

A Clockwork Orange or A Precocious One? A Quest for Alex's Disappearing Childhood

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Abstract. Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* both remains a work illustrating the effulgence of free will and is a masterpiece reflecting the malignant social environment that children face, which mainly results in the acceleration of the disappearance of their childhood. With the aid of George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory in the field of communication, the assertions in Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood*, some findings in music studies and the research in history background, and from the perspectives of the self-seeking government, Alex's "Childified" parents, the negligence of school and Alex's predicament, this thesis aims at revealing the vicious surroundings that children like Alex have long been immersed in, proffering the possibility of their coerced choice instead of choosing their fate out of free will, for under the influence of mass media and social misdeeds, children have no option but to resort to evil and violence to protect themselves. The conclusion of this thesis reveals the anxiety of the disappearance of childhood, illuminating the urgency of protecting childhood in our times.

Keywords: *A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess, Cultivation Theory, George Gerbner, research on children

1. Introduction

Originating in the 1960s, Cultivation Theory was proposed by the American scholar George Gerbner. In its early phase Cultivation Theory analyzed the long-term influence of mass media, especially television, on the audience's cognition in a systematic way. In the mid-1980s, Gerbner adapted the Cultivation Theory to include the hypotheses of "Mainstreaming" and "Resonance" in his study: The mass media process specific ideologies and values into "Symbol Reality" with certain universality which will resonate strongly with most people and then become "mainstream" [1]. Eventually, the refined Cultivation Theory does not emphasize the unidirectional effects of individual media on the audience; instead, it reveals the effects of the cyclical, continuous, and dynamic system constructed by the media information system that implicitly influences the audience's daily life. The Cultivation Theory was first applied in the studies of the influence of television on children, who show age-inappropriate adult and violent tendencies because of the murder and crime scenes shown on television, which implicitly influence children's social cognition and behavior. Neil Postman, a scholar studying American media culture, also shares the same assertions with him on this matter. Postman's book, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, discusses the

media's influence on children, using easy-to-understand images and intriguing communication methods to instill adult ideologies and values in them. In *A Clockwork Orange*, the influence of mass media can be easily sensed, be it the worldcast on telly, the newspapers through which the power of the authorities and the anti-government are vying for public favoritism, or the daubed municipal painting on the walls. Therefore the immanent influence of media upon citizens in this novel is ascertained.

While the UN defines childhood by age of 18, Neil Postman conceptualizes it as a socio-psychological structure that peaked between 1850 and 1950 as a universal ideal [2]. However, the post-1950 rise of television eroded the intellectual hierarchies essential to this concept, exposing children to the complexities of the adult world [2]. This "disappearance of childhood" finds a stark literary reflection in *A Clockwork Orange*, where juvenile malignancy stems from the failure of social protection and media saturation. Moving beyond traditional scholarly focus on free will or the Nadsat argot, this thesis utilizes Cultivation Theory and a multidisciplinary lens—encompassing history, sociology, and music—to critique the failures of government, school, and family. Ultimately, it argues that the synergy between mass media and social decay accelerates the erosion of childhood for characters like Alex.

2. The hypocritic government and Alex's cynicism

As the biographer of Burgess, Andrew Biswell points out that both Burgess' *The Wanting Seed* and *A Clockwork Orange* want to convey that politics is nothing more than a pendulum, and in these two novels, the Government oscillates between authoritarian control and laissez-faire permissiveness [3]. Firstly, it can be sensed in *A Clockwork Orange* that the Government plays a dominant role in controlling what people can watch and read and changes their perspectives at liberty to cater to people's favoritism. From the narration of Alex, one can see that "in the windows of all of the flats...This would be the telly. Tonight was what they called a worldcast, meaning that the same programme was being divided by everybody in the world that wanted to...and it was all being bounced off the special telly satellites in outer space" [4]. Then after Ludovico Treatment disciplines Alex, he is interviewed and taped for the telenews, with his folding up in the face of ultra-violence being demonstrated [4]. When Alex leaves the prison, he randomly picks up a gazette, and it turns out to be a Government one full of lobbying. All the pieces of evidence above point out that the Government in this novel is at the helm of dictating what people would think.

