

# Is Alex Redeemable?

## *A Clockwork Orange* as a Philosophical-Literary Platonic Fable

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### Abstract

This essay explores the philosophical significance of Anthony Burgess's 1960s novel *A Clockwork Orange*. Specific themes in this novel are developed through character and situation, in a way which takes cognisance of important problems in the history of philosophy. The essay looks at two particular themes in this context. The first relates to the epistemological question of the distinction between truth and illusion. The novel thematizes the demarcation between truth and illusion, or truth and appearance, and raises the issue of whether we can have a knowledge or epistemological foundation for such a distinction. Second, the novel addresses a question at the heart of ethics, that is, the issue of whether there is a clear distinction between good and evil. Moreover, it develops this question in relation to the further issue of the explanation for the seeming attractiveness of evil, if good is an acknowledged superior value. In the novel these questions are addressed especially through the main character of Alex, whose incarceration and rehabilitation treatment by psychiatry comes centre stage. Additionally, the text itself is adapted for film by Stanley Kubrick in 1971 and the essay explores how Kubrick's interpretation of the original novel is distinct from that of Burgess (this difference being added to by the medium of film). Kubrick's different interpretation nonetheless builds on the original novel and thus brings new insights in terms of the reading of the primary themes, while also complexifying the hermeneutics.

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### Introduction

*Yet there was no abrupt transition from "myth" to "philosophy"; one might say that the mythic elements retreat before growing rationalisation yet do not disappear.*

– Frederick Copleston: *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*

If, for Copleston, there is no abrupt revolution from myth to philosophy in the early Greek period, we might say that this complicity between mythology and philosophy becomes a perennial relationship. In this paper, I will explore some of these curious and fascinating interconnections which raise issues of aesthetic provenance but which also raise issues of truth and power. In our so-called "post-truth" era, many of these literary works seem obsessed with the issues of "truth" and "control," not only from a literary or poetic point of view but also from a political and ethical perspective. Most recently, we see the foregrounding of Margaret Atwood's (Atwood 2019) work as yet another example of how such concerns (literary-philosophical but also urgently political) have come to the surface in a time of crisis. But extending from the complex dynamics of

control and illusion in the Allegory of the Cave, my particular focus will be on Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*.

Copleston's declaration of the intersectionality of myth and philosophy finds no better and more vivid example than in the works of Plato. There is a great irony in the fact that in the sustained dialogue where Socrates appears to advocate the banishment of art from the *polis*, such art is embedded in the very philosophical structure of the dialogue form itself, as a form of "representation" or "mimesis." Indeed, in many ways, the philosophical content appears dependent upon the very mythic aspect which is supposedly being banished and denied. At the very heart of this Platonic dialogue, *The Republic*, is the complex literary-metaphysical structure of the Allegory of the Cave (514a). This is paradigmatic for the discipline of philosophy per se, as Plato is often considered the Father of philosophy, with some considering the history of philosophy to be "a series of footnotes to Plato." Thus, this amalgam of philosophy and literature is emblematic of a complex relationship between the two domains which will continue to develop historically. What is perhaps most striking about this relationship, despite the very distinctive aspects of each historical epoch, is the relative continuity in focus which we will see equally present even in works of *avant-garde* authors of the recent past, such as Burgess. Themes of knowledge and illusion, of power (control and freedom) can be traced from early philosophy right up to the contemporary period, and while these problems can be directly addressed through logic and reason, we will be more concerned with the more enigmatic exploration of such issues through the lens of literary-philosophical myth and fiction. *A Clockwork Orange* is a subtle and enigmatic example of this typology and we have the further example of its development in filmic form, in the case of Stanley Kubrick's cinematic adaptation of Burgess's 1962 literary text in the film version of *A Clockwork Orange* from 1971 (Kubrick 1971). We will explore how the cinema example extends and complexifies some of the philosophical and aesthetic issues so central to the original text (McDougal 2003).

