A Clockwork of Sex and Violence:
A Look at the Banning of a Clockwork Orange in the UK

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These days the American film industry creates tons of films which portray sex and violence in a manner which is presentable to the right viewable audience; but what are the limits to portraying a crude act of sex or violence onto the big screen? When looking back over the decades of the film industry, if one could chose one film that set the limits of a film that film could possibly be Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*. A film that portrayed violence and rape, while make it seem like a fun thing to do. It mesmerized as well as disgusted its audience. The film brought controversy after its release and was abruptly pulled out of distribution and banned. Could what some deemed to be a “Brilliant piece of art,” be a powerful tool in casting negativity in society? Or could it be that we as a people are not mature enough to realize the rights and wrongs of everyday decisions that are made as well as distinguish the true nature of a film and basically not judge it by its cover or content.

In 1962 a book was released called *A Clockwork Orange*. It was written by a man called Anthony Burgess. The book presented violent situations involving rebellious teens as well as putting the government under the gun with its failed attempt a reforming the villainous youths of society. According to the documentary *Great Bolshy Yarblockos! Making 'A Clockwork Orange'* the book was given to Stanley Kubrick by Terry Southern the man who wrote the screenplay for *Dr. Strangelove*. Kubrick went on to make the film adaptation of the book. Kubrick would go on and be very faithful to the book by including such scenes the raping of the writer’s wife and the beating of a homeless man. These two key scenes that would be included in the film are just two parts of the film that sparked off the controversy that would surround it. Set in England in an unspecific future, Kubrick depicts a socially and politically degenerate environment inhabited by fearful citizens, reckless young outlaws, and an authoritarian government which is unable to control the country's flood of violence. Despite its issues the film received many awards of
achievement. The film received four academy award nominations that included Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay. It’s just puzzling to think that a film of such achievement could garner the evil within a troubled individual. After the controversy and all the crimes were well surfaced by the media, Kubrick began receiving death threats to himself and towards his family. As much as he did not want to his only choice was to pull the film from circulation and that is exactly what he did. According to the documentary Kubrick was very hurt by the whole situation; never did he think one of his films would cause so much violence and hostility. The real disturbing aspect of this whole array of crimes that were clockwork orange influenced is the fact that even today these type of crimes mainly influenced by the film are still occurring. According to The Independent, a British Newspaper, on October 30, 2004 a group of teenagers brutally beat up a bar manager and killed him in a clockwork orange style manner. Like the other violent acts that preceded the release of the film, the teenagers involved preceded to simulate acts produced by the films main character and his gang. What made each of the acts of violence cry out clockwork orange are the details of each crime. One crime had the attackers singing “Singing in the Rain”, a direct connection in the film in which Alex sings that exact song while he terrorizes a writer and his wife. Another direct connection which was very influential in the attack of the bar manager which led to the connection was that fact that the attacks communicated in code. In the film the gang spoke in a type of slang also a type of code. The crimes that were committed back when the film first came out had more to do with rape then just straight up violent beatings. There was an incident in which a Dutch girl was raped by a gang of thugs dressed as the gang from a clockwork orange sent chills down the spine of everyone. So the fact that these crimes almost mirror that of the film’s just adds on to the controversy that this film. But is A Clockwork Orange really to blame for all these problems it so call caused or is
there something else that is igniting the fire that keeps blowing this whole issue out of proportion.

