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The Shared History of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971)

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Abstract: *This article aims to offer a comparative critical discussion of both Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971) as contemporary texts. Outwardly and at first glance their works, seems stylistically and aesthetically distinct from each other, nevertheless these films released within a year of each other, share a set of historical overlaps, occupying the same cultural and cinematic space and context: a cinema which emerges out of the rubble of the previous decade's counterculture and utopianism, and which replaces 'free love' with libertinage and cruelty. The relationship between the two has, maybe surprisingly, gone largely unremarked upon hence this paper aims to provide a critical, historical relationship of their overlaps. Drawing on a body of archival research as well as offering a critical discussion of the Evening Standard film critic Alexander Walker's contradictory attitudes to these films, this article hopes to show how the fates of these two films overlap and how they are historically (and competitively) interconnected in terms of their distribution, festival exhibition and (interestingly) how it seems Kubrick, himself, imagined *The Devils* as the film with which *A Clockwork Orange* would most clearly compete.*

Introduction

In this article I wish to propose a set of shared historic connections between Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and Ken Russell's controversial masterpiece *The Devils* (1971). Not only is 2022 the 50th anniversary of the UK release of Kubrick's film (and the 60th anniversary of Burgess's novel) 2021 also sees the 50th anniversary of *The Devils*; these two films embody, possibly more than any others of the period, the nihilistic and transgressive milieu of (cult) British cinema at the end of the 1960s and the start of the 1970s where the cliched and naïve aspirations to free love and liberalism had given way to a Sadeian cinematic impulse towards violence, libertinage, and cruelty.¹ Rather than being an arbitrary comparative and formalist account, this discussion will draw on evidence from the archive of the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) and the Stanley Kubrick Archive (SKA), as well as at the archive of the British Film Institute (BFI) in order to investigate intersections between these two key markers of the period. In doing so, the article will address and explore how the hitherto largely unexplored intersection of the two films may be mediated through the response of the then leading British film critic Alexander Walker (*Evening Standard*). Walker's response to both films undoubtedly contributed to their public reception (and certainly contributed to the public notoriety of Russell's film), but his response is also problematised by bias and at times personal animosity. The article will also draw on a range of archival evidence to draw critical parallels between the two and to reveal Kubrick's awareness of Russell's film as both a competitor and even as a template for his, and Warner Bros. strategies, of distribution and categorisation.

While aspects of the respective production and censorship histories of both *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Devils* (Kubrick's withdrawal of his own film; Russell's struggles with Warner Bros. and the BBFC) have been covered extensively elsewhere, there has been no substantive discussion of the more direct and immediate overlaps between the two

(although, as I shall highlight, they share a set of individual responses by a set of the same critics and authors).² In a previous article, I broached the potential (and unexplored) stylistic and aesthetic crossovers across Kubrick and Russell's work.³ This article aims to develop this discussion by interpolating the 'Ven diagram' that binds these two films, offering an analysis which goes beyond merely the stylistic.

Before we begin to consider a parallel historical study of *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Devils* via their 'shared history', it is perhaps wise to prefix the discussion by saying that there is no hard historical evidence that Kubrick and Russell ever met but there are certainly some interesting circumstantial and often apocryphal points of communication: a letter, for instance, in the Stanley Kubrick Archive appears to show Kubrick writing to Russell to ask his opinions on the Gate Soundstage at Elstree, and in an article written by Russell in the *Times* in 2006 he claims that ahead of the production of *Barry Lyndon* (1975), Kubrick had called him out of the blue (the two having never before spoken or met) to question him over location choices (country houses, estates etc) made for *The Music Lovers* (his 1971 biopic of the composer Tchaikovsky).⁴ In the event, both of these films make use of Wilton House in Salisbury, UK.⁵

One of the more persistent myths was that Russell had been considered a potential director for an early iteration of *A Clockwork Orange*. There is no solid evidential foundation for this, however, and it remains unconfirmed. In an email exchange between myself and the author Jonathan Meades, Meades revealed to me that Russell was Burgess's first choice to direct the film: 'Burgess was no fan of 'cool' or of Kubrick's elegance. He admired gaudiness and energy.'⁶ Meades also alludes to this in his book *An Encyclopaedia of Myself* (2014). As I have noted elsewhere, Burgess's 1967 script for the film diverges greatly in style from Kubrick (and the Terry Southern/Michael Cooper screenplay from 1966).⁷ Burgess's unmade original script appears to corroborate this, containing moments which might well be

considered ‘Russellian’. In one sequence Alex fantasises about conducting the 9th Symphony wearing a Beethoven mask, tearing it off at the climax and firing bolts of lightning at the audience members from his baton. This anticipates the carnivalesque tone of Russell’s 1975 biopic of the composer Franz Liszt, *Lisztomania*, as well as the sequence in *The Music Lovers*, during the fantasy/nightmare/1812 overture sequence in which Tchaikovsky’s (Richard Chamberlain) brother Modeste (Ken Colley), astride a phallic canon, removes the heads of the eponymous ‘Music Lovers’ with canon ball fire

Stanley Kubrick, Ken Russell and Alexander Walker.

