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**BLISSFUL VIOLENCE**  
**AMBIGUITY IN STANLEY KUBRICK'S A CLOCKWORK ORANGE**

por

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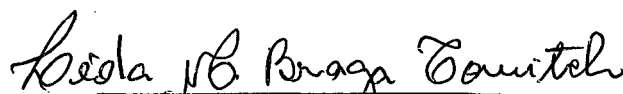
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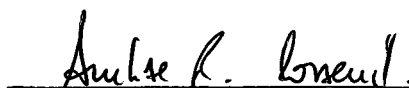
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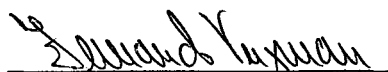
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To Carlos Dowling with love. And if reasons were necessary, for that day, years ago, when he said between one sip of wine and another: "I've just read this amazing book, A Clockwork Orange. Have you heard of it?"

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## ABSTRACT

BLISSFUL VIOLENCE  
AMBIGUITY IN STANLEY KUBRICK'S *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE*

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UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA  
2002

Supervisor: Dr. Anelise Reich Corseuil

The aim of the present thesis is to analyse the construction of ambiguity in the narrative of the film *A Clockwork Orange*, by Stanley Kubrick (1971). In a selection of scenes, I investigate the mechanisms that operate in the relation of identification-detachment that the film promotes between the protagonist and the viewer, and the peculiar way in which the film depicts violence, which are the two main faces ambiguity acquires in the film. In order to discuss Kubrick's identity as an auteur, I draw upon writings from the *Cahier du Cinéma* to Roland Barthes (1987). And in the analysis of *A Clockwork Orange*, narrative theories by Genette (1990), Chatman (1993) and Kozloff (1988) are employed. The thesis also dialogues with the criticism on Kubrick's films developed by Kolker (1980), and Menezes (2001), among others. Stanley Kubrick's filmography is marked by controversies. As an auteur, Kubrick seems to be characterised by the escape from a precise definition. His films present a movement toward ambiguity which begins with more traditional structures and characters, gradually abandoning secure moral positions. Three films will be discussed as a sample of the director's filmography in order to trace the evolution of his world view and style: *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963), *2001 - A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). The director's pessimistic view of humankind in face of civilisation is reflected in a narrative form that favours ambiguity and avoids value judgement. It is also possible to notice, in the director's work, a refusal of the identification strategies characteristic of the apparatus of mainstream cinema. The pathway to ambiguity that could be perceived in Kubrick's trajectory finds its most problematic moment in *A Clockwork Orange*, which came to be his most polemic film.

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## RESUMO

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UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA  
2002

Orientadora: Dr. Anelise Reich Corseuil

A presente dissertação tem como objetivo analisar a construção da ambigüidade na narrativa do filme *Laranja Mecânica*, de Stanley Kubrick (1971). Eu investigo, nas cenas selecionadas, os mecanismos que operam na relação identificação-afastamento que o filme promove entre o protagonista e o espectador, assim como o modo peculiar como o filme trata a violência, por serem essas as duas principais faces que a ambigüidade adquire no filme. A fim de discutir a identidade de Kubrick como auteur, eu recorro aos textos desde os *Cahiers du Cinéma* a Roland Barthes (1987). Na análise de *Laranja Mecânica*, são empregadas teorias da narrativa de Genette (1990), Chatman (1993) e Kozloff (1988). A dissertação dialoga ainda com a crítica aos filmes de Kubrick empreendida por Kolker (1980) e Menezes (2001) entre outros. A filmografia de Kubrick é marcada por controvérsias. Como um auteur, Kubrick parece caracterizar-se pela fuga de uma definição precisa. Seus filmes apresentam um movimento em direção à ambigüidade que se inicia com estruturas e personagens mais tradicionais, abandonando gradualmente as posições morais seguras. Três filmes são discutidos como uma amostra da obra do diretor, de modo a traçar a evolução de seu estilo e sua visão de mundo: *Dr. Fantástico ou Como Aprendi a Parar de me Preocupar e Amar a Bomba* (1963), *2001- Uma Odisséia no Espaço* (1968) e *De Olhos Bem Fechados* (1999). A visão pessimista do diretor em face da civilização reflete-se na forma narrativa que favorece a ambigüidade e evita julgamentos de valor. Percebe-se ainda, na obra do diretor, uma recusa das estratégias clássicas de identificação. A trajetória em direção à ambigüidade nos filmes de Kubrick tem seu momento mais problemático em *Laranja Mecânica*, que veio a ser seu mais polêmico filme.

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## Introduction

This is where the real weepy and like tragic part of  
the story begins, oh my brothers and only friends<sup>1</sup>  
*A Clockwork Orange*

The cinema industry produces, now and then, pieces that have the power to become unforgettable, to move numerous audiences or to insult them, to keep the media busy for good or for bad and to become symbols of an age. When *A Clockwork Orange* was first released, in 1971, the world of arts gained one of such remarkable moments. And a problem. The film, adapted from Anthony Burgess's homonymous novel, and produced and directed by Stanley Kubrick, generated a controversy in which attack and defence were equally passionate, and integrated a debate that has survived persistently these thirty years without a pacific conclusion.

The paradoxical reactions to the work seem to reflect a strong ambiguity within the film itself. The disturbing effect of *A Clockwork Orange* may not be only related to the acts of violence that it pictures but to Kubrick's style and narrative choices as well. As Pauline Kael notes (in the article in which she strongly attacks the work and the director), "the film has a distinctive style of estrangement (...) the movie doesn't look like others, or sound like them."<sup>2</sup> One of the indicators (or consequences) of this estrangement is that the film hardly fits a genre classification. In the absence of a suitable category, some critics, as Scott Thill in his *Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*<sup>3</sup>, have labelled *A Clockwork Orange* as a science fiction piece. But the classification shows to be questionable, for the film could also be said to be a psychological drama, or a black comedy, or many other imaginable hybrid categories. While it contains elements of all those genres, the film does not seem to fully belong to any of them.

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<sup>1</sup> All dialogue quotations, in the epigraphs or within the text, are direct transcriptions from the films.

<sup>2</sup> Pauline Kael. "Stanley Strangelove". *The New Yorker*, January, 1972. In: *The Kubrick Site*.

<sup>3</sup> A Clockwork Orange (entry). <http://www.geocities.com/area51/shire/3566/clockwork.html>



The fundamental concern of the analysis is the ambiguity that characterises *A Clockwork Orange* and which seems to be responsible for the disturbing effect of the film. The present thesis is motivated by the controversy that surrounds the film, or to put it better, by the wish to understand how can a work of art move its audience in such a contradictory way, what are the elements operating in the construction of that disturbing narrative, by what means can it achieve that level of ambiguity and what are its moral implications. In order to answer these questions, I will investigate the dubious relation that the film suggests between the protagonist and the viewer and the peculiar way in which the film depicts violence, including the violence that is practised by the film itself against the viewer, and not only by character against character.

Ambiguity is a trace that seems to be present in every element of the picture, from its construction of characters and the mechanisms of narration (the camera movements, the use of voice-over, the management of the information presented to the viewer), passing through the *mise-en-scène* (with its peculiar use of colours and the arrangement of the sets), finally overcoming the boundaries of the film to invade the space of the viewer. The film plays with the spectator's identification and detachment from the protagonist. Both in the novel and in the film, the narrative is submitted to the verbal narrator Alex (performed in the film by Malcolm McDowell) who presents the events according to his own view of them. The amorality of his character, the perverse vision of violence as a funny game, the placid and distanced reaction before the victims' suffering contrasting with his self-pity, the traces of his problematic personality and world view find echo in the narrative. In the film, the *mise-en-scène*, editing and camera movement reinforce the ambiguous effect, alternating elements of estrangement—which enlarge the distance between Alex and the spectator—with strategies of identification that approximate the viewer to Alex's experience. And while it presents a character that haunts the peace and order of society, the film mitigates the moral distance

between spectator and protagonist, and suggests that the audience empathise with him. The ambiguity of *A Clockwork Orange* reverberates through the universe of the spectator, it is present in the different interpretations that the film offers, it jeopardises the security of the viewer who has already constructed an aesthetic and narrative pattern that provides her with a pacific understanding of the stories, the viewer who has learned to read in the school of Hollywood cinema.

Such a disturbing style, rather uncommon in a film of the great industry, would not pass unnoticed. *A Clockwork Orange* was recognised as a masterpiece. The film was named the Best Film of the year and Kubrick Best Director by The New York Film Critics, and earned Oscar nominations for best picture, director, adapted screenplay and film editing. It became a model of technical excellence and an icon of pop culture. Yet, in spite of such fervent acclamation it also faced a violent opposition. In England, the polemics reached the Parliament, and the aggressive reactions to the work culminated in the director's decision to withdraw the film from distribution in the country after sixty-one weeks of successful exhibition. But British polemics, although probably the most intense, was not an isolated case. In the United States, thanks to the scenes of violence and sex it presented, the film was classified as X-rated by the Motion Picture Association of America, a label that attributed to it the status of 'adult film' and restricted considerably its audience<sup>4</sup>. And even Anthony Burgess, the author of the original novel and a fervent defender of Kubrick in the press by the time of the film's release, stated about the cinematic adaptation, years later, in his autobiography: "a vindication of free will had become an exaltation of the urge to sin."<sup>5</sup> The original novel had already had its share in the polemics. First published in 1962, the book inspired opposition even before printing. Burgess' literary agent resisted presenting the novel to a publisher, because, in his words, its "pornography of violence would be certain to make it

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<sup>4</sup> *The Kubrick Site*

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Burgess. "You've Had Your Time." In: *The Kubrick Site*

unacceptable."<sup>6</sup> In England, its native land, Burgess's work did not find great support. What the author considered to be a defence of liberum arbitrium, a philosophical lampoon against the mistaken methods with which the State treated social problems, was dismissed as a pop eulogy to violence, with a potential pernicious influence on the youth. In the USA, on the other hand, the novel inspired respect of the critics and soon was worshipped in the pop culture circles<sup>7</sup>. Burgess had to make concessions, nevertheless. W.W. Norton Inc., which bought the book in New York, demanded the exclusion of the last chapter, in which Alex, the violent hero, realises that he is too grown-up to go on attacking people or vandalising the streets, and renounces violence to look for a woman with whom he would have a son. Kubrick's film is based on the American version of the novel, therefore excluding this final maturation process of Alex's.

It was only with the screen adaptation, however, that the novel acquired widespread fame, which for Burgess was more a curse than a blessing. The media ascribed to Burgess as well as to Kubrick the responsibility of creating the polemic story, and the writer was called to defend the film in the press (replacing the director, who tended to be reticent about his position), and got himself involved in an exhaustive debate which was generally restricted to the issues of violence and a supposed pornographic mark of the film, rather than in any philosophical, sociological or psychological question that *A Clockwork Orange* raised.

According to critic Christian Bugge, the controversy was due not simply to the content of the film itself, but also to the fact that its release coincided with a moment when the theme of violence was particularly unwelcome. In Britain, the set of the most acute polemics, urban violence was on the spot. In that year of 1972, the tensions around the Northern Ireland conflict had achieved one of its most problematic moments, when the IRA bomb outrage at Aldershot killed five civilians. Bugge explains:

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<sup>6</sup> Christian Bugge. "The Clockwork Controversy." In: *The Kubrick Site*.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Burgess. "You've Had Your Time." In: *The Kubrick Site*

There existed a certain sense of inevitability that given the contemporary mood the film was not going to be judged on its own merits, but put into a much larger context of societal concerns. Since the 1950s more and more onus had been directed towards the accountability of the power of films to influence their spectators. Many had thought that the arts were going too far and they needed to be checked. *A Clockwork Orange* was at the end of a long line of hysteria that was bound to lead to its downfall<sup>8</sup>.

In the press, one of the most critical moments of the polemics was afforded by *The New York Times*. Between January and February 1972, the newspaper published a debate involving the film critic Fred Hechinger, the actor Malcolm McDowell, and Stanley Kubrick himself. Motivated by the director's declarations that man was "an ignoble savage"<sup>9</sup> and McDowell's provocative statement that liberals hated the film "because they're dreamers and it shows them realities"<sup>10</sup>, Hechinger developed his argument against *A Clockwork Orange*. For him "any liberal with brains should hate Clockwork, not as a matter of artistic criticism but for the trend this film represents. An alert liberal should recognize the voice of fascism."<sup>11</sup>

And indeed, the film seems to call for a reflection that goes beyond violence and sex on themselves, or a mere rejection to an unfamiliar style. The film provokes questions about the results—or more precisely the failure—of humankind's attempt to mask the violent nature of itself and of the civilisation it has built. The idea that the film talks about something broader than the saga of a psychotic teenager provided a connection between *A Clockwork Orange* and the rest of Stanley Kubrick's filmography and led to the necessity of including other films in this study. In the director's work, there seems to be a prevailing pessimism in face of

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Craig McGregor. "Nice Boy from the Bronx?" *The New York Times*, January 30, 1972. In: *The Kubrick Site*

<sup>10</sup> Tom Burke. "Malcolm McDowell: 'Liberals, They Hate Clockwork.'" *The New York Times*, January 30, 1972, In: *The Kubrick Site*

<sup>11</sup> Fred Hechinger. "A Liberal Fights Back". *The New York Times*, February 13, 1972. In: *The Kubrick Site*

Western capitalist civilisation. The institutions it created in order to organise and govern itself—be it the army, the State or the family—are presented throughout the films as the human's main source of pain. And people, unable to understand themselves and the world, are caught in the trap they themselves have prepared, becoming dehumanised, or insane, or marginal.

