

'SOUND & MUSIC IN A CLOCKWORK ORANGE'

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Abstract

In this essay I will illustrate how placed music functions to implant extra narrational information into the reading of a film. I have chosen to achieve this through examination of Stanley Kubrick's use of music in his 1971 film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange*. I will consider how Walter Carlos' (*) reworking of classical themes via electronic synthesis invests the film with two strands of referential meaning. That of the European classical 'high art' culture, and that of a futuristic, or modernist, aesthetic. I will then look at why this music carries meaning by suggesting referentialism as a semiotic system. In conclusion I will examine how Kubrick's iconoclastic use of 'classical' music plays with notions of referentialism and re-appropriates it's cultural meaning and context.

A Clockwork Orange concerns the central character of Alex, the leader of an ultra-violent group of thugs, or 'Droogs'. It is set in not too distant unspecified future and concerns the notion of free will and how this can be taken away by the 'Ludovico' treatment. At the time of release, the film caused a backlash of criticism in the United Kingdom accusing the film of propagating and glorifying gang violence and fascism. After small debate Kubrick personally imposed an outright ban on the film from being seen in the UK.

Shortly after the success of Walter Carlos' 'Switched on Bach' album, he began working with a 'spectrum follower', a device which converts sounds, especially speech, into electronic signals which mirror the overtones and rhythms of the original sound. This enabled Carlos to create the first electronic 'vocal' piece, this was to be the choral movement from Beethoven's ninth symphony. Carlos was at the time reading Burgess' novel of A Clockwork Orange and when he heard that Kubrick was nearly at the completion stage of making a film version of the book, Carlos mailed some ideas to Kubrick and was invited to discuss work on the music for the project. Carlos was contracted to re-arrange some of the classical temp tracks which Kubrick had been using, and also set down some original ideas for other background music, although many of these original works were not used in the film.

I now wish to examine some actual extracts from the film which I feel are particularly pertinent examples of how Carlos' music breathes life into the film.

The first section of the film I wish to examine is the opening sequence(extract one). Carlos' version of Purcell's music for the funeral of Queen Mary dominates the soundtrack as the camera slowly pulls away from Alex's face. This tracking shot slowly reveals the modernist interior of the 'Korova Milk Bar'. The music conjures a quintessentially English Baroque feel, and the air of a dark funereal fanfare (the music was composed for Mary II's funeral and played at Purcell's own funeral in 1695). However, the *sound*, or timbre of the piece tells an audience that the setting is somehow alien and futuristic, echoing precisely the 'classical / modernist' imperatives evident in the mise-en-scene.

The second extract again re-affirms these ideas. In a modernist shopping arcade, Alex strolls around in a neo-classical costume, the music again referring implicitly to this fusion of styles. The music here is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, fourth movement. Beethoven was one of the major composers of the 'high classical' (Haydn / Mozart) style in the late 1700's and early 1800's. The ninth represents part of his late period works and was completed in 1823. Beethoven himself became a powerful symbol, the prototype of the modern artist-hero as opposed to the artist-craftsman of pre-Revolutionary Europe. He represents fierce independence and artistic triumph over many personal tragedies such as extreme deafness (this individualism can be read into Alex's character). The vocoder or 'spectrum follower' makes it's appearance in this piece. This emphasises a notion of a non-human sound, again of an implied futuristic world.

The third extract, I wish to point out for the main section of this essay is the police beating scene later in the film. This provides an example of sound effects and music becoming a subjective and coherent 'whole' for Alex. Carlos supplied music spot effects for the body blows in this scene which Kubrick cut to match the action. The main Purcell theme can be heard as the background to these effects, creating a coherent timbral unity for both music and sound.

Timbre is referential in A Clockwork Orange, just as it is in China Town as the timbral colours of Jerry Goldsmith's score, using the prepared piano, are used as a reference point to John Cage and his influence by the sound of eastern instruments such as the Gamelan.

