

The Clockwork Within: An Assessment of the Musical Genre in *A Clockwork Orange*

Rhett Orvin

The release of *A Clockwork Orange* in 1971 presented the Motion Picture Association of America with a peculiar rating dilemma: the film contains multiple scenes of rape, assault, and murder but, by modern standards, these scenes are fairly tame. They are not what most viewers would describe as especially graphic or gory. Typical action flicks feature assault scenes many times more explicit than the gang's attack on the homeless bum. The rape of the writer's wife takes place off camera, although Alex (Malcolm McDowell), the gang leader, does cut off her clothes a second before the scene ends. The characters, however, seem to be having an extraordinary amount of *fun* committing these brutal acts. The merging of violence with lighthearted fun perhaps explains why the MPAA gave the film a highly unusual X rating. What immediately strikes the viewer about the film are the direct and subtle references to the carefree musicals of the 1940s and 1950s that director Stanley Kubrick associates with acts of violence and rape. In *A Clockwork Orange*, he taps into the audience's cultural associations of song and dance with expressions of personal energy and exuberance, producing disgust in viewers by manipulating these associations in the service of perversity.

Historically, the Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly musicals produced from roughly 1930 to 1950 are some of the happiest, most upbeat productions in Hollywood cinematic history. The plots tended to be very straightforward and, in many cases, little more than the success of a Broadway show (in the case of the backstage musical) or a love affair. *42nd Street* (1933), for example, follows a prominent-but-aging Broadway director as he puts on a career-capping show. Complications inevitably

Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs, College of Charleston
Volume 6, 2007: pp. 91-100

© 2007 by the College of Charleston, Charleston SC 29424, USA.

All rights to be retained by the author.

arise when the lead actress (Bebe Daniels) breaks her ankle the night of the show and a chorus girl (Ruby Keeler) takes her place at the last minute. The uncertain fate of the show provides dramatic tension as the plot progresses from one song and dance number to the next. Many of these classic musicals represent the quintessential expression of the “energy within,” as Leo Braudy coins it (139). In the overwhelming majority of cases, the “energy within” a character is joyous and effervescent and infects the entire community or family. *Meet Me in St. Louis* (dir. Vincente Minnelli, 1944) provides perfect examples of this infectious joy during the streetcar scene and the opening sequence. As the film begins, the camera follows members of the Smith household throughout its daily routine, each individual singing lyrics of the title track and passing off the role of lead singer to another member of the household. The camera moves effortlessly from one character to another, following the movement of an infectious happiness. In the streetcar scene, centered on Esther Smith (Judy Garland), the entire community takes part in a joyous sing-along. The brightly colored outfits suggest the atmosphere of an Easter day parade. Minelli presents the entire community as drawing happiness from the “energy within” Esther manifested through their participation in her song.

Hence, the inherent *happiness* of the musical functions as perhaps its hallmark characteristic. Audiences in the 1940s and 1950s came to expect song and dance as expressions of joy and exuberance and subsequent generations inherited this cultural sensibility. Malcolm McDowell recalled a conversation with Kubrick on the set of *A Clockwork Orange*. As the crew was shooting the scene in which the gang assaults the writer and his wife, Kubrick asked:

“Hey, Malcolm, can you sing and dance?” I can’t do either. I said, “Oh, yes, Stanley, sure,” and just sort of started dancing, then kicking the writer. And I began “Singin’ in the Rain” as it’s the only song I know. (qtd. in Burke 13)

Kubrick apparently sensed the unsettling effect created by adding a song and dance to a horrifying criminal act. By playing on the audience’s cultural associations of song and dance as the joyous manifestation of one’s inner self, Kubrick completely reverses their meaning by using them in a terrifying sequence of assault. Hence, the happiness and exuberance

of song and dance is twisted perversely as it becomes the vehicle for violence and rape. The film thus violates our cultural predisposition towards song and dance as consistently positive artistic expressions. Much like the townspeople in Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Kubrick's characters are infected by the force of the music and the "energy within" a central character. The members of Alex's gang look all too happy to be expressing their innermost, ultra-violent feelings to the world.

