Fifty years since the release of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*

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Directed by Stanley Kubrick; screenplay by Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke

Warner Brothers recently presented a theatrical re-release of Stanley Kubrick's science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey* to mark the 50th anniversary of its opening in April 1968. It is a significant event. *2001* has a definite standing in cinema history, whatever one concludes about its merits.

"For the first time since the original release," explains Warner Brothers, "this 70mm print was struck from new printing elements made from the original camera negative. This is a true photochemical film recreation. There are no digital tricks, remastered effects, or revisionist edits." A new home entertainment release will be available in the autumn.

Co-written by Kubrick and British science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, *2001* is an ambiguous, elliptical story about spaceflight in which Kubrick pioneered remarkable special effects that remain striking. The film's well-recognized soundtrack features "Also sprach Zarathustra" ["Thus Spoke Zarathustra"] by Richard Strauss and "The Blue Danube" by Johann Strauss II, along with pieces by György Ligeti, the Hungarian-Austrian modernist composer, and others.

2001 is an attempt to cover four million years of human evolution, and takes as its premise the fact that some form of alien life has been directing the growth of human intelligence.

New York City-born Kubrick (1928-1999) was a leading filmmaker of his generation and left a significant cultural imprint. Besides *2001*, his best-known works include *Lolita*, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Shining*.

Kubrick is a more contradictory artistic figure than most, a peculiar hybrid product of the postwar period and its confused intellectual atmosphere. He has been over-praised as a genius, while simultaneously arousing considerable hostility for his grandiosity and his murky, even misanthropic ideas. Having grown up in the shadow of World War II and the Holocaust, Kubrick at times expressed strong anti-war and anti-establishment sentiments, and, at others, conveyed a general contempt for human beings. His films alternate (sometimes within the same work) between piercing cynicism and a more sympathetic view of humanity's difficulties.

*2001*embodies these disparate qualities.

The movie opens with a sequence titled "Dawn of Man." Primitive man-apes struggle to survive in the vast African savannah. A rectangular black monolith mysteriously appears concurrent with the apes' discovery that the bones of dead animals can be used as weapons to vanquish rival groups for domination of resources. In what has become a famous transition, one of the creatures powerfully hurls the bone-weapon into the air and the image transforms into one of a craft voyaging through space.

Now, millions of years later, at the dawn of the 21st century, Dr. Heywood Floyd (William Sylvester) is charged with traveling to the Moon's Clavius Base where scientists have unearthed another monolith, which was deliberately buried forty feet beneath the lunar surface. The scientists are puzzled by the object and the piercing sound it emits, directed at the planet Jupiter.

Some of *2001's* most human scenes involve Floyd's flight on a Pan Am aircraft (a company that went out of business years before 2001) and his interaction with flight attendants sporting "grip shoes" [velcro?] to counter the lack of gravity.

A mission is eventually dispatched to Jupiter. Awake on board the spacecraft are Dr. David Bowman (Keir Dullea) and Dr. Frank Poole (Gary Lockwood). Three other colleagues are voyaging in suspended animation. The vessel is piloted and its operations managed by the HAL 9000, an artificial intelligence computer and "the brain and nervous system of the ship," addressed as "Hal" (the voice of Canadian actor Douglas Rain). The computer is considered infallible. (As Hal tells an interviewer, "No 9000 computer has ever made a mistake or distorted information. We are all, by any practical definition of the words foolproof and incapable of error.")

Needless to say, the computer system designed to be "infallible" suffers a type of nervous breakdown, killing Poole and the three hibernating scientists. In a memorable encounter, Bowman has to break back into the craft (from whose entry Hal is blocking him) and systematically dismantle the "brain" of the computer. As Bowman takes apart the computer's memory, Hal appeals to him and eventually regresses, like a child. Oddly, the talking machine's death agony is one of *2001's* most emotional moments:

"Stop, will you? Stop, Dave. Will you stop, Dave? Stop, Dave. I'm afraid. I'm afraid, Dave. My mind is going. I can feel it. I can feel it. My mind is going. There is no question about it. I can feel it. I can feel it. I can feel it. I'm afraid. Good afternoon, gentlemen. I am a HAL 9000 computer. I became operational at the HAL plant in Urbana, Illinois on the 12th of January, I992. My instructor was Mr. Langley, and he taught me to sing a song. If you'd like to hear it I can sing it for you. … It's called 'Daisy.' Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer true, I'm half-crazy over the love of you. It won't be a stylish marriage, I can't afford a carriage, but you'll look sweet upon the seat of a bicycle built for two ..."

