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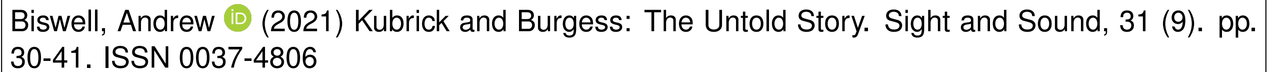

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Andrew Biswell
Anthony Burgess and Stanley Kubrick: The Untold Story

Anthony Burgess and Stanley Kubrick worked together, not always harmoniously, on three film projects -- *A Clockwork Orange*, the unmade Napoleon film, and *Eyes Wide Shut*. New research into the archive of the Burgess Foundation in Manchester has uncovered a series of letters and other documents, which allow us to chart their collaborations in detail.

'I'm in the early stages of writing a novel about juvenile delinquents in the future,' wrote Anthony Burgess in a letter to his friends Diana and Meir Gillon in April 1961. 'The whole thing's making me feel rather sick. My horrible juvenile delinquent hero is emerging as too sympathetic a character.' *A Clockwork Orange* was one of two futuristic novels commissioned by the publisher Heinemann in 1960. Burgess intended his twin nightmare futures to be read as a pair, but his other dystopia, *The Wanting Seed* (1962), is unknown to most people. This ecological fable, in which a future Britain is overwhelmed by its growing and hungry population, is much clearer in its political meanings than *A Clockwork Orange*. Despite Burgess's attempts to set up *The Wanting Seed* as a film with Sophia Loren and Carlo Ponti in the 1970s, the novel has never enjoyed the success of its dystopian companion-novel.

The earliest outline for *A Clockwork Orange* appears in Burgess's notebook for 1960. Under the working titles 'A Maggot in the Cherry' and 'The Plank in Your Eye', he made a chapter outline of the three sections of the book. No other substantial plans have survived, and it seems that most of the details of plot and dialogue were improvised at the typewriter. The major piece of research was the time Burgess spent learning Russian to devise the new 'Nadsat' vocabulary for the novel. This process is documented by a collection of 'Teach Yourself Russian' vinyl records in the Burgess Foundation's archive.

The novel was completed in August 1961 and submitted to Burgess's publisher via his agent, Peter Janson-Smith. Commenting on the meaning of his story in a 1972 interview, Burgess said: 'Some of the symbolism is spelled out in big letters ... There's a home place with the gloopy title of 'HOME', and this is the place where charity is supposed to begin. Both Alex and his namesake, F. Alexander, fail in charity at the two climactic points.'

It's clear from the editorial files that *A Clockwork Orange* caused trouble from the beginning: Burgess's London publishers, William Heinemann, were worried that the novel might be prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act, and thought that it was likely to damage the author's reputation. His editor, James Michie, wrote in a confidential memorandum: 'The author can plead artistic justification … but a delicate-minded critic could convincingly accuse him of indulging in sadistic fantasies.' Michie considered asking Burgess to publish under a pseudonym.

When the book was released on 14 May 1962, the early reviews were mixed: Kingsley Amis and Malcolm Bradbury liked it, but there was strong disapproval from the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New Statesman*. Sales of the UK edition were much slower than expected, with only 3872 copies sold in the first five years after publication, despite endorsements from Roald Dahl and William Burroughs.

Nevertheless, there was a significant response from the Sixties counterculture, especially in America. Andy Warhol and Ronald Tavel made a pirate adaptation at the Factory in New York in 1965. *Vinyl* is a low-budget 16mm film, composed of two continuous takes and lasting 66 minutes. There is an element of improvisation, because most of the actors had not bothered to learn their lines. By 1966 Burgess had sold the film rights to the producers of *Walkabout*, and in 1967 a script by Terry Southern and Michael Cooper was submitted to (and rejected by) the BBFC. There was speculation in the press about David Hemmings being cast in the leading role. Andrew Loog Oldham, manager of the Rolling Stones, wanted to set up the film as a vehicle for Mick Jagger, whose performance in *Ned Kelly* gives us a taste of how he might have played Burgess's juvenile delinquent hero.

