

A Narrative and Genre Approach to “2001 : A Space Odyssey”

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How could we possibly appreciate the Mona Lisa if Leonardo had written at the bottom of the canvas : “The lady is smiling because she is hiding a secret from her lover.” This would shackle the viewer to reality, and I don’t want this to happen to *2001*.

--Stanley Kubrick¹

I. Narrative Structure in “2001 : A Space Odyssey”

Like Homer’s “Odyssey,” “2001 : A Space Odyssey” refers to a journey, this time concerning all of humankind. The film’s narrative structure is episodic, treating three distinct phases : the dawn of man, the advanced technological exploration of the solar system in the year 2001, and an individual futuristic trip through Jupiter’s cosmic space.

At first, the journey across time appears to be a linear progression toward the discovery of cosmic intelligence. Through a close analysis of the narrative episodes, however, we perceive a latent circularity to the so-called evolution of mankind, with change occurring only in the addition of new technologies. From bone weaponry, Kubrick dissolves to a floating spaceship, from an ape moon-watcher to a space-watcher. There seems to be an analogy of predetermination within a given topography and chronography. Despite an effort to resolve the “mystery of existence,” the human condition has not attained a superior state of consciousness. Ape-men and astronauts alike remain unaware of

their conditions and limitations.

It is relevant that Kubrick portrays his astro-men as robot-like, expressionless, imprisoned travelers, unconcerned with experiencing their journey. Their total indifference to the content of the mission, the mechanical functioning of the crew, and the lack of individual pleasure with the space trip are even more caricatured by investing HAL, the mission control computer, with feelings, psychological reactions, intellectual inquisitiveness, unique knowledge of the goal of the mission, and total control over it.

The secret plan of the spaceship Discovery is to resolve the enigma of the black monolith, diffusing rays toward Jupiter. Within the narrative structure of the film, the monolith is a prehistoric construct, appearing on earth for the first time during the dawn of "ape-man." Its capacity to appear, disappear and reappear through the ages of time accentuates the repetitive cycle. As an instrument through which signs beyond the frontier of our solar system are communicated, its very nature suggests the possibility of alien life forms and prehistoric human intelligence. The Discovery is in quest of that knowledge.

As the Discovery mission evolves, however, the pre-programmed journey in HAL's memory goes out of control, and the film dissolves into an individual experience of a dream-like trip without resolution except in rebirth. The two phases of the space adventure combine a high-level technological culture with a suggestive drug sub-culture. Video screens, lights and buttons, video-phones, computers, moon buses, weightless chemical food, zero gravity toilets, centrifuge sets, free-floating bodies captured by the arms of a spherical pod, HAL's murdering of three hibernating astronauts, the disconnection of the higher functions of HAL's electronic brain--the cumulative effect demonstrates the complexity of a fictional, technological world conditioning human activities.

Despite the "technological miracles" in the film, man cannot defeat the enigma of the superior intelligence embodied by the monolith. Human progress in comprehending the origins of creative intelligence and the future of society and the universe is illusory. Kubrick disillusiones the audience from all kinds of optimistic or apocalyptic messages, and develops a nihilistic, ironic approach to the futility of the Discovery's mission. Instead of making a "discovery," he creates an epistemological caricature of the process of discovery itself.

The narrative structure of the space odyssey voyage is circular. After disconnecting the higher technical functions of HAL, Bowman, mission commander of the Discovery, pursues an individual, inner odyssey. As he enters the star-gate beyond the infinite universe, the audience witnesses an intense visual experience of bright colors, galaxies in exploding motion, and abstract artwork hurling through space. Having conquered the solar system, Bowman reproduces the world he left behind hundreds of years and millions of miles ago. He is now living in a paradoxical environment, surrounded by Louis XVI decor. He eats, drinks, and dies as any other being of his kind, except that all the stages of his life pass by with remarkable speed, within a single sequence. The intensity of his visual trip, the paradoxical decorative style, and his accelerated aging process are analogous to elements of the drug sub-culture. Bowman alone sees the monolith, which appears before him as he lays dying in bed. Drawing his last breath, he points to the monolith as the scene fades to the birth of a star-child. This metaphysical reverie, far from resolving the mystery of the monolith provides a new enigma.

The latent irony of the film is that man, even when transcending the bounds of history, is always depicted as a part of the exterior decor, conditioned by his needs and finally limited by his death. Life in its best individual expression, as exemplified by Bowman, is a journey that provides some visual experiences and

data, enriches one's feelings and increases one's knowledge, but is ultimately without any deeper significance.

While developing the plot of the Discovery space mission, Kubrick at the same time negates its finality by focusing on a futuristic science fiction odyssey, which he turns back into the past. Is it in this way that the film becomes a modern allusion to the original *Odyssey*? The three narrative elements of the epic structure, the linear appearance of progress, and the circular determination of the plot, provide a model implicated in both literary and filmic discourses on the *Odyssey*.