The two main questions we will focus on here are the following:

1. Is there a clear demarcation between truth and illusion, or truth and appearance, and can we have a knowledge or epistemological foundation for such a distinction?
2. Is there a clear distinction between good and evil? What sense can we make of the attractiveness of evil, if good is an acknowledged superior value?

In each case, we will refer specifically to the literary and cinematic versions of *A Clockwork Orange* as our examples, with reference back to Plato's Cave as an original interpretative framework.

### **Exploring the Thematics of Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange***

Our case study here is the example of Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* (Burgess 1962/2012). Indeed, this single example is doubled and complicated by the fact that its literary text is adapted (but also transformed) in cinema by what becomes an even more infamous study than the original novel (Kubrick 1971; McDougal 2003). Although both foreground related themes, it has been argued, despite being based on the same original narrative, that each of these artistic examples gives us a diametrically opposed philosophical answer to the question of freedom and responsibility in a contemporary era (Kael 2003, 134ff.) Other interpreters, however, such as Robert

Hughes (2003) argue for the “joint imagination” of the two works. One of the most interesting questions with regard to the supposed divergence is the rationale for such a reinterpretation. Why would Kubrick take the literary narrative into such a different filmic direction? Before exploring our two main philosophical questions, we will first indicate the main thrust of the original narrative, as well as a key distinction in interpretation between the text and film versions.

The original novel is divided into three main “Parts.” Part 1 sees the introduction of Alex and his gang of “droogs” (Burgess, 7) and we witness a succession of violent attacks. As Martin Amis notes, “Alex is so bad and he knows it” (Amis 2012, iv). The catchphrase of the gang “what’s it gonna be then, eh?” is a rhetorical ploy; in this instance the consistency is gratuitous and brutal violence (“stealing and roughing” [Burgess, 18]). Burgess intended this depiction as an indictment of the “feral youth” of 1950s/1960s society, the growth of youth subcultures such as the Mods and the Rockers (Biswell 2012, xvii). This violence is supported by a prominent usage of drugs which are portrayed as central to the youth subculture, which also has its own dialect (“Nadsat”). In the *Korova Milkbar* where Alex and his droogs gather to plan their crimes, the drinks are spiked with an assortment of drugs, such as “synthemesc” (mescaline) and “knives” (amphetamines) (Burgess, 9ff.). But this is not the only backstory as Burgess was also fascinated by the apparent complicity between brutalism and high art in Nazism. He consequently draws Alex as an evil character (“we were full of, like, evil”) with an implausible love of classical music, especially Beethoven. In the film version, the love of music described in the book takes on added life on an accompanying soundtrack, and the connect between the music and the violence is all the more immediate. But in terms of interpretation, the Burgess and Kubrick readings are similar with regard to Part 1. This section of the work ends with Alex’s own gang turning against him and deserting their leader, allowing him to take the blame for one of the victims dying in hospital after one of their malevolent attacks.

This consistency between Kubrick and Burgess is also present in the depiction of Part 2. In Part 2 of the text, violence comes not from below but from above; it is the supposedly rehabilitative violence of the state. Having seen out two years of his sentence, Alex is selected for reclamation treatment (using what is termed “Ludovico’s technique”). This turns out to be a crash course of aversion therapy, using Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. It is the reading of Part 3 of the text which sees an important difference emerge between Burgess and Kubrick. *A Clockwork Orange* was in fact published with 2 endings, one which presents Alex as properly rehabilitated and one which sees the whole state apparatus of treatment as just as bad as the crime itself. Burgess had added the second ending to his original text as a kind of Epilogue but this was not published in the American edition of the text (this was the publishers’ decision). “I was cured all right” says Alex, in an ironic tone. It is the latter version which Kubrick adopts (the version of the novel published in America). But this is where there is a clear ideological divergence between Burgess and Kubrick, as for Burgess the first rehabilitative ending (described in a final 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter) is the essential and authentic one. In Burgess’s official version of the text, Alex is fully redeemed. He outgrows the violence and immoralism of youth, longs to get married and even carries a photo of a baby around with him (“a baby gurgling goo goo goo”). It is not coincidental that Burgess was a Christian, in fact on his own terms an “Augustinian Catholic” and this is the key to his preferred ending. For some commentators such as Amis for example, this “feels like startling loss of nerve on