The aforementioned rape and assault scene begins with Alex ringing the writer's doorbell to a long shot of the writer sitting at his typewriter. As he wonders out loud "who on earth that could be?" the camera slowly pans to the far side of the room and settles on his wife, wearing a tight orange, dancer-styled outfit and sitting in a chair. Kubrick then cuts to a deep-perspective shot of the entrance hall of the house. The wife answers the door and, after some persuasion, Alex convinces her to let him in to use the telephone. The gang enters, seizing the wife and prancing into the next room; Georgie (James Marcus) hurdles over a banister railing as Alex glides gracefully forward and plants the heel of his shoe in the writer's eye socket. He then tumbles, doing a complete back-flip. Georgie leaps, floats, then falls on top of the writer and pins him to the ground. A quick cut shows Dim (Warren Clarke) throwing the wife over his shoulder. A second later, the camera cuts behind Alex as he fully assumes the posture of a ring-leader or maestro and calls his men to order. Alex barks an order, then bursts into "Singin' in the Rain," breaking out a few cool dance steps before he kicks the writer in the ribs, then cracks his cane over the wife's shoulder to the rhythm of the song. He proceeds to destroy the rest of the living area in rhythm with the song. Finally, he grabs a pair of scissors and approaches the wife, who is restrained by Dim. Still in sync with the rhythm of the music, Alex cuts holes on the wife's skin-tight outfit over her breasts. Dim, in the meantime, has been mimicking Alex's song, terribly off-key and inaccurate. Alex punctuates his sardonic performance, trimming away the rest of her clothes from her pant leg up and, once she is almost nude, joyfully exclaims, "I'm ready for love!"

Representing the clearest sampling of the musical genre's conventions, this scene presents the "energy within" Alex as violent, lustful, and sadistic. As critic Robert P. Kolker claims, the assault and rape scene is "exaggerated not to diminish its horror, but to offer perspective on it" (32). In other words, the elements of the musical genre in the scene amplify its horror

by suggesting Alex's delight in his actions. One could just as easily imagine a musical "hero" exclaiming "I'm ready for love!" before breaking into a dance routine. The fact that Alex directly cites Gene Kelley's character in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) draws a direct connection between the expectation of a joyful, exuberant dance and the brutality of a sexual assault. Furthermore, Kubrick's mise-en-scene clearly presents the rape as a dance sequence: Alex's choreographed dance moves, the wife's stylized costume, and her ballet-inspired struggling movements suggest that this act is, in fact, a dance between two "partners." In the classic musical, dance represents a dialogue between two complimentary forces, male and female, working towards, as Leo Braudy argues, the "ability to idealize personal energy into a model relationship" between partners (146). Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *Shall We Dance?* (1937) display this classic musical relationship through the film as Peter P. Peters (Astaire) tries to woo Linda Keene (Rogers) with his jazz dance style. Control of the relationship swings back and forth, manifested through a sequence of dominant/submissive dance numbers, until the two finally fake a marriage to avoid the publicity storm that has followed their high profile romance. For Kubrick, however, the perversion of Alex's mind leads his protagonist to the belief that the perfect partner is the ideal rape victim, and the model relationship is one in which he forces the submission of his subject and rapes her.

Kubrick thus heightens the sense of terror by sampling the musical genre. He presents the quintessential expression of harmony and joy, song and dance, as a horrific, violent assault. By doing this, Kubrick taps into our cultural expectations of song and dance and then distorts them. This inversion becomes uncannily terrifying. In other words, the effect of Alex singing and dancing while beating a man and raping his wife is many times more terrifying than even the most gratuitous depiction of blood and forced sex. Even worse is the fact that the cultural associations of song and dance and their cinematic heritage in the musical genre imply that assault and rape are in Alex's soul. They reveal how his "energy within" manifests itself in the world spontaneously and infectiously.

The spontaneity with which Alex expresses himself is, again, tied to the improvisational nature of dance numbers in musicals. Alex's delight in his actions makes him a sort of performer, one who "views himself perhaps as a rock star or a performance artist and does not associate

viciousness or brutality with any of his actions” (Falsetto 153). Coupled with this is the fact that, as some critics suggest, Alex “views his entire life, especially his acts of violence, as artistic creation,” much akin to characters played by Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers who spontaneously create an artistic dance sequence to express their joyous “energy within” (Falsetto 154).

This sense of spontaneity being conjoined with artistic expression has deep roots in the musical genre. For example, the opening sequence of *Easter Parade* (1948), directed by Charles Walters, presents Don Hewes (Fred Astaire) in a toy shop improvising music with toys and dancing through the shop’s props as he gleefully entertains a young boy. The sense of exuberance and joy pervades the scene: bright Easter egg colors are paired against equally vivid toy drums and instruments. Fred Astaire, flashing his ear-to-ear smile, joyfully executes his dance routine and sings to the boy. In *A Clockwork Orange*, a similar sequence takes place in which Alex, having been recently supplanted by Georgie as the gang leader, suddenly realizes that

thinking was for the gloopy ones, and that the oomny ones used like inspiration and what Bog sends. For now it was lovely music that came to my aid. There was a window open, with a stereo on, and I viddied right at once what to do.

The sequence begins with Alex walking in front of his other three gang members, Georgie to his right, Dim to his left, and Pete obscured behind the front three. The group moves in slow motion, walking towards the camera alongside a marina. As the scene progresses, Alex proceeds, with majestic fluidity in slow motion, to spontaneously slap Georgie in the “yarbles” with his cane, kick him in the side, then throw Dim in the water as he attempts to thrash him with a chain. The camera cuts to a low-angle shot of Alex as he draws his knife and slices open the top of Dim’s hand. The entire sequence is filmed as a slow motion ballet.