A Clockwork Orange and *The Devils* opened within six months of each other in the UK (13 January 1972 – *A Clockwork Orange*; 25 July 1971 – *The Devils*). Alongside (American director) Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1972), the films comprise part of an ‘unholy trinity’ of early 1970s British Cinema. In his 1972 article ‘*Straw Dogs, A Clockwork Orange and The Critics*’, Charles Barr delivered a comparative study of how Peckinpah and Kubrick’s films were received in the media and by the critics.⁸ Early on he cites Conservative critic and ‘vocal champion’ of Kubrick’s cinema Alexander Walker and his defence of *A Clockwork Orange* and his condemnation of *Straw Dogs* as ‘vicious and degrading’, though omits mention of Walker’s 1971 review of *The Devils*, which he called ‘monstrously indecent’ and ‘a garish glossary of sado-masochism.’⁹ As a critic, Walker was a mouthpiece for the more conservative views of the British film establishment, which itself depended on American studio finance and the work of American émigré directors such as Kubrick. Kubrick had nurtured his own relationship with the British film industry since the early 1960s but was also someone who resisted being wholly assimilated into it.¹⁰ Both *A Clockwork Orange* and *Barry Lyndon* are his most ‘British films’ but are ‘obliquely’ so and, like other films in his canon of work, they address central themes of displacement (cultural and spatial):

A Clockwork Orange offers a view of a Britain ambiguously displaced in time, a dystopian future or possibly an alternative present, while *Barry Lyndon* is a film fraught with displacement: from its picaresque narrative and wandering central protagonist to a troubled production that was forced to move from its base in Ireland due to IRA threats on account of the film's British colonial themes (another aspect of the film that connects it to an interrogation of 'Britishness').¹¹

What impressed Walker about Kubrick, however, was his totality of control the power he wielded over his own status and position and the perceived discipline of his film making – contrary to his feelings about Russell and in particular *The Devils*. Recent acquisitions in the SKA from 1977, four years after Kubrick had withdrawn *A Clockwork Orange* from any further exhibition or distribution in the UK, demonstrate the influence of his position.¹² Correspondence between Bob Webber (then marketing director of EMI) and Warner Bros, point to a mooted re-release of *A Clockwork Orange* in 1977 and Webber's unhappiness at the 'special treatment' Kubrick was seen to be receiving. He writes,

As an aside, it strikes me rather odd that in dealing with "Clockwork Orange" we are dealing with a Stanley Kubrick film, and my mind goes back to another Stanley Kubrick film, BARRY LYNDON, where we, as exhibitors, were asked for certain concessions to which we agreed. My mind goes forward to the next Stanley Kubrick film and I wonder what special arrangements we will be asked for in regard to the release in the UK of this forthcoming production [...] I personally consider that the relationship which this Company has had with Warner brothers over many years, and the various concessions

which we have made in respect to SK productions in the past, make it unreasonable for the re-issue release of *Clockwork Orange* to be held up any longer in the UK.¹³

Kubrick responded with an eight-point missive stating that,

That the extremely personal reasons for the withholding of the re-issue had been discussed on numerous occasions and that although discretion was promised on the matter such promises were not upheld.¹⁴

Furthermore, there is a flurry of correspondence in response to then Labour government's enactment of the 1974 finance act in 1976, and the withdrawal tax breaks and incentives for creatives from abroad who had been living in the country for more than 9 years. Kubrick writes two letters, one to then labour Chancellor Denis Healey and the other lobbying Shadow Conservative chancellor Geoffrey Howe. The difference in tone in these letters gives some indication as to Kubrick's politics: the letter to Healey is short and accusatory. In it he threatens to leave the country (at the head of a potential mass exodus of US directors to the continent- asserting their importance in the economic stability of the British film industry) and release the current film under production (*Barry Lyndon*) everywhere in Europe except the UK.¹⁵

The letter to Howe, however, is lengthier and more appealing in tone. In fact, the Howe letter opens with Kubrick suggesting that Alexander Walker himself proposed brokering a meeting between the two:

Alexander Walker spoke to me about your interest in meeting to discuss the crisis in the British film industry created by the departure of the American film colony, and the resulting massive withdrawal of American film investment.¹⁶

This perhaps indicates that Kubrick was at least as much on the fringes of the conservative establishment (or aspired to be so – this is after all a director who made his UK home a country house and estate in Hertfordshire) as he was the labour establishment. As James Fenwick notes in *Stanley Kubrick Produces*, Kubrick was also friends with subsequent labour leader Michael Foot. His playing both sides might be indicative of his canny business sense as a producer. These letters assert the (studio backed) control and power exerted by Kubrick as a self-appointed spokesman for the American émigré directors and the US film industry in the UK. Alexander Walker's response was to write an open letter to the director in the *Evening Standard* begging for him to reconsider and to affirm the importance of the presence of the American 'moguls'.¹⁷ One might therefore begin to read Walker's own self-styled role as not simply a film critic but also an intermediary whose unofficial role was to maintain the integrity of the film industry and archival correspondence in the SKA demonstrates Walker's willingness to lobby in favour of these film workers.

