STANLEY KUBRICK'S

2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

NEW ESSAYS EDITED BY ROBERT KOLKER

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NEW ESSAYS

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Introduction

ROBERT KOLKER

I first saw *2001* in 1968, on a gigantic Cinerama screen in a London theater. I was overwhelmed by the images and only somewhat impressed by what the images were trying to tell me. I left frankly questioning what all the fuss was about. On subsequent viewings, in slightly more intimate surroundings, on smaller screens back home in New York, the film began to grow and grow on each successive screening. Each viewing opened up more questions and more answers—and even more admiration. *2001* became one of the touchstones for my love of film and a major factor in my desire to make the study of film part of my intellectual life. I realized, as I would with all subsequent Kubrick films, that it is a kind of double, triple, quadruple play, revealing more meanings on each viewing—and more mysteries.

On its initial release, *2001* was advertised as "The Ultimate Trip," a smart appeal to the counterculture of the 1960s. It was played for its spectacle and the psychedelic quality of the images that make up the "Stargate" sequence near its conclusion. But it was, of course, another film entirely, a deeply serious, richly textured, enigmatic, meditative spectacle of a film, so complex and so unyielding in its answers that its cowriter, science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke, wrote "novelizations" to try and explain it. Kubrick himself, with the

exception of a few tightly controlled interviews, remained silent. Control was the way Kubrick survived as a completely independent filmmaker. He continued to edit *2001* in the projection booth before its New York premiere. He was concerned that it was too long. At one point during its first New York run, a sheet of paper was handed out (I cannot recall if it was signed by Kubrick) to the people on line that explained that Bowman's reentry into the vacuum of the ship's airlock was scientifically accurate. Kubrick was very keen on *2001*'s scientific accuracy. But by and large, the important matters of the film—the validity of extraterrestrial life, the willingness of humans to devoid themselves of feeling, the relationship of men to machines—he left to the film itself and to an audience that he trusted would stay with it, understand it, even if it provided no final answers to the questions it posed.

I was not the only one who responded to the film with growing enthusiasm and with the experience of seeing something new every time I watched it. *2001* was enormously popular at the time of its release and is now generally regarded as one of the most important films ever made. Significantly, it continues to reveal meaning. Objects and ideas, movements, gestures, and words, invisible once, suddenly become obvious, even though "obvious" in a film like this does not make them any more comprehensible. Even though its prophetic year has passed, it still speaks to us about our past and future, our relationship to the unknowns of the universe, and cautions us about the ways in which we deal with the technologies we invent.

2001: A Space Odyssey is a film that shows and hides, gives and takes away, promises to reveal great secrets of the universe and then reneges. This is a film of spectacular images developed slowly, contemplatively, even elegiacally. It has little dialogue; it shows more than it tells, and what it shows is not always what we think we see. Kubrick is not being perverse; he was very consciously making a difficult film, which itself is something of a contradiction in terms, since we do not usually equate difficulty with watching a movie. We expect to be given a clear plot and obvious emotion, not confronted with complex ideas and insoluble problems.

In order to understand some of this, it will be helpful to put the film in context, two contexts in fact. One is the cinematic and cultural history that surrounds it; the other is the body of Kubrick's work—and with the filmmaker's death in 1999 after the completion of *Eyes Wide Shut*, that body of work is complete. Stanley Kubrick is a director to whom the term *auteur* can be applied with little hesitation. He created and managed every aspect of his films, from inception through advertising and distribution. He often depended on writers to initiate the words of a project, but he created a final shooting script that was to his liking. The shooting itself (during which he would sometimes operate the camera or direct from a distance a second unit, who might be in another country making background shots), the visual design of the film, the actors' performances, every detail was under his control. The result is an amazing uniformity of production. Despite the differences in each of his films, they carry forward visual designs and narrative and

thematic movements that make all of them cohere as Kubrick films. We need to understand *2001* in this light.

