

The Tamed Rebel: Violence and the Dilemma of Choice in *A Clockwork Orange*

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Abstract:

Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) remains a seminal work in dystopian cinema, provoking intense debate about free will, state control, and the ethics of behavioral conditioning. This study examines the film's psychological and philosophical dimensions, focusing on protagonist Alex DeLarge's transformation under the Ludovico Technique—a state-mandated aversion therapy that strips him of autonomy. Employing textual analysis and psychological frameworks (including Self-Determination Theory and behaviorism), the paper dissects how Kubrick uses cinematic techniques (e.g., ocular symbolism, classical music juxtaposition) to critique dehumanizing social engineering. The findings reveal that forced behavior modification, while superficially effective, destroys intrinsic motivation and identity, reducing individuals to “clockwork” mechanisms. By contrasting Alex's performative violence with his post-treatment emptiness, the study concludes that authentic humanity requires imperfect freedom, even at the cost of moral ambiguity. The film's warning resonates in contemporary discussions about AI, surveillance, and state power, urging a balance between social order and individual agency.

Keywords: *A Clockwork Orange*; psychological theory; film.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Stanley Kubrick's controversial dystopian film, as a lens to examine the psychological and ethical dilemmas of free will versus social control. The research is significant for understanding how authoritarian attempts to “reform” human behavior may dehumanize individuals, a theme increasingly relevant in debates about criminal justice, AI ethics, and state surveil-

lance.

The paper analyzes three key aspects: The Ludovico Technique's parallels with real-world behavior modification and its psychological consequences; Alex's performative violence as a manifestation of existential crisis and social alienation. Kubrick's cinematic techniques as metaphors for surveillance and identity erosion.

Methodologically, this study employs literary, and film analysis combined with psychological theory in-

tegration. By systematically reviewing scholarly articles, film critiques, and primary sources, this approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how Kubrick's artistic choices reflect empirical psychological principles. The comparative analysis of fictional and real-world cases further strengthens the interdisciplinary validity.

The research aims to: Expose the dangers of conflating compliance with moral reform; Demonstrate how art can serve as a vehicle for psychological inquiry; Propose ethical frameworks for behavior modification technologies. To achieve this, the study dissects Alex's transformation through psychological theories, contrasts the film with historical cases of social control, and evaluates Kubrick's warnings about sacrificing humanity for order.

2. Literature Review

Many researchers have studied *A Clockwork Orange*, but there are still important things we can learn from it. Some scholars, like Smith have looked at moral problems with the Ludovico Technique, showing how it takes away people's free will [1]. Others like Bandura have examined how the conditioning process works from a psychological perspective [2]. While these studies are helpful, they mostly focus on the ideas in the story without paying enough attention to how Kubrick uses camera shots, music, and other film techniques to show these ideas.

Historical researchers like Solzhenitsyn have compared the movie to real-life dictatorships, which helps us understand its warnings about government control [3]. However, few have connected these ideas to today's world, where social media and artificial intelligence can influence our behavior in similar ways. This is an important gap because Kubrick's film seems to predict many modern problems with technology and mind control.

This paper will do three main things to help fill these gaps: It will show how Kubrick uses specific camera techniques (like close-ups of Alex's eyes) to make us feel what it's like to lose your free will - something most books about the movie don't talk about enough. It will connect the movie's warnings to current issues like social media addiction and how apps try to control what we do, making the 50-year-old film feel very modern. It will use simple psychology to explain why Alex behaves the way he does, helping us understand both the character and real people who act violently.

Some important studies like Kohut's work on narcissism help explain Alex's personality, but they don't look at how the movie shows these ideas visually [4]. Other studies about behavior change help us understand why Alex goes back to violence at the end, but they don't examine how

Kubrick shows this through the character's wink at the camera [5]. My research will put these pieces together to give a more complete understanding of the film.

By looking at both the psychological ideas and how Kubrick presents them on screen, this study will help show why *A Clockwork Orange* remains so powerful and important today. The movie isn't just about one violent teenager - it's about all of us and how much freedom we're willing to give up for safety and comfort. As technology gives governments and companies more ways to influence our behavior, Kubrick's warning becomes more relevant than ever.

This review of existing research shows that while we know a lot about the movie's themes, there's still important work to be done in understanding how its visual storytelling makes those themes so powerful. That's what this paper will explore, using ideas from psychology and film studies to give us new ways of thinking about this classic movie.