Although *A Clockwork Orange* remains the centre of the thesis, the study of the other films offers an overview of the development of that vision of human fate, showing the different faces it can acquire in the various contexts and how the films evolve from an already dark but still hopeful prospect of civilisation, to the abandoning of beliefs, and the final acceptance of ambiguities and contradictions of human nature. The films approached here are *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963), *2001—A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). Among the director's filmography these works—all of them also polemic pieces—seem to be the most directly concerned with the predicament of ambiguity.

The first chapter is dedicated to the discussion of how those ideas are presented in the films, trying to show the trajectory towards a loss of centres that is delineated in the director's work. And since the whole point of the chapter depends on the idea that there is a certain coherence among the films which is related both with thematic concerns and with the development of an aesthetic project (which integrates those themes in the formal elements of the movie), it was pertinent to provide a brief review on the notion of authorship. Beginning with the French champions of the *politique des auteurs* and ending in the post-structuralist writings of Barthes and Foucault, I try to determine the sense in which Kubrick is taken as an *auteur* in this thesis.

Chapter II presents an analysis of *A Clockwork Orange*. Starting from the idea that this film occupies a special place in Kubrick's work, thanks to the treatment it gives to a

problematic issue such as violence, the chapter is an attempt to investigate the peculiar way in which the narrative operates in the construction of the protagonist and the consequent problematic relation the film establishes with the spectator. Along the discussion, other critics' analysis will be used whether to support or to dialogue with the ideas presented here. A greater attention is given to the writings of Hans Feldman and Philip Kolker, both of whom provide insightful interpretations of the director's films, with the caution of avoiding as much as possible a restrictive view of the works. Besides, the two critics—who adopt antagonistic positions in relation to *A Clockwork Orange*—focus on the ambiguity of the cinematic text, which is the core of the thesis as well. Also useful was the text by Paulo Menezes that offers a counterpoint to Kolker's argument against the absence of a value judgement in the film. In addition to that, I shall resort to authors such as Gérard Genette, Seymour Chatman and Sarah Kozloff in order to support the analysis, particularly in what concerns narrative problems, since most part of the text concentrates on the roles of the voice-over and the camera-narrator in the construction of the identification which the film tries to establish between the protagonist and the spectator. I may also make references to the writings of non-academic critics, like the already mentioned Fred Hechinger and Pauline Kael. These names were brought up here in order to offer a broader view of the reception of *A Clockwork Orange*, emphasising the turbulence the film caused in different areas. Hechinger and Kael, whose works are compromised with the media and the cinematic industry rather than with academia, produce texts which reflect more closer (and are more influent on) the taste of the general public, reaching an audience who is not achieved by the theories of the scholar.

Finally, in the Conclusion, the text reflects upon the implications of the film's ambiguity, considering the absence of a moral position that could console the viewer with a secure interpretation of the work. Also a brief comparison between the protagonist of *A Clockwork Orange* and that of another of Kubrick's film, namely *Full Metal Jacket* (1987),

will be employed in order to discuss the problems involved in the already mentioned identification process.

## Chapter 1

### Kubrick's Anti-Identity

or

### How I Learn to Stop Worrying and Love Ambiguity

- You write "born to kill" in your helmet and you wear a piece bottom. What's that supposed to be, some kind of sick joke?
- (...) I think I was trying to suggest something about the duality of men, Sr.
- What?
- The duality of men. Jungian thing, Sr.
- (Pause)
- Whose side are you, son?

*Full Metal Jacket*

#### 1.0 Introduction

However different the approaches that Stanley Kubrick's work has received from the critics, there seems to be a consensus among them in what concerns the classification of Kubrick as an *auteur*. Even when the term is not mentioned explicitly, the idea that the director belongs to that select group of those who, among the proliferation of names within the cinematic industry, can be called *artist* is an underlying assumption in nearly all the material written about him. Alexander Walker defined this characteristic mark as a "conceptual talent", or the rare capacity of developing a certain cinematic concept in every movie, elaborating his singular vision in such a peculiar way that each film becomes unique (9). García Mainar points Kubrick as "one of the few 'auteurs' in contemporary cinema", a director from whom "one could expect a relatively coherent filmography." (4) Norman Kagan is more eloquent by stating that Kubrick is "the auteur critic's dream", thanks to his



remarkable control over the film-making process, from the writing of the script to the publicity. For Kagan, “his films are probably as close to personal works of art as any in the commercial cinema.” (12)

Frequently compared to Coppola and Arthur Penn, Kubrick has been recognised as a filmmaker who managed to combine the commercial success and a signature, thus refusing to make concessions to the industry (but not breaking with it) and developing a distinctive style. In *A Cinema of Loneliness*, Robert Kolker calls attention to the place occupied by directors like those in the history of Hollywood film industry. After the crisis Hollywood faced in the 1950’s—due, among other factors, to the popularisation of television and the threaten of censorship during the McCarthyist years, with the black lists of the HUAC (House of Un-American Activities Committee)—the big studios ceased to be the support and security for the business, or “the centralized community of administrator and craftsmen who [could] be drawn upon from production to production.” (5) The context in which directors like Kubrick, Coppola or Scorsese are inscribed is one of an apparent independence for the filmmakers, since the studios are no longer a controlling entity. But associated to freedom, the change brought a greater responsibility for the individual productions, for each film has to cope now with its own commercial risks. “The ‘new Hollywood’ is in fact the old Hollywood without security and without community. Money was still the beginning, middle, and end of its existence, and therefore fear of formal and contextual experiment in its creation reigns as strongly as ever.” (5) In those conditions, the directors who had the ambition to develop a personal style and carry out experimentation should do so within the constraints of the economic structure. In order to survive in the business, they could not abandon the necessity of profit. Such was the challenge imposed on Kubrick, who managed to conciliate the demands of the industry with a conceptual project, creating pieces that could be at the same time box offices and great innovations in terms of cinematic language, as *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The idea that Stanley Kubrick is an *auteur*, then, is putative among critics. Since I agree with them as to the existence of a signature, which means, a remarkable style linked to a particular conception of the world that identifies and is developed along Kubrick's films, I will take that as an assumption in my own analysis of the director's work. What needs to be defined at this point is, first, the concept of authorship adopted, and second, the elements in Kubrick's work that characterises him as an *auteur*.

### 1.1 Notions of authorship

Developed under the influence of French structuralism, the term *auteur* as originally employed by French writers of *Cahiers du Cinéma* did not only defined an individual who was responsible for the creation of a film. More important than that, those critics—some of them also directors—were involved in the project of raising the status of cinema as an art form that, despite being a collective production, should be used as a vehicle for personal expression. Partly driven by a discomfort that has always visited critics and filmmakers since the birth of cinema, *Cahiers* members were moved by a desire to define the frontiers between cinema and the other arts, and as Caughie puts it, “appealing for a cinema that was truly cinematic.” (35) The *politique des auteurs*, as the French called it, consisted of a new posture in film criticism, one that concentrated on the expression of the artist's personality as a criterion for valuation. It is worth remembering, however, that the *Cahiers* never attempted a theory of the *auteur*. The term *auteur theory*, which is largely used in English, is due to a (mis)translation by Andrew Sarris, in his 1960's version of the *politique des auteurs*.

Crucial for the *Cahiers* notion of artistry is the distinction between *auteur* and *metteur en scène*, which, as Buscombe quotes, is developed by André Bazin in his review of *The Red Badge of Courage*, in *Cahiers* no. 27. “Bazin distinguishes between Hitchcock, a true *auteur*, and Huston, who is only a *metteur en scène*, who has ‘no truly personal style’”, says

Buscombe. "Huston merely adapts, though often very skilfully, the material given him, instead of transforming it into something genuinely his own." (23-4) *Cahiers* critics were reacting against the *tradition de la qualité*, that dominated the French cinema in the 1950's, with names such as Autant-Lara and Delannoy, "a tradition which gave the central creative role to the writers (...), whose work was mainly adaptations of 'quality' novels, leaving to the directors the secondary role of implementing their scenarios." (Caughie 35) Moreover, they went against the grain of traditional film criticism which, no longer disturbed by the question of whether cinema was art but still caught by the paradox of an art that was also industry, tended to value those films that were as far as possible from the commercial cinema, mainly the European productions. *Cahiers* articles championed not only what is conventionally seen as "art film", but also, and mainly, the great names of Hollywood industry, such as Orson Welles and John Ford. In that sense, they adopted a rebellious posture, defying the common opposition between high culture and a less valuable popular one.

The *politique des auteurs* then, threatened the notion of art as belonging to a transcendent realm, beyond "mundane affairs", such as commercial profit. Nevertheless their belief in the individual talent risked to be another form of essentialism, one that defended the artist as an "illuminated being", or, as Buscombe defines, "the notion of a 'divine spark' which separates off the artist from ordinary mortals, which divide the genius from the journeyman." (24) Besides, as Caughie remarks, their political position was one of indifference and abstention. Abandoning the usual content based analysis, they concentrated their attention on the *mise-en-scène*, looking for the traces of a personal style (36). The despise for political issues that could permeate the movies, and their focus on the "filmic aspects of the film" brought to *Cahiers* critics the stigma of reactionary formalists. About that, André Bazin was cautious enough to ponder: "the individual transcends society, but society is also and above all *within* him. So there can be no definitive criticism which does not take into consideration the

social determinism, the historical combination of circumstances and the technical background which to a large extent determines it.” (qtd. in Buscombe 26)

The notion of *auteur*, thus, as the *Cahiers* used it, presents obvious limitations. In the following decades, the *politique des auteurs* was subject to appropriations and modifications that tried to adapt some of those principles to a less radical approach to films. Edward Buscombe’s article *Ideas of Authorship* suggests that Bazin’s effort was not enough to free criticism from its conceptual bias, its view of the artist as “an individual that transcends society.” For Buscombe, it was necessary to eliminate the dissociation of the film and the artist from the history of cinema and from the context of production (32). What seems to have remained of *auteurism* in more recent criticism is the idea that, as Norman Kagan puts it, a movie director has the same freedom and authority of a writer, a painter or other artists in the elaboration of his creative product (11).

With the development of post-structuralist thought, the idea of authorship once defended by the modernist tradition (the *politique des auteurs* being only one branch of it) was threatened. In the end of the 1960’s, Roland Barthes’ article *The Death of the Author* defends that the Author is a product of modernity that emerged in the Middle Age and acquired prestige thanks to the individualist ideology of capitalism. Barthes attacks the critical tradition, which tends to focus on the person of the Author in order to find an explanation to the text, therefore reducing its possibilities of meaning: “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.” (212) According to Barthes, a text is not a linear sequence of words leading to a final essence, but a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.” (211)

The idea that the author is a cultural-ideological construct returns with Foucault in *What Is an Author?* Less enthusiastic than Barthes, Foucault alerts that the supposed death

of the author announced by Barthes could be in fact only a change of centres in which the author is replaced by other notions, such as the *work* or the *writing*, which, as much as the author, are not established units of meaning, but concepts variable according to cultural values. He traces the history of the author as a function of discourse, pointing how the concept of authorship changed in different periods until acquiring the privileged position it came to occupy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and remarks how powerful is the author's name as a value criterion to attribute status to a work within a particular society. For Foucault, the rules for the construction of the author in modern literary criticism are derived from the Christian exegesis procedures to validate the authority of a text: there should be a "constant level of value" among the works of the same author, a "conceptual or theoretical coherence", a "stylistic unit" and historical coherence between the biography of the author and the events mentioned in the texts (151).

Not surprisingly, these seem to be also the general criteria to name a filmmaker an *auteur* in the writings of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* and subsequent supporters of the *politique des auteurs*. In their effort to establish the identity of cinema as an independent art form, and to find a parameter for aesthetic valuation based on the supposed specificity of cinematic media, *auteur* critics brought to cinema the label, the guarantee certificate of the work that already existed in other arts, which is, the name of the author. Foucault exposes the fragility of the author-function and insists, in chorus with Barthes, that the author's name carries a set of values—a number of characteristics, expectable themes and style—that tries to contain the flow of meanings in a text, or, in his words, "the author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning." (159) For Foucault, "the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction." (159) But Foucault lucidly adds:

“It would be pure romanticism, however, to imagine a culture in which the fictive would operate in absolutely free state, in which fiction would be put at the disposal of everyone and would develop without passing through something like a necessary constraining figure.”  
(159)

## 1.2 Kubrick as an *auteur*

If there is no escape, then, what is left to the critics is the awareness of their limitations and the wish to restrain as least as possible the flow of meanings in a work. So, when I adopt the notion of authorship I intend to take Stanley Kubrick’s name not as a label, but as a metonym to represent a group of works produced by that director, that carry certain meanings in common and that are the product, among other things, of the historical-cultural moment in which they are inscribed. What Kubrick, the artist, says about his own films only interests me if it is at work in the films themselves, but then, if those elements are already in the films, the directors explanations about them are redundant and can be used but as illustrations.

Moreover, dealing with Stanley Kubrick’s works is particularly interesting considering the debate about authorship that I summarised above. Kubrick seems to occupy two antagonistic positions. On the one hand, he conquered a certain space within cinema industry that guarantees him not only the freedom to develop his projects with little intervention of the commercial demands but also the status of *auteur* with all the weight it carries within it. On the other hand, Kubrick’s works seem to resist the containment implied by the name of the author. For one perspective, the whole of his work is highly heterogeneous. Unlike directors like Hitchcock or John Ford, his name cannot be connected to one single genre. From science fiction to war movies, including those films which hardly fit a generic classification, Kubrick moves through a variety of genres and themes that

troubles the work of the critic who tries to force uniformity in the whole of the director's work.

