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A Clockwork Orange: 40th Anniversary Digibook (Blu-ray)

[Warner Bros.](#) // R // May 31, 2011 // Region A

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Review by [Thomas Spurlin](#) | posted May 24, 2011 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

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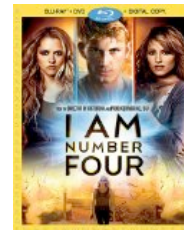
Though I've seen Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* numerous times in my stretch as a purveyor of cinema, I doubt I've ever seen it the same way twice. It's not because of alternate cuts or tweaks, changes in color or intentionally altered states of perception, but because of the subversive nature that churns underneath its lurid, sardonic imagery. A large phallic decoration used as a bludgeoning weapon. A milk dispenser shoots "moloko" from the extremities of a female statue. Hearing "Singin' In the Rain" while a gang of black-hat, jockstrap-wearing "droogs" violate an innocent couple in a hyper-modern house. The images Kubrick orchestrates dig deep into the corners of the human psyche, toying with our observation in the context of an inimitably bleak dystopian future. It challenges through sensory provocation and stylized violence, yet, remarkably, the unsettling rawness can still to this day rock the foundation of fervent cinephiles with the bizarre, meticulously-crafted observations coursing in its veins.



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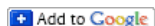
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Kubrick adapts Anthony Burgess' early-'60s novel of the same name, which starts by pulling back from a close-up on vile, sex-driven sociopath Alex (Malcolm McDowell), holding a glass of milk while he stares with fuming eyes and an unquenchable vigor. Voiceover enters the soundtrack, where our humble narrator, Alex himself, speaks in an infantile broken slang -- Russian-and-Gypsy infused "nadset" -- as he describes the setting and his compadres, with synth music powering the slow pull-away to reveal erotic statues in their "den". This straightforward, faultlessly composed shot establishes a calm-before-the-storm tone that'll pervade the spikes in violence and the backlash accompanying said violence, chronicling the elevation of Alex and his droogs' sadistic tendencies against Kubrick's methodical composition of a

the elevation of Alex and his droogs' sadistic tendencies against Kubrick's methodical composition of a grimy ultramodern landscape. But, more importantly, it makes palpable the fabric of Alex's lurid brain, his stream-of-consciousness guiding towards a crash-and-burn point where he answers to authorities for his vulgarity.



Alex's sadistic nature shocked audiences in the '60s when they first glimpsed upon his black lashes, vivacious body language, and knee-jerk jostles towards "ultra-violence", yet this also occurred in a time when the boundaries of cinema's aggression in the public's eye hadn't been fully stress-tested. Kubrick's talent as a provocateur doesn't err towards simple, once-off shock gags and single-note symbolism, though, instead using his penetrative awareness of deep-rooted panic -- the mental instability of real sociopaths, the guise of safety created by the walls of one's home, and the resilience of our own cerebral space in terms of our inherent behavior -- to incite the nerves through the droogs' volatile travels. This adaptation of already aggressive source material knows how to reach deep into a malevolent mindspace and pull out raw subject matter that's often equal measure darkly humorous and unsettling to behold, centered on painting our narrator as a lost cause to the whims of anarchistic abandon.

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The world around Alex, shot by Kubrick's long-time collaborator John Alcott, feels something like a mentally-unhinged kid in a candy store. Their razor-sharp eye for detail and ephemera sketches out a candy-coated atmosphere around the tumbledown thugs, with a stimulating variety of abstract palette flickers and costume flare that think forwardly but feel uninfluenced by the era -- and, looking back, endure because of it. The attentiveness to even mild ephemera becomes

magnetic, from Alex's pyramid-pointed bedspread and walls slathered with hand-sketched carnal sexuality in a woman's home to the droogs sporting cricket cups outside their full-body white drapery. He creates an avant-garde portrait of post-London powered by classical music and heavy synth scoring, swapping acts of the old ultra-violence when the music clashes with the scene and, eerily, when they merge together into a disquieting synergy. Kubrick broadly researched architectural curiosities and aesthetics, yet none of it feels overworked or bluntly creative; it disconcerts as a surreal dystopian future because of the matter-of-fact way it's made up, eccentric but tactile.

It's often astonishing how jovial *A Clockwork Orange* can be as it pursues its commentary through a gauntlet of violence. Action after brutal action depicts Alex and his cohorts storming houses, driving chaotically, and attacking mercilessly in the night with no rhyme or reason other than to be without rhyme or reason, rendering a clear portrait of chaos through the lavish palette choices and bravura camera angles. The artistry behind Kubrick's maneuvers paints the parade through Alex's reign as the frenzied patriarch with broad strokes of mania, shaping him into a crazed yet intelligent entity that makes wrapping one's head around his unruly mental state quite a brilliant affair. Adding to this, the austere humor accompanying the collision of glee and aggression never ceases from making the environment feel in-your-face erratic, such as the merry woodwinds of "The Thieving Magpie" backing a "devotchka" having her clothes vigorously torn from her body, continuing through Alex's debauchery.

