

5-2-2018

Stanley Kubrick & The Evolution of Critical Consensus

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Recommended Citation

Keller, Cote (2018) "Stanley Kubrick & The Evolution of Critical Consensus," *Global Tides*: Vol. 12 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol12/iss1/3>

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Stanley Kubrick's greatness as an American director precedes him to such an extent that the virtues of his films are rarely subjected to critique. Even laymen who have not followed his career that scrupulously or may not recognize his name at all would still likely regard *The Shining*, *2001*, and perhaps *Dr. Strangelove* as benchmarks of their respective genres. The influence of Kubrick on pop culture is undeniable, but his films have not always enjoyed the fine repute they cherish today, since they tended to leave the first critics who saw them divided and conflicted. Examining contemporary critiques of the director's filmography reveals not only aspects of his technique that may have been overlooked but also insightful constants about the process of criticism and the development of consensus.

One convenient way to categorize Kubrick's works emphasizes their timeline and relationship to the Motion Picture Association of America. Kubrick made the majority of his films under the strict ordinances of the Production Code, but after the MPAA elected filmmakers' advocate Jack Valenti to its presidency, he would proceed to direct several more provocative films for which he is most recognized today. Even while Geoff Shurlock was acting director of the Production Code Administration, Kubrick relied on veiled innuendo and visual metaphors to circumvent the Code, and the very existence of his early films arguably played a role in undermining the 30-year-old system.

The elaborate interplay between MPAA regulators and filmmakers is clearly embedded in the 1962 adaptation of *Lolita*. Kubrick struggled for about a year to obtain financing for the film, getting turned down by United Artists, Warner Bros., and Columbia (Leff, 221-223). Shurlock consented to the distribution on one moral condition, that *Lolita*, who was 12 in the book, be identified as either older or as married—a condition Kubrick accepted in order to secure a wide release. With original author Nabokov penning the script, Kubrick opted to shoot the film in England under the pretense of redeeming tax credits, although some believe that he went abroad to exclude more effectively the MPAA from the creative process (Howard, 78). By the time the PCA examined the final edit, it was too late for making drastic revisions to the basic premise, and Shurlock could only press for relatively minor changes.

Kubrick's rendition of *Lolita* had the impressive effect of aggravating film regulators and critics for diametrically opposed reasons, starkly exposing the different priorities of both. Shurlock requested the producers expunge several double entendres and trim the scene in which 12 year-old *Lolita* seduces Humbert, his goal being to arrive at a "reasonably acceptable" depiction of the relationship endemic to the story. Shurlock had for some time wanted to amend the "sexual perversion" clause of the Code to allow films treating the subject with "good taste", and in 1961 he got his wish in the form of a "restraint and care" revision. Though Kubrick and Harris eventually won their seal, and helped to advance the

demise of the Production Code, in so doing they alienated critics who thought the concessions weakened the film's artistry. *Variety's* original review of *Lolita* typifies the critical consensus at the time:

“Vladimir Nabokov's witty, grotesque novel is, in its film version, like a bee from which the stinger has been removed. It still buzzes with a sort of promising irreverence, but it lacks the power to shock and, eventually, makes very little point either as comedy or satire.”

Andrew Sarris, who would later profess his distaste for the “misogynistic” novel and his preference for the 1998 Adrian Lyne version, complained that, “The sex is so discreetly handled that an unsophisticated spectator may be completely mystified... Consequently, we face the problem without the passion, the badness without the beauty, the agony without the ecstasy.” While calling *Lolita* “in its way—a good film”, Arlene Croce in *Sight & Sound* essentially agreed with that assessment: “If the film has Nabokov's ear and voice, it has not his eye... There isn't a hint of eroticism in the film and the only lunges Kubrick makes in that direction are perfunctory and misguided.”

The prevailing assumption, trumpeted by Sarris and others, held that the very premise of Nabokov's novel called for a maturity and sobriety missing from the coy and Code-savvy film interpretation. In 1962 *Lolita* sparked no more raging controversy among critics than the difficulty of perceiving whatever made it inherently controversial. Summing up this disappointment, *Time's* review observed, “Those who know the book will hoot at this decontamination: those who do not will be mystified as to how the story got its lurid reputation.” Indeed, author Greg Jenkins outlines several techniques Kubrick drew upon to push the film through regulatory constraints. As one example, the film *Lolita* runs away from Humbert on foot instead of on bicycle, which would have highlighted her youth (Jenkins, 59). Another, perhaps more jarring change was omitting dialogue implying that Humbert physically harmed Lolita; Jenkins rationalizes this as part of a larger agenda to make the main character look more like a sympathetic, soft-hearted man than a predator (54). The same *Time* review, however, had the opposite impression, arguing that Kubrick seemed intent on victimizing the child and vilifying the adult: “In the book, it was Humbert who appeared romantically naive when Lolita quite casually and ironically seduced him... But in the movie, she seems to fall into Humbert's voracious clutches...” If anything, this disagreement points to the ambiguity woven throughout the film.

