

From biblio to sinny:
how faithful an
adaptation is
kubrick's a clockwork
orange?...



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John Huston's 1941 version of the classic private detective tale *The Maltese Falcon* remains one of the most faithful film adaptations of any novel ever turned into a movie in Hollywood history. Entire chunks of dialogue by not just leader character Sam Spade but every other major character are lifted straight out of Dashiell Hammett's novel placed verbatim into the mouths of actors recreating scenes just as they are found within the pages of the novel. Dialogue is just one element of a work literary fiction that can determine the faithfulness of a film adaptation, however. In the case of *A Clockwork Orange*, creating a faithful film adaptation in the manner of *The Maltese Falcon* was made practically impossible by the author, Anthony Burgess. His invented language that mashes up slang, Russian and some elements of Gypsy for his character—a language he termed Nadsat—densely populates the book's descriptive elements as well as its dialogue to the point that a glossary must be consulted every few scenes.

Trying to transfer such incomprehensibility intact to the screen would prove not only impossible, but pointless since the primary point of Nadsat is to allow the reader to disengage from the endlessly bleak and violent narrative. Why make it practically impossible for viewers without a handy glossary nearby to understand the dialogue when the novel could remain faithful to the myriad other literary elements equally as important while manipulating the visual power of the cinema to remain faithful to distancing aspect of Nadsat? Stanley Kubrick's use of multiple cinematic techniques that equate with the literary devices employed by Burgess even if they do not actually replicate them serves to make *A Clockwork Orange* one of the most faithful

film adaptations of a novel by choosing to focus on remaining faithful to elements other than dialogue.

Apart from its decision to equate faithfulness with attempting the kind of scene by scene transformation that marks *The Maltese Falcon*, the film diverges from its source material in other significant ways. For instance, the casting of Malcolm McDowell to play the novel's protagonist Alex could be viewed as irrefutably unfaithful. The only way to have remained faithful in the casting of the character who inhabits practically every second of screen time would have been to find an amazing teen actor and then convince a film studio in 1970 to allow that young man to act out scenes for a movie he would be prohibited from actually attending due to age restrictions. A perfectly faithful film of the novel almost certainly could not be made today; to have attempted it at the time would have been unthinkable if not actually a criminal offense.

Casting has the power to make or break a film and it is likely true that if Kubrick had tried to transfer Alex as described by Burgess in the novel intact, the film would have been a massive failure. Alex is not just the most extreme version of the character type known as the juvenile delinquent that had ever been portrayed on screen, the story is told from his point of view. Alex would have been the villain in any other major feature film of the time and so the audience is asked throughout the film to look at the world he inhabits from his point of view. That point of view for at least half the film essentially asks the audience to view the world from the perspective of a psychopath. And then for the second half of the film to alter their perspective so that their point of view is now that of a psychopath who should be pitied. Only tweaking <https://assignbuster.com/from-biblio-to-sinny-how-faithful-an-adaptation-is-kubricks-a-clockwork-orange/>

the character's age somewhat so that an actor of McDowell's ability to project menace, childishness and pathos in equal parts and equally realistic could audiences respond to this genuinely indulgent request.

What helps *A Clockwork Orange* succeed in asking audiences to see the world through such a reprehensible lead character is the way Kubrick engages cinematic techniques to transfer from page to screen the literary techniques that allowed readers to do the same thing, only to an even more extreme degree. Nadsat does creep into the screenplay to a far less significant degree than in the book, but more as recurring motif to distance viewers by situating the narrative as taking place at some point in the future. The novel's use of the often impenetrable slang used by its characters is for the purposes of constant distraction capable of alienating the reader from Alex just enough that they don't fall victim to identifying too closely with him and thus fail to grasp the author's ultimate message. Stanley Kubrick manages to achieve the same effect while avoiding alienating the viewer by either presenting dialogue they must work hard to understand or treating Nadsat as a foreign language by translating meaning through subtitles.

The necessary distancing of the audience from Alex so that they can simultaneously be forced into his point of view to understand him while forcibly alienated in order to gain objective critical engagement is accomplished through non-diegetic sound during some of the film's most violent sequences, the use of low-angle close-ups of Alex to endow him with malevolence and film editing that reverses the natural movement of the camera toward the protagonist as a means of forcing identification by repetitive use of reverse zooms in which the movement of the camera away

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from Alex has the effect of detaching audience identification. Through these and various other cinematic effects, Kubrick manages to retain the distancing purpose of Nadsat while avoiding the irritating aspects of constantly consulting the glossary while reading the book, allowing the film to not only remain faithful to the spirit of the novel, but actually be a more enjoyable aesthetic experience.

The film also manages to remain faithful to the novel's vision of a nightmarish, but also strangely alluring near-future while simultaneously succeeding in replicating the distancing effect on the reader of such an innovative yet disorienting environment. The world in which 15 year old Alex and his droogs move in the novel is clearly established not as some utterly fantastical imagined world as divorced from concepts of realism as a science fiction novel taking place hundreds of years in the future, but as logically possible outcome of then-current society no more than a few decades into the future. At the same time, the reader experiences a sense of dislocation from his own time while reading the book due to the more bizarre outcomes of that very future the book predicts.

The film utilizes all the visual power of the cinema to bring that vision of a future that is entirely possible while at the same time alienated enough from the contemporary setting fully to life. The décor is garishly colored and populated by instantly identifiable objects that nevertheless enhance that sense of disorientation as a result of being too large or too smooth or too rounded or just too out of place. If the décor of ridiculously large penis sculptures disorients by being recognizable enough, but just not quite right, then the costuming choices may be said to take the film to the limits of its <https://assignbuster.com/from-biblio-to-sinny-how-faithful-an-adaptation-is-kubricks-a-clockwork-orange/>

own stylized absurdity. Every individual aspect of attire worn by Alex and his droogs is recognizable as existing in the time and place of our world; nothing they wear is inherently out of place. Nevertheless, the combination of white shirt and pants, suspenders, back boots, bowler hat and codpiece together all serve to create one of the most singularly disorienting costumes in the history of film while at the very same time being alluring and idiosyncratic enough to facilitate the audience's willingness to accept being forced to take on this character's point of view.

While the film version of *A Clockwork Orange* is not considered a faithful adaptation by certain conventional measures—Alex is older in the film, he is conditioned to respond negatively to any kind of music in the novel but only Beethoven in the film, a prison murder pinned on Alex is entirely absent from the movie—by others it must be considered one of the most faithful of all time. The director, Stanley Kubrick, manages to maintain a faithful rendering of the most literary element of the book—its invented Nadsat language—by using a host of cinematic devices to replicate its purpose as a distancing device. While one of the necessary alterations from the source was making the main character significantly older in terms of maturity if not chronologically, the film nevertheless remains faithful to his basic personality component as a psychopath and even retains the ability of the reader to identify with him through the casting of an actor capable of fulfilling Alex's role as something of a childishly immature psychopath. The disorientation of the novel's vision of a believable yet undeniably repugnant dystopian near-future is fully realized through a production and set design reliant on making

familiar objects seems unfamiliar through their bizarre perspective or antirealistic context.