

# Space Odyssey: Stanley Kubrick, Arthur C. Clarke, and the Making of a Masterpiece

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Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the film's release, this is the definitive story of the making of 2001: A Space Odyssey, acclaimed today as one of the greatest films ever made, including the inside account of how director Stanley Kubrick and writer Arthur C. Clarke created this cinematic masterpiece.

Regarded as a masterpiece today, 2001: A Space Odyssey received mixed reviews on its 1968 release. Despite the success of *Dr. Strangelove*, director Stanley Kubrick wasn't yet recognized as a great filmmaker, and 2001 was radically innovative, with little dialogue and no strong central character. Although some leading critics slammed the film as incomprehensible and self-indulgent, the public lined up to see it. 2001's resounding commercial success launched the genre of big-budget science fiction spectacles. Such directors as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Ridley Scott, and James Cameron have acknowledged its profound influence.

Author Michael Benson explains how 2001 was made, telling the story primarily through the two people most responsible for the film, Kubrick and science fiction legend Arthur C. Clarke. Benson interviewed Clarke many times, and has also spoken at length with Kubrick's widow, Christiane; with visual effects supervisor Doug Trumbull; with Dan Richter, who played 2001's leading man-ape; and many others.

A colorful nonfiction narrative packed with memorable characters and remarkable incidents, *Space Odyssey* provides a 360-degree view of this extraordinary work, tracking the film from Kubrick and Clarke's first meeting in New York in 1964 through its UK production from 1965-1968, during which some of the most complex sets ever made were merged with visual effects so innovative that they scarcely seem dated today. A concluding chapter examines the film's legacy as it grew into its current justifiably exalted status.

Michael Benson works at the intersection of art and science. An artist, writer, and filmmaker, he's a Fellow of the NY Institute of the Humanities and a past Visiting Scholar at the MIT Media Lab's Center for Bits and Atoms. In addition to *Space Odyssey* he has written such books as *Cosmigraphics: Picturing Space Through Time*, a finalist for the Science and Technology award at the 2015 Los Angeles Times "Festival of Books." Benson's planetary landscape photography exhibitions have been shown internationally. He has contributed to many publications including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Smithsonian*, and *Rolling Stone*. Visit Michael-Benson.com.  
Space Odyssey CHAPTER ONE

## PROLOGUE: THE ODYSSEY

The very meaninglessness of life forces man to create his own meanings.

-STANLEY KUBRICK

The twentieth century produced two great latter-day iterations of Homer's *Odyssey*. The first was James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which collapsed Odysseus's decade of wandering down to

a single city, Dublin, and a seemingly arbitrary day, June 16, 1904. In *Ulysses*, the role of Ithaca's wily king was played by a commoner, Leopold Bloom—a peaceable Jewish cuckold with an uncommonly fascinating inner life, one the author effectively allowed us to hear. Serialized from 1918 to 1920, it was published in full in 1922.

The other was Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which the islands of the southeastern Mediterranean became the solar system's planets and moons, and the wine-dark sea the airless void of interplanetary, interstellar, and even intergalactic space.

Shot in large-format panoramic 65-millimeter negative and initially projected on giant, curving Cinerama screens in specially modified theaters, *2001* premiered in Washington, DC, on April 2, 1968, and in New York City the following day. Produced and directed by Kubrick and conceived in collaboration with Clarke, one of the leading authors of science fiction's "golden age," the film was initially 161 minutes long. Following a disastrous series of preview and premiere screenings, the director cut it down to a leaner 142 minutes.

Where Joyce's strategy had been to transform *Odysseus* into a benevolently meditative cosmopolitan flaneur, and to reduce ten years of close calls and escape artistry to twenty-four hours in proximity of the River Liffey, Kubrick and Clarke took the opposite approach. Deploying science as a kind of prism, which during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries entirely transformed our sense of the size and duration of the universe, they vastly expanded Homer's spatiotemporal parameters. *2001: A Space Odyssey* encompassed four million years of human evolution, from prehuman Australopithecine man-apes struggling to survive in southern Africa, through to twenty-first-century space-faring *Homo sapiens*, then on to the death and rebirth of their *Odysseus* astronaut, Dave Bowman, as an eerily posthuman "Star Child." In the final scene, the weightless fetus returns to Earth as Richard Strauss's 1896 composition *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* pounds cathartically on the soundtrack.

