

2001: A Space Odyssey [1968]

by

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2001: A Space Odyssey is a film of the 1960's that is almost totally based in existential philosophy. In this film, life is a series of unconnected events. Causations arise randomly with no hidden master plan. Life does not move toward an ultimate goal. Events do not interact in a causative way. This may be the only sound film in existence where no one raises a voice in anger or excitement. All is flat and even, mundane. Conversations come and go with no emphasis on what is important to the plot and what is not. As a matter of fact, there may be no plot, just a series of events for us to observe and only attempt to analyze at our own peril.

With our experience being almost totally with teleological films, we hunger for connections and explanations. Is there a relation between what happened to the proto-humans and what happened on the moon? Is there are relation between the monoliths and H.A.L.? Another problem with the film to those hungry for teleology is that despite the visual beauty of the film, it can easily become boring.

Yet even taking the film within its own set of rules, we can still ask some questions. For instance, what is the film saying about the "ascent" of the apes to human-hood? Certainly, they learn to use tools, but the first practical use of those tools is to kill their fellows. Is the film saying that murder is the sign of human-ness? Before the appearance of the monolith the pre-humans lived in harmony with their environment, they were vegetarians and got along with their fellows and with the other animals about them. Is thus the monolith a symbol of the fall from grace or the tree of knowledge of life and death that appeared in the Garden of Eden? If so than what is the effect of the same monolith on those exposed to it on the Moon? Is their fall from grace the knowledge that there is other intelligent life in the universe? Is our second fall from grace a fall from egotistic anthropocentricity? And then what about the monolith in space near Jupiter? Is the location significant? Jupiter was replaced by God the Father as Christianity replaced and absorbed paganism. Is the third fall from grace experience by Dave Bowman release from time? But it would seem to me that that would be an experiencing of grace rather than a fall!

A powerful image of *homonoia* concludes *2001*. This idea, that the world will become one unitary whole, is rooted in the philosophy of Alexander the Great, a disciple of Aristotle, who saw military expansion as a great cross-fertilizing process by which diverse peoples would

share the same mind. To this end, he married thousands of Asian women to his soldiers at the point of a sword. *2001* ends with a gigantic human embryo as a symbol for the cosmic awareness that is just on the horizon for all humankind. The embryo rides within a membrane that is the world's womb. Thus, all has become one, the largest has become the smallest, the youngest the oldest.

The major philosophical thesis of *2001* is clearly – and cleverly – set out in the first episode, *The Dawn of Man*. Here the tools that humans use as extensions of the body are as ambivalent as the human using them, that bone can be used to hunt for food or to kill others. Similarly, the rocket that goes to Jupiter (Zeus the Father) is used for information gathering simultaneously as an instrument of the Cold War.

H.A.L., another tool, is too well made in the image of its maker. It replicated the theme of the original sin by turning on its creators in order to protect its full autonomy and not be threatened with doubt. On the other hand, the makers seem to have lost their own humanity, for HAL has more personality than the crew.

There are no real human acts in *2001*, like characters on a pool table, the humans only react to events, most often caused by machines (or aliens).

This is one of my student's, Dan Asahi's contribution on *2001*:

My ideas about the film begin with Kubrick's choice of music. As you probably know, he discarded Alex North's completed score for the film and decided to replace it with Gyorgy Ligeti, Stravinsky waltzes, and the very famous main theme, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Well, Richard Strauss based *Also Sprach Zarathustra* on the philosophical work of the same name by Nietzsche. This was the book in which he introduced the idea of his over-man (Übermensch). In the prologue of Nietzsche's book, he defines the "Three Metamorphoses" of man. *2001* is also split into three sections by titles, which I have outlined here:

1.) In Nietzsche, the first metamorphosis is from the spirit to a **camel**. This **camel** is the first form of the spirit, which kneels down to be loaded up (metaphorically) with ideas, virtues, values, etc. This corresponds with "The Dawn of Man" in *2001*, where the apes first touch the monolith and are inspired to use their intelligence. A little further in the film, though before the next title card, another monolith points us to Jupiter, sending us on a mission. Nietzsche's **camel** is also sent on a mission after it has been loaded up -- into the desert of solitude.

2.) Immediately after this, we see the title card, "Jupiter Mission." The emptiness of space seems to me Kubrick's equivalent of Nietzsche's lonely desert. It is here, in Nietzsche, that the **camel** becomes a **lion**, and this **lion** must slay the dragon whose name is "Thou Shalt." Whether the dragon is HAL I'm not exactly sure, but that makes the most sense at this point.

3.) Again, the title card comes in at exactly the right time, just after HAL's death. "Beyond the Infinite." This is the equivalent of Nietzsche's final metamorphosis: from **lion** to **child**. The final state of the spirit is pretty literal in Kubrick's film. This is the formation of an Übermensch, seeing the world from a superior perspective.

From Nietzsche's prologue: ". . . Zarathustra has become a child, Zarathustra is an awakened one; what do you now want among the sleepers? You lived in your solitude as in the sea, and the sea carried you. Alas, would you now climb ashore? . . ."