Reification and Alienated Form in *A Clockwork Orange*

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Abstract:

This article argues that Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) produces for its viewers an abstracted sense of alienation with which they emotionally identify. To illustrate this claim, the narrative and formal presence of reification is traced in two key scenes, those in which the state performs experimental aversion therapy on Alexander DeLarge (Malcolm McDowell) and publicly demonstrates its results. In particular, the demonstration scene invites the viewer to detect in its unfolding an operative distinction between theatrical and filmic reality impressions, in order to simultaneously (a) render visible the mystification present in the story world and (b) encourage the viewer to emotionally affirm and enjoy the very presence of that mystification. Whereas the mise-en-scène makes it clear to the viewer that both the treatment and the authority that produces it rely on the opacity of appearance, the scene raises this insight only to deem its exposure useless for the comprehension of reality. In turn, the scene emotionally flatters a social consciousness that regards external reality with cynicism and resentment.

In his 1976 essay on the ideological function of popular cinema, Thomas Elsaesser argues that *A Clockwork Orange* unconsciously reproduces for its viewers the negative emotions that structure their daily lives:

In the film’s cynicism the spectator recognizes the negative experiences, the failures and disappointments of his own everyday life; a hostile impulse is allowed to avenge itself on a hated and incomprehensible world. On the other hand, the sentimentality enshrines and reinstates those feelings, hopes and wish-fulfilling dreams whose impossibility and failure the cynicism confirms. This in itself is a vicious circle, but one that gives pleasure because of the way it validates the spectator’s personal experience (‘yes, I know, that’s how it is’) — a validation that functions as an important criterion of realism in the cinema: it ‘feels’ true to life (i.e. to one’s negative response). (195)

Although the audience and political urgency of Elsaesser’s critique are both long gone, this type of social relation he posits between the film and its audience remains a fruitful point of departure for mise-en-scène analysis. Attending to the correlations between filmic meaning and social consciousness helps the critic more concretely situate a film’s formal and ideological elements, which reciprocally enriches the comprehension of both the film and the social totality in which it appears. With this approach in mind, I believe that if we take up Elsaesser’s symptomatic reading and expand upon its terms, we may better apprehend both the emotional negativity Elsaesser references and its formal presence within the film.

I propose that we begin approaching this negativity with the general term, *alienation*. Two axioms of Elsaesser’s reading justify our use of this term in both social and formal registers: (1) that popular
film participates in a socially dynamic “emotional structure” that displaces the contradictions of consumer society and “allows an alienated subjectivity to experience itself vicariously as an object” (172-173); and (2) that the form of *A Clockwork Orange* “has sealed itself off from contact [with the spectator] by an emphatic construction of symmetry and order” and “gives itself the formal appearance of objectivity, autonomy, and the pure aesthetic perfection of closure” (197). In the first case, popular narrative film participates in a social field characterized by self-alienation; in the second case, the specific form of *A Clockwork Orange* expresses and participates in that alienation.

Both these axioms and their insistence on autonomous objectivity bring to mind a specific type of social alienation called reification. Reification is a socio-historical state of being in which humanity collectively experiences the world as excessively objective. This state results from the extension of the commodity form to all corners of human life. In commodity production, the total mental and physical efforts of producing individuals are negated and transformed into quantitative objects that automatically and mysteriously claim existential independence. Upon their appearance both at the end of production and in the marketplace, commodified objects acquire in the eyes of producers and consumers what Georg Lukács, following Marx, calls a “phantom objectivity,” phantom in that their laws of exchange are experientially divorced from the material reality of their production (83). Although commodities originate in this material reality (comprised of workers, managers, labour, wages, etc.), they are experienced by individuals as consumptive ends whose origins remain inexplicable. When commodities become the primary means by which human society produces and sustains itself, material production becomes structurally alienated from the objects it produces.

Now, a positive outcome of the extension of the commodity form to all industry and culture is that humanity can transcend the concrete particularity of production and master external reality in increasingly sophisticated ways. However, since the founding alienation between production and commodity remains operative in this extension, the proliferation of forms produced to anticipate and master reality actually intensifies the independence of the object enacted by the commodity form. Humanity is able to better anticipate and calculate reality precisely because its productive activity renders the world as something requiring anticipation and calculation. By consequence, it becomes impossible for individuals or institutions to truly comprehend the genesis of phenomena, since the world appears more and more to “come from” itself. A reified world appears to humans as entirely self-motored, or, in the words of Lukács, as “impervious to human intervention, i.e. a perfectly closed system” (89).