His friendship with Kubrick, potentially shared political leanings, and a pragmatic desire to keep Kubrick as the foremost American émigré on-side for the sake of the British film industry helps frame an understanding for Walker's support for *A Clockwork Orange*.¹⁸ In 1972, he reviewed the film for the *Evening Standard* under the headline 'A Bit of the Old Ultra Brilliance' and in it stated that, 'After its gripped you by a bold, violent and clever story that is an allegory of power and corruption couched in the terms of a horror comic, the film expands into an infinity of terrifying implications for us and the times we live in.'¹⁹

Walker's relationship with Kubrick and Russell was markedly different, partisan and dictated, potentially, by personal conservative politics and a possible perceived kinship with Kubrick's own and his relationship with Russell was considerably more combative. There are also inconsistencies in Walker's approach to both *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Devils*. Let us consider that both films are thematically, and in fact stylistically, not dissimilar. At the centre of each is the freedom of the individual and the individual pitted against the power of the state and, just like Alex (Malcolm McDowell) in *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Devils* has its own non-conformist libertine and individualist, Fr Urbain Grandier (Oliver Reed), physically restrained and tortured for refusing to bow to the whims of the state for instance (see images 1 and 2):

[Image 1 here]

[Image 2 here]

Walker was certainly predisposed towards Kubrick, and he had in fact even reacted positively to Ken Russell's earlier work for the BBC's Arts Programme, *Monitor* (1958-1965), where Russell's contributions had been pioneering innovative documentary-biopics of composers and artists. In his book *National Heroes* (1985), Walker later reflected on the problems that *The Devils* had caused then newly minted BBFC secretary Stephen Murphy. The film had been passed as an X certificate by the previous chief censor, John Trevelyan, who in a move not unlike Kubrick inviting Walker to the set of *A Clockwork Orange*, had himself been invited to the set of *Women in Love* (1969) by Russell. Nevertheless, the film was passed in the UK with a total of 17 cuts prior to Stephen Murphy's taking up of the position.²⁰ Letters in the archive of the BBFC illustrate that, while Murphy had initial reservations over defending the film, he ultimately relented, stating in a letter from 1971 after seeing the film at a private screening that, 'Quite honestly I was worried before I saw it that I

would find it too difficult to defend the decision that was taken before I joined the board. However, I am happy to do so.²¹ Nevertheless Walker proposed that,

It wasn't long before Murphy discovered to his cost one of the built-in contradictions of the British film industry in which the censor is supposed to protect the public from the excesses of the film makers and the film makers from the intolerance of the public. With the appearance of Ken Russell's, *The Devils* (22 July 1971) the cordon sanitaire between the two was badly indeed irretrievably breached.²²

Here, then, is the nub of Walker's problem with Russell's film – with *The Devils* Russell (in the opinion of Walker) proved himself to be a director that the public and the industry needed protecting from, unlike Kubrick, who he openly appealed to not leave the country. In his review of *The Devils*, Walker wrote that,

Even if you are the star graduate of the Torquemada School of film direction, so undifferentiating assault on the senses of your audience, never mind the bodies of your stars, is bound to provoke not horror but indifference. Not thought but numbness. Not scandal at your own outrageousness but concern for your own artistic sanity.²³

Walker also stated that,

Inspired more by Dachau and De Sade than either Aldous Huxley's book or John Whiting's play on which Russell based his screenplay *The Devils* deals with the attempt by Cardinal Richelieu (Christopher Logue) and his lay or ecclesiastical minions (Dudley Sutton, Michael Gothard, Murray Melvin) to rid themselves of an obstinate

priest (Oliver Reed by alleging that the admittedly sensual man has used unholy means to infect the Mother superior of the Ursulines (Vanessa Redgrave) with erotic fantasies [...] Almost every serious question raised by the historical situation is thrown away by Russell in order to flaunt a taste for visual sensation that makes scene after scene look like the masturbatory fantasies of a Catholic boyhood.²⁴

In *National Heroes*, Walker repeats the statement referenced earlier, made in his initial review of *A Clockwork Orange*, 'A Bit of the Old Ultra Brilliance', but reflects that 'the film expands into an infinity of terrifying implications for the mid-1970s. After the multitude of films that exploited the 'permissive society', it was the first landmark study of the 'violent society' and voices the outraged public reaction to the film as 'the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in the mirror.'²⁵ One might assume that Walker viewed *The Devils* as symptomatic, or an illustrative embodiment, of this 'violent society'.²⁶

Walker is also keen to exonerate Murphy from any wrongdoing in passing *The Devils* for release, instead conferring that responsibility on Trevelyan. His key objections to the film are in what he perceives as a lack of discipline in its production and its aesthetic of orgiastic excess, which he believes obscures and undermines the historical origins of the story and thematic commentary of the film. He notes that Warner Brothers were so embarrassed by the film that in the press pack sent to critics they included a 'booklet filled with scholarly glosses on the religious heresies and state politics of the time' and that,

It looked less like a political-ecclesiastical crib than a worried distributor's alibi for a movie that was a garish glossary of sadomasochistic practices and used serious issues of conscience as opportunities to flaunt its director's striking flair for portraying pain and suffering.²⁷