Whatever his intentions, Kubrick had adroitly skirted the Code restrictions, and reviewers deemed the resulting product a toothless, altogether different product from the book. Bosley Crowther for *The New York Times* conceded that it was “a provocative sort of film” but said, “The character of Lolita... is not a child in this movie. She looks to be a good 17 years old, possessed of a striking figure and a devilishly haughty teen-age air.” *Time* argued

the same point, insisting that actress Sue Lyon undercut “the shock effect” of the premise. In fact, Pauline Kael, who would subsequently become one of Kubrick’s most dogged critics, noticed so many quibbles about the lead actress’ mature appearance that she mocked the naiveté of the critical consensus in her own review:

“Have the reviewers looked at the school-girls of America lately? The classmates of my fourteen-year-old daughter are not merely nubile: some of them look badly used... Kubrick and company have been attacked most for the area in which they have been simply accurate.” (42)

Kubrick himself would later voice some commonality with critics over his mostly suggestive handling of the material. According to him, one of the book’s “most poignant elements” is the epiphany several years after their separation that Humbert actually loved Lolita and was not just lusting after her. “I believe I didn’t sufficiently dramatize the erotic aspect of Humbert’s relationship with Lolita,” he said, “and because his sexual obsession was only barely hinted at, many people guessed too quickly that Humbert was in love with Lolita” (Gelmis).

Age, however, appears to have served the perception of *Lolita* well, as modern review aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes has compiled a higher percentage of positive reviews for it (95%) than for both *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Shining* (91 and 87% respectively). Author Norman Kagan suggests that the subtlety of Kubrick’s book has become more valued in the days since its release. “These 1960s comments seem irrelevant now,” he writes. “Kubrick’s use of visual metaphors and *double-entendre* to handle the film’s eroticism can now be appreciated, especially as a witty alternate to today’s obligatory tumbings, lubricities, and assorted inarticulate cries” (100). The pointedly critical reception of *Lolita* may suggest that adaptations from one medium to another always have to contend with unfair comparison in their early lifetimes. Only with time do most adaptations attain the privilege of being judged on their own merits. Kael herself chastised her contemporaries for the undue reverence with which they all seemed to be treating Nabokov’s work:

“Perhaps the reviewers have been finding so many faults with *Lolita* because this is such an easy way to show off some fake kind of erudition: even newspaper reviews can demonstrate that they’ve read a book by complaining about how different the movie is from the novel... They don’t complain this much about Hollywood’s changes in biblical stories.” (42)

In 1968, the newly appointed Jack Valenti replaced the Code with a four-tiered ratings

system more accommodating to adult-oriented pictures. Kubrick no longer had to bind his own hands to get a picture made, but that liberty did not preclude his first post-Code film from stoking tremendous outrage. *A Clockwork Orange*’s ignominious reputation has been well documented, placing #5 on a *Time Out New*

York countdown of the 50 most controversial films and regularly gracing similar lists. However, it would be vain to assume a binary divide on the film between critics and a thin-skinned public or religious right. In truth, some of the most ardent detractors of *A Clockwork Orange* belonged to the profession of journalism.

Extreme on-screen violence was not exclusive to Kubrick's film by the time it came out, nor were depictions of rape. Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* is usually credited as the turning point in American cinema for bloody violence, and his *Straw Dogs* similarly infuriated critics for the way he directed a rape scene. Accordingly, the critical backlash over *Clockwork* was rooted not in the violence itself, but in the manner people thought Kubrick was glorifying it. Negative responses were fueled by what looks today like sanctimonious moral and political antipathy. Roger Ebert opened his review by calling *Clockwork* "an ideological mess, a paranoid right-wing fantasy masquerading as an Orwellian warning," and proceeded to fault Kubrick for supposedly blaming the protagonist's wrongdoing on society. Ebert pondered, "What in hell is Kubrick up to here? Does he really want us to identify with the antisocial tilt of Alex's psychopathic little life?" For some of the most trusted critics as well as the general public, the idea of rooting for Alex's liberation seemed incomprehensible, dangerous, or repugnant.

Ebert was not alone in denouncing the story as "right-wing." On the contrary, left-wing intelligentsia in the day would commonly write off the film as a misanthropic, "fascist" narrative. *The New York Times* featured two reviews, which roughly concurred on *Clockwork*'s politics but disagreed on its ideological merit. Whereas Vincent Canby extolled the movie as a beautiful and "essentially British nightmare... in its attention to... the state of mind created by a kind of weary socialism," Clayton Riley indignantly suggested that the movie's theme justifies totalitarianism and "the freedom to commit atrocities":

"Kubrick has emphasized the book's notion that, in the name of free will, all self-expression becomes highly valued... That is, the will to perpetrate evil is better than no will at all. I don't believe the victims of yesterday's Nazi terror or today's racist and sexist oppression around the world ever had the luxury of indulging themselves in such petty abstractions..."