In addition to that, what the many texts which analyse Kubrick's productions under the influence of *auteur* ideas seem to find in common among the movies is exactly the avoidance of ready answers, a tendency toward ambiguity, producing meanings that escape clear-cut conclusions, or even a defined political-ideological stand. Films like *2001, A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) disturbed the critics for the multitude of interpretations they offer, and sometimes for the difficulty to find at least one. The position generally adopted in Kubrick's films accords with the post-structuralist principle, underlying the writings of Foucault and Barthes, that signification proliferates in the texts and that interpretations which search for essences or one hidden central message, tying the text to a closed meaning, eventually castrate their objects of analysis. Kubrick seems to refuse the reductionist burden by denying or threatening a centre. According to Kolker, "Kubrick's narrative work centrifugally. Parts of the whole are delineated and then set outside a center never seen or defined, and therefore non-existent. Kubrick's narrative are about the lack of cohesion, center, community." (81) What seems to unite Kubrick's work, then, and confers on it the coherence sought by the critics rather than being one common meaning is the very instability of meaning, creating perhaps not an identity but an anti-identity, which means, an identity characterised by the escape from a precise definition.

But even this tendency is far from being homogenous in the director's filmography. Rather, it is developed in a continuous process. The films seem to present a movement toward polyvalence which begins with more traditional structures and characters in the films of the 1950's, such as *Killer's Kiss* (1955), *Paths of Glory* (1957) and *Spartacus* (1960), gradually abandoning secure moral positions and characters easily identifiable as heroes to adopt a distant perspective, one that does not offer judgements, but leaves them open to the

audience in loose ends never tied up. That same movement represents the refusal of the identification strategies characteristic of the apparatus of mainstream cinema. As Mainar notices in his analysis of Kubrick's work, there is an "overall tendency to favor the construction of an external position for the viewer. The patterns of focalization exploit the films' capacity to present the visual material as too spectacular or too mysterious for the viewer to identify with it." (5) Kubrick's films, particularly those produced since *Lolita* (1961), tend to reserve a distant standpoint for the spectator, adverse to an uncompromised engagement of the viewer.

The matter of identification strategies will be taken further in the analysis of *A Clockwork Orange*, which is the focus of this thesis. At this point, however, I will concentrate on films that can offer a general understanding of the development of Kubrick's style before and after *A Clockwork Orange*, beginning with *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, passing through *2001* and Kubrick's last film *Eyes Wide Shut*. My purpose is to situate *A Clockwork Orange* in the broader context of the director's filmography, in dialogue with the other films, and to provide a brief view of how the "lost of a centre" takes form along his work, before analysing the specific case of *A Clockwork Orange*, in which that absence of an established moral stand, of a centre, that is, is responsible for the construction of a narrative that can lead to antagonistic—and sometimes rather problematic—interpretations, without compromising itself with any of them.

### 1.3 *Dr. Strangelove* and the failure of language

The initial project for *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* was not to produce a comedy. Based on the novel *Red Alert*, by Peter George, the film was supposed to be a tense and dramatic story about the extreme risks that the arms race posed to humanity. However, the absurdity of the situation described was so



acute that the story became risible<sup>12</sup>. *Dr. Strangelove* questions how far can nations go in the dispute for power, tracing a sinister prospect of a civilisation in which greed and the incapacity to understand and accept the other obliterates humanitarian values and even existence itself.

During the Cold War, the American general Ripper (Sterling Hayden) goes crazy, driven by his anti-Communist paranoid, and orders a nuclear attack on USSR. The Soviets, however, have produced a weapon so powerful that it could destroy all human and animal life on the planet, producing, as the Russian ambassador (Peter Bull) says “a cloud of radioactivity that would circle the Earth for 93 years.” The Doomsday Machine, as it was called, was an automatic and irreversible super nuclear bomb. As soon as an attack was perceived in Russian territory, the weapon would trigger global destruction without the possibility of human interference.

The film is a mark in Kubrick’s construction of characters. Most of the previous productions exhibited conventional heroes who stood for models of conduct, as orators of the principles defended in the film. *Paths of Glory*, for instance, is exemplary of that trace. Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas) is a lawyer and as so he is allowed to utter what could be only underlying ideas: “I can’t believe that the noblest impulse in man, that is, compassion for another, is completely dead here.” The despair expressed by Dax is coherent within the context of a war in which enemy and allied are hardly distinguishable. But while the world has such men as Dax, there is still hope. He has principles, he believes in justice and in institutions, even though these beliefs are swallowed up by impotence in the end.

From the 1960’s on, however, the profile of Kubrick’s characters change in direct proportion to the erosion of that former hope. If *Lolita* already has in Humbert Humbert an atypical hero, *Dr. Strangelove* is the final abandoning of all heroism. The film does not have

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<sup>12</sup> *Stanley Kubrick – A Life in Pictures*, by Jan Harlan (2001)

a central character, nobody is able to solve the conflict, and nobody escapes the ridicule. The only character who tries to find coherence and keep seriousness is Mandrake (one of the three roles performed by Peter Sellers), but he is caught up in a tangle of bathetic situations which can only contribute to reinforce the stupidity of the environment to which he belongs. Mandrake tries to convince general Ripper to cancel his order of attack but his speech does not affect Ripper's lunatic thought. He then tries to communicate to the American president (performed by the same Sellers), but now the obstacle is the rigidity of the military structure, which seems to be beyond reasoning. In fact, sensible reasoning is exactly what does not exist in the film, or else, the film deals precisely with that lack of sense. The idiocy of a society that produces a weapon to destroy itself is revealed in the most trivial acts, like a phone call. Conversation is useless because words are impotent. As Kolker defends, "it is a film about language that creates its own destruction, its own death and the death of the world." (91)

The story is concentrated in three settings. With the exception of a few external shots and the first appearance of General Buck Turgdison (George. C. Scott) in his bedroom, the action takes place in the War Room, in General Ripper's office, and in the interior of a B-52. All of them are enclosed, claustrophobic spaces. And enclosed less by actual walls than by the inefficiency of the communication they try to establish with each other and with the outside world. Although verbal language is insistently used, it seems that meaning is never achieved, as if words were "floating signifiers". In one of the most hilarious dialogues (actually, a monologue) of the film, the American president tries to report to the Russian premier—who is drunk—the incident with general Ripper. After a long, banal and amiable greeting, which carries a slightly sexual connotation, the president finally introduces the subject:

Now, then, Dimitri, you know how we've always talked about the possibility of something going wrong with the bomb. The bomb, Dimitri, the hydrogen bomb. Now, what happens is: one of our base commanders, he had a sort of... well, he went a little funny in the head, you know, just a little funny. And he went and did a little silly thing. Well, I tell you what he did. He ordered his planes to attack your country.

Language can mitigate the shock of the information but not the information itself. What was supposed to be an extremely serious talk between the leaders of the two most powerful (and antagonistic) nations in the world loses completely its sense when it slides into a futile lovers-like argument: "Why do you think I'm calling you, just to say hello? Of course I like to speak to you! Of course I like to say hello! Not now, but any time, Dimitri." The extravagant diplomacy is obviously incompatible with the seriousness of the problem. The film satirises a civilisation to which the respect for human life is reduced to codes of conduct and civility. When the values of that civilisation are lost, meaning vanishes as well. Not coincidentally, trying to explain the origin of his paranoia, Ripper attributes it to his realisation of a "loss of essence", which for him is located in the contamination of what he calls "our precious bodily fluids."

The formalities of the language are a surrogate for the lost centre. Language is a device to try to establish a logic, to fix a meaning, to find coherence in the crisis. It is at the same time insufficient, for it never fills the gap of significance, and excessive, because it produces no more than an accumulation of empty forms. About Ripper's discourse, Kolker reflects: "there is a perfectly logical movement to these words, just as there is perfectly logical movement to the mechanism of defence and retaliation that makes up the war machine. But the logic of both is internal only: the forms are correct, but what the forms signify is illogical and destructive." (95) The logic only exists inside that system of rules, that syntax governed

by intricate norms which is unable to produce a practical result other than destruction. Verbosity would not save the planet.

The choice of the satirical mode to narrate the story is revealing of at least three important traces of the film. Satire, as Pasold puts it, is loaded with an inherent pessimism which is felt first in the absence of heroes and then in the fact that it does not signal to a change in the world it portrays (48-9). In *Dr. Strangelove*, the fruitless verbal battle keeps going while the world is being destroyed. The last sequence shows the magnificent nuclear mushrooms growing slowly while a sweet and joyous feminine voice sings “we’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when, but I know we’ll meet again some sunny day.” The song stands out people’s incapacity to perceive the magnitude of the situation they created, reinforcing the disparity between words and concrete reality thoroughly presented in the film.

Pessimism is a remarkable trace of Kubrick’s work. Although acquiring different faces, a feeling that civilisation has come to a cul-de-sac prevails in the films. Characters seem impotent before the adversities of the world their discursive practices have helped to create. In *Dr. Strangelove*, more than in any of the other movies, the result of that contradiction is grievous. And yet, the film is extremely funny. One of the reasons why we can laugh at our own misfortune is that, unlike traditional melodrama, we do not get emotionally involved with the tragic aspect of the story. As Kolker states, satire provides “the distance needed to observe the process, it removes the barrier of psychological realism” (99) and therefore “demands that we be observers and not ‘identify’ with the characters.” (100)

*Dr. Strangelove*, then, denies commotion and proposes analysis. The world as it is depicted in the film looks like a distorted mirror image of a reality that is in fact shocking and sinister. Bravely released amid the collective hysteria of the Cold War, the film vexed the Pentagon for its bruising attack to the bellicosity of their international policy (and the Soviet’s as well), used to sustain another form of fundamentalism which was the anti-Communist

crusade. The film adopts a clear and secure moral position, which is also typical of a satire. As Pasold says after Frye, the satirical work tends to be moralist (50), in the sense that it judges a certain behaviour on the grounds of a specific right-and-wrong conception, implying the belief in a determined ideal of correctness.

#### 1.4 *2001* – The perpetual search

The beliefs, however, explode with the bomb by the end of the film. In Kubrick's next work, *2001–A Space Odyssey*, the moral judgements, if there is any, is thoroughly diffuse. Critics have taken pains to find a coherent interpretation for the enigmatic narrative of the film, sometimes even forcing a solution. Feldman, for instance, in his anxiety to explain the meaning of the monolith, says that “its appearance again at the deathbed of the astronaut clearly [sic] suggests that the rebirth of the human spirit will establish the species upon a broader spiritual basis than that upon which it had previously existed.” (15) If there is something clear about the monolith it is that it is not clear at all.

*2001* is probably the most hermetic of Kubrick's films. The puzzling elements of its highly symbolic narrative have generated a number of interpretations, sometimes clashing ones, which evolves around two main lines, defined by Kagan as a poetic-scientific interpretation and the view of the film as a new myth (176). The former sees the story as a review of the evolutionist conceptions of the origins of civilisation whereas the later would be concerned with the understanding of fundamental truths of life and the universe. I want to suggest here one possible interpretation of the film which transits between these two main streams, and since my purpose is to raise questions that can be enlightening for the coming

analysis of *A Clockwork Orange*, I will concentrate on one element of the film, namely the figure of the monolith as a representation of ambiguity.

The story covers a time span of about four million years in the history of humanity, from the primate man to the space colonisation, in chronological order, including what is probably the longest time ellipsis in the history of fiction. The narrative is divided in three parts—*The Dawn of Man*, *Mission Jupiter*, and *Jupiter and Beyond*, each of them punctuated by the appearance of the monolith, an enigma that remains unresolved.

*The Dawn of Man* presents human being in its primitive form, as the ape, still hardly distinguishable from other species in what concerns their capacity to compete for survival in the ecosystem. The apes, integrated in their environment, seem to live in a state of total present, or better, in an atemporal state, where notions like past, present and future do not exist. Life consists in keeping on living, in trying to provide food and shelter, their defence against the adversities of the environment lies in their gregariousness.

That is so until the interference of a new force. After finding the monolith, the ape has the first insight that will not only mark its difference from the other species but will constitute its power over them. The moment the ape discovers that the bone of a dead animal can be used first as a tool to acquire food and then as a weapon to guarantee its protection, that is, the moment the ape discovers its potential violence, history begins. Both nourishment and protection are associated with the power to kill and to dominate the other. The monolith works as a catalyst that originates the notion of time, since it is only after that first insight that the ape is able to interfere in its environment and to start the process that in the film culminates in human's colonisation of this and other planets. Violence, thus, is neither good nor evil, it is both. It is a form of energy, a propelling force that initiates the process of evolution.

Moreover, in the ape's vision of that first bone weapon the primary principle that characterises the civilisation to come is delineated: the one who is most powerful imposes its will on others. When the two groups of apes face each other to compete for water, what could be suggested is that power is external to individuals, it lies in the supplement, the accessory. The apes are equal, it is the equipment that makes them different. Power, then, is directly connected to technology.