Burgess's part or a recrudescence of self-punitive religious guilt" (2012: xiii). In Kubrick's filmic example, to the contrary, the final part simply reinforces the reality of Alex's evil, his being bad and knowing his badness in an unapologetic way. In this version, the Part 2 process of state rehabilitation is just shown to be itself violent and merciless, and also a failure in terms of its supposed goal of inducing normalised behaviour and thought.

Let us take each of our two philosophical questions in turn as they relate to the Burgess and Kubrick examples of the text, while keeping this potential philosophical divergence in mind. We will see below that Plato's original Cave allegory already implicates both of these philosophical approaches in its depiction of the search for existential meaning and truth.

*1. Is there a clear demarcation between truth and illusion, or truth and appearance, and can we have a knowledge or epistemological foundation for such a distinction?*

At one point of the text, the anti-hero Alex exclaims "It's funny how the colours of the real world only seem really real when you viddy them on the screen" (Burgess, 62). This confusion or blurring of the clear distinction between what is real and what only appears to be real is a foundational dilemma for Burgess's text. It seems to have become exacerbated as a problem in the twentieth century as human perception must engage with so many new media and image-saturated cultures, including television and cinema (and more recently the virtualisation of communication in social media). As Martin Amis notes in his Foreword to the Penguin edition of the novel, Burgess is projecting forward in the early 1960s when some of these media developments had already taken place, with a prescient sense that such media would only become ever more dominant and overwhelming for human perception. "When in 1960, Anthony Burgess sat down to write the novel, he knew that the novel would be set in the near future and that it would take the standard science fictional route developing and fiercely exaggerating current tendencies" (Amis 2012: vii).

Alex as a character is right at the heart of this intensification of illusion, not least because even his supposed treatment or cure for his destructive behaviour is precisely through an exposure to intensely violent imagery, in Part 2's "Ludovico treatment." But there is also an age-old principle at work here, which develops from Plato's Allegory, and which connects to Burgess's own Christianity. Part of the punishment for original sin in the Christian story is the weakening of our capacity for knowledge; humanity after the Fall is doomed to a certain ignorance. Plato's Cave becomes the post-Fall alienated home of every human being. In this, it is impossible to tell the up from the down, the good from the bad, in clear or definitive terms.

The filmic version of the novel adds to this sense of alienation and disconnection from truth and belonging. As Robert Hughes notes, "The impression, a very deliberate one, is of cultural objects cut loose from any power to communicate or even to be noticed; there is no reality to which they connect . . . a vast cultural emptiness" (Hughes 2003: 131). In such a context of disorientation, it seems as if anything goes and we just make up our own truths and values. The opening lines of the novel spoken dramatically and didactically by Alex foreground this knowledge and truth vacuum:

What's it going to be then, eh? There was me, that is Alex, and my three droogs, that is Pete, Georgie and Dim, Dim being really Dim and we sat in the Korova Milkbar making up our rassoodocks what to do with the evening... a flip dark chill winter bastard though dry. (Burgess, 7)

This crucial opening phrase of “what’s it going to be then, eh?” points us to the lack of inherent value or orientation in the pre-existing landscape. Moreover, the “making up our rassoodocks” phrase indicates that no inherent value seems to be forthcoming and thus, that it is left to Alex and his gang to “make up” truth or value. As an opening gambit, this is both a challenge to the reader but also a description of late twenty century existence, as Burgess sees it.