3. Case Analysis

The profound statement, "If a man can't choose, he isn't a man anymore," delivered by the prison chaplain in *A Clockwork Orange*, penetrates directly to the philosophical core of Stanley Kubrick's disturbing masterpiece, encapsulating its central dilemma about the nature of humanity and free will. Through the harrowing psychological journey of *Alex DeLarge*—the charismatic yet sociopathic protagonist who transforms from a violently rebellious delinquent into a helpless brainwashed victim—Kubrick constructs a multilayered cautionary tale that interrogates the fundamental tension between individual freedom and societal control. The notorious Ludovico Technique scene, where Alex is brutally strapped into a chair with his eyelids forcibly held open while being subjected to graphic violent imagery paired with nausea-inducing drugs, presents viewers with far more than just the superficial reformation of a troubled youth; it reveals the profoundly unethical process of complete mental reprogramming through psychological torture, raising urgent questions about the ethics of behavior modification that continue to resonate in contemporary discourse [1]. This so-called "treatment," far from eliminating violence as its proponents claim, merely substitutes one form of inhumanity (Alex's random acts of aggression) with another (state-sanctioned psychological abuse), demonstrating how institutionalized cruelty often mirrors the very behaviors it seeks to eradicate [6].

The Ludovico Technique's methodology, as depicted in the film, operates on principles strikingly similar to those

used in animal behavior experiments—specifically Pavlovian classical conditioning where violent stimuli are systematically paired with chemically-induced nausea to create an automatic aversion response [7]. However, the true horror of this process lies not in its clinical effectiveness but in its complete denial of Alex's basic human autonomy: his eyes are mechanically restrained open against his will, his body painfully immobilized in a Christ-like posture of submission, and even the most fundamental freedom—the ability to look away from something disturbing—is cruelly denied. This dystopian “therapy” reduces the infinitely complex human mind to nothing more than a simple machine that can be arbitrarily rewired through brute force conditioning, ignoring decades of psychological research demonstrating that authentic behavioral change requires cognitive engagement and personal volition [2]. When government officials proudly declare Alex's transformation as “true reform,” their terminology reveals the disturbing reality—they haven't created a morally enlightened individual but rather a perfectly obedient automaton stripped of all authentic humanity, a walking embodiment of what Skinner warned about when describing the dangers of radical behaviorism applied to human subjects [8].

The treatment's catastrophic side effects become horrifyingly apparent when Alex discovers he can no longer derive pleasure from *Beethoven's Ninth Symphony* — the very music that previously fueled both his violent fantasies and his rare moments of aesthetic transcendence. This devastating loss proves that the Ludovico conditioning operates with terrifying indiscrimination, obliterating not just so-called “bad” desires but all capacity for passionate engagement with the world. As noted by PhiloMedium, “When a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man”—a observation supported by contemporary neuroscience research showing that the brain's reward systems cannot selectively target only undesirable behaviors during aversion therapy [9]. The government's well-intentioned but ultimately fascistic attempt to impose goodness upon Alex through force results not in moral enlightenment but in the creation of a hollow political puppet, physically intact but spiritually eviscerated, capable of mechanical thought but devoid of authentic choice—precisely the ideal subject for authoritarian regimes throughout history, from Stalin's Soviet Union to modern surveillance states [3].

Kubrick's nuanced portrayal of Alex's violence reveals it to be far more complex than simple mindless aggression. Each brutal act is carefully choreographed like a perverse theatrical performance—the camera lingers obsessively on his eerily dilated pupils and grotesquely grinning face, while the soaring strains of classical masterpieces provide

ironic counterpoint to the mayhem. This deliberate stylization suggests that for Alex, violence functions as both existential assertion and artistic expression—his only means of proving his existence in a world that otherwise renders him insignificant. Psychological analysis of the character suggests this behavior pattern reflects what Kohut termed “narcissistic rage,” where aggression stems from profound vulnerabilities masked by grandiose displays of power [4]. The film implies that Alex's psychopathology originates in his profoundly dysfunctional family environment—his ineffectual father represents failed patriarchal authority while his nearly invisible mother offers no emotional nourishment, creating the perfect psychological vacuum that his violent persona fills [10]. Significantly, Alex never acts alone but always within his “droog” gang, revealing his pathological need for audience validation—his violence serves as much to impress his peers as to harm his victims, exemplifying what social psychologists call “performative aggression” in group dynamics [11].