Walker's chief objection, however, was with *The Devils'* foregrounding of the agonised, writing and sexually transgressive and transcendent body. Walker wrote that, 'In short, the drama's analytical function was persistently subjected to the anatomical embarrassments of the martyrs.'²⁸ Whereas Kubrick's film distinguishes itself in this regard because the,

Violence is stylized rather than realistically presented: the gang rape is done to Rossini's *Thieving Magpie*; the mugging of a householder is turned into a surrealistic shoe shuffle and Alex puts his not so soft boot into the lilting rhythm of *Singin' an Dancin' In the Rain*; and even the grotesque killing of the Cat Woman simply shows those that live by the erotic symbol die by it.²⁹

Walker misses that Russell never claimed for the film to be 'analytic' – although that is not to say he did not aim for historical accuracy, as with Kubrick's own meticulous (and archived) design and production research, archived material in the Derek Jarman files (Jarman was the film's production designer) at the BFI reveal correspondence with the Benedictine monk, poet, historian and artist Dom Sylvester Houedard who offers reams of historical background to the political and religious contexts and structures of 16th century France and in particular the Bordeaux region including Poitiers and Loudun, its religious orders and cults, beliefs as well as sketches of religious garments and biblical inscriptions.³⁰ Furthermore, Walker also notes how,

On the very night of the premier. Russell followed the example of his film's inquisitors in expelling the devils and, live on BBC TV [...] he drubbed a film critic over the head

with a rolled-up copy of the newspaper in which the movie had been condemned that very afternoon.³¹

The critic in question was, of course, none other than Alexander Walker.

The production design and location research folders at the SKA evidence an abundance of material culled from contemporary style, design and architecture publications and Walker notes that it was this attention to stylisation that caused chief censor Stephen Murphy to confer an 'X' certificate on the film but to pass it without any cuts

Russell, on the other hand, was deemed by Walker to be uncontrollable in his cinematic practice, sitting at the opposite end to Kubrick's own 'controlled' and stylised point of view. Walker had been a frequent critic of Russell's work, and while he had praised some of the early BBC films and *Women in Love* (1969), he reserved the full bore of his ire for both *The Devils* and *The Music Lovers* (1970). Russell famously summarised the latter as the story of the marriage between a homosexual and a nymphomaniac.³² (In his review of it, Walker wrote 'This man must be stopped – bring me an elephant gun!')³³ Writing for *Electric Sheep* magazine, Virginie Selavy notes that,

One distinctive characteristic of Russell's divisive oeuvre is the way time has treated it: a slow wave of respectability or near-respectability has been advancing over it, starting at the beginning and working forward. At the time of *The Music Lovers* (1970), there were voices bemoaning his creation of such a dreadful, unsubtle and lecherous film when his BBC work had been so very fine. The unspoken feeling was that tight budgets and strict supervision by Huw Weldon had focused Russell, curbed his tendency to excess, prevented plunges into sensationalism. Which was probably true enough. Hand in hand with that belief went the assumption that artists are better when controlled by

executives, or that the moving image isn't an art and needs to be governed by some kind of management class.³⁴

Selavy suggests that the transition from working within the tightly controlled world of the BBC to being his own master had, as it was perceived (and certainly by Walker) allowed Russell too much freedom from 'censorship and editorial constraint'.³⁵ Here however we can draw a parallel with Kubrick. In his study *Stanley Kubrick Produces*, James Fenwick presents the thesis that Kubrick was given an excess of creative freedom and control by Warner Bros., which hampered his ability to get projects off the ground.³⁶ It should be noted as well that *The Devils* presents a significant shift for the worse in Russell's relationship with Warner Bros, co-incidental with the way they feted Kubrick post-*2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Fifty years later, Warner Bros still refuse to release the full cut of Russell's film.

Historicising *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Devils* through the archive(s)

In this section I will give a more focused consideration of what the archives can tell us about the intersecting and parallel relationship between *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Devils* and what can they reveal about Kubrick's relationship to Russell's film. Firstly, however, several interviews carried out in preparation for this article (and previous publications) further reveal some interesting wider points of intersection between Kubrick and Russell's work. *The Devils* certainly seems to have been one of the jumping off points for *Barry Lyndon*, for instance. In an interview in 2018 with Murray Melvin, who played The Reverend Runt in that film, the actor confirmed to me that Kubrick had cast him on the strength of his performance as a similarly devious cleric, Fr Mignon, in Russell's film. Furthermore, the distinctive Gothic-Brutalist set design for the walled city of Loudon (in Southwest France), where the action of the film takes place, was the work of Russell's friend and collaborator Derek Jarman, who a

year later, in 1972, would also design the sets for Russell's film *Savage Messiah*, which detailed the life of the Vorticist sculptor Henri Gaudier-Breszka. In his biography of Jarman, Tony Peake claims that Kubrick had approached Jarman to do the set design for *Barry Lyndon*, but Jarman had been tempted away to work with Russell again on the (unmade) film project *The Angels*. I asked Peake, via email, about this and he referred to a letter from November 1972 in the British Film Institute (BFI) archive from Russell to Jarman that reads,