Let's examine briefly a general history of the films that, in important ways, made the creation and reception of Kubrick's film possible. *2001* appeared in a decade of intense cinematic experimentation, mostly from abroad. There was, earlier, Italian neorealism. Their country in ruins after World War II, Italian filmmakers turned to filming in the streets with nonprofessional actors, capturing a desolate world and a desperate people in ways that film had never done before. Neorealism influenced, in turn, the French New Wave, a group of film lovers and critics who discovered in American film a vitality and a sense of authorship that they took to heart when it came time to make their own films. These films, like those of the neorealists, were shot on location, and at the same time they grabbed hold of American film genres and turned them inside out. At one time or another during the late 1950s and 1960s, many New Wave directors, especially Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, made gangster films—or at least their version of gangster films, like Godard's *Breathless* (1959). Kubrick, who started his career in the United States before moving to England in the early 1960s, had already made two gangster films, *Killer's Kiss* (1955) and *The Killing* (1956). This was a popular genre in the United States, which is one of the reasons the French New Wave took it on. Kubrick's versions of the gangster film, especially *The Killing*, looked forward to the kinds of existential gangster movies that the New Wave would create. Later, in America, under the direct influence of the New Wave, other experimental filmmakers emerged in Hollywood. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)—a gangster film—set a new style for films of violence; in 1972, Martin Scorsese made *Mean Streets*, another gangster film, one that turned filmmaking upside down for almost two decades. It became a model for almost every young filmmaker to follow in his or her first movie. With *M.A.S.H.* (1970), a war film, Robert Altman began an unprecedented string of films that went counter to Hollywood tradition in narrative structure. Many others followed.

2001 was part of this explosion of film, part of a culture in which filmmaker and audience alike took part in experimentation, in a reexamination and rediscovery of cinematic language. But Kubrick was ahead of the game before this. *The Killing*, with its exterior shooting and maddeningly complex time scheme, was a big influence on future directors of gangster movies; we can still see traces of it in the films of Quentin Tarantino. With *The Killing*—and the two films that preceded it, *Fear and Desire* (1953) and *Killer's Kiss* (1955)—he began what was to become a lifelong experiment in narrative and visual construction. He created what was to become, in effect, one long film about the ways that people attempt to impose themselves on their worlds, erecting enormous barriers, schemes, structures, and technologies to which they yield their power, lose their agency in the world, and via which are eventually destroyed.

Kubrick from the start experimented with the limits of film, intent upon using it to examine complex ideas with an unyielding intensity, always focus-

ing on the ways in which people diminish their capacities in the world and, in *2001*, the universe. From his first film, *Fear and Desire*, through *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), men in Kubrick's films act against their own best interests, or are driven by political forces they can't control (driven so far in *Dr. Strangelove* [1964] that they destroy the planet), or put themselves in situations where they are guaranteed to be undone by their own demons (think of Jack in *The Shining* [1980]). Kubrick saw all of this with a clarity of vision that was at the same time richly textured and deeply ironic. *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), for example, was condemned when it appeared for exalting violent behavior, and indeed the film does at first seem to condone Alex because he alone seems to have free will and vitality in an exhausted world. But look again. We are had by this film. Alex is indeed the only energetic presence and voice in his world. We are given no alternatives, and neither is he. He can be a thug and rapist, choreographing his energies on the stage of a world in ruin, or his violent ways can be taken away by the state, given back when it is in the state's interest to use it. Brainwashed, restored, violent, barely controlled, "I was cured alright," cries Alex at the end of the film, chillingly echoing Dr. Strangelove's cry, "Mein Führer, I can walk," when he rises from his wheelchair and the world explodes. Kubrick's films tend to end with overt or inverted violence, with a character and his universe either exploding or collapsing in.

Kubrick's characters almost always think they are in charge, masters of the bright, fluorescent worlds they inhabit. But they are never in control and not really characters at all, in the traditional movie sense. Kubrick's characters are *ideas* given human form, acting out their own processes of destruction. They are, in effect, part of the spaces that define them. In a Kubrick film, the mise-en-scène, the totality of the cinematic space created on the screen, is part of a usually destructive pattern the characters follow. Character and pattern, place and the figure inhabiting it are reflections of one another. Jack may "always" have been the caretaker of the Overlook Hotel, but the hotel and its "ghosts" also open the spaces of Jack's own growing madness. The painterly compositions of *Barry Lyndon* (1975) trap the characters in an illusion of civility and order that finally crushes them. Kubrick's images confine his characters and point to their breakdown. Within the spaces of these images, his characters always act out the same pattern—against their own best interests. They are rarely what they say, but always how they are seen. In *2001*, there is a startling image—one of many. Heywood Floyd calls his daughter from the space station. The Earth rotates behind him. Floyd pays absolutely no attention to it. He is the man of the future, with no emotions, oblivious to a universe he takes for granted and which, therefore, not taking him for granted, will swallow him up (figure 17).