Secondly, the fickle changes in the Government's treatment of Alex reveal its selfishness, for its true intention is to win the next election instead of full-heartedly humanizing criminals. From the perspective of Cultivation Theory, the Government is appeasing citizens by causing an interactive cultivation effect, making sure to nurse its constituency: The traditional Cultivation Theory emphasizes the one-way cultivation of the media to the audience, but the functioning of Cultivation Theory in this novel is bi-directional—the mass media and the audience forms an interactive relationship: Firstly, the Government "cultivates" the people's lifestyle, behavior, and psychological cognition through media implicitly, letting citizens get used to the current state of affairs. Secondly, people's reactions toward the deeds of the Government "re-cultivate" government-led media, making the authorities adjust the content to people's preferences; Finally, the adjusted news will be aired to the audience, constantly affecting people's mindset with the contention same or similar as theirs, so that the people will resonate with the news. Just as the "Resonance" hypothesis proposed by Gerbner, when the symbolic world of television appears to correspond to the viewer's own reality or to overlap with the subjective reality formed in the viewer's mind [5], it eventually the Government's control upon people's thoughts through mass media by applying Cultivation Theory is realized.

Meanwhile, in stark contrast to the "sensible" Government, most citizens are depicted as yes men, which makes the Government's selfishness more outstanding: Dim follows Alex to satisfy his violent desire before becoming a cop but beats Alex once he is an underdog, those baboochkas who perjure as long as the boys get them beer, and Alex's parents who always connive with Alex by saying "things will be as you like" [4] ... Therefore, the Government's hypocrisy and selfishness are transparently reflected in the way it treats the people as votes and puppets at its whim, with regarding Alex as a tool to please those people.

Alex's disdain towards the authority can be easily understood during this process. As Neil Postman puts it, Prior to the rise of television, the darker and more private aspects of political life were generally confined to adult awareness. Television, however, continually presents children with the imperfections of public figures who once might have been seen as unimpeachable. Consequently, children may develop adult-like responses—such as cynicism or apathy—toward political leaders and politics as a whole [2]. Furthermore, vice versa, from the perspective of Alex, one can see the atrocity that the Government commits upon him, while on mass media, there are only "boast slovos" about what the Government has done. Consequently, Alex's attitude towards society becomes acidic and adult-like, suggesting the proclivity that the values of children and adults are exceedingly conflating.

3. Alex' s parents: the emergence of the "childified"adults

In response to the question of whether any social institutions remain powerful and devoted enough to counter the erosion of childhood, Postman suggests that only the family and the school have a genuine interest in doing so. Even so, the family's structure and authority have been seriously undermined because parents no longer control the information world to which children are exposed [2]. It is conspicuous that Alex's s parents are depicted as someone who are always helpless, who have no foresight, firm standpoint, parental dignity, or serious plans, and who have no extended conversations with their son. Therefore, it seems that the roles of Alex and his parents in the family have been converted, with the parents bearing little resemblance to children. At home, Alex's parents have no choice but to resort to sighing and crying when Alex seems to be committing crimes, and although they appear several times in this novel, none criticize Alex's delinquency, only daring to narrate facts at the most. The only men who exhort Alex are his Post-Corrective Advisor, Deltoid, who will "make a confession failure with being left a big black mark [4]" if Alex commits a crime again, and Joe, who has paid the rent to his parents. Both of them criticize Alex mainly out of their profits. Moreover, Alex's parents also take the money of their sons, even if Alex is still a schoolboy, making them more like business partners than parents and son.

Additionally, the food that Alex's mother prepares illustrates that the alimentary habit of the family is unhealthy, with most of them being fast food: "Mum had laid out on the table my malenky bit of supper—a couple of lomticks of tinned spongemeat with a shive or so of kleb and butter, a glass of the old cold moloko" [4]. It seems that what Alex eats outside is way better than the food at home. Postman argues that fast food, formerly regarded as suitable chiefly for children with relatively insensitive palates and strong stomachs, has since become ordinary food for adults as well. In his view, this shift reflects a broader forgetting of the idea that adults should possess higher standards than children in judging what is and is not edible [2], through Alex's mother's preparation of food, an air of nonchalance is brought out, justifying that his parents are poor at leading a quality life and that Alex has little attachment to his family.

