
Stanley Kubrick

The American director Stanley Kubrick, who died March 7, 1999, was well known for his troubled, controversial films. Working at his own and strictly on his own terms, he completed only eight films between 1962 and 1999. His last film, Eyes Wide Shut, was completed only days before his death. All of these films—Lolita, Dr. Strangelove, 2001, Clockwork Orange, Barry Lyndon, The Shining, Full Metal Jacket, and Eyes Wide Shut—have made strong impact on critics and audiences. Only Barry Lyndon failed to turn a sizable profit.

From the beginning of his professional career, as a teenage photojournalist for Look magazine, Stanley Kubrick relentlessly pursued the definitive images necessary to tell a story. Once he chose to be a film maker and turned his eye to the moving image, he used his photographic knowledge and talent to learn all the elements of movie making, from the technical to the financial, largely from scratch. A classic autodidact, Kubrick had put no effort into public school education, but once he knew his ambitions, he educated himself with a meticulous concern that would become legendary. By the time he was twenty-five, he had completed two documentary films and two largely self-produced and directed feature movies, Fear and Desire and Killer's Kiss. Although Kubrick later disparaged these two early films as immature learning exercises, he gained enough experience, showed enough talent, and acquired enough contacts to make his first Hollywood-backed feature film, The Killing, in 1956. The creativity Kubrick displayed with The Killing, which has since been recognized as a classic example of 1950s film noir, attracted the interest of the established star Kirk Douglas, who agreed to star in Kubrick’s next project, the World War I drama, Paths of Glory.

After the success of Paths of Glory, Kubrick agreed to direct Kirk Douglas’s next film, a big-budget “spectacle film” titled Spartacus, about a heroic slave rebellion in ancient Rome, led by the title character, played by Douglas. Kubrick hated the entire experience, from dealing with his star’s big ego, to fretting over production costs, to studio meddling with his vision for the film. He then decided to move his film operation to England, where he proceeded to establish his own independent production company and exploit the high-quality, but less expensive, technical resources there. Stanley Kubrick thus became the first major auteur film maker to emerge from the American studio system, and the rest of his films would be made his way, on his timetable, and would be under his total personal control. He would use this control to create films which were often direct challenges to both industry standards (particularly the Production Code) and film audience expectations.

Kubrick’s films can indeed employ racy and sensationalistic subject matter that challenged industry standards, but what truly sets his films apart is their deliberate assault on the audience’s assumptions. At the time Dr. Strangelove was made in 1963, for instance, most of the viewing audience saw their national leaders in larger than life terms. Kubrick presents them as jingoists, incompetents and buffoons fully capable of destroying the world with weapons they barely understand. In Lolita, Clockwork Orange, Barry Lyndon, and The Shining, the protagonist is clearly an anti-hero—a totally disreputable character, sometimes a charming manipulator, sometimes dangerously violent. In Full Metal Jacket, Kubrick pays as much attention to the brutality of 1960s Marine Corps basic training as he does to the horrors of the Vietnam War itself, drawing a
connection between the two that the audience may not have considered before. *Eyes Wide Shut* examines the relationship between love and sexual imagination with disturbing frankness. Kubrick’s work has a kind of fearless, existential adventurousness to it. His movies document his absolute determination to see, and if he seems a pessimist, it is a pessimism born of a hard-earned realization that what we truly see is rarely what we expected to find.

**2001: A Space Odyssey: An Overview**

Stanley Kubrick may have been the most demanding perfectionist among movie makers, though the profession is notorious for that trait. In 2001, he applied that legendary perfectionism to making the first scientifically credible science fiction film and succeeded spectacularly. Given that the film took several years to make and employed some of the most innovative and convincing special effects ever attempted, the ten million dollars it cost MGM turned out to be a relative bargain. Like his two previous films, *Dr. Strangelove* and *Lolita*, 2001 was filmed at studios in England, which offered an extremely high standard of craftsmanship at relatively low cost. The computer graphics, the silence of space, the lack of a clear notion of “up” or “down” are all presented with admirable scientific validity. (In contrast, the subsequent *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* films, which drew heavily on Kubrick’s technical innovations for details of outer space visualization, have largely ignored scientific accuracy: space ships whoosh by as though there were something in space to whoosh through; everything is always right side up, even though there’s no reference point in space to determine what exactly is right side up.