I'm very mad at myself for letting you down so badly and can only say sorry (very weakly) and trust I haven't mucked up your plans too much. In particular I hope you don't feel too bitter about sacrificing the Kubrick film. I feel particularly guilty about that...It wasn't that we couldn't get the money...it was simply that....I just couldn't get the wretched script to work....³⁷

Kubrick scholar and biographer Filippo Ulivieri confirmed to me also via email that the Kubrick project that Jarman turned down for Russell was most likely to have been *Barry Lyndon*.³⁸ If Kubrick had cast Murray Melvin on account of his role in Russell's film, one could make the assumption that he was also keen to borrow Russell's production designer too. Kubrick started prepping for production in the summer of 1972 (following the completion of *A Clockwork Orange*). According to Ulivieri, Kubrick had asked production designer Ken Adam to work on the film. Adam had initially refused, causing Kubrick to look to other noted designers in the field, and Jarman had recently made a mark with the distinctive monolithic production design for *The Devils*. This may seem speculative, but given the lack of substantial direct archived correspondence between Russell and Kubrick, we must construct the relationship (such as it is) from the material and information that does exist. While all this seems, perhaps, incidental to a discussion of *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Devils*, it does go

some way to indicating and contextualising Kubrick's recognition and awareness of Russell's work and his position as a contemporary.

A reading of the various correspondence in the files at the BBFC archive relating to both *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Devils* indicate the level of resistance Stephen Murphy met, not only from right wing conservative Christian pressure groups, such as the Nationwide Festival of Light and the National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVLA), but also from provincial local authorities for whom both films became pawns in a battle with the Board of Censors. Murphy's predecessor, John Trevelyan, had enacted a policy whereby local authorities / councils could view a film and then override the board's decision to ban it (thereby helping to make the board appear it was not trailing behind public opinion). The fallout from this this was that conservative councils began to be use this freedom to overturn films that the board has passed – pressured by moral guardians such as Mary Whitehouse and Malcolm Muggeridge. Both Kate Egan and Sian Barber have carried out extensive studies of the power of the local authorities in their respective studies of two of the other Bete-Noires of the BBFC, *The Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979) and *Last Tango In Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972). Egan notes that,

[Sian] Barber and Julian Petley have considered how local authority decisions on controversial films released in the first half of the 1970s were informed by the tactics of the Christian organisation the Nationwide Festival of Light, which, as Barber notes, was 'able to exert significant pressure' on local councils through its highly organised approach of encouraging regional members to write to councils or organise petitions to protest against the possible exhibition of a contentious film in their local area.³⁹

Citing Barber's article 'Exploiting Local Controversy' Egan notes how it,

offers a comparative historical analysis of regional responses to Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) in three locations, in order to 'illuminate and explore local difference rather than to argue for a binary of national versus local censorship'.⁸ Drawing on council minutes, policy documents and other council documentation and correspondence, Barber persuasively argues for the crucial importance of such comparative analysis to local film censorship studies in order to consider the particular cultural and social-economic dynamics, preoccupations and networks of power and interaction that inform and shape local film censorship in different regional areas of the UK.⁴⁰

Hence, the decisions to not exhibit films were ultimately made on a micro level, by local councils often under pressure from powerful conservative pressure groups. This is something that Kubrick seems to have been aware of and had taken into consideration. Material at the SKA suggests that Kubrick had noted the furore around Ken Russell's film. One key document is a list of cinemas across North and South London and in provincial areas of the country in which *The Devils* had played.⁴¹ Kubrick has noted alongside this information where his film had played within the Greater London Council (GLC) (at roughly the same number of cinemas) and in provincial areas and where the same local authorities had moved against exhibiting it. This information is also complemented in the file by a photograph of a West End Cinema Marquee showing *Klute* (1971) and *The Devils*.⁴² Kubrick has drawn over *Klute* with a sketch of the poster image for *A Clockwork Orange*, tellingly placing his film directly next to and in competition with Russell's. This demonstrates that for Kubrick, *The Devils*, was perhaps the key competitor to *A Clockwork Orange*.

Furthermore, a reading of the BBFC correspondence reveals the two films posed another problem for the censor. *A Clockwork Orange*, with its central theme of the restriction of liberty by a government body, posed the problem that this would inevitably reflect on the censor. *The Devils* shares similar themes and offered a similar problem. In a letter to the Town Clerk of Leeds Council, Stephen Murphy writes,

A Clockwork Orange represents one of the most difficult censorship problems [...] Censorship of the film would understandably be seen, publicly, as the censorship of ideas. The film is, in its stylised way, simply a vehicle for all kinds of speculation about the human spirit and about the nature of Western society. Disturbed though we were by the first half of the film, which is basically a statement of some of the problems of violence, we were, nonetheless satisfied by the end of the film that it could not be accused of exploitation: quite the contrary, it is a valuable contribution to the whole debate about violence.⁴³

The Devils posed a similar problem, as Murphy wrote to the Clerk of Cambridge manuscript court:

It has been reported to me, by those who know the local authorities concerned more intimately than I do, that it seemed likely that at least the early decisions to ban the film were based on religious motivation rather than on violence. The Board's dilemma is that we are in the midst of cultural conflict which as you must know, affects television, books, magazines and even to some extent the press as well as the cinema⁴⁴

The cultural conflict that Murphy describes in his letter is between the conflicting attitude to permissiveness as well as those Christian conservative cultural consumers who opposed permissiveness, liberalisation and perceived blasphemous climate of the era. Hence in this way both *The Devils* and *A Clockwork Orange* may be seen, in this respect, as a barometer for measuring the tensions of the era and for measuring the changing role and function of the censor.