Even though *A Clockwork Orange* is considered the poster child of stirring the pot it wasn’t the only film to be pitted against receiving a ban. Because the film caused more controversy than pretty much any other film in history other films that were cause problems weren’t as widely publicized. Films such as *Straw Dogs, The Devils*, and *Soldier Blue* received a lot of criticism for their respective controversial topics. Julian Petley the author of the article “*Clockwork Crimes*” explains that after those films were released that it became the last straw. So when A Clockwork Orange came out it was bashed by most of the leading critics. According to the article thirteen leading critics of that time wrote a letter to *The Times* stating “In our view the use to which this film employs its scenes of double rape and multiple killings by a variety of hideous methods is dubious in its intention, excessive in its effect and likely to contribute to the concern expressed from time to time by many critics over films which exploit the very violence which they make a show of condemning.” Its seems as though the time of this film’s release was bad timing because it just because took the most bashing and it seems that the critics were waiting for a film to gang up on and Clockwork Orange fit the bill of what they were searching for. The interesting thing about society is the fact that it is a hypocrite. We as a society look down upon violent acts and censor anything that is not of a society’s liking. According to the Clockwork Crimes the top twenty best films of 1972 in terms of revenue were as follows: *The Devils* was fourth, *A Clockwork Orange* was eleventh, and *Straw Dogs* was fourteenth. From the following information it looks as though we as a society support violence if we are willing to pay to show these controversial films. This is one of several reasons why we as a society are hypocrites. One of the more interesting facts behind the film’s release was the fact that people
had begun to predict what would be the after if such a violent film was bestowed upon the eyes of the public. Julian Petley explains that in an article on the *Evening News* dated at January 27, 1972 entitled “Clockwork Oranges are Ticking Time Bombs”, the Labour MP Maurice Edelman prophesied that “When *Clockwork Orange* is generally released it will lead to a clockwork cult which will magnify teenage violence.” Soon after, the crimes were being blamed on the film. The article also mentions that the first few crimes didn’t seem to fit the evidence so well. It could be possible that people were just putting false accusations out there just to pin it on a film that disgusted them. For example, the *Mail* of 8 May 1973 stated that 'a "Clockwork Orange" gang was being sought last night after the murder of a 50-year-old firewood seller' in Newton-le-Willows. However, the only 'evidence' that the paper adduces to link the murder to the film is the fact that it took place 24 hours after the film finished its run at a local cinema, and teenagers had been buying clothes and makeup similar to that worn by the gang in the film. Another crime that caused a stir was the case of Richard Palmer, who murdered a tramp in Bletchley. The *Mail* of 4 July headed its story 'Why "Clockwork Orange" Boy Murdered a Tramp', but then rather spoiled things by revealing that Palmer hadn't seen the film (as he was only 16 he wasn't entitled to do so anyway) but had simply read the book which, his mother is quoted as saying, had not affected him. The dubious *Clockwork Orange* comes in only because a consultant psychiatrist called by the defense opined that 'it seems to me the boy was acting a part which seemed very similar to the characterizations given by *A Clockwork Orange*. With looking at all the cases it is easy to pick the villain in all this mess and it is not the film. The press is the villain in all this by over exaggerating these crimes. One violent crime and the film is to blame, Richard Palmer was only sixteen when he committed murder. The key fact here is his age. He wouldn’t have been able to watch the movie at all. So it just adds on that the press is what has caused *A Clockwork Orange*
to be shown in a negative way and not in a positive artistic way that it was meant to be looked at. This reiterates the point that was made earlier that we as a society are hypocrites of what we say and believe. We say that we don’t want violence in movies cause they cause problems, but we as a society seem to revere violence because it sparks revenue and helps other people. So we are no better than the people who commit the crimes.

The film *A Clockwork Orange* is a very unique case when involving it with conversations of censorship. After receiving death threats towards himself and his family, Kubrick took an unusual step and pulled the film from circulation. The film was censored or banned from the UK until after Kubrick’s death in 1999. The film was never censored because of people it was censored on Stanley Kubrick’s behalf. The amount of sex and violence in the film wasn’t going to cause a ban of the film. When comparing the film to films now, it really isn’t that bad because violence and sex have stepped up since the 1970’s. The reason why *Clockwork Orange* has so much shock value attached to it because it was different then the trend of films at the time.