The direction humanity took after the ape's discovery is one of sophistication of the early weapon and domestication of the primary urges. The necessity of food and shelter is still the underlying motivation of human actions but the brutality of that first act is disguised by an apparatus of civility which is very well represented, as Feldman notices, in the repeated scenes of meals. Feldman compares the scenes of eating in *2001* in order to suggest how man has tamed his instincts but, at the same time, how the means he used to do it showed to be fragile. The ape's brutal act of eating contrasts radically with the synthetic food served to the astronauts—boxes of rations or shapeless pastes, apparently with no appeal to the senses, which fulfil the need for nourishing but disconnect it from the pleasure that could be perceived in the ape's devouring another animal's meat—and finally with the final scene in which Bowman, the surviving astronaut (performed by Keir Dullea), dines ceremoniously at an 18<sup>th</sup> century table. For Feldman the scenes state that “the acquisition of food [is] the primal need of the instinctual man.” (14) Humankind has transformed the act of eating into a ritual, cleaning it from its barbarism and as a consequence, humans distanced themselves from their origins and became mechanised.

When the monolith reappears after being buried for four million years, civilisation has to face an element that connects it to its genesis, a mark that brings back that violent force which provoked the whole process from the bone to the spaceship, an element that had been disguised, but was always there nevertheless. The gestures of the researchers touching the

monolith in a mix of curiosity and fear mimics that of the apes. Both are ignorant of the power, at once productive and destructive, embodied in that piece, and for both, the monolith is beyond understanding. As it is said in the recorded message in the Discovery, "its origin or purpose is still a total mystery."

The second confrontation with the monolith, and the previous one as well, represents a crisis. The process of humanisation initiated with the first bone-weapon has come to a point of retrogression when civilisation becomes so sophisticated that it ends up in sterility and humanity then turns into non-humanity. Relations between people are generally restricted to formalities. The prolix language experienced in *Dr. Strangelove* gives place here to a disturbing silence. Of the one hundred and forty minutes of film, approximately only forty are filled with dialogues, and those are often mediated by artificial resources or are direct interaction between man and machine.

But the most striking of the contradictions of civilisation is the figure of the super-computer HAL9000. The computer represents the point at which the boundary between human and machine blurs, as much as the difference between the ape and the other animals was blurred in the beginning. One of the astronauts says about HAL: "whether or not he has real feelings is something I don't think anyone can answer." He is, nevertheless, the only character, after the apes, who expresses emotions. HAL is the most charismatic figure in the film. As Mainar observes, "HAL is given the capacity to focalize internally" (129), a resource that helps to promote identification with the audience. Besides, he uses language to manipulate and deceive, he shows pride and resentment, he implores for mercy before death, showing therefore, a more humanised behaviour than any actual human character. When the computer kills the sleeping members of the crew, their death is informed by a succession of digital messages: "Computer malfunctioning. Life functions critical. Life functions terminated." When HAL is disconnected, we hear: "Stop, Dave. I'm afraid. I'm afraid, Dave.



Dave, my mind is going, I can feel it.” “I can feel it”, he insists many times, as to convince us of a genuine emotion. Then he starts to say nonsense, loosing consciousness, and sings a love song until his voice silences completely.

Mainar states that HAL’s disconnection represents the end of our conception of logic. After that, Dave Bowman, the remaining astronaut, will enter a voyage, the meaning of which our system of thought is incapable to grasp (130). In this kind of new dimension in which his journey ends, the notion of chronological time seems to vanish again. There, in a room decorated in a mix of styles from several periods, Bowman meets himself in different stages of what should be his life to come: as an old man having his meal, and as a moribund in his deathbed. Although joined in the same space, all of them seem lonely, isolated. Then, in the middle of the room, the monolith appears for the last time.

The final shot shows a foetus floating in space, an image that has suggested to some critics, like Feldman, Mainar and Kolker, the indication of a positive prospect for humanity, since the starchild would signal to the possibility of rebirth as an affirmation of life. Feldman and Polo see *2001* as a theological film, stating the presence of a superior intelligence, a god-like or extra-terrestrial entity materialised by the monolith. For Polo, particularly, the end of the film would indicate that man achieved a state of self-sufficiency, becoming himself his own god (115-6).

The film sustains that and other quite different interpretations. What I would like to emphasise here is the element of ambiguity which characterises *2001* probably more than any of other Kubrick’s work. From this perspective, the end of the film could point to a new beginning, yes, but instead of being positive or negative, it would stand beyond value judgement, representing life as an endless cycle that succeeds itself and will always encompass elements that cannot be grasped. That would be, then, an acceptance of the unavoidable ambivalence of human nature.

In that context, the figure of the monolith may be not only ambiguous, but it may be ambiguity itself, represented by a material, very concrete object, whose shape, texture and volume can be perfectly perceived by the senses and described by verbal language so that there is no doubt of its existence. And yet, that dark, plane and solid piece is diffuse and uncontainable. Just like the film. Probably never again would Kubrick take ambiguity so further in his work. I mentioned earlier the word *hermetic* to refer to *2001*. I would like now to rectify that affirmation, for if hermetic means something closed, sealed, then that word is thoroughly unsuitable. *2001* offers a multitude of interpretations, taking to extremes the idea of openness in a work of art.

#### 1.5 *Eyes Wide Shut* – Reconciliation with ambiguity

The next movie I will discuss was first released in 1999, that is, more than thirty years after *2001*. Coincidentally the last work in the career of the director, *Eyes Wide Shut* was included here because it can offer an interesting view of what direction Kubrick's work took after that change in the movies of the 1960's. I would like to provide a brief view of where that trajectory toward ambivalence has led, since this film, as much as the others discussed here, has generated very contradictory responses thanks to its metaphorical and sometimes unconventional elements. Here, again, ambiguity seems to play a major role.

The legitimacy of institutions is a theme that marks Kubrick's work as whole. The army, the government, the family, the main segments that constitute the pillars of Western civilisation were subject to analysis (and not simply to attack) in films like *Paths of Glory*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Barry Lindon* (1975), which put into questions the validity of moral values and social codes. In the case of *Eyes Wide Shut*, the lens turn to the microcosm of private life (although never losing sight of its connection with the broader social sphere).

Like an adult fairy tale, the movie narrates, through a number of apparently absurd situations, the process by which Bill Harford (Tom Cruise) discovers the contradictions of human nature and society. Leading a seemingly perfect life, Bill is shaken by his wife's sudden revelation of her desire for a stranger. Disturbed by the thoughts that this declaration brought to him, he enters a dream-like journey of one night in which he meets a number of bizarre characters and is presented with situations that test his certainties and expose the frailty of his morality, threatening the stability of his world.

As I have mentioned before, it is characteristic of Kubrick's style to subvert the traditional strategies of identification, as if refusing to offer the audience a passive acceptance of the universe narrated, denying the viewer an unreflected emotional engagement in the story. In *Eyes Wide Shut*, Bill Harford is a personification of an ideal hero of Western capitalist society: he is young, handsome, rich, happily married to a pretty woman, successful in one of the most respected careers, that of a doctor, and lives in the most important metropolis of the West, that is New York. Apparently, he is also a man of solid moral principles, his discourse reproduces word by word the ideals of political correctness of the society to which he belongs. He is also, of course, absolutely boring. As a reverse of what happens in *A Clockwork Orange*, where identification strategies are employed in favour of a reproachful character, in *Eyes Wide Shut* the apparent perfection of the hero sounds naïve and arrogant, and he is presented as a figure with whom one can hardly identify.

Bill has constructed an ideal image of himself in which he strongly believes and which is the sustaining force of his relationship to the world. His discourse is constituted of a collection of clichés and, as the characters in *Dr. Strangelove*, he reproduces a sterile language that tries to organise the contradictions of human nature and society in the rigidity of its conventions. More than anything, it is the manifestation of desire that provokes the break

in his beliefs. Desire will be Bill's monolith, the destabilising element that provokes the crisis which enables him to enter a process of maturation.

At a party, in the beginning of the film, Bill and his wife Alice (Nicole Kidman) are—each one on their own—confronted with desire in different forms. The process of deconstruction of beliefs for Bill is announced in the narrative when he meets an old friend from the medical school who had quitted college to pursue a difficult musical career. For the doctor, the pianist's choice is inconceivable, since his idea of self-fulfilment is based on social status and capital accumulation rather than on personal satisfaction. Bill uncritically accepts the standard conception of success defended in the competitive capitalist society to which he is integrated. "I never really understood why you walked away", says Bill with a badly disguised superiority feeling, and Nick answers: "No? It's a nice feeling, I do it once in a while." That feeling does not belong to Bill's repertoire.

But it is desire in its sexual connotation that takes a major role in the story, or better, human's difficulty to deal with desire in a highly institutionalised social structure which regulates and tries to contain it in a set of norms that eventually fail to repress the ambivalent power of desire. Marriage is, for sure, the strongest effort of society in that direction.

Bill's wife, Alice, seems to be suspicious of what he still ignores, that is, both the fragility of conventions and the complexity of the world they try to tame. In her flirtatious dialogue with a gallant Hungarian, many of the questions of the film are stated. Initially, trying to impress Alice, the man mentions Ovid and his writings on "the art of love", to which she answers: "Didn't he wined up all by himself, crying his eyes out, in some place with very bad climate?" A first incoherence of love is revealed in this dialogue: all the knowledge about love—and also desire, we could add—does not free a person from the pain it causes. One can never fully know the feeling and, therefore, cannot control it.

If the logic of his flirt does not function, the man tries then to dismantle the logic of her resistance. In order to dismiss her excuse of being married, he defends that the reason why women got married in ancient times was that matrimony "was the only way they could lose their virginity and be free to do what they wanted with other man, the ones they really wanted." Denying a romantic view of marriage as an union of sincere feelings, the Hungarian's provocation reinforces the artificial character of marriage as a formal contract necessary for the functioning of a structure grounded in repression and hypocrisy, disguised in the belief in fidelity. Later on he adds: "Don't you think one of the charms of marriage is that it makes deception a necessity for both parts?" For that system of norms to function, then, it is necessary to transform matrimonial life in a performance. According to that structure, a successful marriage is one in which husband and wife manage to pretend to believe each other. Fidelity and monogamy, then, seem to be not matters of feelings but of business, necessary principles for the administration of an institution.

That can be a conclusion for the Hungarian's discourse, but not necessarily for the film. His malicious cynicism takes the form of a serene acceptance of the complexity of human relationships on the part of Alice and of a traumatic process of acknowledging that complexity on the part of Bill. The set of principles and moral codes of Western capitalist civilisation which Bill has elected to be his centre and to orient his life, protecting him from errors, shows to be inefficient. His belief in that constraining morality prevents him from perceiving it as a social construction and to defend himself in situations in which those values fail to save him. He is then confronted with the idea of entrapment in his sudden realisation that civilisation is defeated by the same structure it has created. The moment he faces that contradiction the centre erodes, for the centre does not admit doubt. Its existence implies that one believes it and therefore, when it shows to be fallible, it ceases to be a centre. Bill will

have to learn how to survive in a decentred world, where truths are not absolute, meanings are not fixed, rules are flexible.

The couple's final conversation suggests a conciliatory position in relation to the problem of ambiguity, which in this case refers to marriage but which could be easily applied to the institutions in general. When Bill, still insisting in finding a solution, asks "Alice, what do you think we should do?" he gets as an answer her melancholic acceptance of the unavoidable instability to which they are subject. Alice repeatedly remarks the non-existence of certainties, of definite answers: no, there is nothing to do about what happened; no, she cannot be sure of even that; no, they will no longer believe the word "forever". "But", she adds, "I do love you, and, you know, there is something very important that we need to do as soon as possible." She explains: "Fuck." End of the story.

That conclusion seems to be a forsaking of metaphysics. In *2001* humanity was condemned to a search for answers it never finds. In *Eyes Wide Shut* we realise that there is no answer, that life is about maintaining the belief in what one knows to be a failure—in this case, marriage and other social institutions. And, as nothing solves the contradictions, it is better to accept them, what in that particular context means to forget explanations and succumb to desire. The conclusion of the film could hardly be called optimistic, but it could be a suggestion that it is possible to survive within the entrapment, if one becomes conscious of it. That is exactly what does not happen in *Dr Strangelove*, for instance, where people destroy themselves and the world without realising the whole absurdity of the situation they have created. If in *2001* man was perplex before the ambiguity of his own nature, in *Eyes Wide Shut* people are at least offered a possibility of understanding. Only the answer they find does not fit the question they made.

## 1.6 Conclusion

The trajectory towards ambiguity that can be perceived in Kubrick's work, then, is connected to the fall of beliefs and secure moral positions, the loss of centres. The pessimism that permeated the thematic of early films like *Paths of Glory*, characterised by the isolation of man and his impotence before the crisis of the civilisation he constructed, invades the structure of the narrative in *Dr. Strangelove*. The disappearance of the hero and the non-resolution of the conflict in that film marks a turning point in Kubrick's filmography. From then on, the play with cinematic language to produce narratives that discuss not only the ambiguities of human nature but also the very ambiguity of a work of art will be a tendency intensely persecuted. Not that the previous films did not present traces of such a tendency, but it acquired a more visible form since *Dr. Strangelove*.

Taking to extremes the idea that civilisation produces the means for its own destruction, *Dr. Strangelove* presents characters that, despite being victimised by their ambiguous power, are not able to recognise it. *2001*, by locating the origin of the civilisation which collapses in the previous film, seems to perceive in the primitive man the force that is at once productive and destructive, the force that will lead humankind to its future of sophistication and dehumanisation, that will domesticate the instincts and primal needs by confining them to rituals and norms of behaviour. The man presented in *2001* is confronted with his ambiguous nature and with the questions he cannot explain in different periods of history. But his reaction to this confrontation tends to reach perplexity, rather than action.