Furthermore, since studies have shown that families are getting smaller and smaller [2], less time are given to parents to foster their children at home. Therefore, the role that the mother plays

becomes exceedingly conflicted as Virginia Woolf asserts that "killing the angel in the house" [6] in the 1930s, while the liberation of women from narrow social roles is a genuinely positive effect of technological change and deserves broad support, it also brings with it the weakening of conventional childcare arrangements. However one evaluates the long-standing association between women and nurturance, it remains true that women have historically been the chief caretakers of childhood, preserving and shaping it. Men are unlikely to replace women in this function to any significant degree, even if doing so would be sensible [2]. Consequently, as both parents become increasingly absorbed in work outside the home, children are more often treated as an added burden, and childhood is progressively shortened. In the novel, Alex also points out that apart from his father, his mother has to go to work: "...There being this law for everybody not a child nor with a child nor ill to go out rabbiting. My mum worked at one of the Statemarts...filling up the shelves with tinned soup and beans and all that cal" [4]. The absence of profound communication with their parents, the lacking of their necessary companion, and their inability to protect him from mass media and society partly contribute to the dissolution of Alex's childhood, disordering his ability to get along well with them and finally and pathetically, an inversion of their roles in the family is caused.

4. School's loose administration and the becoming of child-adults

In this novel, the loss of childhood can also be attributed to the school's loose administration. According to Postman, one essential difference between adults and children lies in the fact that adults possess knowledge of certain dimensions of life—its mysteries, contradictions, violence, and tragedies—that are deemed inappropriate for children and even indecent to disclose without restraint [2]. In contemporary society, these matters are introduced to children gradually as they move toward adulthood. Yet such a practice presupposes a culture that clearly separates the adult sphere from the child sphere and institutions, particularly schools, that reinforce this division. Postman also emphasizes that the school curriculum has historically functioned as the most severe and persistent form of adult censorship [2]. However, in *A Clockwork Orange*, what lies towards all the children is a society suffused with sexual implications and violence, which makes it impossible for the schools to protect these children from knowing the grimy sides of adult life. Eventually, children's perceptions of life will be more similar to those of adults and thus are on the verge of becoming "child-adults."

The becoming of child adults can be patently perceived through the cruel realities exposed to children, the adult-like clothes they wear, the appellative words, and the Nadsat language they use. As for the social misdeeds in this novel, for example, when Alex goes back home, he accidentally sees "one young malchick sprawling and creeching and moaning in the gutter, all cut about lovely, and saw in the lamplight also streaks of blood here and there like signatures... and a pair of devotchka's neezhnies doubtless rudely wrenched off in the heat of the moment" [4], which demonstrates the suffocatingly chaotic social environment that children are confronting. The clothes that the children wear also have strong violent as well as sex appeal, as the boys, including Alex, wear tight tights with jelly mould to make their crutch masculinely stand out, and the little truant girls Alex meets at the disc-bootick "see themselves as real grown-up devotchkas already with the old hipswing and padded groodies and red all plushed on their goobers" [4], signifying that they aspire to be adults. As for the appellative words, Alex calls himself "a teacher" and "uncle Alex" when he rapes the two little girls, being eager to distinguish himself from the "youth group" to which the two girls belong, although he is only seventeen. Alex, as well as his contemporaries, also exclusively use Nadsat language, which consists of "Odd bits of old rhyming slang, a bit of gipsy talk, too. But most of the roots are Slav. Propaganda. Subliminal penetration" [4], revealing its

nature of anti-adult and anti-government. The usage of Nadsat can be regarded as children's revenge towards adults who want to hide secrets from them and a kind of adult-like behavior through which children pretend to have secrets (that is, the words that are hard to decipher) against adults. Eventually, through the identity they regard themselves as, children like Alex boast that they are actually adults who know all the secrets, continuing to destroy others physically and psychologically, forming a vicious cycle of a shredding childhood.