Stanley Kubrick became interested in *A Clockwork Orange* in 1969. Southern had mailed him a copy of the novel, which was read by his wife Christiane and strongly recommended by her. He said later: 'It seemed to me to be a unique and marvelous work of imagination, and perhaps even genius.' After his planned Napoleon film ran into financial difficulties, Kubrick asked Warner Brothers to acquire the rights and began to work on his own adaptation. The project was announced in *Variety* on 3 February 1970, and the first version of Kubrick's screenplay was completed eight days later. It seems that Kubrick gave serious consideration to changing the title:

one of his early draft scripts is titled 'The Ludovico Symphony' -- a double reference to Ludwig van Beethoven and the 'Ludovico' brainwashing process in the novel.

A notable feature of Kubrick's adaptation is that the meaning of 'a clockwork orange' is never explained. Various references in the novel establish that the title is intended as a metaphor for mechanistic state control of the individual. Burgess claimed to have overheard the expression in a London pub during the Second World War -- 'He's as queer as a clockwork orange' -- but the expression is not recorded in Jonathon Green's three-volume *Dictionary of Slang*.

Burgess had already written his own screenplay in 1969 -- a bold reworking of the story in which he introduces new elements not present in the original novel. Kubrick was aware of this script and his annotated copy is in the Stanley Kubrick Archive in London. There was some correspondence between Kubrick and Burgess's agent about the two endings -- which one did Burgess regard as definitive? Despite his many later public statements in favour of the 'long' version of the novel, Burgess makes it clear in his screenplay that in 1969 he favoured the 'short' ending -- a choice echoed by Kubrick in his own adaptation. The 1972 Penguin paperback edition of the novel follows the film by omitting the final chapter, and this alteration to the text seems to have been made with Burgess's full approval.

One other aspect of the Burgess script is worth noting: at the end of the film, Alex rushes towards the camera with his cut-throat razor drawn, shouting the opening line from the novel: 'What's it going to be then, eh?' While these words emphasise the importance of choice and free will, the final image is of Alex, as Burgess said in 1972, 'suddenly almost stereoscopically projected -- so that he seemed to be in the audience -- if this were possible.'

Asked about the extent of his first collaboration with Burgess, Kubrick said that they had little contact before the film was completed, apart from a telephone call in which they exchanged pleasantries. Kubrick maintained that most of what he needed to know was already present in the text of the novel. As he said in an interview with Penelope Houston and Philip Strick, 'I think it is reasonable to say that whatever Burgess had to say about the story was said in the book.' Their first meeting, at a private pre-release

screening of *A Clockwork Orange* in London, was a qualified success: Burgess's agent walked out, and his wife had to be persuaded not to follow.

Visually, Kubrick's film is very much a work of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Shot almost entirely on location, it foregrounds aspects of contemporary architecture and design, such as the newly-completed flat-blocks in Thamesmead and the concrete campus at Brunel University. The question of when the novel takes place is hard to resolve. The outline in Burgess notebook suggests that it will be set in 1980, but this date is nowhere mentioned in the text. In letters he talks vaguely about the future, and his later stage adaptation takes place in the futuristic year 2004. In a copy of the novel signed for a fan, Burgess wrote: 'The story takes place in a sort of England in a sort of 1962' -- implying that he had merely exaggerated certain aspects of the time when he was writing it. Musically, the Kubrick film deviates from Burgess's novel, whose references are mostly to Beethoven, by introducing other composers, such as Purcell, Rossini, Elgar and Wendy Carlos, whose spiky contributions on the Moog synthesiser are most prominent during the brainwashing scenes.