This foregrounding of a vacuum (effectively we are in the realm of *nihilism*) also allows for the possibility of a whole new set of values, but here (unlike in Plato’s Cave) it is not the philosopher Socrates who comes to rescue us but rather, to the contrary, there is no rescue. Rather it is Alex who is presented as the paradigm of the re-evaluator of all values, his impetuous and psychotic actions becoming the new criterion for truth amongst the youth gangs. In this, Alex and his *droogs* serve as a microcosm or a paradigm for the wider macrocosmic late twentieth century society. As we noted above, in Burgess’s original version of the text, this re-evaluation of all values and of truth is finally recoverable in a kind of Christian rehabilitation or redemption of Alex the sinner. But in Kubrick’s version, Alex seems irredeemable.

The opening scene, as already described above in the Korova Milkbar, where Alex and the droogs, are planning their violence and taking drugs, is intensified in the film version. Kubrick’s opening film sequence develops the original narrative in significant ways. In the first instance, when Alex refers to the “viddying on the screen” as the truly if paradoxically real (Burgess, 62), it is as if he is already anticipating the later filmic version. One can contrast the opening scenes of book and film from the point of view of the directness or immediacy of the cinema experience. The specific language of the dialect Burgess employs (entitled “Nadsat,” which is Russian for “teen”) for his youth gangs creates a certain distancing from the textual violence which opens the book, but as McDougal notes, “no such distance is available to the film viewer” (2003, 3). Thus the cinematic experience creates a greater disorientation than the novel in terms of our question of the distinction between “truth” and “illusion.” Because of the lack of distance in the opening scenes of the film version, it is far more difficult to tell clearly what we should consider “real” and what “illusion.” If we are not as liable as Alex to simply invert our usual understanding and to associate the real with “viddying on the screen,” nonetheless cinema as a medium allows Kubrick to intensify the original epistemological problem in the Burgess text.

McDougal refers to the specificity of this as creating an apocalyptic “shock” in the viewer (3), the latter being one of the reasons for the moral panic surrounding the film release and its various issues with distribution. Kubrick himself decided to remove the film from distribution in the UK in the 1970s due to adverse publicity and it was only officially re-released after his death. In many other countries, various issues were raised to limit its availability (for example, in Ireland, it was banned by the state censor for over twenty years). Again, the distinction between “truth” and “illusion” is relevant here, as it was precisely the emergence of copycat killings, caused by a very real identification with the illusory violence of the film, which led to the outcry and

subsequent distribution issues. Jay Cocks refers to this aspect of the film as “chillingly and often hilariously believable” (quoted in Hughes 2003, 131). As McDougal outlines, the purposeful cinematography and use of contrived film sets for this section of the film were all part of the artist’s vision. “The film begins with the striking image of Alex de Large (Malcolm McDowell) seated on a banquette in the Korova milkbar... The camera pulls back to reveal the milkbar in all its splendour. This is one of the few sets created for the film and the sculptures of nude women forming tables and milk dispensers establish an extremely disturbing tone for the film” (McDougal 2003, 4). The extraordinary performance of McDowell in the film also adds to the character’s impact on the viewer, although as we shall see below, this may also be due to a certain reinterpretation of the text by Kubrick in terms of its overall vision and purpose.

From questions of knowledge and epistemology (or the complete lack thereof) we are thus led very quickly to questions of ethics, concerns of good and evil. Indeed, this is precisely where the supposed different interpretation between Burgess and Kubrick comes to the fore. Let us reiterate our second main question, outlined above.

*2. Is there a clear distinction between good and evil? What sense can we make of the attractiveness of evil, if good is an acknowledged superior value?*

Burgess’s Christianity serves also as a background ideology to his depiction of the battle between good and evil in *A Clockwork Orange*. As Amis notes in his Foreword (2012), one of the first themes Burgess was clear on in the novel was that it was going to concern the relation between “good and bad, and the question of free will” (of course, these are perennial Christian concerns after Augustine). While in this sense the figure of Alex can be seen as replaying traditional concerns, nonetheless his specificity (as well as historical particularity) is shown by Burgess through the employment of an “argot or idiolect that the world had never heard before” (Amis 2012, viii). Moreover, some of the post-war concerns about the complicity of High Art and Nazism are exemplified in Alex’s “highly implausible passion; an ecstatic love of classical music. . . Beethoven and Birkenau didn’t merely co-exist; they combined and colluded” (ibid). Thus, Alex’s sociopathy (played so well in the film version by Malcolm McDowell) is all the more complex for its sophistication, or its juxtaposition of basic instinct with high culture.