Probably the most bothersome aspect of 2001’s scientific realism, especially for audiences used to space fantasy action films like *Star Wars*, is Kubrick’s insistence on using “real time” for the space walking sequences. Zero-gravity maneuvering is slow and tedious, and Kubrick gives the modern audience, conditioned to much more rapid cutting, more than it wants. Even in 1968, the premiere audiences, watching all this laborious action on enveloping, 180-degree Cinerama screens (and thus much more likely to be simply absorbed in the visual novelty) expressed enough impatience that Kubrick cut the film by 19 minutes before its full-scale distribution.

The art design and costume design for 2001 still hold up well today. Arthur C. Clarke, the noted science fiction writer who collaborated with Kubrick on the screenplay, contended that 2001 did not get an Academy Award for makeup for the ape sequences because the voters did not realize that the apes were really actors in makeup. Space suits are still somewhat bulkier than the ones envisioned for the future in the movie, but the clean, economical designs produced by Kubrick’s team still look realistic today. Probably the most accurate job, though, was done with the computer graphics, all of which had to be created through analog animation. Even given the sophisticated digital computer graphics everyone is familiar with today, these images still look very believable.

The musical score for 2001 has become justly renowned and influential. Certainly the signature musical themes associated with 2001 are the opening fanfare from Richard Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and Johann Strauss’s “Blue Danube Waltz.” Naturally the first consideration for such film music would be that it match the visual content and rhythms of the cinematic images that it accompanies, and both pieces meet this requirement perfectly. Also Sprach Zarathustra’s majestic chords and percussive impact dramatically match the imposing conjunction of earth, sun, and moon that opens the movie so memorably. So effective is this opening that this theme has come to be identified as the generic musical statement for any event deemed dramatic and significant. “The Blue Danube” is an instantly recognizable melody, but its effectiveness derives from the
delightful surprise of its utter appropriateness to the action that it accompanies. This most familiar of Viennese waltzes precisely captures the dance-like precision of the docking of the space shuttle Orion with the space station and the low gravity delicacy of the later moon landing. In addition, the orchestral sumptuousness deliberately subverts what Kubrick called “the cliché of space music,” typically arrhythmic and resonant sounds produced from specialized instruments like the theremin. Not that 2001 lacks for suitably weird and unsettling musical accompaniment: Gyorgy Ligeti’s bizarre choral music accompanying the monolith contacts assaults the ear with intimidating, portentous mystery, and Aram Khatchaturian’s music from the Gayne Ballet Suite convincingly conveys the achingly desolate expanse of space through which the space ship Discovery floats on its voyage to Jupiter.

Not only are the music and sound of 2001 triumphantly appropriate and innovative, they make important thematic contributions to the movie. Also Sprach Zarathustra draws its title and concept from Frederich Nietzsche’s philosophical narrative of the same name, in which the philosopher presents his theories of the “will to power” and the rise of the “superman,” both of which directly apply to the film’s portrayal of violent and competitive instincts as driving forces of human evolution. The glittering harmonies of “The Blue Danube” reflect the graceful and ordered motions of an enlightened humanity in benign control of its environment, connecting the supposed technical perfection of the twenty-first century with the decorous flow of couples across a nineteenth century dance floor.

2001 also makes powerful dramatic statements by avoiding the use of music where typically it would be employed. Kubrick deliberately avoids special musical dramatization of the life and death conflict that ultimately occurs on the Jupiter mission. As the betrayal unfolds in the silence of space, punctuated by radar blips and mechanical alarms, the relentless consequences unfold in a way that forces the audience to vicariously experience the disorienting shock of an unexpected and unplanned-for catastrophe in progress.

As we approach the millennium, it is fascinating to measure the futuristic aspirations Kubrick offered to the public cinematically nearly 50 years ago against what our culture has actually accomplished. No, we don’t have space stations and moon bases underwritten by corporate investment today. It is still unclear whether we have the will or resources for human voyaging to other planets, and our experience of conversing with computers is still limited to the IPhone’s Siri, mechanized phone messages, and GRS instructions.