In Kubrick's own words, from a 1969 interview, this is what happens next: "When the surviving astronaut, Bowman, ultimately reaches Jupiter, this artifact [monolith] sweeps him into a force field or star gate that hurls him on a journey through inner and outer space and finally transports him to another part of the galaxy, where he's placed in a human zoo approximating a hospital terrestrial environment drawn out of his own dreams and imagination. In a timeless state, his life passes from middle age to senescence to death. He is reborn, an enhanced being, a star child, an angel, a superman, if you like, and returns to earth prepared for the next leap forward of man's evolutionary destiny." As the weightless, fetal "Star Child" floats toward earth, Strauss's "Also sprach Zarathustra" thunders on.

2001 continues to impress in certain ways and to be highly dissatisfying in others. A look at Kubrick's life and times might help explain some of

the issues.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Kubrick began working as a photographer, eventually becoming a full-time staff photographer at *Look* magazine. He developed an obsession with filmmaking at this time. The Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein was a strong influence during this early period. Shortly after he left his job at *Look* magazine, he made his first feature, a war film, *Fear and Desire* (1953), which Kubrick later withdrew from circulation. He directed a mediocre thriller, *Killer's Kiss*, released in 1955, and followed that with *The Killing* (1956), a more polished work, about a race track heist. War and violence already figure largely in these early films.

Kubrick's next effort was the fiercely anti-war epic *Paths of Glory* (1957), set in World War I, featuring Kirk Douglas as the commander of a group of French soldiers who refuse to continue a suicidal attack. The officer later attempts to defend his men against a charge of cowardice in a court-martial. The famed Roman slave revolt (73-71 BC) was the subject of his 1960 movie *Spartacus*, starring and produced by Douglas. The production helped break the Hollywood blacklist when Douglas insisted that Dalton Trumbo, one of the Hollywood Ten, be given screen credit for his work. Then, Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1962) was effectively translated into film by Kubrick, providing a glimpse at the dysfunctionality and hypocrisy of suburban post-war America.

Kubrick's next film, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), remains to this day one of the great anti-war and Cold War satires. In my opinion, this is Kubrick's best film. After *2001* came *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), a repugnant, disoriented film about a working class teenager in near-future London. This was followed by *Barry Lyndon* (1975), based on the novel by Thackeray and shot beautifully by cinematographer John Alcott.

The Shining (1980), adapted from Stephen King's novel, still stands up as a well-crafted and disturbing horror film, and certainly ranks as one of Kubrick's best movies. In 1987, he weighed in against the Vietnam War and the process of militarization with his chilling *Full Metal Jacket.*

Of Kubrick's last film, *Eyes Wide Shut,* released shortly after his death in 1999, the *WSWS* wrote: "If one subtracts from the film all its gratuitous elements, its coldness, the showing off, the murky sequences, the undeveloped themes, there remains a core of feeling that Kubrick has organized, semi-consciously or not, in the form of a plea for mutual tolerance and sympathy, rooted in the knowledge that it is very difficult to be a human being on this planet. *Eyes Wide Shut*, which is a failure, has left me with a higher opinion of Kubrick. There is no question but that his best work will endure for a long time to come."

It is important to understand the murky ideological brew out of which Kubrick developed his conceptions in the postwar period. In the aftermath of the tragedies of the mid-century, with intellectuals increasingly skeptical about or hostile toward socialism and the working class, French existentialism, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Nietzsche came to dominate many artistic discussions and circles. Kubrick once formulated it this way: "The very meaninglessness of life forces man to create his own meanings." This was not his own personal failing. It was in the air. Another favorite work of the 1950s was William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*(1954), which argued that savagery was the natural, underlying condition of mankind.

Kubrick was susceptible to these retrograde influences. His was a somewhat uncomprehending response to the traumas of the Holocaust, fascism and Stalinism. Like many others, Kubrick absorbed the irrationalist angst of the times. He and Clarke were influenced by Joseph Campbell—a Jungian purveyor of "universal myth" and "archetype." (Kubrick's settling on his title was not accidental. There are various references to Homer's *Odyssey* —the one-eyed, Cyclopean Hal; the name "Bowman" (bow-man, as in Odysseus the master archer); the flight attendants perhaps as Sirens; and the expedition to Jupiter—Roman king of the gods.)

The movie's weakest side, its mystical muddiness and apparent chilliness, provoked strong disapproval. Two prominent film critics, Andrew Sarris and Robin Wood, voiced sharp objections.

In *The American Cinema* (1968), Sarris jeered that Kubrick had "spent five years and ten million dollars on a science-fiction project so devoid of life and feeling as to render a computer called Hal the most sympathetic character in a jumbled scenario. *2001: A Space Odyssey* also confirms Kubrick's inability to tell a story on the screen with coherence and a consistent point of view. Kubrick's tragedy may have been that he was hailed as a great artist before he had become a competent craftsman."