II. A Genre Approach to the Film

In the second part of this essay, I intend to develop a genre approach to the film. From this vantage point, we could easily define the film as a paradigm of science fiction and close the discussion before we begin. However, the domain of science fiction is at least as broad as the different thematic elements and landscapes found in the film.

First of all, why is "2001: A Space Odyssey" considered a science-fiction film? For two basic reasons: its attempt to reconstruct the "dawn of man" artificially, and its *mise-en-scene* of the futuristic mission of unexplored space.

The reconstruction of the prehistoric landscape is accomplished by special effects. Specifically, Kubrick projects photographs previously taken in Africa through a half-silvered mirror onto a projecting screen in front of which the ape-men perform. The art direction of the set is highly directorial and creates the impression of a real "primitive" environment². The ape-men's movements are animal-like, with their upper bodies, including appendages (arms and heads), bent forward toward the ground. Their gestures are attached to "mother earth," and their actions express their dependency on nutritional needs. Their freedom of displacement is defined by their hunt for food and restricted by

the laws of gravity. The shape of their bodies is determined by the most elementary natural needs. The formation of the ape tribe by indistinct members signifies a weakness to survive, and is contrasted to a single, powerful black panther which appears on screen, devouring a zebra.

The camera then focuses on the moon-watcher, who is set apart from the other apes by his visual abilities. Seeing a bone, he is the first to recognize its function as a potential weapon. This intelligent observation gives him power both over nature and the other apes. The scene's ultimate meaning is that a change in perception can alter one's state of being.

The iconographic, metaphorical transformation of the bone into the spacecraft signals the historical passage of time from the "dawn of man" to the year 2001. This evolution can be interpreted as an "epistemology of knowledge."³

The scientific part of the fiction in the film is expressed by (1) the inquiry into possible alien life forms and the motivating enigma of the plot on the origins of human intelligence, and (2) the fact that Kubrick tested dozens of military ground-control landing officers, and used information from the Department of the Air Force, Bell Telephone Laboratories, Computer Control Co., IBM, Food Technology Research Center, National Astronautics and Space Administration Headquarters, National Institute of Medical Research, and Royal Greenwich Observatory...⁴ Thus all technological prototypes, movements, and spacial conditions in "2001 : A Space Odyssey" are based on scientific speculations within the realm of possibility.

Nevertheless, blind trust in HAL's infallibility, belief in technology, man's "objectification" as a raw material in a technocratic orbit, social uniformity and lack of individuality, as well as the absence of dialogue and communication are elements that challenge the "science" of this fiction, and create a sociological, pessimistic vision. The paradox of using the strategy of future

space travel in this film is that, while the mission explores the unknown universe in order to demystify “cosmic intelligence,” human activity is reduced to a hypnotic slowness, exemplified in the extreme by three hibernating astronauts.

The film further depicts advanced technology as a new conditioner that dictates man’s development and limits his freedom. In one scene, for example, we find two astronauts who mistrust HAL retiring to the soundproof pod to discuss “his” conduct and to decide whether or not to disconnect “his” higher functions. HAL’s red, lighted eye reads their lips through the window of the pod and once the astronauts are outside the ship, attacks them. Science fiction here reflects the theoretical, sociological model called “Panopticon”⁵ advanced by Michel Foucault, and the “Big Brother” model found in George Orwell’s *1984*. Like Foucault and Orwell, Kubrick suggests that man’s life is inevitably and increasingly under supervision and control as technology becomes more omnipresent and sophisticated.

A. Sociological Fiction within the Science Fiction Genre of “2001 : A Space Odyssey”

Kubrick’s cinematographic vision of futuristic society can be decoded by the following coefficients :

- (1) rising bureaucratic technology substituting for political power/expanding technostructures neutralizing political conflict ;
- (2) military order and suppression of social conflict, with its implicit suggestion of a totalitarian society/rising cool professionalism, extreme specialization of labor and mechanical execution of orders ;
- (3) perfection of the computer era and threat of an electronic intelligence revolution, which will overthrow human control ; and
- (4) an individual renaissance.

These are reflected in the following sequence of events in the film :

(1) During a neutral discussion between American scientists and Soviet experts in Orion, an international space station, political conflict shifts to a technological competition in the area of total intelligence research.

(2) Uniforms suggest military order. At a conference for professionals on a mission on the Clavious base, Dr. Floyd, the head mission control on earth, declares the purpose of the mission top secret. The state of apathy and the silence of the troupe following his speech can be compared to the conduct of a military council on secret strategy.