Finally, in *Eyes Wide Shut*—particularly in the case of Alice, since up to the end Bill naively insists in establishing truths—people seem to have come to a more mature state, one that allows them to recognise those contradictory forces that govern their nature and to perceive the weaknesses of the social structure they have constructed and now help to sustain. That process of recognition could be a first step to create a less authoritarian world, one that

could keep its social codes and institutions, but would use them with awareness of their weaknesses.

That is probably the closest Kubrick comes to presenting an alternative to the isolation of humankind and the crisis of civilisation. In *A Cinema of Loneliness*, Philip Kolker names Kubrick an anti-humanist, complaining of his refuse to offer a way out of the oppressive order civilisation established for the world: "Kubrick perceives individuals and groups assuming a helpless and inferior position with respect to an order they themselves have created. But Kubrick does not go beyond anti-humanism to embrace another social or philosophical order, for he does not see the possibility of men or women regaining control over their selves and their culture." (77) The text, published in the early 1980's, had not the chance to consider the later films, but, had it happened, its conclusion probably would not change that much. As the same Kolker affirms along his text, Kubrick is not revolutionary in the sense of suggesting radical solutions to the reality he portrays. In fact, he does otherwise, reaffirming a disbelief in radical solutions, and proposing that we should learn how to live within the inevitably problematic world we have produced.

Neither is he revolutionary in relation to the cinematic industry. Being acclaimed as a genius, he is, nevertheless, a genius within the boundaries of Hollywood. He certainly diverges from the great industrial productions, specially in the attempt to reveal rather than to hide the cinematic language, promoting a distance between film and spectator that denies the viewer a passive identification with story and characters. But his artistry is also remarkable for his capacity to develop disturbing narratives by employing and refining the techniques and resources of classical cinema.

In the next chapter I will analyse how those techniques are applied in *A Clockwork Orange*, a film that occupies a peculiar place in the trajectory of ambiguity that I summarised up to now. More than refusing those traditional strategies of identification, the film plays with



them, promoting a game of involvement and detachment that is felt not only in the structure of the narrative, but also in the elements of the mise-en-scène and editing. By creating a protagonist that is both evil and attractive, and avoiding moral judgements in a story that deals with problematic issues like violence, Kubrick produced that which came to be his most controversial work.

## Chapter 2

### *A Clockwork Orange*

And

### The Nightmare of the Spectator

It's funny how the colours of the real world only seem  
really real when we viddy them on the screen  
*A Clockwork Orange*

#### 2.0 Introduction

The pathway to ambiguity that could be perceived in Kubrick's trajectory finds its most problematic moment in *A Clockwork Orange* (henceforth *ACO*). The pessimistic view of humankind in face of civilisation that leads to the loss of centre and is reflected in a narrative form that favours ambiguity and avoids value judgement is also present in this film, and so is Kubrick's peculiar mode of dealing with distance and identification. But for different reasons, *ACO* was received with a discomfort that goes beyond the difficulty to find meanings. The negative reactions to the film reflect a moral concern, much more than the estrangement before an unfamiliar aesthetics. Particularly in the United Kingdom—where the attacks were so violent that Kubrick, supported by Warner Brothers, forbade the exhibition and distribution—the movie seems to have become the target of a moral crusade. The press initiated a nearly hysterical campaign that associated *ACO* to supposedly copycat crimes committed by the youth in England, and it did not take long until Kubrick was explicitly accused of murder<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> For more information on the topic, see the testimony of Christiana Kubrick, the director's wife, in the documentary *Stanley Kubrick – A Life in Pictures*, by Jan Harlan (2001).

Yet, it would be too easy to attribute the uneasiness which the film provokes to the fact that it is a violent movie. *ACO* remains impressive even for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century viewer, for whom violence is a routine both in fiction and in daily life. Explosions, serial murdering, sexual abuse are accessible to anyone who dares to spend her or his afternoons in front of a TV set. Something differentiates *ACO*. Its violence is not of the same sort of that which we are used to watch in any commercial movie. The violence in *ACO* is much closer to that which one might find in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), or more recently (and more extremely) in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997), films that are aggressive in themselves, in the threaten they represent to the spectator's passivity. It is not simply the violence that is practised by and against characters in the story that is disturbing, but it is the violence that is practised against the viewer. Something in the film does not allow us to surrender to contemplation, it violates the stability of our experience as spectators. The film wounds something intimate.

### 2.1 *A Clockwork Orange* – A summary

Based on the homonymous and also polemic novel by Anthony Burgess, *ACO* takes place in a near future (never specified), in an urban centre (generally identified as London). The film, like the novel, is the story of Alex, an adolescent for whom rape and Beethoven's symphonies offer equally intense pleasures. Leader of a gang who practises violence as entertainment, Alex takes the profile of non-conventional heroes that people Kubrick's filmography up to the edge of the morally unbearable.

After spanking a woman to death (the "Cat Lady", performed by Miriam Karlin), the protagonist is betrayed by his partners (or *droogs*, in *nadsat* slang) and is caught by the police. He is condemned to 14 years, but his sentence is interrupted when, after two years in jail, he is chosen as guinea pig in an experiment that aims at eradicating criminality, so that the State

prison vacancies can be filled up with political prisoners. The experiment is the Ludovico Technique, a brutal conditioned-reflex therapy which consists of intensively exposing the individual to images of violence while special drugs administered to him provoke a strong feeling of sickness. The final result is the association of human violent and erotic instincts or thoughts to a physical suffering so extreme that the individual becomes incapable of any kind of aggression and inapt for sexual practice. As a collateral damage of the therapy, Alex can no longer bear Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* as well, since it was played as soundtrack for the violent images in the treatment. He is, therefore, deprived of his main sources of pleasure.

Once set free, Alex finds himself in the position of a victim within his former universe. He then faces the revenge of the ones he once victimised in a nightmare-like trajectory that ends up at HOME, the house of a writer whose wife was raped by Alex and his *droogs* in an attack that led her to death and made the writer paralytic and psychologically disturbed. Alex is not recognised at first, and receives the protection of the writer, who intends to use his drama as anti-government propaganda. But the boy involuntarily denounces himself when he chants *Singing in the Rain*, the same song he had intoned while raping the man's wife. The writer, then, tortures him by playing the *Ninth*, up to the point that he tries to commit suicide. When he recovers consciousness, the effects of the conditioning have been reverted and Alex's case has raised a passionate debate in the media. He is now going to be willingly used by authorities, which try to recuperate the public support.

## 2.2 Criticism on the *Orange*

Some critics seem to take *ACO* as an insult, offensive as a bad joke. Their aggressive negative reaction to it is not simply aimed at the violence of Alex's odyssey, but at the particular way in which the story is rendered, as Menezes puts it, "by means of an absolutely

embarrassing ambiguity.”<sup>14</sup> (63) Jackson Burgess, on *Film Quarterly*, for instance, argues that instead of unsettling the viewer, as he has done in the previous films, Kubrick would be now “merely trying to hurt.” (35) Although he recognises a technical excellence in the movie and behaves much favourably towards Kubrick’s previous works, J. Burgess seems puzzled by the seemingly amoral posture of this film, by its striking refuse to offer moral judgements. For the critic, Kubrick would have failed in his attempt to construct a satire of our civilisation, because, differently from *Dr. Strangelove*, *ACO* is a satire without a moral centre. Moreover, the director’s critique toward totalitarianism—which J. Burgess understands as the ultimate theme of the film—would have fallen in its own trap. According to him:

In morals, as in politics, human beings with fascinating regularity turn themselves into the things they hate, and something of the sort has happened to Kubrick in this film. The technique of the picture is the technique of brain washing: emotional manipulation in the most visceral level of feeling. The dynamics of the film is the dynamics of totalitarianism: all choices and values are derived from fear. (35)

The film would be totalitarian in the sense that its narrative pushes the audience to an identification with a protagonist who is a threaten to the moral values of society, who represents disorder and incarnates the inner fears of the pacific and politically correct citizen. Not that this identification is necessarily accomplished. This is a process that depends too much on individual viewers’ subjectivity and it is not the aim of this work to go that further. But the film does suggest that identification, it deploys a number of devices to promote intimacy between Alex and the hypothetical spectator, to present the protagonist as an empathetic character no matter how vicious he is and, against that, the viewer indeed has no choice. In the words of Philip Kolker: “The film gives every indication that we must admire

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<sup>14</sup> In the original: “... por meio de uma ambigüidade absolutamente constrangedora.” (my translation)

Alex and admire him with little hesitation. It therefore becomes exploitative of its audience in the worst way.” (121)

Kolker, who tends to be as impartial and cautious as possible in his analysis of the director’s other films, makes no effort to mask his discontentment with *ACO*, and defines: “If *Dr. Strangelove* is satirical and *2001* contemplative, *A Clockwork Orange* is cynical. There are no honest or even responsible answers to the problems it poses.” (117) Farther on he adds: “Judgement is rendered difficult, and the film, finally, can be seen as a cynical manipulation of its audience. It is a cynicism that indicates Kubrick had become ready to allow his audience to wallow in its own worst instincts or that he simply did not have an adequate understanding of the problem. Or that he didn’t care.” (123)

Even among critics who present more favourable views of *ACO*, or the ones who adopt a seemingly neutral and descriptive point of view, the proliferation of meanings derived from the absence of an orienting moral position is addressed as a major force in the film. Putting together *2001*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Barry Lyndon*, Feldman defends the idea that those movies compose “a trilogy on the moral and psychological nature of Western man and on the destiny of his civilisation.” (12) According to the critic, the point of Kubrick’s trilogy is that civilisation is founded in an erroneous conception of human nature, which therefore leads it to collapse. Furthermore, the critic defends that the basic assumption of *2001* is that cultural forms and social institutions failed to “provide man with the significant order that makes life a meaningful experience” (15), and that *A Clockwork Orange* and *Barry Lyndon* discuss exactly the relation between those decadent cultural forms and institutions and humankind in its search for self-expression. Feldman places Kubrick in the context of post-Nietzschean, post-Freudian and post-Einsteinian thought, which no longer follows the Christian ideal of man as a “supreme creation of God”, but questions the nature and the validity of human existence. Feldman points HAL9000, Alex and Redmond Barry (the

protagonist of *Barry Lyndon*) as a “trio of modern heroes”, who are ironically “the most *human* characters in their environment”. The intriguing ambiguity of *ACO*, therefore, would be a reflex of the erosion of values experienced by society. The loss of centre that can be perceived in the narrative would be a formal representation of a crisis that takes place in the external world and consequently in the fiction that deals with it.

Instead of sounding immoral (or amoral) to critics like Feldman, the fact that the film does not judge Alex seems to represent a trace of maturity. Menezes suggests that by depriving the viewer from the moral parameter we need in order to establish a comfortable answer for the film, Kubrick could be “showing that it is up to us, according to our own values, to take the ultimate responsibility of adopting a position before that multiplicity of possibilities that is indiscriminately presented to us.”<sup>15</sup> (63) Moreover, the critic defends that *ACO* is a visual questioning of the order of things that we take as given in our society. Being amoral himself, Alex would make us reflect upon the validity of the pillars of our own moral positions: “By showing someone with apparently no value, Kubrick forces us to re-evaluate the values that guide our own conduct and its homogenisation.”<sup>16</sup> (78) Thus, rather than insulting the audience, the film would be provoking it, attributing the viewer more responsibility than his or her activity of spectator usually demands.

### 2.3 Narrative ambiguity

As I have stated, the aim of the present thesis is to analyse the construction of ambiguity in the narrative of *A Clockwork Orange*. I defend that the absence of a centre that is developed along Kubrick’s filmography culminates in *ACO* with the creation of an amoral character, that is Alex, to whom is given the control of the narrative, producing, therefore, an

<sup>15</sup> “(...) Kubrick mostra que cabe a nós mesmos a responsabilidade última de tomar uma posição frente àquela multiplicidade que nos é apresentada de maneira indiscriminada, seguindo e segundo nossos próprios valores.”

<sup>16</sup> “Ao nos mostrar alguém aparentemente sem valores, Kubrick acaba nos forçando a reavaliar os valores que orientam a nossa própria conduta e sua homogeneização.”

also amoral story. In a selection of scenes, I analyse the mechanisms that operate in the relation of identification-detachment that the film promotes, which is essential to create the effect of compromising the viewer with Alex.

In the numerous analysis of the film, the ambiguity of the narrative and the film's constant play with the spectator's identification and estrangement towards the protagonist stand out as the main concerns of the critics. The means by which the film constructs these traces are various but one device in the narrative shows itself to be of remarkable importance: that of the verbal narrator. The power that the narrative confers to Alex allows him to be a controller of the information rendered, subjecting the viewer to his knowledge, to his perspective, and to his style. Alex's role is doubly important, because he is at once the character that filters the story within the fictional world, and the narrator who reports it from outside. As a filter, he acts as a "psychological or emotional channel" through which the information flows (Stam 94), and in this case, as Chatman defines, images are filtered through the character's perceptual consciousness, in such a way that the film "defly lock[s] the audience into a character's perception." (157)

In Burgess' original novel, it is an older Alex that reports his adventures. According to Gérard Genette's distinction between story and discourse (25-29), the space and time to which this narrator belongs is different from that in which the story took place. That means, Alex-narrator tells in the time/space of the discourse the events that Alex-character lived in the time/space of the story. And as it typically occurs in a first-person narrative, the presentation of the facts is restricted to the perspective of the narrator. In *ACO*, the narrative obeys Alex's world view and his perception of the events—as narrator and as filter. The effect of this device is that violence is presented according to Alex's understanding of it, emphasising not the horror of brutality but the protagonist's amusement in executing and



reporting his acts. To a certain extent, Alex's pleasure in practising violence can be more shocking than violence itself, as it happens in the following fragment:

Georgie let go of holding his goobers [lips] apart and just let him have one in the toothless rot [mouth] with his ringy fist, and that made the old veck [man] start moaning a lot then, then out comes the blood, my brothers, real beautiful. So all we did then was to pull his outer platties [clothes] off, stripping him down to his vest and long underpants (very starry [old]; Dim smacked [laughed] his head off near), and then Pete kicks him lovely in his pot [belly], and we let him go (9-10).