Yet, the questions that provide the core of the film’s greatest dramatic conflict, our relationship to technology, the consequences of our increasing dependence upon its reliability, the profound philosophical implication of increasing machine intelligence, and our emerging adventure into virtual reality, have direct consequences for us today. As we program more and more of our thought processes and our human heritage into the vast interlocking computer database known as the Internet, we have an increasing responsibility to attempt a grasp of the fundamental nature and origin of human consciousness and identity. Of course, the greatest minds have been investigating these metaphysical questions for thousands of years, but the speed at which machines are learning to mimic us gives a greater urgency to this quest. In fact, it could be argued that many if not most of the scientific and engineering community, our present “best minds,” have abandoned the quest for metaphysical understanding of human consciousness and are actively pursuing a machine paradigm that sees no essential difference between artificial intelligence and
human intelligence. At stake are some of our most important spiritual and emotional assumptions: individual identity, free will, and creativity, to name a few.

If *2001* ended with a resolution of the dramatic conflict between man and machine, it would still merit distinction as a fine movie and a worthy challenge to the intelligence of its audience, but it does not end where our narrative expectations, conditioned as they are by the melodramatic conventions of most modern storytelling, tell us that it must. The final part of *2001*, “Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite,” leaves the realm of science fiction and moves into pure imagination. All of Stanley Kubrick’s films test and challenge audience assumptions, but *2001* probably offers the most radical challenge of all.

**2001: A Space Odyssey-- Analytical Plot Summary**

Stanley Kubrick started his professional life as a free-lance photographer and documentary film maker. His first studio-backed film, *The Killing* (1956), featured Dragnet-style voice-over narration that gave a pseudo-documentary feel to this cleverly structured film. James Mason’s narration of the diary entries of the perversely obsessed Humbert Humbert is an integral part of the narrative of *Lolita* (1962), and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) starts out with a documentary-style portrait of the official mission of The Strategic Air Command. Thus, it is not surprising that Kubrick, his script collaborator, renowned science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke, and his technical consultant Frederick I. Ordway originally planned an extensive documentary component for *2001*.

The original plan included a preview section before the actual movie in which scientific authorities would discuss the possibilities for extra-terrestrial life. During the film itself, the nature of the mysterious rectangular monoliths and their relationship to the protagonists that confronted them would be explained by voice-over narration. Before the film’s release, however, Kubrick made a fundamental change of plan. He dropped the scientific preview and all the explanatory narration. Not only that, he insisted that Clarke be the only credited author for the companion novel, which retains the extensive explanations—quite an unusual move for a man who had been heretofore quite jealous of every speck of creative credit he could obtain for any project in which he was involved. In interviews and statements about *2001*, Kubrick explicitly insisted that the film told its story primarily by visual images rather than words. He further reinforced the distinction between the movie and the book by giving the movie a different, much more enigmatic ending.

According to Jerome Agel’s *The Making of Kubrick’s 2001*, Frederick I. Ordway was especially disappointed with Kubrick’s decision to drop the narration. Agel reprints Ordway’s written criticisms of the film (195-198), which center around Ordway’s concern for Kubrick’s seemingly deliberate decision to confuse his audience. For his part, Kubrick felt that his goal was to inspire the imaginative and interpretive powers of a general audience. To use the narration would show contempt for the general audience rather than faith in it and would hypocritically employ the very sort of condescending intellectual elitism that the film exposes in the behavior of the bullying scientific bureaucrat Heywood Floyd and the ultimately murderous logic of the computer HAL. In interviews, Kubrick would pointedly contrast the enthusiastic interest of ordinary film goers for the movie with the almost uniformly hostile reception *2001* received from the New York intellectual critics, led by such influential figures as Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris.

From a more cynical viewpoint, we might also contend that Stanley Kubrick was also well ahead of his time in marketing strategy, realizing that a film so famously difficult and ambiguous
would generate the now coveted “repeat viewing” syndrome, in which cultists intent on gleaning every detail from such movies as The Star Wars series and Titanic keep buying tickets long after the mainstream audience has moved on to other fare.

Still, it is fair to say that no matter what conclusions one reaches about the merits of 2001, in few other films are plot comprehension and overall interpretation so seamlessly interwoven.