For the purposes of this study, we may more simply define reification as a social alienation between appearance and reality: the way the world appears obscures the social reality that produces that appearance. Practically speaking, this alienation entails that the mechanical/technological, scientific, and cultural operations that facilitate our daily lives retain in their very appearance as operations a visible yet mystified independence from the world in which they operate. That is, the way things look while they function precludes our ability to fully
comprehend their ontological and ethical position in social life.

We see a clear example of this alienation between appearance and reality during the scene that depicts Alex undergoing for the first time the “Ludovico technique,” or a state-sponsored aversion therapy that combines subcutaneous injection with negative visual association. In this scene, Alex is strapped to a chair and forced to watch a series of violent films while his eyes are held open by metal clamps. As the films increase in gratuity, he begins to feel desperately ill, which the observing Dr. Brodsky (Carl Duering) (Fig. 1) explains is the aim of the treatment; quantitative repetition will yield lasting negative association. In following Brodsky, the state is wagering that this experimental treatment will lead Alex to automatically reject violent behaviour upon his release, which will in turn verify that both the treatment, and the incumbent government sanctioning its use, can adequately regulate crime.

Although the scene could easily be read as an allegory for post-war film spectatorship (a reading Elsaesser himself provides), what is of particular interest is the way the scene presents the technique as without any real origin, or as reified (Elsaesser 178). Narratively, this presentation takes form in Dr. Branom’s (Madge Ryan) nefariously evasive responses to Alex’s inquiries about the treatment: “We’re just going to show you some films… Something like that…” (Kubrick, _ACWO_). Compositively, however, the frame makes it clear that even if Branom does know something worth hiding, the treatment actually seems to work of its own accord. In particular, the plumes of camera light and smoke that emanate from behind the doctors (Fig. 1), which recall both Plato’s cave and Jean-Louis Baudry’s apparatus theory, impart a mystical connotation to the technique by signifying the familiar notion that the power of film cannot be rationally ascertained; “people have always loved stories” is one of the sterile phrases one thinks of here. This mystified relation of the treatment to the already-mystified cultural status of film is integral to the
scene, for it leads the spectator to recognize in this relation an emotional truth. When Alex muses that “it’s funny how the colours of the world only seem really real when you viddy them on the screen,” the viewer is presented with a riddle that feels insightful, yet simultaneously separates him or her from the wisdom lurking behind the words (Kubrick, ACWO). Thus the technique is successful, in narrative and spectatorial terms, precisely because its actuality (the relations between the representations and their scientific/authoritarian use) remains hidden by its very presentation as a technique.

A later scene depicting Alex’s public debut as a cured subject offers a more complicated example of the reified alienation between appearance and reality. In this scene, an audience of caricatured authority figures observes two staged confrontations between Alex and two actors. Given the theatrical nature of the demonstration, we might divide the scene into three “acts.” In the first act, a male actor insults and assaults Alex, who recoils in agonizing nausea at his impulse to strike back. In the second act, a half-nude actress appears and moves towards Alex in a seductive, aristocratic pose, which causes in him the same retreat seen in Act One. After it is satisfactorily observed that Alex is repelled from his natural instincts, the third act depicts the prison chaplain (Godfrey Quigley) and Minister of the Interior (Anthony Sharp) engaging in a debate concerning the morality of the treatment. Before attending to the form of the scene, it is important to emphasize that, narratively speaking, the demonstration possesses a pretense of non-mediation. The desired effect of the treatment, that Alex should become ill at the compulsion to violence and sex, is offered to the audience as self-evident call-and-response: Alex wishes to strike the offending actor and becomes sick; Alex desires to have sex with the actress and becomes sick. Since these responses do indeed take place, the display offers an undeniably immediate effect; it not only appears to work, it really does work.