The choice for a character-narrator is essential to the creation of the contrast between the intimacy that the narrative promotes towards Alex and the distance with which violence is presented, not only in the novel but also (and maybe still more) in the cinematic text.

But there are still other intriguing aspects in this narrator's discourse, which applies both for the novel and for the film. His speech reproduces a colloquial language and he addresses the viewer (and the reader, when it concerns the novel) in a rather familiar and friendly fashion, making use of expressions such as "my friends", "my brothers" or referring to himself as "your humble narrator". Such a register attributes an informal tone to the narrative. Besides, by acknowledging the presence of an audience and directly addressing it, the film demands participation and implicates approbation from the viewer, it promotes intimacy between narrator and spectator and, as Kozloff argues, places us in the uncomfortable position of accomplices of Alex's ultra-violent acts (50). The narration is loaded with irony. When Alex makes us aware of our condition of audience and takes our acceptance for granted, he seems to violate our space, and the film, then, demechnicises our experience as viewers.

Nevertheless, in the novel, the approximation reader/narrator is broken by the strangeness of the vocabulary. Anthony Burgess creates in the novel a whole new dialect-

mainly inspired by Russian language, but also by gypsy talk—that is practised by the adolescents, or *nadsats*, of this chaotic society<sup>17</sup>. This nowhere and no time slang confers a certain flexibility to the time and space of the story. Alex's saga could take place in any city of the Western capitalist world, in any time from about the 1980's on. But as much as the narration does in relation to the audience, the vocabulary also denaturalises the language of the narrator, provoking an estrangement that signals a difference between Alex and the reader. Language has, thus, the double and contradictory function of creating complicity and, at the same time, imposing a barrier between narrator and his audience.

This blend of approximation and distance promoted by the narrative is even more emphatic in the cinematic adaptation of the novel. In Stanley Kubrick's film, the narrator of the story is Alex as well. Or to put it better, in the film, Alex is one of the narrative agents. As Chatman suggests, a narrator is not necessarily a human entity. Any narrative text, whatever media actualises it, presents a narrator, but in some cases it is not so easily identifiable as in a literary first-person narrative (126). Christian Metz refers to this narrator with the following analogy: "The spectator perceives the images which have obviously been selected (they could have been other images) and arranged (their order could have been different). In a sense he is leafing through an album of predetermined pictures, and it is not he who is turning the pages but some 'master of ceremonies', some 'grand image-maker'." (21) There is, then, a narrator which is inherent to the cinematic medium: the one that *shows*, in opposition to the one that *tells*, more typical in the literary narrative. In *ACO*, the cinematic narrator is complemented by (and generally subjected to) the voice-over, which performs the function of verbal telling.

Sarah Kozloff calls attention to a common theoretical misinterpretation in the distinction between showing and telling. According to her, some authors (such as Barthes, in *The Rhetoric of Image*) understand the showing function as a non-mediated presentation of

<sup>17</sup> Some editions of the novel present a final glossary elaborated by Stanley Edgar Hyman, in 1963 (In: The Kubrick Site). The translations I provide in the quotations are Hyman's work. Burgess' initial intention, however, was that the meaning of the *nadsat* words could be guessed throughout the story, according to the context.

the referent, as if the image came to the spectator in its supposed pure meaning, which would not have suffered the interference of a narrator's personality and ideology (13-15). In cinema, however, the image is submitted to manipulation through a number of resources amongst lighting, camera position, and set design that contribute to the construction of meanings. Therefore, the cinematic narrator, the one that shows, is not a neutral mechanism. On the contrary, it is no less able to promote cultural and ideological values than the literary narrator.

In *ACO*, there is, then, at least two recognisable narrative agents: the voice-over— inherited from Burgess' novel—and the narrator I will name here "camera-narrator". The term is certainly limited, for, as I have mentioned before, the camera is far from being the only responsible for the production of image. But I will use the expression "camera-narrator" throughout, in the absence of a more appropriate nomenclature, to designate the narrator that shows, the one that narrates through images.

The expression "voice-over" also deserves explanation, specially in what refers to its distinction from "voice-off". The latter refers to any voice (it can be a narrator but also a common character), whose origin is out of the sight of the spectator. There is always the possibility that the source of the voice is revealed some shots later. Voice-over, on the other hand, does not exist within the time/space of the story. It is only in the discourse, in the act of telling the events that it is manifested, or, as Genette prefers, the voice-over is part of the extra-diegetic universe.

In Kubrick's *ACO*, the voice-over preserves the characteristics of the narrator of Burgess' novel: the colloquial tone, the familiarity with the spectator and the vocabulary (which is simplified in the film, but not enough to cancel its strangeness). The relation of proximity/distancing found in the novel is reproduced in the film with the contribution of the camera-narrator, in such a way that the ambiguity of Alex's character is reflected in the

narrative. The two narrators alternate and combine themselves in a permanent play with the spectator's sympathy and rejection towards the protagonist.

#### 2.4 Dissecting the orange

The narrative is symmetrically divided in two blocks in which Alex is respectively the aggressor and the victim (even though this distinction can be blurred by the complexity of his character), and interlinked by the period of his arrest and treatment. The mathematical composition of the narrative structure, which is typical of Kubrick (see for example *2001* and *Full Metal Jacket*), is of fundamental importance for the construction of a dialect of identification and detachment in *ACO*. Alex's ambivalent personality—the protagonist is a mix of sensibility, cleverness and cruelty—finds echo in the very structure of the narrative.

The first images of the film announce something unusual. The lugubrious, gloomy music follows the credits (information is economic, reduced to the essential) that are superposed to a back cloth of shiny colours, primary like Alex's untamed instincts, helping to establish the atmosphere of the movie that begins. The narrative initiates with a close-up of Alex's face (Malcolm McDowell) staring at the camera. The camera then starts a travelling out that transforms the close in a long shot. The movement gradually reveals the presence of Alex's three partners, or *droogs*, and then the space in which the scene takes place. We see the black walls of the Korova Milbar where white inscriptions indicate the speciality of the house—*velocet*, *synthemesc*, *drencrom*—and then white statues of naked women placed as tables, wearing colourful wigs. Other statues show women on their knees inclined to the front as if offering their breasts—these, as we will learn afterwards, correspond to our coffee or Coca-Cola machines. Some seconds later, Alex's voice is heard:

There was me, that is Alex, and my three droogs, that is Pete, Georgie and Dim.

And we sat in the Korova milkbar trying to decide what to do in the evening. The

Korova milkbar sold milk plus: milk plus velocet, or synthemesc, or drenchrom, which was what we were drinking. This would sharpen you up and make you ready for a bit of the old ultra-violence.

The voice-over follows the same movement done by the camera: Alex, then his *droogs*, and finally the place. Besides, the voice is immediately associated to Alex's figure. His eyes facing the camera (he is the only who does so) and his position as a centre of the frame reinforce his condition of leader of the group and nuclear character in the starting narrative. His challenging and strange gaze, with the one false eyelash, is also a first indication of the perverse personality that will be verbally expressed by the familiarity with which he addresses "the old ultra-violence."

The shock produced by the bizarre set and costumes is diminished by the verbal explanation. The voice-over acts, in this scene, in the exposition of the narrative, that means, it introduces the events and didactically provides information so that the image can be understood, approximating the viewer to the universe of the protagonist. A similar behaviour of the verbal narrator is observed throughout the story, particularly in the first part, introducing a new location or elements of Alex's routine.

The strangeness of the environment in this very first scene denounces a threatening to the moral conventions of Western civilisation, or else, a threatening to the hypocrisy of Western civilisation. Women are literally objectified by the statues in erotic poses—open legs, the sex facing the camera—they are robbed of their functions of human bodies to become commodities. Apparently, that is a society that does not know any shame, or political correctness, that does not mask its prejudices. There is no attempt to mitigate the exploitation of woman as a (sexual) object, on the contrary, sexism is declared. When the male body is in question, on the other hand, the acceptance is not the same. In the Cat Lady scene, for instance, Alex is first amazed and then disgusted by the woman's erotic art collection,

particularly by the sculpture of a gigantic penis with which, not coincidentally, he finally kills her, as a reaffirmation of his masculine power.

The images of women displayed throughout the film—with maybe the exception of Alex's mother and a doctor, who presents a very military posture and is in a dominant position in relation to him—are predominantly related to sex, generally violent sex, in which women subdue to the protagonist's virile force. And ironically, the most respected feminine figure in the film is exactly the statue. After having attacked the writer's house, and brutally raped his wife in the most shocking scene of the movie, the gang returns to the Korova, and Dim (performed by Warren Clarke) addresses one of the statues in a soft friendly tone: "Hello, Lucy, had a busy night? We've been working hard too." While he moves a phallic handle-crank placed between her legs in order to fill in his glass with the milk that comes out of her breast, he says: "Pardon me, Lucy." The statue inspires him a humane attitude of which real women are deprived. Something seems to be out of order here. Values are dislocated. Like language in *Dr. Strangelove*, the meaning of things is misplaced, and apparently the logic of Alex and the gang's social conduct are not that of civilisation. As Menezes says, there is in the film a *deterritorialisation* of the places, which, he suggests, could be the source of the spectator's uneasiness about *ACO* (65).

The second sequence of the film opens with an old drunk beggar singing alone in a tunnel. His body is gradually covered by the enormous shadows of Alex and his gang, who walk to him like ghosts, anticipating the moment in which they will cover the man's body with kicks and beats, as if the ape from *2001* had learned to use the club for something else than acquiring food and shelter. The narrator explains: "One thing I could never stand was to see a filthy dirty old drunk, howling away the filthy songs of his father's and going blerp, blerp in between as it might be a filthy old orchestra in his stinking rotten guts." The description is certainly disgusting. The first victim of the gang, who is of course an innocent

unable to defend himself, is also an outsider, a character that is reproached, repudiated and excluded by society. The disgust Alex expresses in his words is no different from that of the general community. Alex (and the film) exaggerates the prejudices and the cruelty that are already present in society, making them so visible that it is impossible to ignore their existence. Hence, Alex does not simply obey a different code of conduct. Instead, his behaviour is an exacerbation of that of society. He attests the failure of the civilised world to control the incoherence and contradictions of humankind by confining them in institutions, by masking the barbarity of human relations in the politeness of society's discourse and, above all, in the oppression of its silences.

The drunk man's answer to the first beat is: "Go on, do me, you bastard cowards. I don't want to live in a stinking world like this (...) What sort of world is it at all? Men on the moon and men spinning round the Earth, and there is no attention paid to earthly law no order no more." In the apparently naive speech of the old man, the film states the loss of values suggested in Dim's conversation with the statue, and the crisis of a civilisation that achieved a high degree of sophistication and yet cannot solve its most basic problems.

The dislocation of meanings that appears in the first part of the film is also a powerful mechanism for the creation of irony, like in *Dr. Strangelove*, with the important difference that the incompatibility of what verbal language says and what we see in the images in *ACO* do not result in laughter. That is what happens in some sequences in which the camera seems to portray Alex's thoughts, as when he listens to Beethoven in his room. The voice describes his thoughts as "oh, bliss, bliss and heaven (...) as I sloshed [listened] it, I knew such lovely pictures." What follows these words is the image of a statue of four Christs (ironical in itself) that, thanks to the montage sequence, seem to be dancing in the rhythm of the symphony. The "lovely pictures" provoked by the music are in fact images of hangings and explosions, or of his own face characterised like a stylised vampire with bloody teeth.

There seems to be a dissonance between camera-narrator and voice-over: the visual correspondent of a religious-like discourse is a succession of catastrophes and bloodshed. Nevertheless, within Alex's universe the two narrations are perfectly consonant. The apparent disparity between them only exists in the universe of the spectator.

That composition of the narrative reinforces the distance between the spectator and Alex. But it does not take long until the narrative restarts the approximation by means of camera movements that seem to copy the character's behaviour. In the following morning, while Alex leaves his room half-naked and walks through the corridor, the camera follows him from behind. He passes in front of an open door and does not seem to notice the presence of a man sat on the bed (Mr Deltoid, his advisor, performed by Aubrey Morry). Similarly, the camera-narrator does not show the man directly. We only have a glimpse of him when Alex turns on the light of the corridor. When the protagonist arrives at the living room and realises that something strange had happened, the camera stops with him for a moment and then does the same route back to the bedroom, this time being followed by Alex until he arrives at the door, when the camera shows Mr. Deltoid in a medium shot. The voice-over is absent here, but the camera movement manifests the presence of a first-person narrator, as though the two narrative agents were condensed. The camera-narrator reproduces Alex's sleepiness as well as his movements. It seems to be humanised and in some way submissive to the protagonist, offering the spectator a view that resembles the one experienced by Alex and favouring the identification between the audience and him.