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the meddling gods of the ancients have become an inscrutable, prying alien super-race. Never seen directly, they swoop down periodically from their galactic Olympus to intervene in human affairs. The instrument of their power, a rectangular black monolith, appears at key turning points in human destiny. First seen among starving man-apes in a parched African landscape at the "Dawn of Man," *2001*'s totemic extraterrestrial artifact engenders the idea among our distant ancestors of using weaponized bones to harvest the animal protein grazing plentifully all around them. This prompting toward tool use implicitly channels the species toward survival, success—and, eventually, technologically mediated global domination.

After vaulting into that happy future in a match cut that has deservedly acquired the reputation of being the single most astonishing transition in cinematic history, *2001* leads us to understand that a lunar survey team has discovered another monolith, this one seemingly deliberately buried under the surface of the Moon eons before. When excavated and hit by sunlight for the first time in millions of years, it fires a powerful radio pulse in the direction of Jupiter—evidently a signal, warning its makers that a species

capable of space travel has arisen on Earth. A giant spacecraft, Discovery, is sent to investigate.

While parallels with *The Odyssey* aren't as thoroughly woven into the structure of *2001* as they are in *Ulysses*, they certainly exist. Seemingly prodded into action by flawed programming, a cyclopean supercomputer named HAL-9000—represented by an ultracalm disembodied voice and a network of individual glowing eyes positioned throughout Discovery—goes bad and kills off most of the crew. The sole surviving astronaut, mission commander Dave Bowman, then has to fight the computer to the death. Apart from dueling a cybernetic Cyclops, Bowman's name references Odysseus, who returns to Ithaca, strings the bow of Apollo, shoots an arrow through twelve axe shafts, and proceeds to slaughter his wife's suitors. A nostos, or homecoming, was as necessary to Kubrick's and Clarke's *Odyssey* as it was to Homer's.

Much like Joyce and in keeping with their expansive vision, *2001*'s authors took parallels with Homer as a starting point, not final word. When they began work in 1964, one initial motivation was to study the universal structures of all human myths. They were aided by Joseph Campbell's magisterial study *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which provided them with a template for the conscious creation of a new work of mythology. Early in their collaboration, Kubrick quoted a passage to Clarke concerning the universal rite of passage of any mythological hero, which Campbell suggested invariably encompasses "separation-initiation-return." This tripartite structure "might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth," Campbell wrote—a term he borrowed from Joyce, who'd coined it in his last major work, *Finnegans Wake*.

Campbell's research helped Kubrick and Clarke delve into the archetypal workings of human mythological yearnings, expanding that template to encompass not just one story and hero, and not even just one species, but rather the entire trajectory of humanity—"from ape to angel," as Kubrick put it in 1968. In this, they also overtly referenced Friedrich Nietzsche's 1891 philosophical novel *Also sprach Zarathustra*, with its concept of mankind as merely a transitional species—sentient enough to understand its animal origins but not yet truly civilized. It was an idea both could get behind, Clarke with his innate optimism about human possibilities, and Kubrick with his deeply ingrained skepticism. It was this seemingly contradictory mesh of worldviews that gave *2001: A Space Odyssey* its exhilarating fusion of agnosticism and belief, cynicism and idealism, death and rebirth.

In Clarke, Kubrick had found the most balanced and productive creative partnership of his career. While the director made all the critical decisions during the film's production, the project started out—and in important ways remained—a largely equal collaboration between two very different, singularly creative characters. Like Joyce, both were expatriates, with the Kubrick family finally settling for good in England during the making of *2001*, and Clarke being a resident of Ceylon—later Sri Lanka—from 1956 until his death in 2008.