The spontaneity of action in this scene recalls many classical musicals. Just as the objects they encounter inspire Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly into spontaneous dance, the music Alex hears moves him into an uncanny reflection of their dance numbers. In a sense, Alex “performs” his acts of inner artistry in the same fashion that classic musical stars performed

their own, finding inspiration in the environment around them. Some critics of the musical genre have suggested that the purpose of a dancer's spontaneity in this context "operates, [. . .] to make musical performance, which is actually part of culture, appear to be part of nature" (Feuer 463). The opposite is true in *A Clockwork Orange* in which Alex performs his "ultra-violence" to the accompaniment of classical music, thus suggesting that acts of violence actually arise from cultural forces.

The second key scene in which Kubrick manipulates conventions of the musical genre occurs when Alex and the hoodlums accost a rival gang in the midst of an attempted rape. The shot begins with the camera focused on a colorful, decorative painting of flowers in full bloom on the proscenium of a dilapidated theatre. The camera recedes away from the painting and downwards to reveal a stage framing five camo-clad thugs attempting to rape a young woman. She screams, thrown back and forth, as the thugs take turns holding onto her legs, arms, waist, and head, almost as if they were performing a spasmodic dance. The camera finally settles on her being thrown onto a filthy mattress as the thugs prepare for what Alex calls the "old in-out." Kubrick then cuts to a wide-angle shot of Alex and his gang approaching the thugs from the entrance of the abandoned theater. Alex accosts the thugs, telling them to come "get one in the yarbles; if you have any yarbles, you eunuch jelly, now." The thugs attack Alex's gang, each man partnering with another in an overhead shot. Holding canes and wearing top hats, the gang crouches and assumes dance posture as they move through a number of highly choreographed attacks that use props such as bottles, tables, windows, chairs, and switchblades to fight the thugs. Even less than a typical Hollywood brawl, this combat bears little, if any, resemblance to a real street fight. It features ballet leaps and tumbles that send thugs smashing into windows, tables, and chairs as if the outcome had been rehearsed. The scene ends with another wide-angle shot of Alex's gang, this time each man poised over another "partner" from the thugs, maiming him with clubs, chains, and fists.

Drenched in musical conventions, the scene functions to turn the audience's culturally acquired sense of the purpose of dance on its head. First, Kubrick places the scene in a dilapidated theatre, clearly suggesting a performance on the part of the combatants. Second, he employs a diegetic camera positioning to film the initial sexual assault. Once the scene progresses into the brawl, the highly choreographed movements of

the combatants reinforce the theatricality of the scene. Leo Brady, who has extensively treated the topic of dance in the musical genre, states that the “essence of the musical is the potential of the individual to free himself from inhibition at the same time that he retains a sense of limit and propriety in the very form of the liberating dance” (140). *A Clockwork Orange* violates this principle by employing musical dance technique to present the “liberating dance” as wanton, senseless violence. The scene described above bends the conventional cheerfulness of dance toward a sinister conclusion. For Alex, dance is equated with displays of violence that “free” him from his inhibitions.

Kubrick’s addition of several subtle elements of the musical conventions adds a subtext to Alex’s character that further strengthens the relationship between himself and the star of a musical comedy. Alex’s musical tastes in Beethoven (or, as he refers to him, “Ludwig van”) suggests Alex’s propensity for established, classical master composers. When Alex walks into the Cat Lady’s room, his look of disgust at the modernist art covering the walls evokes a mild gag and look of wonder. He finds a penis sculpture to be of peculiar interest. The woman screams as soon as he touches it, exclaiming “Don’t touch it! It’s a very important work of art!” Alex eventually murders the woman with the sculpture, adding insult to injury with a fellatio movement over her mouth a second before he kills her.

When asked about his feelings for modernist, high art, Stanley Kubrick responded,

I think that modern art’s almost total pre-occupation with subjectivism has led to anarchy and sterility in the arts. The notion that reality exists only in the artist’s mind, and that the thing which simpler souls had for so long believed to be reality is only an illusion, was initially an invigorating force, but it eventually led to a lot of highly original, very personal, and extremely uninteresting work. (qtd. in Ciment 149)

Kubrick’s attitude manifests in the film as a classic conflict from the musical genre: high brow art versus low brow art. In *Shall We Dance?* (1937), director Mark Sandrich presents this conflict via Peter P. Peters (Fred Astaire), a classically trained ballet dancer experimenting with jazz tap

dance. The hero's patron is, of course, disgusted by his interest in a "lower" form of art and suggests that he maintain his ballet career. Musicals of this era typically contained similar conflicts, with the eventual results falling somewhere between a balance of the "high" and "low" styles and an outright rejection of high art. *A Clockwork Orange* approaches this conflict and seems to settle on an outright rejection of high art with the murder of the Cat Lady. Thus a parallel is drawn between Alex as a musical "hero" who satirizes high art and Peter P. Peters who does likewise in *Shall We Dance?*