The novel is set in a vaguely socialist future (roughly the late seventies or early eighties) in a dreary England, where teenage gangs terrorise at night. The novel was purported to have been inspired by a trip Burgess made to Russia with his wife, where he encountered the same amoral and lawless gangs of Mods and Rockers he was familiar with from late fifties England (this explains the idiosyncratic dialect Nadsat, derived from Russian, which the youths speak). Kael describes the object of study of the novel (with Alex as the paradigmatic leader) as “amoral youth gangs” (Kael 2003, 134) and their “destructive potential.” In the figure of Alex as Burgess depicts him, we would thus seem to have a clear example of “evil.”

But matters are complexified in the novel by the fact that the oppositional forces to the youth gangs—the state, the police, the psychiatrists—are also part of the problem. The “clockwork orange” of the title refers to the problem of conditioned morality; “this leads into criticism of the government that robotised him; turned him into a clockwork orange” (Kael, 135). If Alex is a villain, his treatment at the hands of the moralistic state shows up the state forces of supposed good to be on an equivalent level

to Alex and his thugs. If as Kael suggests the “ironies are protean here” (and the ambiguities multiplied) nonetheless there is a clear message that a “society turned clockwork orange” can be no moral solution to the dilemma of amoral youth. Rather this itself is a horror: “Burgess is clearly a humanist; his point of view is that of a Christian horrified by the possibilities of a society turned clockwork orange, in which life is so mechanised that men lose their capacity for moral choice” (Kael, 135).

Kael argues persuasively that the original novel presents a critique of a mechanised society where we have all become “clockwork oranges,” whether we act morally *or* immorally. Burgess would be arguing against the determinations of our choices and freedoms by contemporary socialisation, but also arguing for our responsibility in seeking to foster the re-emergence of such freedoms as an existential task (Kael, 134ff.). If we do not rediscover and reassert our freedoms, we will enter what Robert Hughes refers to as “the décor of tomorrow’s Hell” (Hughes 2003, 131), completely dehumanised and incapable of discriminating between the best or the worst of actions.

Robert Hughes sees both the textual and filmic versions of the book as congruent in this ethical vision (although he does not discuss their different textual versions). The state treatment of Alex is indicted in not simply turning Alex against violence but also as a conditioning which works against his love of music, most especially his love of “Ludwig van’ Beethoven.” Burgess is once again thematising the complicity possible between “evil” and “good,” the latter here associated for the author with classical music (Amis 2012). There is also a possible connection here back to Plato’s critique of art in *The Republic*, where he warns of the dangers of alienation involved in the representative arts, and Socrates calls for the banishment of the artist from the ideal Republic. Hughes reads the Kubrick style as extending the Burgess point, allowing for an ethics to emerge *contra* evil, even in the very aesthetic approach which Kubrick takes to the making of the detail of the film: “Kubrick delivers these insights with something of Alex’s pure consistent aggression. His visual style is swift and cold, appropriately even necessarily so. Moreover his direction has the rarest of qualities, bravura morality – ironic, precise and ferocious” (Hughes 2003, 132).

