

"2001: a space
odyssey": exploring
the boundaries of
human knowledge



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When Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" was first released to the public, audiences and critics did not know what to make of it. Here was a film with minimal dialogue, long, obscure sequences that seemed to stretch to infinity, and little explanation for the bizarre turning points that unraveled before the viewer. However, it was and is the most ambitious, exhilarating spectacle ever filmed. Its canvas is a dazzling kaleidoscope of visual intrigue, an atmosphere of dream-like images hovering to the sounds of Johann Strauss's "Blue Danube." Its purpose is to transport us through the history of time, showing what we have accomplished in the last million years and speculating what the future holds in store for mankind. Its message is that when pushed to the limit, we can surpass the boundaries of what we once deemed possible, pushing ourselves beyond the threshold of our abilities until at last we outdo ourselves and cease to be human. "2001" scales the trajectory of earth's history, from its infancy to its metamorphosis, in sweeping, graceful strides. The three parts of the movie—the Dawn of Man, the Future, and the Beyond—unfold through a grave symphony, an intergalactic ballet and a laser light show. "2001"'s opening is a masterful exercise in buildup. The movie opens in complete darkness as instruments discordantly lurch into tune. Then the thrilling five notes of Richard Strauss's "Thus Spake Zarathustra" initiate the Big Bang, giving birth to the universe. The pace of the movie mirrors the burgeoning of life on earth, as stagnant shots of barren landscapes lead to a more rapid succession of shots that populates the land with apes and wildebeests. The prehistoric sequence introduces the seeds of conflict, as outside threats and competition for resources prompt the apes to band off into isolated "cliques." Higher knowledge descends upon the apes in the form of a monolith, which they

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tentatively reach out to as an eerie score conveys the transcendent nature of the event. The apes soon discover that bones can be used as weapons. This leads to a segue way where a launched bone morphs into a space shuttle, signifying the power of material objects to propel us into new dimensions. In the euphoric space sequences Kubrick drifts through the interior, contrasting the infinite stretches of space with the intimacy of the shuttle. It's an aeronautical fun-house with a floating pen, a zero gravity toilet and what appears to be a human-sized replica of a gerbil's exercise wheel. Scientific advances have enabled men to break free of all limitations, meshing together the concrete and the abstract. By entering the world of the imagination, the men lose touch with the physical world. A conversation between the astronaut Floyd and a life-size digital projection of his daughter reveals how cut off from humanity the men are. Human relationships do not unfold in flesh and blood but are mediated through technology. In a later scene aboard a spaceship, a shirtless young astronaut removes his fluorescent sleeping mask to watch with dazed indifference as his parents sing him a televised Happy Birthday song. Kubrick conveys isolation not through character but through the chilling lack of character. The humans in "2001" do not attempt to stake out at a place for themselves in the universe but disappear into its folds. In both "2001" and Kubrick's "The Shining," objects take on human characteristics while humans appear artificial. The extraterrestrial landscapes in "2001," like the Overlook Hotel, contain an anatomy as real as our own; a palpable force that breathes and cries out for release. When astronauts encounter the monolith on the surface of the moon, the spiritual takes hold of them in the form of a blinding white light and a soundtrack of primordial wails. The monolith stretches the capacity for

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human knowledge even farther, leading to the invention of the spaceship. When the boundaries between the real and inanimate collapse, only the mind carries any force in the universe. The most advanced mind in "2001" belongs to Hal 9000, a disconcertingly lifelike computer on board the spaceship Discovery's mission to Jupiter. Shots of the astronauts through Hal's point of view assert his authority; in the famous lip-reading sequence he rapidly pans between the two men as he deciphers their plan to disobey him. As Hal, Douglas Rain's suggestive voice lends itself to the creepiest rendition of "Daisy" ever performed. Unlike most sci-fi movies, "2001" does not use detailed expository scenes to explain conflicts. When Floyd's supervisor warns him that "extremely odd things have been happening at Clavious," Kubrick creates unease not through the dialogue but through distancing long shots and the flat, emotionally vacant tones of the speakers. Danger is not explained but felt; imbedded in the atmosphere. The surface of the moon is one of the most authentically alien landscapes ever shot on film. While CGI-concocted sci-fi extravaganzas call attention to their virtuosity by cramming the screen with details, "2001" uses its sparseness to create mystery. The shuttle's landing is accompanied by a soundtrack of ghostly echoes and bathed in a sublime blue light. Kubrick constructs his vision of the unknown with painstaking detail, bringing the landscapes to life. Even after multiple viewings of "2001" we never really familiarize ourselves with these nebulous landscapes because they belong neither to our world or the cinematic world; we have glimpsed them only through the haze of dreams. In the final segment, titled "Jupiter & Beyond," Kubrick completely leaps outside of the narrative and takes us on a psychedelic roller-coaster ride into the unknown. A dizzying ascent over undulating fields, mountain ranges and

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bodies of water comes to a halt in a strangely barren room where an old man eats his dinner. "How did we end up here?" you might ask. In the same way, Kubrick uses this moment of calm to contemplate our place in the universe after our journey of discovery. "2001" is the rare movie that not only holds up to but also demands multiple viewings. Like "The Shining," we can experience the movie differently every time we view it because it does not aim to create a singular effect but inundates our senses and swells with peripheral images that we may not register on the first viewing. We re-watch "2001" not merely to relive memorable moments or to gain a better understanding of the movie but to more deeply immerse ourselves in its world.