If key objections from viewers and local authorities around *A Clockwork Orange* had centred on the alleged extreme violence of the film, then for *The Devils*, an equally, if not more violent film (or at least in the sense that it is a film in which the violence present is less deliberately stylised and more authentically realised, see for example the graphic burning-at-the-stake of Grandier during the film's climax – a sequence which Walker objected to vociferously) the sticking point was its supposed blasphemy. Russell by this now had already removed the problematic 'Rape of Christ' sequence (in which a horde of orgiastic naked nuns simulate sex on a giant crucifix) and made cuts (amongst others) to the graphic 'exorcism' of Sister Jeanne of the Angels (Vanessa Redgrave) (via enema of boiling water). In a somewhat testy letter to John Trevelyan, he wrote:

Having just seen the film again in its dubbed state, I think it might be helpful to both yourself and the committee if I jotted down a few things that might help convince you all (unless as I hope – this is patently obvious to you) that what I set out to do was to make a deeply felt religious statement – and I believe that despite the fact that I have butchered the film at your bidding far and away beyond anything I dreamed of – especially in view of the new rating system – what remains just about retains my intentions – albeit in a watered down version. After all I did not set out to make a cosy religious drama that would please everyone but a true film about the horror and

blasphemy perpetrated against human beings in the name of Jesus Christ. This is an eternal theme and a true one as a glance at the horror in Northern Ireland will remind you.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, John Trevelyan seemed to be more disposed towards *The Devils* despite these enforced cuts (maybe as a result of his previous experience with Russell on *Women in Love* where he had been courted by the director and made party to all stage of the films development), and was outwardly critical of Kubrick's film (which was passed uncut after he had stepped down as BBFC secretary) stating in a letter archived at the BBFC:

This script does of course contain a moral message which I take to be an indictment of a world in which violence is the only law and human beings are programmed like computers. But I think it presents an insuperable obstacle from our point of views, if we still hold – and I personally do still hold – that an unrelieved diet of vicious violence and hooliganism by teenagers is not fit for other teenagers to see. The dialogue is a specialized sort of slang of which I can only understand about one word in three, but the general intention (crude violence and obscenity) is always plain; and the visuals, however restrained, could not possibly get into even the X category unless we are willing to turn our existing standards upside down for the sake of this one film. In my opinion, this would be ill advised, although I do realise that the reputation of Anthony Burgess as a novelist is considerable (so is the reputation of James Joyce. Not but what I'd a good deal rather have Ulysses passed uncut than a film based on this script).⁴⁶

On the question of *The Devils*' alleged blasphemy, we may here reference another figure, who like Alexander Walker connects the two films. Fr Gene D. Phillips, a Jesuit Priest and film

scholar, was a mutual friend of both Kubrick and Russell and offered spirited defences of both films. Phillips is a bridge between the two films and their directors. He had been a consultant on *The Devils* and wrote studies of the work of both directors (John Baxter being the only other author to do so). In Mark Kermode's 2002 documentary *Hell on Earth – the Desecration and Resurrection of The Devils*, Phillips famously defended the film, claiming it was not a blasphemous film but a film *about* blasphemy. Phillips was also consultant to the New York Catholic organisation The Legion of Decency and Professor of English and Film History at Loyola University, Chicago. Correspondence in the BBFC archive concerning both films also reveal that Phillips was consulted by both John Trevelyan and Stephen Murphy. In 1972 he wrote to Trevelyan stating that,

I wrote to Stanley that the C label that the Catholic Film Office attached to CLOCKWORK should really be interpreted as C for Caution for the casual and unreflective film goer, not as condemned. I think the care with which the catholic film newsletter reviewed the film is an indication of this...I very much agree with Anthony Burgess that *A Clockwork Orange* is a Christian sermon, and with you in saying that Stanley cares very much about what is happening in our world. Indeed, that care has become more and more prominent in each film he has made, and I shall say precisely this, in treating *A Clockwork Orange* in the chapter in my forthcoming book about the Kubrick films up to and including *A Clockwork Orange*.⁴⁷

Furthermore, both Trevelyan and Murphy consulted Phillips about *The Devils*. In a letter dated 17 January 1971, Trevelyan warned Phillips that,

I have had a preliminary look at *The Devils*. As I anticipated, Ken Russell has given us some difficult problems and I rather think that the Catholic Office will find some of it unacceptable in their terms. It is, of course, brilliant, and it raises the question of whether artistic quality justifies total freedom. Russell does tend towards sensationalism, which is sometimes justified, sometimes not.⁴⁸