However, that the treatment works in appearance does nothing to help the audience or the spectator comprehend its reality. The search for this more total reality primarily begins in the form of questions: What is lost in the shift from qualitative person to quantitative subject? What sorts of connections were discovered and tested that led to the efficacy of this treatment? What do these connections, and the questions that led to them, say about the society in which this treatment occurs? What does it mean when appearance retains its relative independence from the reality it nonetheless affects? These questions regarding the ontology of the treatment are instantly nullified as pressing questions of social and institutional motivation. In the arena of appearance, things are simpler: as the audience can plainly see, medical science, ambiguously administered through the penal system and the state, nonetheless produces a reduction in crime. As the Minister puts it at the end of his debate with the more qualitatively-minded chaplain, “the point is that it works!” (Kubrick, ACWO). As with all reified appearance, the demonstration offers the visible efficacy of the treatment as a seemingly independent appearance, the mystified inde-
pendence of which prevents the audience from grasping the true reality of the treatment.

Formally, this scene constructs the treatment as just such an independent appearance by rendering it an ironic theatrical production intended to captivate and mystify its audience. The third shot of the scene (Fig. 2) foregrounds the independence of the treatment’s appearance by introducing the spotlight as an autonomous element regulating the apparent immediacy between the demonstration and its audience. By placing the general spectator position behind the Minister and thus “inside” the display, the film emphasizes right away that the demonstration will influence the audience primarily through formal convention. The familiar pretenses essential to official demonstrations are exposed as dependent upon stylization. In the prior shot, Alex and the Minister are set within stable positions of authority, test subject, and audience. The naturalistic lighting and observational spatiality are familiar enough so as to settle the viewer into the position of the audience. However, in this third shot the spotlight is introduced as possessing its own line of sight and connotative force, which divides the general viewer from both the audience and the proceedings, and thus alienates the latter two within both frame and narrative.

With mention of the general viewer position, it is crucial to pause and emphasize that this shot circumscribes the space in which the viewer experiences and participates in the remainder of the scene. By foregrounding the fact that the spotlight is largely responsible for establishing and maintaining the conventional relationship between the demonstration and its audience, the film guides the viewer to simultaneously share the experience of the audience and perceive that experience as a mystified production. With his or her perception thus determined as a participatory act of negation, the viewer is led to actually construct the reification of the treatment within the diegesis.
To grasp the process of this construction, it is useful to reference the distinction Christian Metz has raised between theatrical and filmic reality impressions. In keeping with the terminology of this study, this distinction is essentially a difference in alienated relations between spectator and medium: theatre spectators are alienated from the fiction onstage because they sit in the concrete presence of its production, while film spectators are immersed in filmic fiction because they sit alienated from its concrete production (Metz 13). While theatre spectators must engage with the “too real” movement of the players to get to the fiction, film allows its spectators to experience movement in refined form, localized on the screen, which lifts the “too real” mediation between spectator and fiction that hampers theatrical mimesis (8-9, 13). If we put these laborious reversals into our own terms, we could say that film makes reality itself into an independent appearance, one whose psychological purchase on non-filmic reality is actually strengthened by that independence.

Building upon the viewer-oriented reflexivity of the third shot (Fig. 2), Act One utilizes these differing reality impressions to begin developing the diegetic reification of the treatment. The actor (John Clive) appears from behind the curtain as Terry Tucker’s “Overture to the Sun” plays on the score. His wired demeanor combines with the music to evoke a caricatured image of thespianism. The musical lift in the actor’s intonation as he greets Alex with an insult (“Hello, heap of dirt”) strengthens this sense of parody, distancing the performance to the point of ridiculousness and prompting Alex to amusedly look out into the audience (Fig. 3). “Pooh, you don’t wash much, do you,” the actor continues, “judging by horrible smell…” (Kubrick, ACWFO). While completing this line, the actor gives a playful, knowing glance to the audience (Fig. 3), and a cut suddenly places the camera behind the actors. In this shot (Fig. 4), the
vantage of which repeats in various shots throughout the scene, Kubrick reproduces the description of the spotlight Alex gives in the novel, that of “like one big pool” (Burgess 124). The point of view of the diegetic audience is now reversed: the “big pool” of light, flowing from the spotlight set above and between the heads of the two figures, encompasses the figures and sets them apart from the stage and the audience, which now resides in the background. Whereas the previous shot is seen from the side of the audience, and thus evokes a familiar sense of shared social reality, this perspective sits with the appearance of the demonstration.