1. The Dawn of Man: The first part of 2001 often confuses viewers who come to it expecting nothing but the technology of science fiction. Instead, Kubrick gives us a clan of prehistoric ape-like proto-humans trying to survive in a hostile environment. They have a hard time of it, driven away from their water hole by a band of competing apes, attacked by wild animals, cowering in fear of the dark of night, and suffering the afflictions of drought. The wild card in this bleak scenario is the mysterious appearance of a shiny rectangular monolith that they examine as best they can. One of the apes, their leader, sees the sun and moon in conjunction over the monolith. The obvious inference is that someone or something has put the monolith there for a purpose. (In Arthur C. Clarke’s book 2001, the ape leader’s name is, appropriately enough, “Moonwatcher.” Of course the pre-verbal apes in the movie cannot “tell” us their names, but Clarke’s name is used in the material below as a way to refer to this crucial character.)

The possible purpose becomes clearer when, in the midst of a killing drought, with the apes on the brink of starvation, Moonwatcher “remembers” the sun and moon in conjunction over the monolith. This first memory seems to kick start his powers of insight, and he is inspired to use the bone of dead animal for a tool, specifically a weapon. The apes then use the bone weapons to kill animals for food. The improved nutrition provided by their new carnivorous diet helps Moonwatcher’s group to regain and enhance their strength, thus enabling them to defeat the rival clan in a battle for control of the water hole. As Moonwatcher exults over his fallen foe, he tosses the bone into the air. What follows is one of the greatest “match cuts” in all of movie history. The bone turns into a weapons platform orbiting around the earth. To the strains of Strauss’s “Blue Danube” waltz, a space shuttle docks with the giant orbiting space station. The implication is clear; all the progress brought about in human civilization over the past four million years or so is simply an extension of the violent survival instincts of our earliest ancestors. Modern man may be more technologically sophisticated, but the mental powers stirred to life millions of years before are still directed toward violent ends.

The only passenger on the space shuttle is Dr. Heywood Floyd, a high official of the National Council of Aeronautics, headed for the American moon base on Clavius. In the lobby of the space station, Dr. Floyd meets a female Russian scientist, an old friend of his who is returning from the Russian moon base with a group of her colleagues. A tense conversation ensues between Floyd and Dr. Smyslov, the senior Russian scientist, concerning rumors of a mysterious plague on Clavius. Floyd is close mouthed, however, and Smyslov gets nothing out of him. Kubrick portrays modern humans’ parallels with the apes more subtly here than with the match cut of bone weapon and weapons platform; yet, the hostility and distrust displayed between Floyd and his Russian counterpart Dr. Smyslov is simply a more civilized and sublimated version of the screaming and gesturing the apes engaged in over the water hole four million years earlier. The confrontation begins and ends with social formalities and small talk, but on the crucial issue of the plague rumor and the unexplained hostile behavior of the Americans on the moon toward the Russians there, Floyd manages to intimidate his rival with his possession of dangerous information just as surely as Moonwatcher beat his rival into submission with the thighbone.
Throughout the trip to the moon, the antiseptic, emotionally frigid life of the scientific elite of the future comes out in detail after detail. Family life has been utterly sacrificed to careerism, as evidenced by the Russian lady scientist’s months-long enforced separation from her husband, Floyd’s idle promise to her to bring his family to an international conference, and his empty apology to his daughter for missing her birthday party. Floyd is completely alone throughout his entire trip to Clavius, sleeping most of the time and receiving nothing more than formal attention from the crew and flight attendants. The only flicker of normal, “down to earth” humanity in his character comes with a short scene showing his comic discomfiture with the complicated instructions for using the zero-gravity toilet. Otherwise, he might as well be just another bored commuter riding a train or plane on earth.

As the Aries, the ship bearing Floyd to the moon, descends to the lunar surface, again to the strains of the Strauss waltz, the imagery offers a symbolic clue to the philosophy underlying the narrative of Floyd’s trip. As the Aries touches down to be lowered into the recesses of the vast reddish sublunar complex on a massive platform, its portholes glow like eyes and its design features take on the shape of a human head and face. The scientific organization and the vast technological apparatus that Floyd serves respects only the head. The body, the seat of the emotions and hitherto the chief vehicle for locomotion, has been abandoned to the needs of the conceptualizing, rationalizing intellect. The emotions, now atrophied and trivialized, have been reduced to formulaic chitchat, and the vital motions of the body have been supplanted by technology.