Kubrick's adaptation premiered in New York on 19 December 1971. When it opened in London (and elsewhere in Europe) in January 1972, Burgess reviewed it in an article published in the *Listener* and reprinted in the *Los Angeles Times*. He wrote: 'I went to see Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* in New York, fighting to get in like everybody else. It was worth the fight, I thought -- very much a Kubrick movie, technically brilliant, thoughtful, relevant, poetic, mind-opening.' He added that the film was 'a radical remaking of my own novel, not a mere adaptation.'

Kubrick and Warner Brothers were surprised by the extent to which *A Clockwork Orange* provoked public debate about screen violence. In a letter to Burgess sent a few weeks after the film's release, the studio's head of publicity wrote: 'More attention and controversy is happening on this film than any in recent memory.' Following hostile reviews from Pauline Kael in the *New Yorker*, Fred Hechinger in the *New York Times* and Andrew Sarris in the *Village Voice*, Warner Brothers persuaded Burgess to defend Kubrick in a series of interviews and press articles. Burgess and Malcolm McDowell did a two-week press tour in New York, some of which is documented in the audio archive. A long interview recorded at Columbia University survives as a sound recording at the Burgess Foundation. There were print interviews, for example in *Publishers Weekly*, and a notable

debate on Creative Arts Television with the film critic William Everson. Kubrick kept in contact with Burgess and McDowell by telephone, often coaching them in advance of media interviews.

For the most part, Kubrick left the task of publicity to Burgess and McDowell, but he did give a long interview to Houston and Strick, published in *Sight and Sound* in Spring 1972. His other appearance in print was a long article for *New York Times*, in which he responded to Hechinger's accusations that he had made a film likely to worsen the social decay that it documented. He wrote: 'Mr Hechinger is, no doubt, a well-educated man, but the tone of his piece strikes me as also that of a well-conditioned man, who responds to what he expects to find, or has been told, or has read about, rather than to what he actually perceives *A Clockwork Orange* to be. Maybe he should deposit his grab-bag of conditioned reflexes outside and go in to see it again.'

The sensational press coverage of the film in British tabloids began in January 1972 with a double-page splash in the *Sun* ('The Film Shocker To End Them All'). Similar articles in the *Daily Mail* and the London *Evening News*. Remarkably, the authors of at least one of these apocalyptic stories wrote their article around black-and-white publicity stills from the film without actually watching it. The *Sun* informed its readers that the chief effect of the Ludovico treatment is that 'the young thug [Alex] learns to lick people's boots'.

The controversy soon moved from the tabloids to the correspondence columns of *The Times*, who published letters for and against over a period of weeks. Lord Longford, the anti-pornography campaigner, held a press conference to announce that the film was a 'moral' work. Nevertheless, it was banned by local councils in Blackpool, Dorking, Esher, Reigate and Hastings. The Home Secretary, Reginald Maudling, bowed to public pressure and demanded a private screening of the film in 1972, but he took no further action.

The film was also suppressed in Brazil, South Africa, and in Spain under the Franco regime, where the ban was not lifted until 1975. Hoping to generate popular demand for the film, Kubrick wrote to Burgess and encouraged him to publish the novel in a Spanish translation.

In Britain, Kubrick worked collaboratively with the British Board of Film Censorship to re-cut the trailer so it could be shown to audiences under 18. The BBFC files indicate that he was in regular contact, by letter and telephone, with Stephen Murphy, the recently appointed head of the Board, who agreed press statements with Kubrick before releasing them. Murphy also took the unusual step of writing directly to people who complained to the BBFC. In a letter to a senior official at Leeds City Council, where the film was being hotly debated, Murphy wrote: 'I remain strong in my advocacy of this film: funny, savage and moving. [...] We would find it difficult to accept that, in a free society, a censorship board should refuse certification to a serious examination of social violence: A CLOCKWORK ORANGE is precisely this.' Murphy's letters, including his correspondence with Kubrick, are in the BBFC files.