Keeping in mind the Metzian distinction between theatrical and filmic reality, we can see how the cut in question transforms the demonstration from an immediate theatrical reality into a more distanced cinematic appearance. In the shot prior to the actor’s entrance, the Minister’s line of sight follows and combines with the spotlight to imply point-of-view towards the stage (Fig. 5). Audience members throughout the scene are shown in a similar medium close-up, suggesting reciprocity between stage and diegetic audience. However, with these outward looks by Alex and the actor (Fig. 3), the film compromises that concretely present relationship between stage and audience and withdraws behind the players (Fig. 4). As a result, the perception of the general viewer, who cannot but notice these differences in vantage and form, divides the display into theatrical and cinematic spaces, each of which retain a sense of their opposite; the stark theatrical reality of the players becomes its own negative filmic image. In the movement between these two shots, the inherent live uncertainty of the theatre is raised, negated, and combined with sublime formal stasis. Since this reverse vantage repeats throughout the scene as a structural principle of the frame, we are justified in considering its combination of theatrical and cinematic realities as integral to how the general spectator understands the remainder of the scene. Henceforth, the real movement implicit to Metz’s theatrical reality, which is employed here to lend a live and unmediated credibility to a legal and scientific determination, retains rhetorical spontaneity while commencing securely atop formal inertia.

Keeping equally in mind the presence of the general viewer, whose perception serves as a lever between these two realities, we are able to see that the diegetic audience watches actual, present reality as though it were a performance. Thus, by introducing, separating, and retaining these two reality impressions within the same diegetic space, the film renders the treatment a “phantom objectivity,” or an independent appearance that (a) takes place in reality, (b) influences reality, yet (c) retains its independence from reality in a way that cannot be readily comprehended. The theatrical nature of the display absorbs the narrative/diegetic requirement that the demonstration be a live and immediate occurrence, while the cinematic glimpse into the mechanics of that occurrence betrays for the general viewer its status as theatrical, or, in the language of this study, as an independent appearance obscuring for the diegetic audience the actuality of the treatment.

Now, as I have already emphasized, the divisions these shots (Fig. 2, Fig. 4) enact between the digetic audience and the demonstration are only meaningful if oriented towards and noticed by the general viewer. But what exactly is their meaning? What exactly does the viewer notice, other than the
discrepancy between appearance and reality? If we admit that this film is likely more than a didactic endeavour, it is equally likely that the presence of reification in these scenes serves a deeper purpose than the analytic critique of concepts. Here we return to Elsaesser’s strategy of treating the film and its form as social phenomena. On the one hand, the film offers this foregrounded separation between audience and demonstration as an exposure of the falsity of reified appearance. The spectator could thus very well productively comprehend this exposure as a modest political awakening. On the other hand, however, the film may simply offer this exposure to the general viewer as a negative knowledge, as an exposure with no purpose beyond itself. Such negative exposure would then encourage in the viewer an emotional fixation on the very fact of this separation.

I argue that the formal production of this fixation is indeed the function of the present scene. To better understand this fixation, we might briefly touch upon the emotional experience of independent appearances in a reified world. In everyday reified life, the inability to comprehend the difference between appearance and reality does not produce straw dupes awash in mystification, but instead leads individuals to emotionally register and resent the very presence of the distinction. “It doesn’t matter” could very well be the mantra of a reified mind. Thus when Elsaesser writes that the spectator of *A Clockwork Orange* rails in unconscious enjoyment against “a hated and incomprehensible world,” he points to the notion shared by reified individuals that external reality, because of its dependence on the real but insoluble distinction between appearance and reality, is ultimately inexplicable and indifferent to comprehension. It is on this level that we must approach the real meaning of this scene. The “pure aesthetic perfection of closure” particular to the film’s form functions to reactivate for its viewers this emotional experience of a hostilely independent world (Elsaesser 197).

Fig. 5: Shots of audience vantage anchor a sense of live theatre spectatorship.
With this connection between form and reified consciousness in mind, I posit that these formal operations found in Act One prepare the spectator to experience the alienation between appearance and reality as an emotional truth. In order to grasp how this experience operates in the remainder of the scene, it is important to clarify how the experience of the general spectator helps produce the diegetic reification presently developing.