Phillips responses to these letters are, unfortunately, unavailable in the archive, nevertheless a letter from Stephen Murphy to Phillips also reveals that Phillips had weighed in in defence of the film by writing to Alexander Walker. Here we could draw a comparison – if Walker styled himself as an intermediary, then this also seems to have been Phillips self-styled role, in defence of both films. In an undated letter from 1971 Murphy writes,

Thank you for letting me see a copy of your letter to Alex Walker [...] I would be very interested indeed if you could drop in some time and give me your views on *The Devils*. As you know it passed through the boards hands before I got here and, when I went to see it the other night, I was full of trepidation that I would have to defend public ally a film which, privately, was a great worry; I was happy to find that this was not so. I share Lord Harlech's view and John Trevelyan's view, that this is really quite a picture which people should be given the opportunity of seeing – after all no one is exactly going to stumble into the theatre in ignorance of what they are in for! [...] ⁴⁹ We, here, seem to be having rather more problems with it than was the case when it opened in NY and I am getting quite vituperative mail about it. On the other hand a great many people are going to see it, though it is difficult at this stage to think that it is not a simple result of all the publicity...⁵⁰

Finally, and bringing this survey to a conclusion, archival material in the SKA posit that *The Devils* was used as a model for *A Clockwork Orange* when it was submitted to the Venice Film Festival. A letter from Umberto Orlandi (Warner Bros, Italy) to Michael Baumohl (Director of International Marketing and Publicity for Warner Bros) in February 1972 suggests that *The Devils* might in fact have been in part responsible for the codifying of *A Clockwork Orange* as an 'art film'. Baumohl notes that,

It is clear that a showing of the film in the Vatican, although appealing to all the arguments which could be used in favour of the film, would never induce the Vatican to support it; there would certainly by pressure brought to bear on the censorship committee to make cuts, and also on the Venice Film Festival not to present the film thus avoiding it being declared a work of art. After which, the eventual sequestration of the film by any Public Prosecutor in Italy, would kill it definitely, as without the qualification of a work of art no lawyer would ever manage to get it out of trouble.⁵¹

Baumohl goes on to state that,

Therefore, I must repeat once again the procedure, which incidentally was that followed for THE DEVILS is the following:-

1. The Film is presented at the Venice Film Festival at the end of August / beginning of September
2. Immediately afterwards, the film is submitted to the censors, whilst the outcry caused by the newspaper articles and reviews is at its height
3. When the film is denounced , as is most certain, by any group of catholic moralists, and any public prosecutor orders it to be sequestered, the lawyers can, as was already done

for *The Devils* use the qualification ‘Art Film’ which will be attributed to it, as well as the various international prizes that it will have received in the meanwhile and the fact of its participation at the Venice Film festival, to have it freed in court as happened with *The Devils*.⁵²

It is clear that Warner Bros., despite their treatment of Russell’s film, viewed it as a useful model, providing a loophole for *A Clockwork Orange*’s submission to the festival. By categorising it as an ‘Art’ film, Warner Bros. was able to use *The Devils* as a precedent in avoiding outright rejection or legal challenges.

What this survey of available archival documentation reveals is the historical interplay between these two landmark moments of transgressive British cinema and by extension, Stanley Kubrick and Ken Russell as contemporaries. Since its release (and despite Kubrick’s withdrawal of it) *A Clockwork Orange* has had a remarkable cultural resonance (and multiple cinematic re-releases since Kubrick’s death as well as across different home formats) while the full cut of *The Devils* remains withheld by Warner Brothers half a century after its release. Yet these two films are closely allied as *the* signifiers of a cultural shift in British cinema post and are allied thematically through their overriding concerns for the power and integrity of the individual. Archival sources demonstrate a matrix of interconnections that reveal themselves through intermediary voices like Alexander Walker or Gene D. Phillips and demonstrate how the films were mutually received by those high up in the office of censors. Furthermore, we may also note that both Kubrick and Warner Bros. were keenly aware of Russell’s film which stood as both competitor and model.

Disclosure Statement

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¹ Matthew Melia, 'Altered States, Altered Spaces: Architecture, Space and Landscape in the Film and Television of Stanley Kubrick and Ken Russell', *Cinergie – Il Cinema E Le Altre Arti* 6, no. 12 (2017): 139–152.

² Notable in Peter Kramer, *A Clockwork Orange 2: (Controversies)* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011) ; and more recently in Darren Arnold, *The Devils* (Bedfordshire: Auteur – Devils Advocates Series, 2020)

³ Matthew Melia, 'Altered States, Altered Spaces: Architecture, Space and Landscape in the Film and Television of Stanley Kubrick and Ken Russell'

⁴ Uncatalogued, the Stanley Kubrick Archive, University of the Arts London (SKA).

⁵ Ken Russell, 'How Ken Russell Inspired Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*', *The Times*, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/how-ken-russell-inspired-stanley-kubricks-barry-lyndon-7qrh09ghbwj>. Accessed 25 November 2021.