Moreover, the fact that Alex is narrating the story and therefore presenting the events according to his own view of them is determinant in the film's treatment of violence, resulting in a distance that dislocates the viewer's attention from the act of violence itself. That effect provoked the rage of critics like Pauline Kael, who complains that the film makes us enjoy the rapes and beatings by alienating us from the victims, presenting them as individuals incapable



of suffering whereas Alex's suffering is stressed (263). The protagonist's pain is no doubt more touching than the victims'. The narrative is submitted to him and, according to his absolutely selfish philosophy of life, his own suffering is of course the only one that matters. The victims are generally dehumanised and ridiculed in the narrative for that is the way Alex sees them. Besides, the narrative shows too little about the victims, Alex is the only character we follow, while the others come and go quickly and we hardly know anything about them, not even about their suffering, since the camera generally does not scrutinise the action. When an act of violence is explicitly shown, like in the case of the beggar, the camera is placed far enough to omit details. There is always a device to disguise the act of aggression whenever Alex is the agent, be it the darkness which shows only shadows and silhouettes, like the spanking of the drunk man in the tunnel, or the montage sequence which combines the speedy alternation of still pictures with a very unstable hand camera, as in the Cat Lady scene.

One moment that is particularly emblematic of the distance with which the victims are presented is the sequence in which Alex's gang defies Billyboy's. The first shot shows a jar of flowers in pastel colours, suggesting a sophisticated decoration. In harmony with the image, the sound track displays a classical music that helps to construct an impression of tranquillity and creates in the viewer an expectation that is quickly frustrated. Feminine cries intermittently invade that atmosphere (although the music superimposes them) and the camera gradually reveals that the flowers are just part of what remained from the decoration of an abandoned theatre. In the stage, full of old scenic objects, a group of young men undress a woman and take pains to lay her down in a mattress while she contorts herself in a last effort to escape the violation.

The scene could be astonishing. But the camera shares Alex's point-of-view, and his gaze is not directed to the rape. Although inevitably seen, the rape is secondary, as we notice from the voice-over: "It was round by the casino that we came across Billyboy and his four

droogs. They were getting ready to perform a little of the old in-out in-out with a weepy young devotchka [girl] they had there.” By placing violence in a stage, the film turns it in a spectacle for both the protagonist and the viewer, and puts the last in the position of a double spectator, who watches the representation of the representation of violence. The narrative detaches us from the horror of the action and from the victim’s agony, suggesting to us the same indifference with which Alex faces the event, suggesting that we too look at something else than violence.

The scene has a counterpart in the second half of the narrative. After the Ludovico Technique is tested, the authorities responsible for the project organise a sadistic public demonstration of its effective results. Now it is Alex that is taken to a stage to be affronted. Instead of a distant panoramic shot of the action, the camera shows the boy’s point-of-view, sharing with him the vision of the dirty shoe he is forced to lick, or the woman’s breasts he is unable to touch, stressing his subjugation by means of low angles. If in the previous stage scene the spectator was doubly detached from the act of violence, in this second moment we are doubly approximated to it. The camera is in the stage, and Alex, who is the protagonist of the film, becomes also the protagonist of another spectacle, that of his humiliation. And even though the rape is by concept more brutal than the offences Alex goes through in the stage, the narrative makes the last sequence more touching.

The ambiguity of the film is validated by the dual division of the text. It is supported by that parallelism between the first and the second parts, in which the second is the inverted image of the first. As Mainar (61-70) and Falsetto (21) point out, parallelism and narrative reversals are remarkable strategies in the director’s style. In *ACO*, this kind of organisation provides both a connection and a contrast between the two narrative units, and consequently, between Alex’s role as a victim and as an aggressor. The stage scenes are an allegory of what happens to the protagonist in the whole film. If he is the agent of violence in the first part,

being therefore immune to its shock, throughout the second part he performs the role of the victim.

The disturbing identification that the film sought in the first part is replaced in the second by the familiar language of classical Hollywood cinema. That is the moment when the film speaks the language to which the spectator has been used. That is the moment when the film gives us a hero who we can comfortably pity and accept, with a reasonable conflict that fits our problem-solving narrative models.

Bordwell explains that classical spectatorship supposes that the viewer has a paradigm, an internalised schemata and is able to recognise particular patterns of narrative structure or scenic norms in the films (28-9). That knowledge allows the cinematic resources, like lighting or editing, to pass relatively unnoticed, reinforcing in this manner the impression of reality Hollywood cinema generally pursues. But the use of classical language in *ACO* serves a different purpose from that of creating an "invisible style". One remarkable trace of Kubrick's work is to betray that narrative schemata and frustrate the viewer's expectation, therefore provoking a reflection upon the very making of the film by denaturalising the language and the style. The use of classical strategies of identification and of a more familiar *mise-en-scène* in the second part of *ACO* is all the more effective because it happens in contrast with the estrangement of the first narrative block, standing out the ambiguous effect of the film as an unit. After showing how cruel, cold and reproachful Alex is, the film gives its strongest suggestions that we identify with him and that we fear for his fate.

From the moment Alex is caught by the police on, the shots in which the protagonist works as a filter, that is, shots in which the character's gaze seems to be mediating the presentation of the images (Chatman 157) will be considerably more frequent than before. When Alex is interrogated in the police office, his condition of subjugated prisoner is reinforced by a low angle that emphasises the humiliation he suffers. That is the first moment

in the film in which we see a victim of violence bleeding. As Menezes points out, Alex is the only character whose blood is shed to the camera (62).

The voice-over, although less present in the second part, is more appealing. When Alex is a prisoner and a victim, attempts to move the spectator proliferate. After his sentence, a panoramic view of the State prison building is followed by the moaning voice: "This is where the real weepy and like tragic part of the story begins, *oh my brothers and only friends*. After a trial, with judges in a jury, and some very hard words spoken against *your friend and humble narrator* he was sent to 14 years on Staja no. 84\F." (my emphasis) In addition to this attempt to appeal to the audience's compassion, the brutality of the Ludovico Technique therapy contributes to transform Alex's image from that of a cruel aggressor into that of a defenceless prey. The violence he suffers during the treatment is institutionalised, promoted by a whole group that is more powerful with its political machine than Alex could be with his hands, and more importantly, it is a violence presented according to the victim's view point. The same device that distanced the spectator from the violence practised by the protagonist in the first part of the narrative, that is, the use of Alex as narrator and filter, now works to approximate the viewer to the violence that is practised against him.

Moreover, the change in Alex's position from criminal to victim is accompanied by an aesthetic change from the first to the second part of the film. In prison and after he is released, Alex and the other characters (except for his mother and a violet-hair nurse) do not wear the *nadsat* fashion or the colourful and bizarre dresses we see in the first part, but ordinary clothes. The set decoration creates a seemingly aseptic environment, both in prison and in other locations. In the writer's house, the room where Alex rests seems to be nothing but a comfortable family-house bedroom. The modern art pieces, kitsch decoration and gaudy paper-walls found in Alex's apartment or in the Korova Milkbar, for instance, are generally replaced by light colours and ordinary furniture. The familiarity of costumes and scenery

diminishes the estrangement of the first part and brings Alex closer to the spectator's universe.

The parallelism that structures the narrative operates not only in the repetition of sets and characters but also in the arrangement of the frames and in camera movement. When Alex plays the "surprise visit" to the writer's residence, the camera shows him and his *droogs* sneaking in through the garden during the night. The next shot is inside the house (a view that Alex does not have): the writer is sat at a table, working in a typewriter. A lateral travelling reveals the internal architecture of the house and when the camera achieves the opposite side of the room, we see the writer's wife reading in a strange armchair. The bell rings, we know that it is Alex, but the couple does not. The woman answers the door, Alex asks for help, she asks her husband what to do, he tells her to open, and finally they attack.

In the second part, after being tortured by his former partners who became members of the police, Alex finds himself at HOME again. The place looks familiar, but he does not recognise it at first. We see him hesitantly entering the garden. Then an internal shot shows a picture that is symmetric to the one in the first part: the writer working in front of a typewriter (only its colour is different, for Alex has destroyed the first one), the books placed on the background. The composition of the frame is exactly the same. A similar lateral travelling shows the rest of the room. But in the place we expect to see the woman, there is a strong and tall bodybuilder exercising. The image of the bodybuilder, in addition to the fact that Alex has been involuntarily meeting his victims and suffering their revenge, suggests that at HOME, were he committed his most violent crime, will be also the place of the most violent revenge. The voice-over does not interfere in the suspense—that is increased by the repetition of the dialogue—and the spectator is free to fear for Alex as she or he may have feared for the couple in the first part. The expectation is frustrated when Alex is not recognised and finds shelter. But his role as a victim is established.

When, afterwards, the boy denounces himself and is tortured by the writer and his partners, repetition comes into play again in order to reinforce Alex's change of roles. The protagonist is locked in the bedroom when he starts to hear Beethoven's symphony, then a parallel editing shows the writer in his office, listening to his cries that cross the symphony like the girl's cries have done in the Billyboy sequence. The shot is similar to the opening of the film: the writer is shown first in a close-up and a travelling out reveals three people surrounding him (his political partners) who are equivalent to Alex's *droogs*. The camera moves up to the opposite side of the room, revealing the place, just as it has done in the Korova. Instead of the white statues we see a phonograph. The writer now is the sadistic leader and Alex is the prey. Instead of Alex's secure and arrogant gaze, the old man has a perturbed, but also perverse expression.

We had the chance to sympathise with the writer's suffering in the first part of the film, for the rape of his wife is announced (although nothing is explicitly shown) in a rather aggressive and sadistic manner, with Alex meticulously cutting the woman's clothes in the breasts, then from the legs up to the neck until he leaves her wearing only the socks, torturing both the couple and the viewer with the possibility that he will tear her nipples away with the scissors. But then, in the second part of the narrative, the writer is transformed in a bizarre character. And although we know that his behaviour is a consequence of his trauma and that his wife is now dead, his figure is made repulsive, full of strange mannerisms that make him look abnormal and inhumane, whereas Alex is presented as an ordinary boy.

The proximity between Alex and viewer achieves its apex in the narrative when the protagonist tries to commit suicide. In pain and despair due to the extreme discomfort he feels when listening to the Ninth Symphony, Alex jumps through the window. The voice-over explains: "Suddenly I vidied [saw] what I had to do, and what I had wanted to do, and that was to do myself in, to snuff it, to blast off forever of this wicked and cruel world. One

moment of pain perhaps, and then sleep for ever and ever and ever.” The camera reproduces his fall and turns off when Alex reaches the ground and loses consciousness. The following silence and the black screen deprive the spectator from the knowledge of what happened between Alex’s fall and his recovering in the hospital. Both the camera and the voice-over seem to serve Alex, as if the narrative had stopped in respect to the character’s absence.

The following shot shows Alex moaning in a hospital bed and the voice-over starts ironical: “I jumped, oh my brothers, and I fell hard. But I did not snuff it. If I had snuff it I would not be here to tell what I told now. I came back to life after a long black gap of what might have been a million years.” The long black gap also happened to the spectator. To solve the problem of providing the information missing in the ellipsis, Kubrick resorts to a more impersonal narrator, one that does not compromise the voice-over. Shots of newspapers reporting the polemics of the media inform the events of which Alex may not be aware: “Government accused of inhuman means in crime reform”, “Alex driven to suicide by scientists.” The newspaper could be the means through which Alex himself came to know what happened, and so his control over the narrative is maintained. Besides, the device of the newspapers attributes a dramatic tone to the story, favouring Alex’s image as victim.

The sharing of information is also a powerful means of approximating the spectator to Alex. For Branigan, “narration involves concealing information as much as revealing it.” (82) Thus, when the narrative concedes the viewer the privilege of sharing Alex’s knowledge, therefore allowing the audience to know more than the other characters in the story, the viewer is treated as an accomplice of Alex’s acts. Take the example of the end of the sequence already described, when Alex meets Mr. Deltoid in his parents room. The advisor reveals his suspicion that Alex has committed certain crimes in the previous night and Alex denies his responsibility, but the spectator knows he is guilty. The last shot of the sequence has Alex as a filter. The spectator cannot see him because the image presented by the camera-

narrator is exactly the one that Alex experiences. Mr. Deltoid is seen sat on the bed, picking up a glass of water that lies in the bedside table and drinking. Besides the water, however, the glass contains a set of dentures. The spectator sees it, Alex sees it, but Deltoid does not. At the same time Alex is saying to his advisor: "You can rely on me, Sr." Although the spectator does not have a choice, he/she connives at Alex's lies, sharing his joke and taking part in his irony.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Nevertheless, Alex is a spectator as well. The treatment to which he is submitted consists of making of him an spectator, one that is forced to react negatively to the same kind of violence that we have been seeing since the beginning of the story. Wearing a straitjacket, with his eyelids held apart by tweezers, Alex is tied to a chair facing the screen so that he has no way to avoid the sight of the violent films they show him. His initial reaction, before the effects of the drugs can be felt, is of delight. And while he watches a teenage gang like his spanking a man he reflects: "It is funny how the colours of the real world only seem really real when we viddy [see] them on the screen."

Would Kubrick be suggesting that the film is a mirror image of our civilisation? Reality portrayed in sharper vibrant colours? The uneasiness that the movie provokes could be, then, derived from our inability to recognise ourselves in that mirror or by the discomfort to see exposed a part of ourselves that we prefer to deny. That leads us back to the idea that the film violates the stability of our experience as viewers. By pushing us to an empathetic relation with Alex, the film could be forcing us to acknowledge the violence and cruelty of our own nature, defying the anthropocentrism that still prevails in our culture to show that the human being—including, of course, the spectator—is also a beast. No matter how sophisticated humankind has become, with its complicated rules and institutions, the ambiguous original



energy-productive and destructive—that the ape discovered with the bone in *2001* remains a part of human nature.