Richard A. Brisbin Jr. discusses the interesting change that occurred in the regulation of the sexual content of American movies between 1966 through 1971. In his report *Censorship, Ratings, and Rights: Political Order and Sexual Portrayals in American Movies* Brisbin shows the fact that censorship had changed in a quick span of five years. In 1966 state, local, and industry censors nearly kept actor Elizabeth Taylor, in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, from turning into the camera and uttering “You son of a bitch.” He then compares it to *A Clockwork Orange* and the fact that by 1971, *A Clockwork Orange* would contain a scene of rape, frontal nudity, and an accelerated sequence depicting a ménage-à-trois. Such a change signals a synoptic shift in the morality policy governing an industry with significant influence on public tastes. It is very clear that the governmental censorship had collapsed. If it wasn’t for Kubrick pulling the
film himself then there wouldn’t be this controversial topic of the films ban. One of the interesting points brought up in the article was censorship bargaining. The censorship bargaining was when diverse political and economic elites negotiated the content of movies. This political order, which appeared in the 1930s, censored movies to accommodate diverse social tastes. Brisbin explains that it was a political order that rested on a core assumption or a “constitutive perspective.” The assumption was that liberal “legalism” – the liberal perspective that right and wrong is a function of the application of various forms of rules of law – was the only rational means for the control of sexual passion. The collapse or dismantling of the political order of censorship bargaining was not as sudden as it first appears. In 1968, the regulation of the content of movies was an adaptive bargaining process with four sets of participants: state and local government censors, the studios, the Legion of Decency, and the Production Code Administration (PCA). Their bargains accommodated a specific set of sexual portrayals in the movies, and they cut off the prospects for the expression of alternative portrayals. This is a possible indication as to why A Clockwork Orange was originally able to pass to theatres. But the film was originally given a rating of X so it was good enough not to face the censors. The Production Code Administration was a semiautonomous agency of the motion picture studios’ and distributors’ trade association known as the Motion Picture Producers and Dealers Association (MPPDA, which was reorganized and renamed the Motion Picture Association of America [MPAA] in 1948). The MPPDA drafted a Production Code for administration by the PCA. The Code included descriptions of impermissible sexual portrayals in movies. Production Code set forth the substantive rules on movie content. Under the rules of the Production Code, which served as a basis for negotiation or “discussion and debate,” a stable equilibrium about the participants’ interests developed. The PCA was a way to basically regulate and govern the types
of films that are released by really trying to cut down on all the issues that would be raised with a film. If a film didn’t have an official rating then it would be difficult for a company to pick it up without raising questions. A company won’t risk putting in money to a film that won’t pass the censors and never be shown. All the participants with the censorship bargaining realized that bargaining on sexual content in movies could work to their mutual advantage. These elites assumed that the repression of portrayals of sexual passion and the accommodation of the presumed social hostility to overt sexuality stated in the law was normal. Therefore, they developed a means to avoid the potential costs of state censorship and accommodate political order that frowned on public expressions of sexuality and voyeurism.

The whole idea of censorship can be looked at from two perspectives the producer and the director. Brisbin explains that for quite different motives, elites within the motion picture industry – studio executives and directors – drew upon legal realist theories of rights and themes of sexual repression to challenge the use of the police powers and industry self-regulation of sexual expressions in movies. The studio executives framed the issue of the sexual content of movies in economic terms. The 1950’s saw a change in power within censorship. The executives had more power over the PCA and could do whatever they pleased. This is evident in the fact that the PCA had three strategies to attract new income rejected by executives. Paramount Pictures is a major example in this power over the PCA. Paramount chose to oppose the PCA because they didn’t want what they thought was a good film to be changed by someone you was going to ruin the film. Studio executives brought more direct pressure on the PCA through the MPAA. Despite the historic power and autonomy enjoyed by the PCA, the appeal of PCA decisions went to a group of studio executives. Although there were relatively few appeals, the appeals of PCA rulings in the 1960s resulted in precedent setting decisions. For example, the
appeal of PCA censorship of profanity and themes of sexual repression in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* resulted in an MPAA decision to change the Production Code and allow the release of edited films with the advertisement “suggested for Mature Audiences.” The same Classification was soon applied to two British pictures with sexual themes – *Georgy Girl* and *Alfie.* Thus, just at the time the Supreme Court developed a distinction between adults and minors in its obscenity doctrines, 1966, the MPAA began to make the same distinction. Soon the MPAA created a modified Production Code so they could apply the “mature audiences” label to their films without having to do battle with the PCA about murder, drugs, and brief nudity on the screen.

The second point of view is the Motion Picture Directors involvement with censorship. The big difference between directors and executives is the importance of economics. As said in the previous paragraph executives are more about the money more than anything. The Directors on the other hand use a non-economical approach. Brisban tells us that “Once simply a manufacturer of an entertainment product for a big business, directors gradually came to regard their work as an artistic expression about the human condition.” Most films are considered a piece of art so why would the creator of the piece of art want it revised and changed by someone else. The example he gives in the article is of Eli Kazan who made the artistic movie a more popular and profitable medium. For Kazan, whose films encountered considerable conflict with state and local censors, the PCA, and the Legion of Decency, the aim was to express his individual conscience on topics of repression and alienation by filming scripts based on the work of social critics such as John Steinbeck and Tennessee Williams. He continues to say that The directors’ artistic statement about human oppression and alienation also caused them to explore psychological themes about sexual repression. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s popularized
themes about the harm of sexual repression appeared in the more “artistic” American dramas. The artistic American directors in turn framed sexuality in movies into a more frequent and difficult issue for the PCA. On some instances the inclusion of sexuality or other banned material was a conscious tactic designed to liberate audiences. In Stanley Kubrick’s case that fact that the film only implies but doesn’t graphically show the woman being raped by the Alex. The scene is zoomed in so the viewer never actually sees the rape with both people involved. Many later films have shown scenes of rape that have been more graphic than A Clockwork Orange but they haven’t been cracked down on like the latter. All of Kubrick’s films have been artistic with the lighting and sets this film is probably considered his most artistic. By the mid-1960s American directors wanted to present some of the “beneficial” aspects of the expression of unrepressed human sexuality on the screen, including female nudity. Their tactic of constant pressure on the PCA did not produce a major change in movie content nor link them into a unified campaign to change the presentation of sex in movies, but it did afford the opportunity for the MPAA to make incremental adjustments in the sexual content of American movies. A Clockwork Orange’s content didn’t seem to come in play until the crimes began to happen. So the fact that the sexual content is brought up all the time now is just astonishing. If it wasn’t for the crimes, then the film could have been saved from its removal.