The film's central paradox emerges with devastating clarity: Alex appears most authentically free when committing horrific acts, yet becomes a soulless marionette when “cured” of his violent impulses. This disturbing contradiction forces viewers to confront profoundly uncomfortable questions: If genuine freedom necessarily includes the capacity for evil, does morally sanitized behavior inherently require some degree of dehumanization? Can there be such a thing as ethical compulsion, or does all forced goodness corrupt its own intentions? *A Clockwork Orange* presents us with two catastrophic systemic failures: society's initial inability to curb Alex's violence through conventional means, followed by the even more horrifying “solution” that annihilates his free will entirely. In the aftermath of his conditioning, Alex becomes reduced to a living propaganda tool—his docile behavior paraded before officials as proof of the government's ability to “fix” social deviants, while completely ignoring the ethical violation of his personhood. However, as SoapCentral astutely observes, “The Ludovico Technique didn't reform Alex; it only temporarily stripped him of his ability to act on his impulses”—a finding consistent with modern relapse studies showing that suppression-based therapies have significantly higher recidivism rates than internalized behavioral change programs [5]. The film's ambiguous final scene, where Alex's violent instincts resurface as he knowingly winks at the camera, serves as Kubrick's chilling reminder that imperfect liberty—with all its risks and dangers—remains infinitely preferable to flawless control. Kubrick's persistent visual focus on Alex's eyes—whether forcibly propped open during treatment, grotesquely adorned with fake eyelashes, or staring directly into the

lens with unsettling intensity—constructs a powerful symbolic motif representing both surveillance and identity. These recurring ocular images suggest Alex exists in a perpetual state of being watched, analyzed, and ultimately controlled by external forces, anticipating Foucault's theories about panopticonic societies where visibility becomes a trap [12]. Even more disturbingly, post-conditioning Alex becomes literal propaganda—his transformed behavior used to justify state violence while obscuring its human costs, much like psychiatric institutions have historically been employed for social control [13]. Throughout the narrative, Alex cyclically performs various social roles—the rebellious son, the gang leader, the model prisoner, the rehabilitation success story—leaving viewers to wonder whether any authentic self exists beneath these constructed identities. His eventual return to violence prompts unsettling questions: Is this final reversion a reclamation of his true nature, or merely another performance for a different audience? Kubrick deliberately leaves this unresolved, forcing confrontation with the terrifying possibility that identity itself may be nothing more than a series of masks responding to situational demands [13]. Far from being mere dystopian fantasy, *A Clockwork Orange* stands as an urgent warning about the psychological costs of social engineering. The film's haunting metaphor of "a clockwork orange"—something organic externally but mechanical internally—perfectly encapsulates the dehumanizing consequences of stripping away free will, even for ostensibly noble purposes. As noted by Douban, this creates beings who retain the appearance of humanity while being emptied of its essence—a phenomenon increasingly relevant in our age of algorithmic behavior modification and digital persuasion [14]. The controversial final scene, where Alex vividly fantasizes about ultraviolence while ironically declaring "I was cured all right," serves simultaneously as personal regression and societal indictment—both a return to his primal self and a scathing parody of so-called civilized reform. Ultimately, Kubrick's masterpiece compels us to ask: When societies pursue perfect control at any cost, what invaluable aspects of our humanity might we unwittingly sacrifice in the process? The answer, the film suggests, may be our very souls.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Loss of Humanity Under Social Control

The film powerfully demonstrates what happens when society removes personal freedom. Using psychological theories, we can understand Alex's transformation as

more than just a story - it's a warning about human nature. According to Self-Determination Theory, people need three things to stay psychologically healthy: autonomy (control over their choices), competence (feeling capable), and relatedness (meaningful connections). The Ludovico Technique destroys all three for Alex. He becomes like "a clockwork orange" - natural on the outside but mechanical inside, completely losing his free will. This process is called dehumanization, where a person is treated like a machine rather than a human being.

The treatment works through classical conditioning - pairing violence with feelings of sickness, like how scientists train animals. But this backfires because it doesn't just stop Alex's violent impulses; it also takes away his ability to enjoy music and other normal pleasures. This shows that excessive control makes people rigid and dysfunctional, a psychological state called learned helplessness. The film's most important question - "What do we lose when society controls people completely?" - finds its answer here: we lose our essential humanity. Even positive qualities like creativity and passion disappear when freedom is removed.