Once we understand the coherent patterns in Kubrick's work, the complex articulations of human activity, which ironically undoes itself as it struggles without insight to become more than it is, the job of understanding *2001: A Space Odyssey* becomes a bit easier. You will certainly not find unanimity among the various interpretations offered in this book, but even the divergent

views of the contributors become clearer when set in the context of the work of an artist whose ironic perceptions of the limits of human agency changed only in the ways they are represented from film to film.

We can also understand *2001* a little better when we put it in the context of its genre, the science fiction film, a mainstay of 1950s Hollywood production, and, like the war film, a favorite of Kubrick's. Science fiction films of the 1950s were made mainly on the cheap and were most often used as covert, allegorical political statements that gave voice to the big fear foisted on the culture: that aliens—of the communist variety—would infiltrate and subvert "our way of life." In science fiction films, like the none too subtly named *Red Planet Mars* (Harry Horner, 1952), *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (Gene Fowler, Jr., 1958), or the notorious *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegal, 1956), "communists" were transformed into personality-robbing monsters from outer space. There were, to be sure, a few bigger budget, somewhat more speculative films, such as *Destination Moon* (Irving Pichel and George Pal, 1950) and *Forbidden Planet* (Fred Wilcox, 1956), that explored more interesting ideas. *Destination Moon* and George Pal and Byron Haskin's *Conquest of Space* (1955) nourished Kubrick's imagination of space as much as the mind-robbing monsters of alien invasion films (figures 1 and 2).

With *Dr. Strangelove; or, How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb*, Kubrick made another kind of Cold War science fiction film. Here, the monsters are government and military officials, all of them half or fully mad, hell-bent on destroying the "enemy," which, of course, is themselves. *Strangelove* is a hilarious and hair-raising satire about the United States and the USSR gone mad with fear and vengeance, which results, inevitably, in their both blowing up the world. As Kubrick was making his science fiction film about space travel, the genre had already gone into a recessive mode. Few science fiction films were made after the 1950s (although one of the French New Wave directors, Jean-Luc Godard, made a parody of the genre, *Alphaville*, in 1965), and after *2001*, which appeared in 1968, it took almost another ten years for Kubrick's film to get absorbed and revive the genre, which happened with George Lucas's *Star Wars* in 1977. The genre hasn't flagged since, and almost every science fiction film now made bears a debt to *2001*. Kubrick made a number of decisions that changed the genre for good. He strove for scientific accuracy, calling in NASA and computer scientists to advise him. The texture of his film—the sets, the models, the very movements of the people—were more detailed and more imaginatively constructed than the flying saucers and mutant aliens in aluminum foil or rubber costumes that figured in most 1950s science fiction. In place of the anticommunist hogwash of the previous decade, and even though the film does contain some mockery of Cold War attitudes, he introduced a large measure of complexity, inquisitiveness, and ambiguity, which places his film closer to the best fiction literature than it is to science fiction cinema.[1]

That's why *2001* can be called a speculative, even a meditative film, a film that demands attention and a willingness to wonder. It asks us to do a number

of things at once: to join its meditative pace, to be amazed at its spectacular images, and to go along with that rarest of all things, a film that poses a multitude of problems with no easy answers. In short, to use a word that has occurred often in analyses of *2001*, it is a complex film. As Annette Michelson says in her groundbreaking essay, written when the film first appeared, it elevates "doubt to an [a]esthetic principle" and demands "a kind of critical, apperceptive athleticism" in the act of interpretation.[2] Doubt and aesthetics—the last involving a concentrated gaze at an imaginative object of some intellectual and emotional complexity—are a bit out of style at this moment, when easy answers are demanded no matter how difficult and complex the questions may be and when art itself, along with all of the demands it puts on our time, attention, and critical faculties, is somewhat out of fashion itself, especially in film.

The great paradox of Kubrick's films is that they are intellectually rigorous and demanding; they are indisputably works of a creative, artistic imagination and they are also spectacular to watch, entertaining, as well as profoundly ironic, and always playing jokes on us. Despite the fact that many critics use the word "cold" when talking of his films, they are in fact on fire with ideas, prophecies of the way we live and what will become of us if we continue on our path, and a deep comprehension of the difficulties into which we get ourselves. They are funny, angry, jokey, not compassionate, rarely if ever offering redemption to their characters, but always showing us more than we have ever seen before and showing us with the passion of a filmmaker who sees, feels, and expresses his art deeply.