At *2001*'s release in 1968, Kubrick was thirty-nine, the same age as Joyce when *Ulysses* was being serialized. He was at the pinnacle of his abilities, having already made two of the twentieth century's great films. Each was a devastating indictment of human behavior as

expressed through the military mind-set. Released in 1957, *Paths of Glory* served as a comprehensive indictment of the hypocrisy of the French general staff during World War I—though its meanings were by no means limited to any one army or conflict. And his 1964 satire *Dr. Strangelove*, written in collaboration with Peter George and Terry Southern, cut to the core of the Cold War nuclear arms race, equal parts savage critique and caustic black comedy. A resounding critical and commercial success, it set the stage for the large-scale studio support necessary to realize *2001*.

Kubrick's method was to find an existing novel or source concept and adapt it for the screen, always stamping it with his own bleak-but not necessarily despairing-assessment of the human condition. A self-educated polymath, he was in some ways the ultimate genre director, switching virtuositically between established cinematic categories and forms with a restless analytical intelligence, always transcending and expanding their boundaries. During his career, he reinvented and redefined the film noir heist film, the war movie, the period costume feature, the horror flick, and the science fiction epic, each time transforming and reinvigorating the genre through extensive, time-consuming research followed by an uncompromising winnowing away of clichés and extraneous elements.

Kubrick treated every film as a grand investigation, drilling down into his subject with a relentless perfectionist's tenacity as he forced it to yield every secret and possibility. Once he'd decided on a theme, he subjected it to years of interrogation, reading everything and exploring all aspects before finally jump-starting the cumbersome filmmaking machinery. Having concluded his preproduction research, he directed his pictures with all the authority of an enlightened despot. Following a stint as hired-gun director on *Spartacus* in 1960, he conceived of a personal kind of slave revolt, never again working on a project he didn't produce himself. While in practice, studios such as MGM footed the bills and exerted some influence, this gave him near-complete artistic independence. (Still *Spartacus*, which Kirk Douglas both produced and starred in, marked Kubrick's definitive induction into big-budget Hollywood filmmaking. The picture, which dramatized the bloody trajectory of a Thracian gladiator as he led a successful uprising against Rome, won four Oscars and a Golden Globe award for Best Motion Picture Drama.)

As the ne plus ultra example of Kubrick's methods, *2001: A Space Odyssey* wasn't just rooted in extensive preproduction fieldwork, it continued throughout—an uninterrupted, well-funded research project spanning its live-action filming and extending across its postproduction as well (which, given the importance of its visual effects, was actually production by another name). All the while, the director and his team pioneered a variety of innovative new cinematic techniques. Highly unorthodox in big-budget filmmaking, this improvisatory, research-based approach was practically unheard of in a project of this scale. *2001* never had a definitive script. Major plot points remained in flux well into filming. Significant scenes were modified beyond recognition or tossed altogether as their moment on the schedule arrived. A documentary prelude featuring leading scientists discussing extraterrestrial intelligence was shot but discarded. Giant sets were built, found wanting, and rejected. A transparent two-ton Plexiglas monolith was produced at huge expense and then shelved as inadequate. And so forth.

Throughout, Kubrick and Clarke remained locked in dialogue. One strategy they'd agreed on in advance was that their story's metaphysical and even mystical elements had to be earned through absolute scientific-technical realism. 2001's space shuttles, orbiting stations, lunar bases, and Jupiter missions were thoroughly grounded in actual research and rigorously informed extrapolation, much of it provided by leading American companies then also busy providing technologies and expertise to the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration, or NASA. In late 1965, George Mueller, the czar of the Apollo lunar program, visited 2001's studio facilities north of London. Apollo was then still flight-testing unmanned launch vehicles, while NASA launched the precursor Gemini program's two-man capsules in an ambitious series of Earth-orbiting missions. After touring the film's emerging sets and viewing detailed scale models of its centrifuges and spacecraft, the man in charge of landing men on the Moon and returning them safely to Earth—the ultimate Odyssean voyage yet accomplished by the species—was impressed enough to dub the production "NASA East."