And yet, that all happens in a film that shows little violence directly. Alex's acts are much more suggested (or at least only introduced) than really pictured. When, after stripping the woman and before raping her, he says to the writer "viddy well, little brother, viddy well", the spectator is not allowed to share the husband's astonishing vision. All we see is the tormented face of the man, who also becomes an spectator. And then, the violence that is practised against the writer, that is, making him look at the act of violence, seems to be even crueller than the rape itself—as much as the sight of Alex felling sick, fastened in a straitjacket and with his eyes widened is much more moving than the violence he is watching to, which passes almost unnoticed to us. In those scenes, what shocks is not necessarily violence, but the act of seeing and therefore acknowledging violence. Ironically, then, the spectacle of violence becomes more important than violence itself, and the colours in the screen shine brighter than in the real world. The violence that is not stated by the screen does not disturb, and becomes part of the silence that also characterises human relations in Western civilisation. The violence that is implied in the ritualised dinner in *2001*, hiding the brutality that was necessary for the acquisition of food. The violence that is justified by the logic of war in *Dr. Strangelove*. The violence that is absorbed by routine until it seems natural to explore women's bodies as objects, to expel the citizens who do not fit the institutions, to make the police more dangerous than the criminals. If the film is the image of civilisation, then Alex is the crisis of that civilisation, its violence and cruelty made undeniable and uncontrollable.

But again, this is only one among several possibilities of readings that the film offers. And if it is tempting to resort to one interpretation in order to make the film more suitable to our conventions, it is also worth remembering the ambiguity that characterises it. Maybe

Kolker is right when he says that "there are no honest or even responsible answers to the problems [the film] poses." Maybe the point is exactly that. And then, as much as the narrative makes us focus on something else than the astonishing violence it presents, the place that the film reserves to the spectator (including the critics) should make us search for something else than answers. Because, maybe, there is really none.

## Final Remarks

There are times I am ashamed  
to be a member of human race  
*Paths of Glory*

### Summary

In this research I investigated how the ambiguity that marks Kubrick's filmography takes form in his most polemic film, *A Clockwork Orange*. I began by delineating the trajectory of ambiguity in his other films, in an attempt to understand the different faces it can acquire and what view of the world underlies Kubrick's creation. As an auteur, Stanley Kubrick developed a work that is characterised by an ascending refusal to offer solutions. The films are provocative, and particularly in the productions since the 1960's, the films pose questions that can be read from a variety of different perspectives without attaching themselves to any particular answer. Taking three movies as a sample of the director's work, I tried to explain how a pessimistic vision of human fate and of civilisation that already existed in Kubrick's initial movies invades the form of the film and is reflected not only in the plot but in the very structure of the narratives and in the construction of characters. The films usually deal with individuals that are either isolated and impotent before the cruelty and the incoherence of the world to which they belong. And even in films like *Paths of Glory* (1957) and *Spartacus* (1960), which present typical heroes as standards of the positive values defended, there seems to be a sense of entrapment, with the heroes having to fight against a powerful and oppressive environment, in a battle where logic, sensibility and reasoning are useless in face of the greed and selfishness that dominates. *Dr. Strangelove* denies heroism, and humankind—condemned by its incapability of understanding and control its own destructive power—stick itself to an empty language, in which meanings and things are incongruent. The absence of heroes decentralises the narrative, but there is still a moral and

political stand behind the satire, and its that defined position that crashes from the next films on. In *2001*, the origin of that destructive power coincides with the origin of civilisation and, more important than that, that power, which is productive a well, is the very energy that impel civilisation to development. Humankind will be able to construct a sophisticated society, to change radically its environment, to submit the other species to its power, and yet all that knowledge will not help humans to understand their own existence. In *Eyes Wide Shut*, the individual is surrounded by the contradictions of desire, and by the incompatibility between desire and the institutions in which civilisation is organised. In that film, however, there seems to be a more resigned acceptance of ambiguity, with the individuals giving up the absolute belief in institutions and the search for answers. The films present a distinctive style that seems to detach the audience from the fictional world, rather than approximating it, as it traditionally happens in Hollywood cinema.

The analysis of *ACO* focus on the construction of ambiguity in the film narrative. The loss of a moral centre that is developed along the director's filmography acquires, in *ACO*, the aspect of an amoral character and a consequent amoral narrative. The protagonist Alex is given the role of narrator and of character-filter, so that both in the time/space of the discourse and in that of the story, the narrative is submitted to Alex. Therefore, the cold and inhumane treatment he reserves to his victims is reflected in the form through which the information is rendered. The bipolar role Alex plays—as an aggressor is the first part of the story, and as victim in the second—is crucial to the construction of ambiguity both in his personality and in the film. Since Alex commands the narrative, his own pain is stressed in opposition to the distant presentation of the victim's suffering. Besides, the narrative contributes to approximate Alex and the spectator, suggesting an intimate relation between them, treating the viewer as a supporter of his acts.

## Conclusion

“Whose side are you, son?”, asks the official to the young private in *Full Metal Jacket*, but the question could well be addressed to Stanley Kubrick himself. That is, in fact, with different words, the way critics react to most of the director’s films and, no doubt, mainly to *A Clockwork Orange*. Not resigned with the absence of answers in the film, Kolker argues that ambiguity can “remove the tasks from the film’s initial creator”, resulting in an “yielding up of responsibility.” (117) Rather than irresponsible however, ambiguity is a brave choice. It would be more comfortable not to compromise oneself with the complexity of the questions that the film poses and adopt a secure standpoint, one that conformed with the general view that solves the problem by punishing the evil element in the story and then treating it as a negative other defined in contrast to the positive morality of the film.

The film avoids judging Alex. *ACO* ignores the Manichaeian imaginary boundary between good and evil, between right and wrong, and places itself in a dangerous limbo. The events are then presented from the perspective of someone who, despite being perfectly capable of differing between what is right and wrong according to the society to which he belongs, has chosen simply not to take that difference into consideration and to obey only his own desires, which happen to be wrong. One can conclude that, by refusing to condemn Alex, the film takes the risk of sounding supportive, of being “in the side of evil.”

For critic J. Burgess, Kubrick’s point would be clear: “Alex, who has *chosen* evil, is better than all the mealy-mouthed others in the film who have either chosen evil pretending its good or have timidly not chosen at all.” (33) Indeed, other characters in the story are made as unattractive as someone like Alex could see them. The ones who are on the side of the institutions, like government or the family, are either ridiculously apathetic, like Alex’s parents, or cynical, like the doctors and the Home Secretary. The society that the film depicts is thoroughly dehumanised and Alex seems to be the only vivacious figure. In that

environment, Alex's eagerness to provoke and see suffering seems a kind of nostalgia for intensity, for sensibility. As Feldman notes, Alex is "the only character in the movie who is *not* a clockwork orange." (16)

But should Kubrick really take sides? The narrative seems to suggest that we look beyond violence, and then beyond our moral positions. "Viddy well, little brother, vidy well", tells Alex, but what we see is not the act of violence itself. As much as the spectator must re-accommodate the meanings of words and images in order to understand the coherence between the heavenly blissful feeling the boy has while listening to Beethoven and the scenes of murders and disasters he imagines, the whole film demands that we abandon moral and also aesthetic conventions, that we dislocate our focus of attention. Maybe it does not matter much if Alex is right or wrong—there is no doubt that he jeopardises order, law and the innocent citizen—maybe the question is not who is better than who, but how humankind could have built a civilisation where the only form of liveliness and the only effective vehicle for self-expression seems to be violence. How we could have built a civilisation which destroys itself. That initial energy that is embedded in the ape's discovery in *2001* and which marks the beginning of civilisation is present in *ACO* both in Alex and in the society to which he belongs. And as the narrative makes Alex an attractive character, it suggests that that energy belongs to the viewer as well. The film does not dissociate the spaces, viewer and characters belong to the same universe, that of a decadent civilisation.

Feldman understands *ACO*, and Kubrick's filmography in general, as a statement that civilisation was built upon a mistaken model of human nature. Institutions, forged to control men and women, ignore aspects of human behaviour that are not interesting to the order they attempt to install. For the critic, Alex is "the chief evidence that the significant order of civilization is collapsing", for he is the untamed id (15), a *discontent* of civilisation. Feldman

borrowed from Freud<sup>18</sup> the idea that the progress of civilisation depends on the repression or sublimation of the instinctual id, denying inherent aspects of human nature and resulting in the frustration of primal desires and instincts. Therefore “a civilization in decline would be marked by the increasing ineffectuality of those forms to control the expression of the id and eventually by the unhampered re-emergence of the id itself.”(16) It is not violence itself that is in question then, but the environment that, in trying to ignore its existence, gives it the very reason to show up so intensely. Alex, thus, is the nightmare of civilisation. His attitudes attest the failure of civilisation to nullify human contradictions. As Feldman points out, Alex is not only a symbol of the decadent civilisation, but also the very energy that will provoke its collapse.

Alex is an outsider, a “dissident”, as Menezes says (77). Because he represents a threat to the established order, he is excluded, confined and then artificially shaped to fit the model society needs him to conform. But he could have been absorbed as well, as it happens to his old droog Dim, whose destructive potential is employed by the police, and therefore, in favour of the order. The problem, then, is not whether he is violent or not, but in advantage of whom that violence is being used. There are particular contexts, in which Alex’s violence is more than acceptable, it is even welcomed by society. War, for instance, is one of them. War could be understood as a moment of crisis of civilisation, when the institutions, having failed to keep order according to their own rules, must resort exactly to those elements of human nature they tried to suppress. War is a moment in which civilisation requires the repressed violence in its service and creates a chaos disguised in the discipline of the army and supported by the excuse of patriotism. Joker (Mathew Modine), the protagonist of Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*, is very similar to Alex, maybe with a difference in intensity: he is young, intelligent, sardonically humorous, conscious of (but not shocked by) his own acts and the

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<sup>18</sup> *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, 1929.

brutality of the world in which he lives, with an affected excitement about violence. One difference, however, is crucial: Joker is an authorised killer.

A soldier in Vietnam, Joker does not only have the opportunity to exercise his violent potential, he is also intensely trained and stimulated to do so, as it is expressed by the discourse of the recruits' drill instructor: "It's your killer instinct that must be harnessed if you expect to survive in combat. The rifle is only a tool, it is the hard heart that kills. If your killer instincts are not plain and strong you'll hesitate in the moment of truth. You will not kill." And it is Joker himself who explains: "The instructors are proud to see that we are going beyond their control. The Marine Corp does not want robots, the Marine Corp wants killers, the Marine Corp wants to build indestructible men, men without fear." The Marine Corp wants Alex. What escapes Joker, as Michael Pursell points out (223), is that when they go "beyond the control" is when the control shows to be the most effective, that is, when the boys finally become cold killers as the State needs them to be.

But there seems to be nothing wrong if we sympathise with Joker. Sympathising with the smart kid that fights in Vietnam to defend the interests of his country is in accordance with the moral values of Western civilisation. If this smart kid shows a sadistic curiosity towards killing it is even better. In that particular situation, murder becomes acceptable. War is one of the barbarisms necessary to sustain civilisation, it is violence ritualised by ethic codes that try to determine how brutal can a nation be against another. But in the local sphere, in the battle fields, it does not count on institutions, it depends on individual men's power to destroy the other, and then, civilised manners are not of much use.

Considering that *ACO* is settled in an undetermined future in a Western nation, we would not go too far by suggesting that Joker is the Alex-to-be. The brutal training in Parris Island in *Full Metal Jacket* is the reverse conditioning of the Ludovico Technique in *ACO*, when the government tries to tame the beast it helped to produce. But it would be too



simplistic to defend Alex as a victim of the system or to say, about Joker, that the army turns innocent boys into murderers. The point is that for Kubrick nobody is innocent. As Smith discusses in his article *The Beast Within*, what we see in *Full Metal Jacket* is that the war does not generate destructive instincts, it just gives them space to flourish. For Smith, in this film as in the rest of Kubrick's work man is depicted "as a barely restrained savage whose social institutions reflect his innate depravity." (230)

So man is just the opposite of the Rousseauian ideal of natural goodness. Alex, the pre-civilised man is just as evil as the highly civilised government who tries to domesticate him, and for that problem the film, again, does not offer a solution. All the film offers is perplexity, the pessimism that underlies Kubrick's films in general and that presents people condemned, like the Greek Dedalus, to live in the maze they have constructed and cannot understand. But if perplexity does not evolve to transformation, it generates paralysis. Pessimism could be useful as a process of maturation, but it is necessary to go beyond pessimism, to learn from it if one does not want to stagnate. Trying to find a way out of the labyrinth, Dedalus, the unfortunate inventor whose creations were both impressive and the cause of misery, fled out in his wax wings. Kubrick, however, denies us the wings, as he has done to the writer in *The Shining*, who dies frozen in his allucinated search. The viewer must mould her own wings. Escaping or learning to survive in the maze and then overcome the state of perplexity and the pessimistic stage is a task that the film leaves to the spectator.

Shocked with the conclusion that man is a savage and that institutions are inefficient, Hechinger wrote: "(...) what sort of social institutions are to be built on that pessimistic, antiliberal view of man's nature? They will—they must, if logic prevails—be repressive, illiberal, distrustful violent institutions of fascism."<sup>19</sup> The problem is that the film suggests that logic does not prevail, at least not that same logic that constructed the civilisation in

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

question. And as much as the lost astronaut in *2001*, the spectator is left with the challenge to figure out the meanings of things according to a new logic, the challenge to construct other paradigms.

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