That is the main reason for this collection of essays: to reignite the passion of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, to rethink and reexamine its complexities, and, hopefully, to make the film accessible—though never completely comprehensible—to a new generation of viewers. It is time to reopen the film, resee it, attempt again to understand what it's doing. *2001* has had much written about it, but given its richness, its history, and the changes in its audience since its first release, more is ready to be said. Like the narratives of Kubrick's films, the critical responses they call forth move in a kind of eternal return, coming back again and again to reconsider, reinterpret, and even recreate their meanings.

In order to get fresh perspectives, I have looked to film scholars with broad areas of interest and, in two instances, to scholars who work in areas other than film—a historian and a computer scientist. I wanted to present new points of view and bring new methodologies of thinking and writing about films in general and about this film in particular.

Although they wrote their essays independently of one another, it is not surprising that almost all of the authors touch upon the film's major enigmas: the monoliths, which may or may not be artifacts of alien intelligence; the final sequences in which astronaut Dave Bowman is transported to an imaginary realm "beyond the infinite" and then mutated into a fetus circling the Earth; and *2001*'s most interesting character, HAL, the computer with more than human qualities. Each writer has come up with different perspectives to

similar questions. Are the monoliths—those mysterious structures that seem to spur the movement of human progress whenever they appear—indeed extraterrestrial visitations, or are they symbolic representations of obstacles that must be overcome for the progression from ape to human to some kind of rebirth of a superhuman? This is a central question in a film that depends on an almost tactile sense of the visually real. Things are so strikingly present in such detail that, like the apes that first encounter the monoliths and Dr. Floyd, who reaches out to it when he sees it on the moon, we too want to touch it and know its meaning (figures 19 and 20). We see the monoliths, as do the characters in the film, but are they "real"? Of course not. They are images in a cinematic fantasy. But even within that fantasy, or fairy tale, as George Toles considers it, they may well be the visible projections of the human imagination's need to think beyond where it is currently stuck.

But, then, why does the overcoming of obstacles always involve violence? The ape sees the monolith and learns to use tools as weapons to kill. The discovery of the monolith found on the moon leads to HAL murdering the hibernating crewmen, Dave Bowman lobotomizing HAL, and Bowman's harrowing trip to another imaginative realm, where he is transformed. What exactly is the meaning of the film's last image? Bowman, passing from youth to old age in front of his own eyes in the timeless space of an alien though eerily familiar, dreamlike motel room, seems to pass through the monolith and become an encapsulated fetus circling the Earth (figures 23 and 35). Is this a rebirth into a new human race, or simply the entrapment of humanity gazing in fear and wonder in a way that none of the other characters in the film ever did?

With the monoliths and the mysteries of the Jupiter room, HAL is *2001*'s great enigma: a machine with intelligence and consciousness. A machine with feelings—in fact more feelings than any of the human characters inhabiting the film. A machine that kills. A machine whose lobotomy causes more emotions in the viewer (and itself) than anything that happens to the film's human characters. HAL is the overriding intelligence of this film's imaginary realm, the patriarch, the holder of knowledge and feeling, and, like the apes long before him, he is a killer.

Stephen Mamber, in his chapter on the spatial realms of *2001*, points out that the first time we see astronaut Dave Bowman is as a reflection in HAL's eye (figure 13). It is almost as if the worlds of the film take place in HAL's brain. Marcia Landy picks up on this idea and, working from the discipline of brain science and the work of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, speaks of the film as an odyssey through the brain, a "cerebral journey," a kind of cinematic history of intelligence and consciousness. This is expanded by Michael Mateas's essay on HAL and artificial intelligence. Mateas is a computer scientist, a humanist, and a proponent of what he terms "expressive" (as opposed to "artificial") intelligence. He reads HAL through the history of AI and the ways that Kubrick responded to and prophesied the various episodes and issues in the computer discipline of artificial intelligence.

We begin with Barton Palmer's investigation of the early reception of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He points out that, on its release, the reviewers had more difficulty with the film's slow pace and open questions than did its audience. Contemporary viewers, especially younger ones, moved freely within its enigmatic images. But, while some film reviewers scoffed and dismissed it, other, more thoughtful critics began to examine it, and what they began to discover, Palmer points out, laid the field for the various critical interpretations that followed.