Clarke was fifty when 2001 came out. When Kubrick first contacted him early in 1964, he had already enjoyed an exceptionally prolific career. Best known as a formidably imaginative science fiction novelist and short-story writer, he was also a trenchant essayist and one of the twentieth century's leading advocates of human expansion into the solar system. Apart from his fictional and nonfictional output, he had played a noteworthy role in the history of technology. Clarke's 1945 paper on "extraterrestrial relays," published in the British magazine *Wireless World*, proposed a global system of geostationary satellites, which, he argued, would revolutionize global telecommunications. While some of the ideas he presented had already been in circulation, he synthesized them impeccably, and the paper is regarded as an important document of the space age and the information revolution.

Clarke's fictions were greatly influenced by the work of British science fiction novelist Olaf Stapledon (1886-1950), whose seminal *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* encompassed multiple phases of human evolution across vast timescales. Clarke's early novels *Childhood's End* (1953) and *The City and the Stars* (1956) likewise encompassed sweeps of time so expansive that monumental civilizational changes could be examined in great detail. Still considered his best work, *Childhood's End* closed with the human race being shepherded through an accelerated evolutionary transformation by a seemingly benevolent alien race, the "Overlords." In it, humanity is depicted as obsolete—destined for replacement by a telepathically linked successor species composed, oddly, of children. Clarke's strange vision of mankind outgrowing its childhood was also influenced directly by the great Russian rocket scientist and futurist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, who, in an essay published in 1912, stated, "Earth is the cradle of the mind, but humanity can't remain in its cradle forever." As the central utopian credo of the space age, Tsiolkovsky's pronouncement would find direct expression in 2001's final scenes.

As with *Ulysses*, 2001 was initially greeted with varying degrees of incomprehension, dismissal, and scorn—but also awed admiration, particularly among the younger generation. Its first screenings were a harrowing ordeal, with audience reactions at the New York premiere including boos, catcalls, and large-scale walkouts. Most of the city's leading

critics dismissed the film, some in personal and humiliating terms. And as with Joyce, some of Kubrick's and Clarke's peers went out of their way to disparage the film. Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, possibly the greatest filmmaker of the twentieth century, found 2001 repellent. Calling it "phony on many points," he argued that its fixation on "the details of the material structure of the future" resulted in a transformation of "the emotional foundation of a film, as a work of art, into a lifeless schema with only pretensions to the truth." Soon after its release, Clarke's friend and fellow science fiction writer Ray Bradbury wrote a negative review decrying 2001's slow pace and banal dialogue. He had a solution, though: it should be "run through the chopper, heartlessly."

In retrospect, these initial waves of hostility and incomprehension can be understood as a result of the film's radical innovations in technique and structure—another similarity to *Ulysses*. They were followed by grudging reappraisals, at least on the part of some, and a dawning understanding that a truly significant work of...

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The Spacesuit Film. Filmmakers employ various images to suggest the strangeness of outer space, but protective spacesuits most powerfully communicate its dangers and the frailty of humans beyond the cradle of Earth. (Many films set in space, however, forgo spacesuits altogether, reluctant to hide famous faces behind bulky helmets and ill-fitting jumpsuits.) This critical history comprehensively examines science fiction films that portray space travel realistically (and sometimes not quite so) by having characters wear spacesuits. Beginning [A] with the pioneering *Himmelskibet* (1918) and *Woman on the Moon* (1929), it discusses [B] other classics in this tradition, including *Destination Moon* (1950), *Riders to the Stars* (1954), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968); [C] films that gesture toward realism but betray that goal with melodramatic villains, low comedy, or improbable monsters; [D] the distinctive spacesuit films of Western Europe, Russia and Japan; and [E] America's spectacular real-life spacesuit film, the televised Apollo 11 moon landing (1969).  
? ? ? ? ? . This seems jarringly inappropriate because no one recalls that the third astronaut is dead, making it difficult to ... Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* is widely celebrated as a masterpiece, voted by film ..."