

Movie: A Clockwork Orange (1971)

Synopsis

A Clockwork Orange is a film by legendary director Stanley Kubrick adapted from the novel by Anthony Burgess by the same name. The movie is set in near-future London, and follows the story of Alex (Malcolm McDowell), who is a classical music-loving man who enjoys wreaking havoc on the local people with his friends (called "Droogs") through the use of ultraviolence. The gang goes around at night, following drinks at the Korova Milkbar, stirring up fights with the homeless drunks and breaking into homes to rob, rape, and assault the homeowners. Alex and his Droogs go to the home Mr. Alexander (a writer) and his wife (under the pretense of requiring to phone in a terrible car accident), and proceed to assault Mr. Alexander while Alex rapes his wife in front of him. The following day, the gang goes to the house of a Cat Lady (Miriam Karlin) under the same pretense as the day before, and Alex bludgeons her with one of her art pieces. The police arrive and only Alex is captured, and upon learning of the Cat Lady's death, he is sentenced to 14 years in prison. After two years, Alex agrees to be take part in an experimental behavior modification technique (Ludovico technique) that is designed to make him detest violence, both physical and sexual, through forced viewing of graphic movies, in exchange for his freedom. Unfortunately, while viewing the films, the doctors play Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which Alex previously adored. After the required two weeks of treatment, Alex is released into society, but is turned away by his family, and finds himself at the home of Mr. Alexander. Upon recognizing Alex, Mr. Alexander holds him prisoner and plays Beethoven's Ninth Symphony repeatedly to assert his revenge.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

A Clockwork Orange is a film that is saturated with psychiatric undertones. The most obvious theme of the film is that of morality; the question of "goodness." The government's goal is to turn criminals, who are considered inherently "bad seeds," into good people who do not partake in any immoral behaviors. Theoretically, this would create a society free of violence, eliminating crime altogether. This idea is undertaken by the government by way of behavioral therapy using the 'Ludovico technique.' While Alex did choose to be part of the experimental therapy, he was not told what it was for, and thus did not know that he was giving up his free will. The question of free will arises when the participant is released into society, because as Alex exemplified, he did not choose to be a good person, but rather he was forced to be one through aversive conditioning. This relates as well to the debate about nature vs. nurture, with Alex being the example of 'nurture' seeing as he is taught to be good. He is not born a good person, and he does not choose to be good, but rather is forced to be good.

Another motif in the film is that of conditioning. The Ludovico technique employs classical conditioning, where a neutral stimulus is presented with an unconditioned stimulus, leading the

patient to create associations between the two stimuli. Following therapy, the neutral stimulus should elicit the response which was previously only elicited by the unconditioned stimulus, turning the neutral stimulus into a conditioned stimulus that is responsible for causing the conditioned response. In Alex's behavioral therapy, this is exemplified by the negative reactions he has when triggered by stimuli of violence and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Relating back to the government's intentions, the idea was that Alex would abhor the feelings of sickness and suffocation that he would associate with violence so much so as to deter him from committing any violent acts when released into society.

Key Words: London, behavior therapy, Classical Conditioning, Pavlov, dystopia, Ludovico technique, free will

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