which subsequently leads to a hyper-individualized and rootless populace. Such circumstances culminate in the formation of an anomic state of normlessness in a Durkheimian sense. According to French sociologist Émile Durkheim, societies degenerate due to the lack of strong social bonds and clear moral norms, leading to excessive and unchecked individualism. This is further elucidated by Olsen's definition of Durkheimian anomie as "one source of normative malintegration within social systems, since all social organizations are constructed around bodies of moral norms" (Olsen 7). The values which inevitably spring up to fill the void left by this normative malintegration are oriented around individuals with a strong enough will to assert their own *mores*. This critical commentary on the failure of the post-enlightenment liberal ideals to maintain a functioning society manifests itself not solely in the direct description of the society

but also symbolically through Alex's choice of music. As previously described, Beethoven's *Ninth* is a potent symbol of brotherhood, unity and similar ideals which serve as bedrocks of post-enlightenment thought. Burgess' subversion of these ideals does not end at merely alluding to their historical and cultural connections to extreme violence and brutality. He utilizes the *Ninth* as a symbol of the alluring ideals of post-enlightenment liberal modernity which can lead to societal decadence and normlessness.

Another point in the novel where the relationship between modernity and decadence becomes manifest is articulated by F. Alexander, the writer whose wife dies after being viciously raped by Alex and his droogs. Upon saving Alex from the troubles he experienced after being released from prison, F. Alexander refers to him as "a victim of the modern age" (Burgess 170), equating him to his wife who was brutalized years prior. An environment such as the one cultivated by the said societal model is propitious for Nietzschean figures like Alex who form their own morality and sense of individuality that makes them the de facto authority of the said society. The loss of binding morals and beliefs in modern societies incentivising the creation of individuals that form their own morality through "The will to power" is a central idea of Nietzschean thought that directly parallels the narrative of *A Clockwork Orange.* With that context in mind, labelling Alex as a Nietzschean Übermensch seems appropriate. By the time Alex is finished with the Ludovico treatment and reintroduced to society, the society seems drastically different from the one described earlier in the narrative. Alex illustrates the difference between these two societies by once more noting the interior of his flat that

underwent a noticeable change, saying, "what surprised me, brothers, was the way that had been cleaned up [...] And what also surprised me was that the lift was working" (Burgess 146). Nevertheless, the novel criticizes the new societal model and its stifling of human freedom. Law and order seem not only restored, but taken to an extreme, with what appears like the formation of a police state. Former criminals, including Alex's former droog Dim, are no longer violent thugs, instead opting for a career in the police force, thus enacting their violent impulses in a societally acceptable way. Alex can no longer function as an outlaw bending society to his will in the previously mentioned Nietzschean manner.

The way both societal models tie into the *man as a beast* and *man as a cultured being* dichotomy is clear in the fact that they both push a respective side of that dichotomy through their structure and interworkings. The new quasi-fascist societal model tries to rid humans of their bestial condition and transform them into *homo culturalis* through societal conditioning, which requires strong suppression and infringement on freedom, choice and human rights. In opposition, the society from the first part of the book catered to entropy and incentivized the *bestial* part of the dichotomy but left humans with freedom and individuality. That culture of individuality implies the choice to pursue both violent and cultural impulses inherent to humans. Hanoch-Roe comments on this inherent, and somewhat contradictory duality of freedom and choice by saying:

> Freedom of choice includes the choice of violence and destructiveness as well as the choice of culture and aesthetic pleasure. The two coexist in all mankind

> and this is the joy to which we should aspire. Freedom of choice is also inherent in musical work, and even Beethoven's Ninth, moral, sublime and humanitarian as it is, also contains aggressiveness and impulsiveness, and thus allows a choice for each to hear or see it as one wishes. (Hanoch-Roe 8)

The duality of freedom and individuality, terms which can denote the ultimate emancipation of humanity from coercion and oppression but can also lead to hedonism and the breakdown of social bonds and virtue, has been a perpetual theme in countless philosophies and worldviews from Plato and the Christian tradition to many contemporary thinkers. Authoritarian and liberal societies alike fail in their insistence on cultivating and incentivizing only one of the two aspects of human modality by overlooking the universality of the tension between the *cultured* and *bestial* in humans that has been present throughout history.

In the symphony of *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess and Kubrick orchestrate a profound exploration of humanity's dichotomous nature, resonating with the timeless tension between the cultured and the bestial. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Beethoven's *Ninth*—a pinnacle of human artistic achievement—with scenes of brutal violence not only challenges our aesthetic sensibilities but also prompts us to question the very essence of culture and its capacity to elevate or degrade humanity. In this fusion of high art and primal instinct, Burgess and Kubrick beckon us to confront the uncomfortable truths about the human condition and the precarious balance between our loftiest aspirations and basest impulses. Beyond the individual psyche, the narrative casts a critical eye on societal structures— from anarchic social anomie to

quasi-fascist regimes—revealing the inadequacy of both in addressing the perennial struggle within human nature. The failure lies in attempts to suppress one aspect in favour of the other, overlooking the inherent tension that defines the human experience. As Beethoven's *Ninth* weaves through the narrative, the leitmotif becomes clear: humanity's quest for harmony amidst discord, navigating the fine line between civilization and beastdom.

End Notes

[1] For clarity, the term 'libertarian' here is being used as an equivalent to 'liberal' meaning the combination of philosophical, economic, political and moral ideas that trace their roots to the Enlightenment, not the more contemporary connotation present in American politics.

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