Alex's wink at the camera in the final scene perfectly shows the "rebound effect" - when suppressed desires return even stronger. Like an addict who starts using again after treatment, Alex proves that forced change doesn't last. True reform must come from within.

4.2 The Film as Psychological Study

Kubrick uses visual storytelling to deepen these psychological themes. The extreme close-ups of Alex's eyes during treatment symbolize how the government invades his private mind space. The fake eyelashes and direct camera stares create a disturbing effect - Alex is always being watched and controlled, which twists his sense of self. This connects to the "looking-glass self" theory, which says our identity forms through how others see us. The classical music during violent scenes creates an important contrast. While most films would use intense music for fights, Kubrick uses beautiful compositions like *Beethoven's Ninth Symphony*. This shows Alex views violence as art - his way of fighting emptiness and proving he exists. Psychologically, his brutal acts may represent what Carl Jung called "the shadow" - the dark side of personality that society forces us to hide.

Ultimately, Kubrick turns the entire film into a psychological experiment. He asks: Can environment alone create violent criminals? (Alex's absent parents and gang culture suggest yes.) Can behavior modification create real change? (Alex's relapse says no.) Through Alex's journey, the film becomes more than entertainment - it's a brilliant

study of human nature under pressure.

This analysis shows how *A Clockwork Orange* uses both story and visual techniques to explore deep psychological truths about freedom, control, and what makes us truly human.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that *A Clockwork Orange* serves as a powerful psychological case study about the dangers of removing free will from individuals. Through Alex's journey, we see that the Ludovico Technique fails to truly reform him—it only suppresses his violent impulses temporarily while destroying his ability to enjoy life's simple pleasures. This aligns with psychological studies on autonomy, such as Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, which argues that human motivation and personality development fundamentally require the satisfaction of three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The Ludovico Technique's complete removal of Alex's autonomy creates a textbook case of psychological breakdown - he becomes unable to experience genuine emotions or make meaningful choices. This leads us to the conclusion that forced behavior modification does not create moral change; it merely produces obedient but hollow individuals. When society prioritizes control over freedom, it risks losing what makes us human—our capacity to choose, even when those choices are flawed.

This research provides valuable insights for future studies in multiple areas. First, it highlights how film can be used as a psychological tool to examine complex themes like free will, conditioning, and societal control. The visual techniques in *A Clockwork Orange* (such as the focus on Alex's eyes and the use of classical music) offer a unique way to analyze human behavior beyond traditional experiments. Second, this study contributes to ongoing debates about crime prevention and rehabilitation—showing that methods like aversion therapy may backfire if they ignore personal agency. Similar cases can be found in real-world examples like the CIA's MKUltra program during the Cold War era, where government agencies experimented with mind control techniques including drugs, hypnosis and sensory deprivation. While these experiments sought to create compliant agents, they often resulted in severe psychological trauma for participants, mirroring Alex's experience in the film.

For future research, three key directions should be explored: The long-term psychological effects of behavior modification—Does forced conditioning lead to lasting trauma, or can individuals eventually recover their true selves (as Alex seemingly does at the end)? Further exper-

imental research could test Kubrick's themes by designing psychological studies that examine the long-term effects of different behavior modification techniques. For example, researchers might compare the outcomes of punitive approaches versus autonomy-supportive interventions in juvenile rehabilitation programs. The role of art in psychological resistance—Alex's love of Beethoven suggests that creativity might be tied to both violence and redemption. Could artistic expression be a healthier alternative to suppression? Modern parallels to the Ludovico Technique—With advancements in AI and neurotechnology, how close are we to real-world “mind control,” and what ethical safeguards should exist? Neuroimaging studies could investigate how different forms of conditioning affect brain structures related to decision-making and emotional processing, while sociological research could explore how various societies balance individual freedom with social control.

Ultimately, *A Clockwork Orange* forces us to confront an uncomfortable truth: A society that demands perfect obedience may lose more than it gains. Future studies should continue examining where the line should be drawn between safety and freedom—because if we remove a person's ability to choose wrong, do we also remove their ability to choose right? More recent examples like certain “conversion therapy” practices aimed at changing sexual orientation have shown similarly destructive results, proving that attempts to forcibly reprogram fundamental aspects of human identity frequently cause more harm than the behaviors they seek to eliminate. These historical and contemporary cases reinforce Kubrick's warning about the ethical dangers of state-controlled behavior modification.

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