In the first place, the diegetic audience experiences the real and present demonstration of a real technique from an estranged, contemplative position. They are given the demonstration of an authoritarian-scientific process by actors bathed in spotlight. The reality of the treatment, its scientific and social basis, is thus reified by the appearance of its display, which the diegetic audience in fact understands as the reality of the treatment. Now, again, the experience of the spectator actually provides the audience with its own reified experience. For the spectator, the representation includes (a) the appearance, (b) its mystificatory nature, and (c) the understanding that the mystification is nonetheless reality for the audience. Here we must emphasize how the necessities of narrative spectatorship help transform the diegetic alienation of the scene into an emotional abstraction for the spectator. Whereas the diegetic audience does not reflexively experience the demonstration as a bizarre independent appearance, the general spectator does experience it as such and, as a narrative spectator, must still heed its pretenses for the sake of narrative. Since the spectator recognizes the display as an alienated discrepancy but is barred by the irreversibility of narrative time from using that knowledge, the alienation itself decouples from the diegesis/narrative and becomes an abstracted feeling from which the spectator may derive pleasure.

Act Two further develops this emotional abstraction by pairing the intrusion of the actress (Virginia Wetherell) with the equally intrusive return of Wendy (credited as Walter) Carlos’ electronic treatment of “Funeral for Queen Mary.” Despite Peter J. Rabinowitz’s passing but suggestive remark that “Funeral” “launches the film and returns, in a variety of guises, as a leitmotif throughout,” little attention has been paid to Kubrick’s use of this song (112). In addition to producing the alienating sense of awe central to the film’s opening moments, each repetition of the theme accompanies a narrative turning point rooted in confrontation: the conclusion of the attack on Mr. Alexander (Patrick Magee) and Mrs. Alexander (Adrienne Corri); Alex’s menacing reproach of Dim (Warren Clarke) in the Korova; Act Two of the present scene; and Alex’s fateful, dramatically ironic run-in with Dim and Georgie (James Marcus) on the waterfront. Each repetition relegates the general spectator to an alienated position of awe that requires a not-knowing, or an affective alienation that insists on conflict as intellectually irreducible. In the terms of our narrative/emotion tandem, “Funeral” both launches conflicts for the sake of narrative movement and abstracts the particularities of those conflicts into a singular emotional state.

The invading figure of the actress formalizes this mystified state and lends it an abstract figurative credibility. As the actress moves towards Alex, the circle of spotlight that follows her eventually vacates the frame, leaving her figure shadowed against a stark black background (Fig. 6). Her movement is consequently abstracted and held in

Fig. 6: An intrusion of awe.
the perception of the viewer. Since, as Metz points out, spectators always experience movement as real—that is, intentional, meaningful—the static motion of the actress functions as the figurative embodiment of the emotional alienation being produced by the scene (8-9). The elsewhere or without “Funeral” evokes condenses onto a figure that is simply moving, which in turn renders the alienating and sublime connotations of music and visual form as simply real. That is, through this play of movement and high-relief, the awe and alienation connoted by the intruding actress can themselves intrude as enigmatically self-evident emotions. This sense of enigma and the separation it maintains are further connoted by shots which place Alex and the actress in a kind of transparent relief against the source of the spotlight (Fig. 7), causing its peripheral rays to shroud them from the diegetic world.

Act Three provides the climactic experience of this abstracted alienation by conflating a narrative confrontation between the Minister and chaplain with a thematic confrontation between appearance and reality. As the Minister pedantically explains to the audience what they have just seen, the chaplain emerges from the audience and stands on the right of the frame with his hand on Alex’s left shoulder. He argues that Alex “has no real choice” in the matter and that this “self-abasement” is nothing more than an over-quantified intervention in the ambiguous struggles of personal morality (Kubrick, ACWO). The chaplain concludes that by acting good out of programmed compulsion, Alex “ceases to be a creature capable of moral choice” (Kubrick, ACWO). In the terms of this study, the chaplain argues that although Alex will appear to be good, to really be good means grasping and occupying a deeper reality. During the chaplain’s appeal, the film cuts to a medium close-up of Alex (Fig. 8), a structure that will serve as the compositional anchor for the rest of the scene. Given the dual inclusion of the chaplain’s hand and the implied off-screen figure of the Minister, this shot stages the colloquial battle between devil and angel, with visual advantage afforded to the chaplain.