When star Malcolm MacDowell remarked, "Liberals, they hate 'Clockwork' because they're dreamers and it shows them the realities," journalist Fred Hechinger penned an enraged response loosely tying the human depravity in the film to authoritarian demands for "law and order," or a police state. Hechinger's article read, "In a reversal of history, Europe may this time be more sophisticated than America about... the fascist threat. This is why American liberals have every reason to hate the ideology behind *A Clockwork Orange* and the trend it symbolizes."

If Hechinger's definition of fascism has any authenticity to it, then he was certainly right about Europe's greater sensitivity to fascism. *A Clockwork Orange* was particularly poorly received in Britain, where both Labor and Conservative Party officials (Maurice Edelman and Reginald Maulding; Bugge) rebuked it and where the news media repeatedly made unsubstantiated connections between the film and youth-committed crimes, sometimes by those who had not even seen it (Baxter, 265-270). According to his family, Kubrick received such an abundance of death threats over *A Clockwork Orange* that he was compelled to order a ban on the film's screening in Great Britain, a ban that stood until after his death. Perhaps this sensationalistic response relates to the more tenuous protection of free speech in Great Britain, where films had to be approved by the British Board of Film Censors. One paper called for censor Stephen Murphy to be fired precisely because he gave a pass to a film as socially pernicious as *Clockwork*.

Another reason critics took such offense to the violence stemmed yet again from liberties Kubrick took with the original text. In Anthony Burgess' novel, the reader was supposed to loathe Alex but pity him in spite of his flaws because the state deprives him of his free will, nullifying his capacity for good as much as his capacity for evil. In the film, several critics argued that Kubrick wanted to make Alex genuinely likeable, even superior to the people he terrorizes. Ebert criticized the cinematic point of view itself, arguing that Kubrick's wide-angle lenses frequently distort everybody in the film except for the central thug, an effect encouraging identification with a rapist creating the illusion that "Alex, and only Alex, is normal." Others argued that the essential goodness of Alex's animalistic state is driven home by his love of classical music and by the comparatively vulgar artworks that permeate the homes of the upper-class. In his exceptionally vitriolic take for *The Village Voice*, Sarris described at length how the movie conveniently omits Alex's abuse of books in order to make him seem more cultured and intelligent.

"Kubrick seems concerned that if Alex's anti-bookishness were made too explicit, the more literate spectator... might be disconcerted by the psychological and cultural improbability of a music lover and a book hater coexisting in the same psyche... There are no visual suggestions in the novel for Kubrick's exploitation of Pornographic Pop as the presumed life style of Alex's upper-class victims. Whereas Burgess signals a prevailing mediocrity in the society at large, Kubrick overdesigns every social occasion into a disconnected grotesqueness."

Kael agreed with his sentiment in large part, condemning the film and its apologists in the strongest words. For her and others, the slick carnality and violence orchestrated by Kubrick didn't necessarily make the film repulsive. Rather, the anti-institutional ideology underlying the violence repelled them. Kael wrote, "The 'straight' people are far more twisted than Alex; they seem inhuman

and incapable of suffering. He alone suffers. And how he suffers! ... society itself can be felt to justify Alex's hoodlumism." Her invective closes with an urgent appeal, basically equating her resistance and the dialogue over it to a free speech battleground. According to the critic, the censorship controversy surrounding *A Clockwork Orange* is a kind of circular, self-affirming specter, ironically abetting the censorship of anyone who scrutinizes the "implications" in popular entertainment. Essays like Kael's, Ebert's, and Riley's cast doubt on the assumption that film writing is innately less political than other writing. Irrespective of the movie's presentation or storytelling, each person imposed personal biases on the work to fashion meaning out of it.

Discounting morality and politics, *A Clockwork Orange* was shunned for purely technical reasons as well, by people who thought that it was just too overwrought and dull. Critics often levied the charge that Kubrick's content did not warrant his ostentatiousness, and *Clockwork* was no exception. Sarris drawled,

"Kubrick tricks up his feeble continuities with... some slow-motion violence that is even more soporific than the claustrophobic unreality of his standard shots full of wide angles and shallow feelings... See 'A Clockwork Orange' for yourself and suffer the damnation of boredom."