A Clockwork Orange meticulously focuses on this rush of brutality as an appallingly blissful lead-in to the film's more seditious contemplations, which arise once Alex is forced to face the repercussions of his lack of control under law enforcement's lock and key. Watching how he copes with solitude and a lack of access to his cherished ultra-violence ignites the psychological exploration in the film, where we look into Alex's brain and see what he culls from the prison's mundane demoralization and glimpses into the Bible--which, of course, he imagines himself in the violent and salacious periphery scenes instead of the redeeming ones. But the memories of the moloko bar, a sullied woman in a tattered red jumpsuit, and a bloody slow-motion brawl between the civil-warring droogs are the images that sit in our minds as our narrator undergoes the Ludovico Treatment, an archaic display where the viewer is subjected to violent, perverse, and sadistic images with their eyes pried open by a pair of clamps, resulting in illness whenever they experience urges.



The aversion treatment -- and watching the aftereffects on Alex -- becomes the bedrock to *A Clockwork Orange* and its cynical outlook on free will and human nature, and why its thematic context rearranges and challenges in varied ways upon each viewing. One might see the ultra-violence, Alex's treatment, and hear the film's final derisive line, then walk away feeling as if the fibers of human nature can't be hot-wired towards civility, shaping it into a portrait of the futility of changing one's internal make-up. A subsequent absorption of the content could have a different psychological effect, instead captivating as a confrontational glimpse into the maniacal vividness stirring within a sadistic mind that can't be controlled.

A Clockwork Orange is one of those films that, undying due to its punctilious details, seems to morph and mold alongside the cerebral make-up of those who viddy it, and Kubrick's brilliant stranglehold on the human mind's perceptions of decency and comfort assure it'll continue to challenge for years ahead.

The Blu-ray:



Arriving under the banner of its 40th Anniversary, Warner Brothers have re-released *A Clockwork Orange* on Blu-ray within a thick Digibook presentation, containing two discs that clasp on each end of the set. The film disc itself isn't the exact same as the previous release, though, defaulting to a home menu featuring Alex De Large's iconic facial shot. Also, when playing the disc, it automatically defaults to the HD audio option instead of the Dolby Digital 5.1 track, a minor but noticeable uptick. The book's pages offer mostly photographs and generic textual information about Stanley Kubrick, Malcolm McDowell, and translating the book to the screen.

Video and Audio:

A Clockwork Orange originally arrived from Warner Brothers during the format scuffle with HD-DVD, which means that the original release has a few years under its belt. Since then, a newly-restored print has toured from location to location, recently making a stop at the Cannes Film Festival for a screening. Unfortunately, if you've seen or own the previous Blu-ray, then this 1.66:1 1080p VC-1 encode will look strikingly familiar, as Warner Brothers have recycled the same master used previously for this 40th Anniversary Blu-ray. That's not to say that the treatment for John Alcott's cinematography is utterly lacking; several textures peek through the hazy photography intermittently, while skin tones remain well-balanced, the pops of red and other lavish candy-coated colors inks through rather well, and contrast stays stable and attentive to details within when needed. Sharpness could certainly be tighter and a few slight blips need polishing, but Kubrick's film still looks robust and apt in high-definition.

Though the audio comes in a slightly-altered DTS HD Master Audio track instead of the Linear PCM from the previous release, you're essentially getting the same sound treatment as before as well -- though, it might be a hair fuller at times. This, again, isn't a negative mark against the aural presentation. The classical music from old Ludwig Van spreads across the stretch of channels with a tight grip on tonality and clarity, while the synth-heavy elements tap into intriguing highpoints and a few higher-end bass pulses. Alex's narration shares the twang of the film's age, but remains resolute and audible throughout. A few sound elements might exhibit a little bit more oomph than the PCM track -- a stray musical cue, the thickness of the narration's age, and a few echoing sound effects -- but it's largely the same well-mixed, balanced offering. WB has included their typically wide variety of subtitles and language tracks for this release.

Special Features:

Commentary with Malcolm McDowell and Historian Nick Redman:

This commentary offers a subtle stream of material, where Redman occasionally serves as an interviewer, luring him into conversations about his experience working with Kubrick and on th set. They discuss conducting stunts during the gang throw-down, the artistry in the set design, McDowell's accent, the differences between Lindsay Anderson and Stankey Kubrick in the director's chair, and the history behind many of the locations. They discuss the physical and verbal black humor, talk about Burgess' vernacular, and some neat conversation about the marina sequence. Then, once they get into the prison and Ludovico treatment, McDowell gets taken to task about his strip search and the agonizing sit session.