Thus as both Hughes and Kael present the novel, what emerges is a counter-cultural ethics which is also expressed in a complex and sophisticated aesthetics. Both Alex and his youth gangs on the one side, and the totalitarian state on the other, are seen as manifestations of evil, while the good can only emerge in their mutual critique; but this critique (in order to engage the complexity of the problem) cannot be linear or didactic—rather it must be “ironic and precise.” We might say that in both Burgess and Kubrick, the problems are much more clearly described and evoked than the solutions, which remain sketchily or “ironically” suggested. Both as an ethical and aesthetic problem, the manifest evils of contemporary society belie easy remedy. Thus, questions remain as to the predicament of art in this situation. Certain kinds of contemporary art are vehemently critiqued in the texts, as already suggested. “The impression, a very deliberate one, is of cultural objects cut loose from any power to communicate or even to be noticed; there is no reality to which they connect . . . a vast cultural emptiness” (Hughes 2003, 131). Significantly, Kael even goes so far as to indict Kubrick’s aesthetic approach as fundamentally failing to translate the humanistic ethical vision of the original novel.

On Kael's perspective, Burgess succeeds in employing a complex literary art to develop the ethical and philosophical questions even if the solution remains "ironic" or nondidactic. In this, Burgess would seem to have succeeded in overcoming the Platonic dilemma regarding art and truth, as outlined in the *Republic*. Of course, for Plato, no such resolution was possible and, at least as understood literally, he seeks to banish the artist from the *polis*. In the case of Burgess's literary art, to the contrary, art and truth, literature and philosophy are seen to co-operate successfully. However, this is a complex predicament for literature and for cinema and while we saw above how Hughes vindicates the cinema version of Kubrick's for its "bravura morality," Kael sees the cinematic example as succumbing to the pitfalls of the Platonic dilemma. Kubrick's cinematic example remains caught within the prison house of the Cave. Of course, considering the different textual versions used by Burgess and Kubrick as described above, this is hardly a surprising distinct end result. By omitting the original ending, and opting for Text 2, Kubrick would seem to be consciously eschewing a redemptive or happy ending.

Already on the philosophical level of hermeneutics and meaning, according to Kael, Kubrick's film changes the claim; he can be said to invert Burgess's thesis. In Kubrick's contemporary world, the questions of "what is truth?", "what is good as opposed to evil?" and "what is authentic freedom?" are also at issue. But whereas, for Burgess, the anti-hero Alex becomes an example of how society "has lost its soul," in Kubrick's vision Alex becomes a hero, "pitted against society"; "the movie becomes a vindication of Alex, saying that the punk was a free human being and only the good Alex was a robot" (Kael 2003, 134ff.). Thus freedom in this latter instance becomes identified with a kind of "hyperviolence," a destructive form of anarchism precisely pitted against the form of humanism which Burgess's original novel seemed to espouse.

We might return to Alex's question to the reader, which kicks off *A Clockwork Orange*: "what's it going to be then, eh?" On Kael's view, Burgess and Kubrick actually give us very different interpretations of what our answer to this question should be. If Burgess opts for an ethics which might emerge in the mutual critique of contemporary self *and* society, Kubrick rather presents us with an affirmation of Alex as hero and nihilist, reinventing values in accordance with his own vision of radical and violent freedom. On Hughes's terms, to add a further complication, the artistic and philosophical visions of Burgess and Kubrick are actually distinct but consistent; they both offer the humanistic third way. While each of the interpretations has something to offer, nonetheless it is clear that the different textual versions used by the literary and film versions are highly significant here. In this, Kael's reading of the ultimate antagonism between Burgess and Kubrick seems more persuasive. It is interesting that in later theatre versions of the text, adapted by Burgess himself, Kubrick was often introduced as a character who would then be run off the stage by Alex and the *droogs* (Biswell 2012, xii). It seems clear that Burgess remained unconvinced by Kubrick's filmic reinterpretation of his original literary work.