Alex is visibly disconcerted, perhaps even irritated, at the chaplain’s remarks, and looks to the implied off-screen space of the Minister for assurance. As the Minister counters the chaplain’s appeal to the virtue of choice by dismissing ethical “subtleties” and emphasizing qualitative gain as its own virtue, Alex begins to smile with familiar satisfaction at the force of this ready-made answer. The diegetic audience responds with candid applause and Alex, smiling even wider, looks out at their off-screen presence, which is located in the next shot behind the glare of the spotlight, reproducing a vantage of the spectacle similar to that seen in Fig. 4.

Up until this point, the chaplain’s hand has

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Fig. 7: “She came towards me...”

Fig. 8: The chaplain objects.
remained on Alex’s left shoulder, and the Minister now counters the gesture by placing his own hand on Alex’s right shoulder. The medium close-up returns (Fig. 9), with visible changes in prominence afforded to the implied figures and thematic functions of the two men. The arm of the Minister now extends from Alex’s shoulder into off-screen space, while the chaplain’s hand has receded to the right edge of the frame. Alex’s line of sight follows the angle of the Minister’s arm, and the Minister gives Alex’s shoulder a number of squeezes as his monologue increases in passion. That the Minister can with impunity denote this new Alex as a “true Christian” and proclaim “reclamation, joy before the angels of God” attests to the power of stolid speech in such an over-quantitative, reified society: never mind the qualitative contradictions, “the point is that it works!” (Kubrick, ACWO). Rapturous warmth surges into Alex’s smile (Fig. 10), a glowing recognition that the certainty of the Minister (and the state force behind him) will ensure that “the very next day, your friend and humble narrator was a free man” (Kubrick, ACWO).

We have now arrived at the climax of our posited emotional identification. In order to fully grasp the consequences of this brutally calculated sequence, let us focus on the relationship it threads between identification and composition. To begin with, I contend that the function of this final act is to have the general spectator identify with the Minister’s words through the figure of Alex. This thesis requires that we look below the surface of obvious character identification and grasp what Alex abstractly represents within these present frames. Elsaesser argues that through his specific function as narrator, Alex encourages “a subtle degree of jovial complicity that overtly appears to acknowledge his dependence on the audience’s approval, while also efficiently ensuring the reverse, namely their desire to be led in their responses by his judgments and values” (179). In the case of this sequence, the desire in question is a desire of the spectator to be led like Alex into a “jovial” consent to reified authority.

The minimalism of these medium close-ups (Figs. 8-10) fosters and gratifies this desire by reducing the conflict between the chaplain and Minister to disembodied speech and its visible effect on a privileged narrative figure. The capacity for the voice to activate an emotional flourish is employed to funnel a negative affirmation into the figure of Alex, which in turn leads the spectator to identify with Alex in two mutually reinforcing senses: (1) as a figure who has beaten the system by cynically playing along with it, and (2) as a figure who consents to a system that will turn out to be profoundly bad for him, as is coldly foreshadowed by the Minister removing his hand from Alex’s shoulder and vacating the frame as the diegetic audience is roused to hysteria (Fig. 10). In the first case, the
spectator sees in Alex’s smile a powerful and, most importantly, free assertion of his or her own impotent cynicism; in the second case, the Minister’s outburst, “the point is that it works!” leads the spectator to delight in the fact that his or her humble narrator has now entered into an inescapable fate. In both cases, identification with Alex is a gleeful recognition that the lies of appearance always win.

Facilitated by this formal abstraction, the spectator thus experiences in these concluding moments the emotional verification of an experiential truth: in a world run by independent appearances, appearance is reality. The chaplain may have a point, but what the Minister says goes. This equivocation is of course one of bad faith; it is not that appearance actually is reality, but that it might as well be. Here we recall that our general spectator is not a mystified dupe, but one who likes how badly reification feels. “It doesn’t matter” is in this sequence not a concession, but a perverse affirmation fused with libidinal electricity.