Meanwhile, apart from the loose supervision of the school, it is likely that educators are becoming frivolous, intolerant, and short-sighted while humanizing children. For example, Alex's Post-Corrective Advisor, Deltoid, does not regard Alex as a child by threatening him and revealing to him that he will "make a confession failure with being left a big black mark [4]", which is supposed to be the secret of adult, not to mention that when Alex is caught in prison, he even does not regard him as a human by spitting in his list, for he suffers a loss in his profit because of Alex. Therefore, the school's limited ability to retain childhood, the educator's impatience, and the social turmoil depicted in the novel gradually dissolve children's childhood, causing his prematurity.

5. "what's it going to be then?" Alex as a helpless individual forced to choose

Taking the chaotic environment in the novel into account, though it seems that Alex chooses to be evil and it is all about free will, one cannot deny the possibility that he is coerced to be evil by bidding farewell to his childhood or otherwise he will be devoured by social turpitude, and the reasons are as follows:

First and foremost, media dominance with graphics plays an essential role in affecting children like Alex. The novel shares many affinities with reality. For example, according to Burgess' biography, just like the plot of this novel, Burgess' wife was harassed by punks, too. One can also clearly sense the infiltration of the ideologies of the Soviet Union when the Cold War was ongoing at that time. Therefore by combining what the phenomenon is in the novel and what Burgess went through in the 1950s, Thus, Alex can be seen as living in a period shaped by the so-called "graphic revolutions," in which a symbolic environment of pictures, cartoons, posters, and advertisements has emerged. As *The Disappearance of Childhood* notes, the electronic and graphic revolutions of the 1950s recast the world of ideas into speed-of-light icons and images [2]. and the impacts brought by these two revolutions are also reflected in the novel. In *A Clockwork Orange*, violence seems to be omnipotent, and it can be said that a considerable part of the implications of violence hides behind mass media, including paintings and magazines, cultivating people by osmosis. For example, when Alex randomly reads a gazetta at home, along with those attractive advertisements triggering Alex's interest to continue reading and "made him smuck" [4], a sea of activities of ultra-violence including "bank robberies and strikes and footballers making everybody paralytic with fright by threatening to not play next Saturday if they did not get higher wages" are indiscriminately shown, and Alex calls them "usual," which suggest a disordered society behind the gazette.

Moreover, through Alex's eyes, one can see the daubed municipal painting, which conveys substantial sexual implications, and which, according to Postman, belongs to a picture that in contrast to a sentence, it is not subject to refutation. It advances no proposition, implies no contrary or negative form, and is not required to follow the conventions of evidence or logic [2], that is to say, the sexual content on it can be quickly and directly taken in by whoever sees it. Additionally, the many slogans and the picture of a window also partly cause Alex to commit suicide, though he sees "the slovo DEATH on the cover of a like pamphlet, even though it was only DEATH TO THE GOVERNMENT. Furthermore, like Fate, there was another like malenky booklet with an open window on the cover. It said, 'Open the window to fresh air, fresh ideas, a new way of living' [4],

confirming the inducing as well as the dominant effect of mass media, which is likely to penetrate and integrate into people's daily life more profoundly, with causing enormous harm to children in this novel.

Secondly, children's talents are likely to be submerged or destroyed in this violence-reigned society of loose administration instead of being discovered and appreciated. When Alex listens to the orchestra, it is highly likely that he has synesthesia, which is a neurological condition that enables him unwittingly "see" specific colors while listening to the sounds of different instruments by associating the sounds with forced imagined scenes [7]. This testifies that, like Franz Liszt, Rachmaninov even Beethoven himself, who "referred in one of his sketchbooks to B minor as the black key although there is no evidence that he regularly associated tonalities and colors" [8], he is highly talented and extremely sensitive to music. The violent society may make him fascinated by the violent images which pop up when he listens to the orchestra and that the Ludovico Treatment the Government imposes upon him cannot fundamentally solve the problem by being just a means of strangling Alex's instinct, for the problem does not lie in him but the whole society. As is shown in the novel, he is disciplined to feel nauseated when he encounters the involuntary violent images that pop up in his brain while listening to the orchestra, and thus he is catapulted into a perpetually inferior position and is deprived of the right of imagining. The "Ludovico" is the Russian spelling of German "Ludwig," which conveys an air of satire when the Government obliterates Alex's synesthesia under the name of Ludwig Van Beethoven, who is claimed to possess the same ability. Therefore, it is lucky for Alex to restore his synesthesia and, according to Burgess himself, eventually become a composer.