### **Conclusion – No Futures Are Inevitable**

If we return to the original allegory, which we see as structuring the dilemmas played out in the text of Burgess and the cinema of Kubrick, we can note that its own resolutions are far from being unproblematic. If Plato's Allegory is intended (along with the Sun and the Line analogy and simile [Plato 508–514]) to clarify the understanding

and justification for the theory of forms, it hardly succeeds in this task in any straightforward manner (Annas 1981, 250ff). Rather, as Annas has shown, the Cave story tempts us to ask questions which are unanswerable within the limits of the imagery. Similarly, Annas cites the Platonist Iris Murdoch warning of the “blazingly strong imagery . . . which can obstruct the understanding” (Annas, 252). There are strong connections in our analysis of *A Clockwork Orange*, both in its literary and cinematic versions, back to Plato’s original depiction. As with Plato and the Socratic example, once more we have at issue questions of knowledge and truth on the one side and questions of ethics and self-knowledge on the other. As with the early Greeks, questions of moral conduct are dovetailed with questions of epistemology in a manner which highlights their inter-dependence. How can we know if Alex is a villain or a hero? How can we know whether the state treatment of evil is either a moral remedy or part of the problem? The differences between the text and film versions of this hermeneutic show up the complexity of interpretation involved.

However, Kael’s strong avowal of Burgess’s novel and her complete disavowal of Kubrick’s cinematic example seem rather exaggerated and overly dualistic, even if her reading of the conflict between Burgess and Kubrick is persuasive. She already notes in her review of the film that the “ironies are protean” (Kael, 137) but of course, these ironies are already present in Burgess’s novel. It is as if Annas and Murdoch, in noting the risk taking of Plato’s textual craft, were to dismiss his entire *Republic* as a result. Instead, both Annas and Murdoch contextualise the ambiguity of the Allegory within a wider philosophical project of Plato’s to draw us towards a complex and difficult set of human truths. This is also what Robert Hughes does in looking at a comparison between Burgess and Kubrick. He notes how Kubrick’s style mimics a certain aggression in the character of Alex, but unlike Kael, he reads this aesthetic as being “appropriate even necessary” (Hughes, 132). This is because Kubrick’s morality is “bravura...ironic, precise and ferocious” (ibid).

We might make the comparison with Plato. Why did he include the Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic* when it runs the risk of ambiguity and confusion? Why cite the exiling of the artist from the *Republic* when this appears contradictory to his own employment of artistic means? Perhaps the answer lies in Kubrick’s approach which itself translates Burgess’s literature. If we want to offer a critique of not simply Alex but also of the government’s inverted-Beethoven techniques, we require a courageous type of ethics. This ethics must be “bravura,” it must be “ironic and precise.” It must combine the resources of philosophy and “science”-fiction, of metaphysics and art, often in a risk-taking manner so as to subvert the conventionalities of common or complacent morality (better understood as narrow “moralism”). Perhaps the last irony in this story is that Plato was precisely already practising this hybrid art in 2500 BC—in this, his work shows an extraordinary sophistication and prescience. Furthermore, his descendants are not always so readily apparent in contemporary philosophy, which often has become so specialised as to disallow recourse to other forms of expression or representation. In this, contemporary philosophy often seems indeed to have banished the artist from the *polis*. Who, for example, writes today in the form of philosophical dialogue? However, if there is a lack of Platonic dialogue, there are honourable exceptions to a hybridity in philosophical approaches and styles. Perhaps the existentialist thinkers of the twentieth century are the most powerful example of philosophers who sought to render their philosophy in literature, poetry and film as

well as in more rationally argued treatises (for example, the counterpoint between Sartre's novel *Nausea* and his treatise *Being and Nothingness*).

Thankfully, there are other thinkers and writers working outside professional philosophy who can be seen as developing some of Plato's hybrid aesthetic in significant and provocative ways. In this essay, we have explored the examples of Burgess and Kubrick, who like Plato, place the need for a "bravura morality" at the heart of their work but do this slantwise, in addressing the ever more convoluted dimensions of knowledge and ignorance, good and evil, in our contemporary epoch. If as Hughes warns us, we wish to avoid living within "the décor of tomorrow's hell," and if also "no futures are inevitable" (Hughes, 132), we would do well to see Plato's original mythic-philosophical vision and the literary-philosophical expression of Burgess and Kubrick as vivid and stark wake-up calls from our somnambulistic human condition.



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