(3) HAL 9000 is the major protagonist of the Discovery sequence. HAL is the embodiment of electronic perfection ; supposedly lacking the possibility of human error, "he" is a kind of super-rational being to oversee the entire mission. No longer an instrument or piece of equipment, as the bone was for the ape-man, "he" becomes an autonomous agent of total power. The tragic irony is that HAL is the only object on the spacecraft to be treated as a subject. HAL has perfect knowledge of the new data (spacial events, psychological state of the astronauts, etc.). HAL also has an individual psychology, feelings, and intuitions. "He" states "I enjoy working with people" ; "he" foresees the astronauts' intention to disconnect "him" ; and "he" sings a sentimental song just before "he" dies. HAL is the only factor to provoke the astronauts to think, or to break their long silences with dialogues, which seem rather more like monologues.

Another element of tragic irony is the exchange of roles between man and computer. The astronauts are caricatured in a state of total indifference, lacking feelings, doubts about their mission or their reactions, and without conflicts of consciousness. In short, they lack the proper mental conditions that account for human error. By contrast, HAL's feelings, epistemological anxieties, and desire for independence from mission control on earth are human qualities that result in error-making. HAL is por-

trayed as having human characteristics, which lead to conflict, revolt, the killing of four astronauts, and self-destruction.

(4) Individual renaissance is suggested by the reactivated Bowman at the crucial moment in the fight for survival. The episodes, starting with his entrance into the star-gate and ending with the disconnection of HAL and the break with mission control on earth, imply an individual revolt against a humorless, inhuman technostructure. At this point, science fiction evolves into a vision of utopianism and euphoria, without any spacial or temporal reference.

B. Dream Fiction in "2001 : A Space Odyssey"

"Superman" exiting the technological frame, enters into the imaginary world: "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite." Bowman enters the dream era at the speed of light.

Those who won't believe their eyes won't be able to appreciate this film.

--Stanley Kubrick⁶

The final episode can be described as a dream fiction, and it is choreographed like a chromatic ballet. Bowman, like the moon-watcher in the opening sequence, is the first to see something new. Through his eyes we see fantastic, colorful, abstract compositions in speeded-up motion, created by a slit-scan process⁷. In some shots, Bowman's eyes become a mirror reflecting his vision, where the dream fiction addresses the single sense of visual pleasure. As in the "Odyssey," this surrealistic sequence suggests the final destination is one of discovery, where the journey itself is nothing more than a visual experience. In this end, the stated mission of the Discovery is not accomplished, and the audience is left to wonder whether or not it is not Bowman himself who is reborn as the star-child.

C. Mythology in "2001 : A Space Odyssey"

If "2001" has stirred your emotions, your subconscious, your mythological yearnings, then it has succeeded.

--Stanley Kubrick⁸

The film ends with metaphysical shots that negate reason. In the final sequence of the film, Bowman is seen aging very rapidly. While he lies dying in bed, the monolith reappears before him. The very last shot is of Bowman's finger pointing at the monolith and the appearance of the star-child on the screen. This image evokes the "mythos" of the symbolic phallic power of the vertical monolith that generates the conception of the star-child. The birth of the fetus and its resemblance to Bowman are intentional.

There are many metaphors for this "genesis," found in both mythology and religion: the mythic god Zeus produced Athena from his brain; the Christian god created Jesus even before the human manifestation of his birth. Kubrick ends the "Space Odyssey" with an ironic approach to the science fiction journey across time:

What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock, a thing of shame.
And just the same shall man be to the Superman: a laughing-
stock, a thing of shame.

"Thus Spake Zarathustra"⁹

D. Conclusion

In conclusion, "2001 : A Space Odyssey" is a science-fiction film that refutes both apocalyptic and utopian conventions. The genesis of the star-child at the end completes the mythos of the monolith travelling through time. The narrative cycle is completed by the spiritual meaning of the visual journey. The film's symbolism allows for many interpretative speculations. One is that Kubrick develops what seems to be a pessimistic, ironic

cinematography as far as the evolution of humankind concerned. By denying that progress can be measured in terms of technological advances, and demonstrating that discovery cannot defeat the stage of observation, Kubrick satirizes human pretensions at attaining a level of emotionless intelligence, perfection, and supreme power.

Yet what are we to make of the beauty and delirium of the film's ending? Where did the monolith come from? Where will the star-child go?

NOTES

1. James Agel (ed.), *The Making of Kubrick's 2001* (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 93. This and all subsequent quotes from this source are located in various inserts and addenda supplied by the editor (Agel).
2. James Monaco, *How to Read a Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 112.
3. Annette Michelson, "Bodies in Space: Film as Carnal Knowledge," *Artforum* (February, 1969): 59.
4. *The Making of Kubrick's 2001*, pp. 321-324.
5. "Pan" means everything; "opticon" means visual. In sociological fiction, "panopticon" refers to a cyclic set. Man finds himself in the center of the circle, observed from all points around the perimeter.
6. *The Making of Kubrick's 2001*, p. 7.
7. The slit scan process optically and mechanically produces visual motion on film. Each frame contains a complex streak exposure which, when projected frame by frame, move and change, just like animation.
8. *The Making of Kubrick's 2001*, back cover.
9. As Quoted in *The Making of Kubrick's 2001*, p. 159.