Stanley Kauffmann seconded the notion that Kubrick delivered style over substance, pinning the flashy design on his inability to capture Burgess' "linguistic acrobatics" using the filmic medium. His review singled out the scene in which Alex and his droogs beat the homeless man as one where visual complexity trumped the narrative. "A great deal of the film is banal or reminiscent," he said. "The four ruffians stand before a streetlamp when they batter a tramp, so that the light streams out around them—one of the hoariest of arty poses" (90). Unlike Sarris, Kauffmann ended on a note, not of disdain, but of regret: "One thing that, two films ago, I'd never have thought possible to say about a Kubrick film is true of *A Clockwork Orange*: it's boring." Interestingly, Riley, Kael, Sarris, and Kauffman all drew attention to the lack of any explanation for the cryptic title, as if this was a crippling fault in the clarity of the film. Again, they advocated deference to the novel, declining to judge the film on its own merits even though Kubrick blatantly differentiated his downbeat ending, wherein Alex is freed to resume his unchecked criminal life, from Burgess' more optimistic one.

Both these criticisms, of ambiguity and elongation to the point of boredom, carry over without issue to the reception three years prior of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which elicited more praise for its technical virtuosity and considerably more bafflement at its meaning. *New York Times* reviewer Renata Adler combined such opposing statements as "the special effects in the movie... are the best I have ever seen" and "the visual equivalent of rubbing the stomach

and patting the head” to communicate the splendor and sheer excessiveness she saw in it. *Variety*’s Robert Fredrick registered a great deal of confusion at “the plot, so-called,” which Kubrick divides into three sections only loosely connected through a cryptic black monolith. The ending of the movie, leaving interpretation almost entirely in the hands of the viewer, prompted both elaborate appreciations, as printed in *The Harvard Crimson* and *The Christian Science Monitor*, and disgruntled wishes that the film had not meandered so long to tell so little. In his book on the making of the film, Jerome Agel compiles excerpts of many such reviews, one of which from *Minneapolis Tribune* curtly reads, “What he made in *2001* is not so much a movie as a stunt. It is one of the dullest movies of the year” (249).

To what does the re-consideration of *2001* chiefly owe? As with most of the director’s works, the answer is exposure and time. A series of three essays by Joseph Gelmis provides an indelible glimpse into the significance that repeat viewings had on Kubrick’s films and reputation. While his write-through for *Newsday* commended *2001* as an “unparalleled movie spectacle,” Gelmis nonetheless critiqued the film as an incomplete experience, one that substitutes “near-automatons” for characters and that “abandons plot for symbol” (Agel, 264-265). His second impression constituted a radical reversal, complete with a theory as to why his judgment changed. Gelmis also pointed out the conflict of interest that every critic must resolve between praising great art and helping entertainment-hungry readers to make a prudent investment of their time:

“A film of such extraordinary originality as Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*... upsets the members of the critical establishment because it exists outside their framework of apprehending and describing movies... Their most polished puns and witticisms are useless, because the conventional standards don’t apply... The problem in recommending *2001: A Space Odyssey* is implying that it may not fall into place for you until the second viewing. And that’s asking, perhaps, too much stamina and cash outlay in the case of a three-hour... film.” (Agel, 266-67)

As Gelmis puts it, film criticism essentially amounts to a form of categorization, to making order out of foreign concepts by relating them to familiar ones, and Kubrick’s films sometimes seemed so foreign as to deter critics from relating to them on any level. John Russell Taylor echoes this assertion in an essay on his second viewing, where he noticed that an 11-year-old boy appeared to be more enraptured by the film than either of his parents. “It seems that we have here, in a rather extreme way, is a whole new way of assimilating narrative,” he conjectured, tracing the editing of *2001* to TV’s effects on attention spans. “Plot in particular does not greatly matter, and neither does an overall sense of form. Provided the attention-grabbers are spectacular enough in themselves, no one is going to question the rationale behind them too closely” (Agel, 273).

Though the term may not have been en vogue at the time of Taylor's writing, here he seems to have been describing a kind of "pure cinema," stripped back to its most basic elements and treating narrative as secondary. Taylor summarized his feelings on *2001's* wandering plot and arresting visuals in simultaneous frustration and humility:

"I suppose I shall adjust eventually to... films that are all flash and outbreak, with little sense beyond the sound and fury. But meanwhile, it really is rather worrying to think of current cinema as an unknown territory into which, perhaps, only a little child can confidently lead me" (274).

The turbulent relationship critics have had with Kubrick's filmography supports three main observations about criticism: that deviations from familiar forms or an original source are rarely taken on their own merits, at least initially; that political bias inflects even writing about entertainment; and that popular memory tends to remember the praiseworthy in art more than its defects. Kubrick polarized the critical class for decades by pushing against the confines of categories they traditionally imposed. On account of his persistence and refusal to compromise, "Kubrick-ian" has become a category in itself.

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