The press controversy returned in 1973, with accusations that the film had caused several copy-cat crimes in Britain, including the case of a homeless man who was robbed and kicked to death by a gang of teenagers. It turned out that none of these young men had seen the film. Nevertheless, Burgess and Kubrick were blamed for a general escalation of violence in society, exemplified by industrial disputes and sectarian killings in Northern Ireland. Burgess felt that he had been unfairly blamed for the possible effects of the film on its audiences. Interviewed by the *Daily Mirror* on 6 August 1973, he said that *A Clockwork Orange* 'was a good film, though boring in places.' He suggested that he had come to hate the novel because it overshadowed his other writing. As for Kubrick's film, he was quoted as saying that 'it should have been more violent, because only by piling on the violence could the absurdity of violence be shown.'

Warner Brothers were evidently displeased by this turn of events. A few days later, they issued a press statement in which Burgess denied that his feelings about the film had changed since 1971. Distancing himself from his own comments in the *Daily Mirror*, he said: 'Most of the statements I'm alleged by journalists to have made are in fact distortions of what I have really said.' He blamed the confusion on the poor quality of telephone lines between Rome, where he was now living, and London.

Kubrick's decision to remove the film from UK circulation in 1976 was another response to the climate of tabloid hysteria. Uniquely in the history of film, he suppressed *A Clockwork Orange* in Britain but in no other territory. According to Alexander Walker, a friend of Kubrick's, interviewed

by Paul Joyce for a documentary in 1999, the director was advised by the police to take this step after receiving death threats. This self-imposed ban remained in place until the film was re-released by Warners in 2000, the year after Kubrick's death.

May 1973 saw the publication of a book titled *Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange*, consisting of black and white stills from the film with the complete script appearing as captions. Setting out his intentions in an introduction, Kubrick writes: 'I have always wondered if there might be a more meaningful way to present a book about a film. To make, as it were, a complete graphic representation of the film, cut by cut, with the dialogue printed in the proper place in relation to the cuts, so that within the limits of still-photographs and words, an accurate (and I hope interesting) record of a film might be available.' With the exception of a handful of original scenes, most of the dialogue was lifted directly from the novel.

Burgess was quick to point out that Kubrick, who did not own any publishing rights, had infringed copyright in his original literary material. Before instructing his agent to litigate this book-of-the-film out of existence, Burgess reviewed it playfully, in the voice of Alex himself: 'Our starry droog Kubrick the sinny veck has, my brothers, like brought forth from his bounty and all that cal this kniggiwig, which is like all real horrorshow lomticks from his Great Masterpiece which would make any fine upstanding young malchick smeck from his yarbles and keeshkas.'

Among other things, this episode of 'Kubrick the Bookmaker', as Burgess called him, illustrates a struggle for ownership of the cultural commodity called *A Clockwork Orange*. This remained a constant preoccupation for Burgess until the end of his life. Interviewed by a student at the University of Iowa in 1975, he was told: 'Essentially, you were a lesser English novelist until Kubrick came along with that film.' Wounded by this accusation, Burgess replied that Kubrick was in fact a creation of his.

Burgess and Kubrick were working on the Napoleon film project from early 1972. Burgess's novel *Napoleon Symphony* was intended as the literary material out of which a historical drama could be made. Kubrick encouraged this work by sending a series of letters, enclosing books about Napoleonic history and biography. The process is further documented in a series of unpublished letters between Burgess and New York agent, Robert Lantz. After Lantz had agreed a fee, Kubrick read the first two sections of

the book. He sent Burgess a friendly letter which explained why this material had not solved his narrative difficulties as a film-maker. Burgess replied magnanimously: 'Thank you for reading the first pages of the Napoleon novel and please don't feel any tinge of guilt about rejecting them.' He added that 'the whole project is becoming somewhat hypothetical' because of obstacles raised by the studio.

Burgess pushed on with his novel, eventually published in 1974. In fact this is one of the most accomplished works of his middle years: a formally experimental piece of fiction, written as a homage to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Describing his work-in-progress in a 1973 interview with the *Paris Review*, Burgess said: 'I found myself interested in the subject in a way that didn't suggest a film adaptation, and am now working on something Kubrick couldn't use. It's a pity about the money and so on, but otherwise I'm glad to be free.'