The whole interesting aspect of this controversy is the fact that Kubrick pulled the film from circulation not the studio and not the MPAA. In my opinion the film is misunderstood and has been for the years it has been banned. In Yvonne Ng piece called “A Clockwork Orange: The First 25 Years,” it discusses the meanings behind the film and what was really intended for viewers to understand and not the fact that violence is acceptable. The article states “A Clockwork Orange is a rare instance of a thought-provoking film that poses fundamental
questions of morality wrapped in a deceptively frivolous cloak of sex and violence. It presents the perennial problems of crime and corruption which are intrinsically linked to the human condition.” The film is a visual tour of the human psyche and it uses the main character Alex as a way to show the good and bad sides of society and government. There are two sides two the story. There is bad Alex that causes problems and there is reformed Alex that can’t do anything wrong or he will get sick. Article talks about this contradiction by saying “The antithesis of the film is the reverse image of the first segment. Alex, now reduced to a mere bag of conditioned reflexes against violence, is in turn tortured by each of his former victims before finally being restored into his former violent self.” Alex painfully learns the strength of the old saying that violence breeds violence. In *A Clockwork Orange*, the perpetrators of violence include members from every part of society; not only are those who desire vengeance involved in violence, but also those who are the traditional keepers of law and order, and those who are considered the pillars of society. Thus the accomplices in violence include the police, the intellectuals, the scientists, the doctors, and the government which has promised to wipe out crime. A huge exposure of corruption among government officials makes the controversy expand. It asks the question who is really good and who is really bad?

Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* is an artistic master piece in its own right. The way the lighting and the sounds mesh, really form a magnificent collage of imagery, which distort and disturb the human mind at the same time. The film is a victim of its own violence. Being subjected to accusations of copycat killers really destroyed the artistic value this film contained. Stanley Kubrick created something that in 1971 people weren’t ready for and in his attempt to do something totally the opposite of what society wanted it backfired. But now as a
society is it fair to assess this film on the basis of its violence or should society look at it for what it really is and that’s a masterpiece in filmmaking. Just like the main character Alex the film is portray in two shades of light. There is the violent film that caused issues and violence and then there is the artistic film that shows the full extent of what hard work and beauty of sound and lighting can make. In conclusion the banning of A Clockwork Orange was a travesty to viewers and to Stanley Kubrick. The viewers they were stripped of a beauty piece of filmmaking and had to wait almost 30 years to see it again. For Stanley Kubrick he had to ban his own masterpiece because he never wanted his work to force anyone harm. We as a society need to realize that what is portrayed on film is fiction and is never right to replicate it in away shape or form.
Annotated Bibliography


This article discusses the true meaning behind the film. The purpose is thoroughly explained and provides insight on the real Clockwork Orange and not the violent film that people perceive it to be.


This article looks at the history of censorship and how it has evolved over the years into what it is today. Presents good information that helps with the surrounding controversy of the films violent and sexual content.


A documentary about the making of 'A Clockwork Orange'. The documentary Chronicles the pre-production, filming, and post production of the film. This documentary discusses the controversy that followed the film after its release. This documentary gives a good personal opinion on the creation of the film and on the controversy that led to its withdrawal from circulation.
Akbar, A. “Clockwork Orange' gang found guilty of killing bar manager” The Independent UK Dec 15, 2005.

This article discusses a crime committed by copycat killers that posed as the gang from the film and killed a bar manager. The article gives full details of the crime and the people involved.

Petley, J. Clockwork crimes Published in: Index on Censorship, Volume 24, Issue 6 November 1995, pages 48 - 52

This is the original book that the film’s material is based on. The books contains majority of the scenes that are presented in the film. This is a good source to look at the original material that is causing all of the issues surrounding the film.