The futuristic meaning in *A Clockwork Orange* comes from Bebbe and Louis Barron's 'electronic tonalities' for the 1956 film *Forbidden Planet*. This pioneering work established a precedent for the electronic score as a completely new and 'alien' sound in the 1950's, hence its association with science fiction film. This 'sound world' of electronic synthesis informs an alienation effect, placing the audience within an unfamiliar sonic environment. Since then, science fiction films have relied heavily on synthesised sounds and music to conjure these unfamiliar sonic environments of a possible future.

Carlos' re-working of such classical themes as those mentioned can clearly be set into this tradition. However, by setting 'classical' pieces the music does not date as much as in most sci-fi films. It is here that I posit my thesis that the '*sound*' of the music, the 'timbre' carries its own referential world. This is music *as* sound.

The essence of referentialism in music can be thought of as a 'semiological system'. The two major theoreticians of contemporary semiotics are Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Saussure founded the science of semiology in his most celebrated work, 'A Course In General Linguistics', however Peirce's 'semiotics' is the preferred term.

The way in which semiotic analysis clearly echoes how music in film can be referential to further narrative information can be demonstrated if we think of the music and the timbre as the signifier, and the intellectual associations which are evoked by the music as the signified.

"The signifier is the sensible, material acoustic or visual signal which triggers a mental concept, the signified. The perceptible aspect of the sign is the signifier; the absent mental representation evoked by it is the signified, and the relationship between the two is signification. The signified is not a 'thing' an image or a sound, but rather a mental representation." (New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics, p.8)

It is this mental representation which is carried through both the music and the timbre separately in *A Clockwork Orange*.

The system of signification however is constantly in flux. Just as words gradually attain new meaning and connotations within specific cultural contexts, music gains and changes meaning when it is associated with a cultural artefact, such as cinema. Bakhtin, a critic of Saussure, offers fundamental observations on this point (part of a post-structural critique).

"The signifier, within this view, is an object of struggle, as conflicting classes, groups and discourses strive to appropriate it and imbue it with their own meanings, whence what Bakhtin calls its Multi-Accentuality, i.e. the capacity of the signifier to elicit variable social tones and 'evaluations' as it is deployed within specific social and historical conditions" (New Vocabularies In Film Semiotics p13)

I feel *A Clockwork Orange* uses its music within this notion of a struggle to re-appropriate 'meaning'. Beethoven, Purcell and Rossini are taken away from their guarded 'high art' classical contexts and placed into fresh juxtaposition with images and texts (Burgess' novel placed them first) of the most popular art form of the twentieth century, cinema. Kubrick does this through both Carlos' re-orchestration and by playing with the very notions of referentialism in combining the music with scenes of extreme violence and rape (see the fourth and final extract on the tape). This achieves what Michel Chion, calls an aempathetic effect, whereby music and image are in distinct contrast. Kubrick is an iconoclast in this sense, smashing accepted referential notions carried by classical, 'high art' culture. Kubrick states in an interview in 1971...

(Interviewer) "Alex loves rape and Beethoven: what do you think that implies?"

(Kubrick) "I think this suggests the failure of culture to have any morally refining effect on society. Hitler loved good music and many top Nazi's were cultured and sophisticated men, but this didn't do them, or anyone else, much good." (*)

Walter Carlos was obviously not chosen for this film because he could compose in any style of music as a good film composer (this is not to say that he can't). rather, he was chosen for how his work *sounded* (the fact that he pioneered the use of the vocoder and had experience of re-working classical music, Switched On Bach, for electronic synthesiser). The same is true of why Miles Davis was chosen for his 'sound' to score Louis Malle's 'Lift To the Scaffold' (1957) and not for his compositional skills (the score was completely improvised). I feel therefore it is Carlos' sound which captures perfectly the fusion of classical and modernist styles that informs the world Burgess' novel and Kubrick's film.

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