The conversation between the writer and director resumed in October 1976, when Kubrick telephoned Burgess with a proposal that he should adapt Arthur Schnitzler's *Dream Novel* in a film starring Woody Allen as Bill Harford, the role eventually taken by Tom Cruise. Asking Burgess to cast a writerly eye over the Schnitzler material, Kubrick mailed a copy of the book with a letter in which he proposed updating the story to a contemporary setting. Burgess wrote back, expressing his admiration for *Paths of Glory* as a masterpiece he had seen ten times, and wondering if Schnitzler's novella could carry 'the same devastating load.' Disregarding Kubrick's wish to modernise the story, Burgess proposed that the location should be Schnitzer's Vienna of the 1920s, with music drawn from Richard Strauss's *Metamorphosen*.

This correspondence clearly shows that Burgess's vision of *Eyes Wide Shut* did not coincide with the adaptation Kubrick had in mind. By the mid-1970s Burgess was regularly employed as a screenwriter on British and Hollywood films, writing James Bond scripts and a remake of *When Worlds Collide* for Zanuck and Brown. There was a distinct cooling in his relations with Kubrick after this point, as the director moved on to consult a string of other writers about his long-cherished Schnitzler project.

Taking advantage of the ongoing ban on *A Clockwork Orange* in the UK, Burgess decided in 1986 to adapt his novel as a stage musical, writing the song lyrics and music himself. This reworking of the story, with a new

romantic ending -- Alex acquires a girlfriend called Marty -- and with comic songs throughout, represents yet another attempt by Burgess to regain control of his own work. 'A man bearded like Stanley Kubrick' appears briefly as a character in the text -- he is kicked off the stage -- but the entire play was written in defiance of the film, as a deliberate re-visioning. This play with music has been performed all over the world, most recently in Leipzig, Moscow, Singapore and Mexico City.

Although, in his numerous interviews and articles, Burgess was often critical of Kubrick's adaptation, the director remained mostly silent on the subject of Burgess in later years. The exception was an interview with Jay Scott, published in the Canadian *Globe and Mail* on the release of *Full Metal Jacket*, in which Kubrick was asked about Burgess's response to *A Clockwork Orange*. He replied: 'I think he's a great writer and I wish he would stop being bitchy about it.' One interpretation of *Full Metal Jacket* sees it as *A Clockwork Orange* in reverse: young men are conditioned by the US Marines to become violent killers in the Vietnam War. This element of the story may be why the original novel by Gustav Hasford appealed to Kubrick.

As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of its first screening, Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* remains a work of central importance within his canon: a classic of the 1970s which also speaks to our own time. Burgess's version of the story has proved to be no less resonant. The novel has been widely sold and translated, and the stage play continues to be reimagined with each production. It's also clear from Burgess's later statements that his characters remained imaginatively alive several decades after the book was published. In a public conversation with the Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer in 1985, Burgess spoke about what becomes of Alex after the end of the novel: 'He grows up. He realises that violence is an aspect of youth. Now he has energy, he's able to use it for creation. He's going to become a great musician.' It's a striking idea, but perhaps only the author of the novel could be so confident about the future of the central character.

Judging from the available evidence, it seems that Burgess was too strong-willed, and too much of a free spirit, to be a successful collaborator with Kubrick on the Napoleon and Schnitzler projects. But no reader of *Napoleon Symphony* can fail to notice the novel's panoramic scale and its human dimension -- it presents Bonaparte as the conqueror of Europe who is also a jealous husband and a martyr to his piles. Knowing about the

novel's origins, there is a strong temptation to speculate about what a glorious film this book would have made. The dedication is shared between Burgess's wife Liana and his other creative partner: 'Stanley Kubrick, *maestro di color*.'

[end]