Still Tickin' (43:42, 16x9 AVC):

This piece remains an extremely insightful overview-level series of interviews with filmmakers and scholars alike, who discuss their experiences in obtaining the film, their interpretations of the film, and the sordid history of the film's content as a provocative piece of art. It reveals the series of events that occurred when Kubrick pulled the film out of theaters, the tension between he and author Burgess, along with the general subversive nature of the context and how it fit in with the burgeoning rush of violent/challenging content like *Straw Dogs* being released at the time. *American Beauty's* Sam Mendes, *American Psycho's* Mary Harron, and a large handful of authors and scholars on Kubrick's work contribute their thoughts and insights, which maintains a nice stream of revelation from start to end.

Great Bolshy Yarblockos! Making of A Clockwork Orange (28:19, 4x3 Letterbox AVC):

Similarly to the previous piece, this one dips into several of the same topics discussed as Still Tickin', but it moves along at a more resolute pace in telling the story of the film's conception. Filmmakers like Stephen Spielberg and Sydney Lumet mix with various Kubrick authors to reveal more nuggets about the film, from Kubrick's inability to get Burgess' Nadset language to Kubrick's insistence on McDowell largely based on his performance from *If...* They discuss the budget and production, as well as the trials McDowell underwent for the role. The tone of this series of interviews, however, is a little dramatic and over the top with the production values, with brash graphics and kitschy sound effects here and there, but it's insightful enough to overlook these things.

Turning like Clockwork (26:19, 16x9 HD AVC):

This newer piece mixes interviews with James Mangold, Oliver Stone, Paul Greengrass, Malcolm McDowell himself and other writers for a new reflection on the film, which say similar things as the other pieces but in a different tone and from added perspectives. The topic of "Clockwork Crime" gets tossed about, showing the effect that the film had in society, which loosely ties together Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* and the effects of it. They also discuss a bit of the physiological and psychological elements, bring up surface-level questions about the aversion therapy, as well as analyze the nature of violence a bit and how it connects to Kubrick's impressions.

Malcolm McDowell Looks Back (10:30, 16x9 HD AVC):

Alex De Large finds himself in front of a table full of photographs of posters, letters, and stills involved with the film, which sparks a number of really great stories -- from a story about Kubrick's handling of some WB execs to some talk about the costumes (and how the cup came to be). He talks affectionately about Kubrick and his body of work, as well as the director's lack of winning an Oscar for himself. McDowell's a magnetic entity to behold, and his time glancing over the relics of the film's past is a welcome distraction.

A **Theatrical Trailer (1:03, 16x9 AVC)** rounds out the supplements on Disc One.

Disc Two:**Stanley Kubrick: A Life in Pictures (2:22:15, SD 4x3):**

Prepared in 2001, *A Life in Pictures* chronicles Stanley Kubrick's body of work through a series of interviews involving a wealth of high-profile actors and filmmakers, edited together with clips from his films for added impact. The content itself opts for comprehensiveness instead of deep exposition, revealing anecdotes and woes from the construction of his film. It reveals some of his early photographs, including the one that *LOOK* magazine purchased from him when he was young, then chronicles his transition into a love of filmmaking. Every one of his pictures receives discussion; chatter falls on the existential characteristics of his film noir *The Killing*, his rough relationship with Kirk Douglas (especially with the actor a producer on *Spartacus*), the aggressiveness of *Dr. Strangelove's* message, and the way *2001* changed the face of film's creativity. There's a neat analogy between Kubrick, playing chess, and making mistakes that's superb to see, and it's occasionally not purely starry-eyed when it talks about his "bossiness" with his kids. It also discusses his fascination with modifying his own lenses and cameras. The transitions between films discussed seamlessly integrate into an immensely complete documentary.

Also included again on the second disc is **O Lucky Malcolm! (1:26:12, HD AVC)**, which chronicles the actor's career from *If...* and *A Clockwork Orange* to the later extremities of his career. McDowell is always very candid and fascinating to watch, and it makes the material crammed into this reflection quite gripping to listen to.

Final Thoughts:

A Clockwork Orange is, simply, a subversive and thought-provoking masterwork, one that mixes peculiarity and deep-rooted meaning through Stanley Kubrick's mesmerizing composition. It proves that the potency in confrontational filmmaking isn't necessarily in the scenes themselves depicted on-screen, but the energy injected into them; the violence might not be as edgy and the psycho-sexual poking and prodding as lurid, yet the eerie tension that's crafted in the haunting futurist environment enables it to remain relevant and artfully effectual in the modern era.

Warner Brothers' Blu-ray won't offer any surprises in the audiovisual department, unfortunately, or much new in the already dense supplements, but the inclusion of the documentary *Stanley Kubrick: A Life in Pictures* makes it the most comprehensive and rewarding package on the market -- as long as you're not considering WB's Stanley Kubrick large boxset, which also includes the documentary. The film itself, the rather good audio and video treatment, and the supplements come with an exceedingly high recommendation, but this higher-priced Digibook set can only earn very strong **Recommendation** in comparison to its less-expensive Blu-ray counterpart, which contains the bulk of the supplements available. The documentary *is* worth the extra money, though, so bear that in mind if you haven't purchased this essential film.

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