Another scene bears a remarkable resemblance to a common convention of the musical genre and, more interestingly, some of Frank Capra's films: the sing-along. Spontaneous outbursts of music or song in musicals are typically used to create a sense of communal harmony. In *It Happened One Night*, Peter Warne (Clark Gable) and Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) witness a sing-along in a bus that bears a peculiar resemblance to the prison sing-along in *A Clockwork Orange*. In the Capra film, the bus scene depicts a fleeting utopia in which social classes are equalized (or at least temporarily forgotten) during a cheerful song. Various people take turns singing the verses, including a sailor and an older, impoverished man. *You Can't Take it with You* (1938) provides another prime example when the class differences between Anthony P. Kirby (Edward Arnold) and the impoverished Grandpa Vanderhof (Lionel Barrymore) are transcended through their one common bond, the harmonica. Mr. Kirby, a New York millionaire trying to purchase the city block that Grandpa Vanderhof's house is on so that he can build a factory, finally gives up his plan. As the two characters sit in the house's empty living room, Mr. Kirby pulls out his harmonica and plays along with Grandpa Vanderhof.

In *A Clockwork Orange*, however, the sing-along has again been subversively perverted by Kubrick, who uses it to generate fear and disgust rather than communal harmony. The scene progresses with several long takes of a preacher standing in front of a congregation of prisoners, lambasting them with a hellfire and brimstone sermon as they look on in total apathy. Alex sits to the preacher's right at a projector and, when cued, turns it on display the lyrics to the sing-along on a screen. They sing:

I was a wandering sheep
I did not love the fold
I did not love my shepherd's voice
I would not be controlled
I was a wayward child
I did not love my home
I did not love my father's voice.

The lack of harmony and bored expressions show an ironic turn from Capra's bus scene as the inmates appear to be having anything but an enjoyable time. The audience's cultural heritage, as previously mentioned, has assigned a certain value to the act of a group of people coming together to sing a song. That value tends to be a utopian vision of communal harmony seen in Frank Capra films and innumerable other musicals. For Alex and the prisoners, however, the vision is anything but utopian. As the song progresses, the camera cuts to a shot of two inmates, and as Alex says that he has been "meeting leering criminals and perverts, ready to dribble all over a young mouchet like your story-teller," one of the two inmates blows Alex a kiss as the other stares on, smiling smugly. The scene neither erases status differences between the inmates, nor does it offer a moment of hope for harmony in the prison. If anything, the scene amplifies the discordance in Alex's world; it appears as though under no circumstances will this world ever see a glimmer of hope.

Fittingly enough, the film ends with a final devastating allusion to the musical comedy as Alex is fed his dinner by a government official in the hospital after having the Ludovico treatment reversed. Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* blasts through ceiling-high speakers in front of Alex's hospital bed as reporters snap photographs of him and the government official. Kubrick abruptly cuts to a low-angle shot of Alex in the snow having sex and framed by lines of Victorian ladies and gentlemen watching. As Robert P. Kolker has noted, this scene appears to be "some odd allusion to the Ascot sequence of *My Fair Lady*" (35). Alex ironically declares, "I was cured alright." Kubrick's punctuating of *A Clockwork Orange* with yet another reference to the musical genre validates its importance within the film: it is the last shot that the audience takes with them as they leave the theater, and it is absolutely terrifying. By tapping into the conventions of the musical, both syntactically in the form of song and dance, and

semantically with a sing-along and a rejection of high art, Kubrick's ability to generate disgust and terror reaches an unprecedented level. Having inherited the expectations formed by musical comedies of the 1930s and 40s, we know that song and dance represent the unquenchable and infectious joy within a character. Shockingly, Alex and his gang perform acts of violence and rape with such joy. Kubrick ensures that we see the twisted blackness of their hearts in a way that would otherwise be inexpressible.

Works Cited

- Braudy, Leo. *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976.
- Burke, Tom. "Malcom McDowell: The Liberals, They Hate 'Clockwork.'" *New York Times* 30 January 1972: B13.
- Ciment, Michel. *Kubrick: The Definitive Edition*. New York: Faber, 2001.
- Falsetto, Mario. *Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*. London: Greenwood, 1994.
- Feuer, Jane. "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment." *Film Genre Reader*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: U of Texas P, 2005.
- Kolker, Stuart Y. "A Clockwork Orange...Ticking" *Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange*. Ed. Stuart Y. McDougal. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003.