⁶ Email from Jonathan Meades to the author, 14 December 2020.

⁷ Matthew Melia, 'Scripting *A Clockwork Orange*' in *Anthony Burgess, Stanley Kubrick and A Clockwork Orange*, eds. Matthew Melia and Georgina Orgill (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2022).

⁸ Charles Barr, 'Straw Dogs, *A Clockwork Orange* and the Critics', *Screen* 13, no. 2 (1972): 17–32.

⁹ Alexander Walker, 'Review of *The Devils*', *Evening Standard*, 22 July 1971, Press archive, British Film Institute.

¹⁰ Matthew Melia, 'Kubrick and Britain' in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Stanley Kubrick*, ed. Nathan Abrams and I. Q. Hunter (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021): 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹² James Fenwick, *Stanley Kubrick Produces* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 174-176.

¹³ Letter from EMI Marketing Head Bob Webber to Warner Bros., 1977, uncatalogued, 'British Film Industry' file, SKA.

¹⁴ Letter from Stanley Kubrick to Warner Bros, 1977, 'British Film Industry' file, uncatalogued, SKA.

¹⁵ Fenwick, *Stanley Kubrick Produces*, 174-176.

¹⁶ Letter from Stanley Kubrick to Shadow Chancellor Geoffrey Howe, 23 May 1977, uncatalogued, SKA.

¹⁷ Alexander Walker, 'Who gains if the Moguls go?' *Evening Standard*, 13 March 1975, Press Archive, British Film Institute (BFI).

¹⁸ 'I was There!' *Empire Magazine*, no.54, December 1993, p.68

¹⁹ Alexander Walker, 'A Bit of the Old Ultra-brilliance', 13 January 1972, *Evening Standard*, Press Archive, BFI.

²⁰ The history of the censorship of *The Devils* has been well documented so there is no need to go over it in detail here.

²¹ Letter from Stephen Murphy to unspecified recipient – but possibly Ken Russell or Fr Gene D.. Phillips, British Board of Film Classification Archive (BBFC).

²² Alexander Walker, *National Heroes: British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties* (London: Harrap, 1985), 40-41.

²³ Walker, 'A Bit of the Old Ultra-brilliance'.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 44

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 41

²⁸ Walker, *National Heroes*, 41.

²⁹ Walker, *National Heroes*, 45

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- ³⁰ Letters to Derek Jarman from Dom Pierre Sylvester Houedard giving detailed background information on the Ursuline Nuns and Loudun, including sketches of religious garments and biblical inscriptions, ITM-18966, Derek Jarman files, BFI Archive.
- ³¹ Walker, *National Heroes*, 45.
- ³² Gene D. Phillips, 'The Movie Lover: An Interview With Ken Russell', *Film Comment* 6, no. 3 (1970), 17.
- ³³ 'Farewell to the wild man of cinema', *The Independent*, 29 November, 2011.
- ³⁴ Virginie Selavy, 'Ken Russell and The Press: Why Such Fury', <http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/2012/03/07/ken-russell-and-the-press-why-such-fury/>. Accessed 24 November 2021.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Fenwick, *Stanley Kubrick Produces*.
- ³⁷ Letter from Ken Russell to Derek Jarman, Ref: N-36793, Derek Jarman files, BFI Archive.
- ³⁸ Email to the author, 1 March 2021.
- ³⁹ Kate Egan, "'The Film That's Banned in Harrogate': Monty Python's Life of Brian (1979), Local Censorship, Comedy and Local Resistance', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 41, no. 1 (2020): 152–171.
- ⁴⁰ Sian Barber, 'Exploiting Local controversy: Regional British Censorship of *Last Tango In Paris* (1972)', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 36, no 4 (2016): 587-603; Egan, 'The Film That's Banned in Harrogate'.
- ⁴¹ Figures for the film and 'The Devils' [released Jul 1971 in UK] probably for comparative reasons, SK/13/5/12, SKA.
- ⁴² Photograph of 'The Devils' hoarding in its West End [London] opening with hand drawn additions to show 'Clockwork Orange' hoarding layout, SKA.
- ⁴³ Letter from Stephen Murphy to Town Clerk, Leeds. No Ref. BBFC Archive.
- ⁴⁴ Letter from Stephen Murphy to the Clerk of Cambridge. No Ref. BBFC Archive.
- ⁴⁵ Letter from Ken Russell to John Trevelyan, BBFC Archive.
- ⁴⁶ Comments on the script for *A Clockwork Orange*, John Trevelyan. No Ref. BBFC Archive.
- ⁴⁷ Letter from Gene D. Phillips to John Trevelyan., 1972. No Ref. BBFC Archive.
- ⁴⁸ Letter from John Trevelyan to Gene D. Phillips. No Ref. BBFC Archive.
- ⁴⁹ Then president of the BBFC.
- ⁵⁰ Letter from Stephen Murphy to John Trevelyan., 1971. No Ref. BBFC Archive.
- ⁵¹ Letter to Michael Baumohl from Umberto Orlandi (Warner Bros, Italy, 29 February 1972, SK/13/8/5/7, SKA.
- ⁵² *Ibid*

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