The tragic dimension of this experience, if we understand tragedy as the staging of a foregone conclusion, is that the very condition of narrative film as an irreversible duration has led us here. As I have argued above, the nature of narrative time, that one has no control over it, has largely helped this appearance/reality alienation take on its emotional charge of inevitability. Hence the tragedy: where the general spectator position affirms the Ludovico technique as a simple narrative turn, so too is alienation pleasurably avowed. We need only posit two registers to which the Minister’s declaration might belong to grasp this inextricable relation between narrative duration and ideological function. On the one hand, the narrative itself only requires that the spectator understand the success of the treatment; “The point is that it works!” is for the narrative merely an emphatic determination needed to keep the story moving. On the other hand, in the register of the surplus enjoyment we have proposed, “The point is that it works!” is a layered testimony to the pleasure of determinacy itself; the emotional determinism produced by the scene is experientially verified by real narrative time. Thus, with his remarkably impenetrable phrase, the Minister produces a climactic reification of abstract feeling and narrative duration, providing the spectator with an emotional and experiential affirmation of a world “impervious to human intervention.”

Before concluding, I want to briefly provide and contextualize an historical verification of my thesis that A Clockwork Orange offers viewers a way to pleasurably experience the alienation they encounter in daily reality. We note a critical-historical experience of this type in British critic Jan Dawson’s observation, contemporary with the film’s release, that “by the time Alex regains consciousness in his hospital bed, Kubrick has us rooting for him to resume his thuggery” (qtd. in Barr 31). What Dawson expresses here, through her use of the phrase “by the time,” is an experience of captivation imbued with ideological certainty. Implicit to this captivation, the stakes of which are expressed here by the “rooting” of the spectator, is a desire to experience a world beyond intervention. A Clockwork Orange, both as a film text and in its historical British reception analyzed by Elsaesser and Charles Barr, reflects Baudry’s theory of a desire to experience the un-
folding of representations from the position in which one experiences temporally irreversible reality (Baudry 121). Dawson notes the presence and satiety of this desire when describing *A Clockwork Orange* in terms of Kubrick’s talent for creating “closed universes” (qtd. in Chapman 135). She attributes the power of the film to the way “it so devastatingly reduces the audience to the level of the characters, all of them perfectly adapted to the cynical system which contains them” (qtd. in Chapman 136). In other words, *A Clockwork Orange* conflates the intuitive sense of historically present time with a specific, self-contained, and alienated world. It provides the opportunity for aesthetic abandon to a distant present.

With this historical example of British criticism, it becomes clear that the attention to the movement of mise-en-scène in *A Clockwork Orange* helps to better comprehend not only its formal operations or ideological functions, but also its place in cultural history. Therefore, I want to conclude by dwelling on the problem of method in mise-en-scène analysis. Elsaesser’s work is instructive here. Elsaesser proceeds by situating *A Clockwork Orange* within a concrete social totality to which equally belong the film, its viewers, and the complexes that form and surround their interaction. This delineation importantly entails that filmic form does not reflect but rather participates in the social field. Throughout his treatment of the film’s form, Elsaesser shows a clear understanding of this distinction and consistently portrays the film and its mise-en-scène as socially dynamic processes. There is not a single trace of forced analogic exegesis in his analysis of the frame.

This study strives to walk the same line Elsaesser threads between conceptual application and authentic comprehension. One of the foundational antinomies of mise-en-scène analysis, which harkens back to problems inherent to the New Criticism of literature, is summed up by the following question: Do meanings ascertained by close textual analysis exist in the art object, or are they forced onto the object by the critic? I do not believe this question can be adequately answered, but then I am not convinced it needs to be. In fact, I suspect that this contradiction is precisely what animates the practice of close analysis. But I do insist that what makes this contradiction methodologically tenable is the critical decision to place the object at the level of totality, to denote it explicitly as an object taking part in the formal, temporal, and ideological exchanges that comprise the paradoxical infinity of a monist social world. This assumption affords the critic a view that is as inclusive as it is incisive, since it only asks that the critic consider in all theoretical decisions the humanist category of the for. Totality critique is a critique for humanity. Skeptics of my suggestion will be surprised at the extent to which this orientation helps film scholarship generally avoid regressing into theoretical exegesis, inductive analogy, or positivistic sociology. It is my modest hope that the study of mise-en-scène might be further explored in this key.

**Works Cited**