In an essay on Kubrick in *Cinema A Critical Dictionary* (1980), Wood argued: "In *2001* Kubrick accepts man's dehumanization within a universe dominated by technology. The style of the film—its famous visual splendours—expresses this as clearly as its thematic progress…

"The concluding triumphal image of the luminous babe conveys, with undeniable effect, an immediate sense of awe, but conceptually it is too lacking in definition to offer real emotional or intellectual satisfaction. … This apotheosis is reached, the film suggests, through man's casting-off of all his old-fashioned humanity (outgoing emotions, the capacity for human relationships) and the development of his intellect—intellect conceived as expressing itself exclusively through science and technology … The final rebirth, or transformation, seems in human terms—in terms, that is, of any values by which we might order our lives—useless in its vague pretentiousness. The film's ambition challenges one to see it as a great work or as nothing; for me, the choice is easy."

Sarris and Wood certainly make a number of legitimate points, as there are decidedly incoherent and unappealing elements in the movie. It is not accidental that Kubrick chose a piece for the movie's soundtrack that bears the title of Nietzsche's philosophical novel, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-91), in which the infamous concept of the "*Übermensch*" [superman, overman] plays a central role. One can find an echo in the film, in the final rebirth of humanity as "an enhanced being," of Nietzsche's reactionary, ahistorical pronouncements, such as: "What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now, too, man is more ape than any ape."

Above all, Kubrick's point of view is neither clear nor consistent. Is he criticizing this cold, emotionless, machine-dominated future world or yearning for it? Are the bland, almost interchangeable human specimens in *2001* something to be dreaded or desired?

One can draw either conclusion, and the filmmaker's comment, in a 1969 interview, that "the film becomes anything the viewer sees in it" and that if "the film stirs the emotions and penetrates the subconscious of the viewer, if it stimulates, however inchoately, his mythological and religious yearnings and impulses, then it has succeeded," is less than helpful.

Looking forward, Kubrick's next film was *A Clockwork Orange*, his nastiest and most pessimistic. In a conversation with a *New York Times* reporter in January 1972, following the release of that work, Kubrick gave vent to his bleak views: "Man isn't a noble savage, he's an ignoble savage … He is irrational, brutal, weak, silly, unable to be objective about anything where his own interests are involved—that about sums it up. I'm interested in the brutal and violent nature of man because it's a true picture of him. And any attempt to create social institutions on a false view of the nature of man is probably doomed to failure."

However, a filmmaker is not simply the sum-total of his political and philosophical misconceptions. Other impulses, of a much healthier variety, had also been at work on Kubrick. The late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed the eruption of the mass Civil Rights movement, the end of the

McCarthyite era and a generally more non-conformist, anti-establishment atmosphere in filmmaking. Kubrick was not immune to this, as *Paths of Glory*, *Spartacus*, *Lolita* and *Dr. Strangelove* reveal.

Concretely, *2001* was released a year before humans landed on the Moon. Kubrick unquestionably had a deep fascination with outer space and the possibility of encountering extra-terrestrial life. He and Clarke consulted with cosmologist Carl Sagan during their pre-production process, who argued that "any explicit representation of an advanced extraterrestrial being was bound to have at least an element of falseness about it, and that the best solution would be to suggest, rather than explicitly to display, the extraterrestrials." (*Carl Sagan's Cosmic Connection, 2000*) This advice from Sagan, a genuinely progressive intellectual figure, was apparently accepted.

More generally, *2001* reveals a fascination with human capacities that goes beyond the limits of the sometimes foolish and farfetched plot. It treats a wide range of human behavior, including horrible violence as well as limitless imagination, ingenuity (Dave's outwitting Hal) and self-sacrifice. The filmmaker's intense visual clarity hints at the fact that Kubrick had more confidence in human beings than he cared to admit. He did, after all, fashion the scene in which Floyd encounters a group of Soviet scientists and addresses them not as adversaries but as colleagues. This sequence stands out for its humane and sympathetic treatment. Of course, *2001* was Kubrick's next film after *Dr. Strangelove*, which envisioned the super-powers annihilating themselves.

Kubrick never "made up his mind," so to speak, about humanity, whether it was salvageable or not. In the final analysis, that was his fatal intellectual and artistic weakness. Nonetheless, along the way, he fashioned some absorbing and rewarding dramas or dramatic moments.

Fifty years after it was made, *2001: A Space Odyssey* remains often pleasurable, intriguing and inventive.