Moreover, the types of celebrities children admire in this novel will likely transform into those disqualified icons, affecting children's behaviors malignantly. When Alex and his peers wear masks to intrude on the writer's home, one can see that Alex is not even familiar with Shelly by derogatively calling him "a poet veck called Peebee Shelly" [4] while juxtaposing rock star Elvis Presley with celebrities like Disraeli and Henry VIII, even though Elvis Presley is a singer singing songs with provocative lyrics, a high-school graduate, a drug addict and is famous for being a bit of a "hound dog," for he dated many women, including his wife when she was only fourteen. According to George Gerbner's hypothesis of "Mainstreaming" and "Resonance," the process of cultivation remains a continuous, dynamic, developing interaction between information, audience, and environment, and mass media such as television dominate to a considerable extent the source of entertainment and information for those who have the potential to repeat, consolidate, nurture — that is, cultivate the values and perspectives of the audience by exposing them to messages continuously [9]. When the virtual reality constructed by mass media corresponds to the audience's own experience of reality or merges with the subjective reality in the mind, its impact on the audience becomes especially clear and significant. Therefore, as a famous singer in the 1950s, which is also the era of the electronic revolution, Elvis Presley becomes the icon of those children who lead a promiscuous life due to his libertine style while latently and reciprocally internalizing the children's self-identity. Therefore, *A Clockwork Orange* seems to mirror and elucidate the trend of enthroning disqualified icons in the 1950s.

Lastly, the end of this novel unfurls a despairing world where childhood continues to disappear. It is noticeable that chapter 21 ends unnaturally with Alex suddenly growing up and being humanized. Eric Swenson, the American editor of this novel, asserts that chapter 20 rather than 21 should be the end of this novel by writing, "I remember...he had added the light and positive Chapter 21 for the British publisher wished a happy closure. I also distinctly remember him pressing me to publish an American version of *A Clockwork Orange* without the final chapter, so that is how we printed it" [4].

Therefore, according to the original intention of Burgess, though Alex says with an air of nativity that he "was cured all right" [4], he remains a trivial cog securing the public credulity of the Government and is not extricated from the society which continues its way to fall into disorder. Therefore, the dissolution of his childhood and that of others in this novel is still ongoing.

6. Conclusion

Burgess depicts a society in which children not only face the risk of being overly disciplined but also are jeopardized by excessive vivacity leading them towards prematurity and rotten early adulthood. Therefore, when contemplating their disproportionate misdeeds, one cannot solely impute their evil to free will, for in the context of the time, they may not have the due freedom to choose who they could be. Moreover, the disappearance of childhood under the influence of mass media and the social atmosphere depicted in this novel is worthy of further discussion, for nowadays, it remains a hot potato, especially when the perpetrators and victims become much younger than before, when the information explosion attacks the world with keeping the parents from forbidding children to know a plethora of details of the adult world, and when the tendency of "involution" determines to cram children's brains with immense knowledge, forcing them to behave more like adults. Retaining childhood entails the joint force of mass media, the authorities, parents, schools, and the whole society. Moreover, as Rousseau once noted, "Reading is the scourge of childhood, for books teach us to talk about things we know nothing about," reading *A Clockwork Orange* once left me immense anxiety about violence and social turmoil when I was thirteen, though it was the book's refreshing cover and the non-mainstream name that attracted me to buy it. Such experience enables me to know the ponderance of protecting children's childhood, triggering my desire to re-explore this topic from an adult's perspective.

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