All interpretations proceed from the fact that Kubrick was the embodiment of the film auteur, in control of all facets of his work from inception through distribution. Auteurism is a seminal theory of film that speaks of the director as the driving, creative force of a film. James Gilbert, a historian who has written on various aspects of science and film, expands on this idea. His chapter provides a history of this particular director's restructuring and rethinking of the science fiction genre, in which Kubrick was interested for many years. *Dr. Strangelove*, as we noted, is a kind of satirical, political fantasy/science fiction, which points a direction toward *2001*. Even its final images of the B-52 flying toward its destination in Russia are similar to the strange trip through alien landscapes at the end of *2001*. Gilbert's chapter examines the film as the work of a guiding cinematic intelligence (not at all extraterrestrial), fully in control not only of his film but of the history and science that make it up.

Throughout this introduction, I've been stressing the *seriousness* of *2001*, which has a depth of speculation and thought not usually found in film. Jay Telotte addresses this "gravity" in both senses of the word. *2001: A Space Odyssey* shows us what it might be like to defy gravity and the known spatial coordinates that gravity makes possible. Kubrick takes great visual pleasure in the spectacle of antigravity activities—from walking, to eating, to going to the bathroom. Telotte expands upon this to examine the concept of trajectory in the film and its spatial movements of regeneration and birth. He plays upon the other meaning of "gravity": seriousness, weightiness, as opposed to weightlessness. Gravitas. Profundity.

There is a good connection between Jay Telotte's essay and Stephen Mamber's on Kubrick's use of space. Mamber categorizes the various spaces of the film, from the "realistic" to the imaginative, indicating how Kubrick creates boundaries and then makes them porous. Mamber also connects the spaces delineated in *2001* with those in other Kubrick's films, further indicating that, unique as it is, *2001* is still part of the fabric, the spatial density, of Kubrick's entire imaginative output.

Barry Grant's "Of Men and Monoliths" takes a slightly different turn to address the issues and spaces of gender in the film, from the dominance of men and the absence of women to the phallic nature of the space ships and the monoliths themselves. He understands this as part of a broader view of a male-dominated Earth and universe. But Grant recognizes that, finally, Kubrick goes beyond the usual gender boundaries. The end of the film offers

an opportunity for a different way of being and understanding than the usual dichotomies of gender allow.

It is important to note that, as Kubrick's work matured, he questioned gender stereotypes more and more. *The Shining*, cowritten by a woman, Diane Johnson, is literally about the collapse of patriarchy and the end of woman hating. *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) turns the tables on marine machismo when a female sniper brings down the platoon. Kubrick's last film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, is a profound examination of domesticity and the enormous effect on a male's ego when he discovers that a woman has her own sexual fantasies and desires. Moving from the universal in the early part of his career to the microcosm of marriage at the end, Kubrick continued throughout to see the cycles of awareness and defeat, of male ego leading to some variety of emasculation, if not downright self-destruction. Gender was always on Kubrick's mind, coming more and more to consciousness as he and his work matured. But even as early as *2001*, Kubrick understood that maleness was an earthbound concept. Freed of the spatial constraints binding it to the Earth and its culture of male dominance, "man" becomes unmanned in an odyssey that releases consciousness and the body that contains it into spaces of imagination.

Marcia Landy's and Michael Mateas's chapters continue to explore the movements of intelligence and consciousness as they are figured in Kubrick's film. They come to it from different perspectives while expanding the spatial metaphors developed in the previous essays. Landy, as noted, examines the film through the discipline of brain science, seeing it as an imaginary journey through the brain itself. Mateas examines the film, and HAL in particular, through the work of computer science, specifically artificial intelligence. The latter was, of course, an abiding interest of Kubrick's, so much so that he planned a film called *AI*, which he was unable to make, but which Steven Spielberg took over after his death. Intelligence, natural or artificial, is part of the reigning paradox of all of Kubrick's films: human intelligence inevitably creates something that will ultimately turn on its owner and undo him. We see it in the fantastic robbery plot in *The Killing*, in the Doomsday Machine in *Dr. Strangelove*, in the Ludovico technique in *A Clockwork Orange*, in the mechanism of the aristocracy in *Barry Lyndon*, and so on throughout the films.

The pivot point in *2001* is HAL, a perfect machine that thinks and feels. Mateas puts this fantasy computer in the context of the real research being done on artificial intelligence—research that Kubrick himself used in creating HAL—and then extrapolates his own computational-based fantasy into the future of AI. He speculates on what would happen if HAL were lifted as a character from the narrative fiction of the film into another fiction: the interactive game. Considering the fact that HAL and the astronauts are engaged in a life-and-death game within the fiction of *2001*, this extrapolation is not extreme.

Susan White's chapter picks up a number of threads woven by the other contributors. She continues an exploration of gender in Kubrick's work, and