Stanley Kubrick's

2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

A SLEEP AND A FORGETTING

> "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting. The soul that rises with us, our life's star, hath had elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar, not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness, but trailing clouds of glory do we come, from God, who is our home."
> –"Ode: Intimations of Immortality,"
> William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

The "Problematical Film Award 1968" will perhaps go to Stanley Kubrick's brainchild *2001: A Space Odyssey.* To be released nationwide into off-campus theaters by late fall and early winter semesters, *2001* (1968) is filmic signal that, in matter and style, the art of the film has been keeping pace with the technological revolution which has superseded the industrial. Kubrick has famously said, "You are free to speculate as you wish about the philosophical and allegorical meaning of *2001.*"

Shot in single-film Super Panavision Cinerama, *2001* opened in a few select large-city theaters on a reserved-seat basis, and was projected, with an intermission, on to the curved Cinerama screen whose arms embraced the peripheral vision of audiences, taking them along for the ride which they really experience. Previous Cinerama movies required three films projected in synchronization from three projectors. The nationwide release, at "popular prices" and with no intermission, will drop from the 70mm print to a 35mm print projected onto Cinemascope screens. The drop down in size will also lessen the sensual experience. The sound also drops from stereo to mono, but Kubrick still manages to make Strauss' "Blue Danube Waltz" hip enough for an acid trip.

Small-town audiences with smaller screens, as much if not more than the large-city viewers who saw *2001* in its original huge Cinerama version, will leave the theater muttering through their popcorn-salted lips, "It was good, but what's it about?" Recent films, during this decade of revolution in art, taste, and politics, have been equally disquieting. Conflicted viewers exit Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966) energized by desolate frames; they leave Bo Widerberg's gorgeous *Elvira Madigan* (1967), and gasp and gasp again, saying, "God, it was beautiful, but oh so boring."

Kubrick, indeed, commits (and gets away with) the Original Sin explicated in classrooms where Literary Interpretation and Film Interpretation are taught. He drops few if any hints to clue in his Super-Panavision audience as to what is happening. Audiences accustomed to traditionally plotted narrative and action—and the spy-technology gimmicks of campy James Bond movies—tend to be stymied by the serious matter and overwhelming form of *2001: A Space Odyssey* as it deals with our already technologized world where technology itself has become the esthetic. *2001*, by its very title, pushes viewers into the future, at least by making audiences of men, women, and children struggle to calculate how old they will be on that far-off but reachable date. In this way, *2001* pulls them into willingly suspending their disbelief, because this is their future. *2001* is not the Hollywood sci-fi audiences first think it is.

The first huge-screen movie, *This Is Cinerama* (1952), featured Lowell Thomas narrating travelogues of water-skiing at Cypress Gardens, with a snatch of *Aida* here, and a roller coaster there in a wide-screen format that caused vertiginous sensory audience reactions, because movement on screen tricked the viewers' senses to engage in a whole new way, screaming and gripping the arms on the seats. The early Cinerama movies themselves were about the format experience of feeling-you-are-there. In content, the Cinerama movies were an omnibus of conventional tastes, the ultimate in middle-class voyeuristic vicarious involvement. Cinerama movies were episodic and innocent, and in construct like the genre of *Mondo Cane* movies, which were equally episodic but much more sensational and geared to adults. Cinerama and *Mondo Cane* (directed by Gualtiero Jacopetti, 1963) created a

new kind of pop culture on American screens, and *2001*, equally discontinuous, is even newer because its content and form both work together to sweep up the mass movie audience in a whole new way of confusion that enlightens.

2001: A Space Odyssey is a long way from *This Is Cinerama*. The audience is no longer protected. In fact, Kubrick has married the eye-involvement of the Super-Panavision screen to Theatre of Assault and produced technically a three-dimensional physical form whose matter goes well into the fourth dimension of time. This is not to say Kubrick's story, written and directed by Kubrick, is entirely successful, but it is definitely disturbing to viewers accustomed to safe two-dimensional films that are less quantum folds than *2001*.

Forget Charlton Heston in *Planet of the Apes*. The first segment of the tripartite *2001* is "The Dawn of Man" when, in evolutionary scale, this earth was indeed the planet of the apes. Kubrick, with small plane and helicopter, uses the old Cinerama technique: "Now we fly through the Alps; feel your stomach as we just miss the peaks." Kubrick fulfills what the form of Cinerama always viscerally promised but never before esthetically fulfilled. His camera sweeps over waste desert places to establish a tone at once scientifically evolutionary as well as intensely and obviously biblical. In fact, without any direct biblical reference *2001: A Space Odyssey* seems twice the theological film one presumes John Huston and Dino DeLaurentis' *The Bible–In the Beginning* (1966) hoped and failed to be.

Completely without dialogue, the first third of *2001* is a ballet of evolution, a frightening mime dance of man's increasing self-awareness. The balletic quality is unmistakable in the sequence in which one of the apemen discovers how to use a bone for a percussion weapon. Kubrick's is a major creative invention, because Hollywood has always been at a loss as to how to show someone having an idea—which probably says more than a little about Hollywood. For instance, David Lean's direction proved embarrassing in *Doctor Zhivago* as Yuri's freezing fingers repeatedly scratched *LARA* across the top of petite blank stationery to indicate how poetry is created. Actually, animated cartoons have handled the get-an-idea scene best with the "lightbulb" over the

head. In recent memory, it has been since director Arthur Penn dramatized Annie Sullivan communicating to Helen Keller at the water pump in *The Miracle Worker* (1962) that the audience has participated without embarrassment in the Absolute Thrill of Getting An Idea.

But there's this ape, see. And he hits a bony carcass with a thigh bone. His hairy ape face changes. He strikes again, tentatively. Carcass bones fly into the air, right into your Cinerama face, see. Then the camera goes slow motion. He strikes again; bones float out into the audience. His face, you oughta see his face. It's like a light bulb. You know what he's discovering and you think of all the assassinations that are McLuhan extensions of this one discovery. I mean, there's this humanoid and the whole screen is filled again and again, first with his raised hairy arm smashing down with his new weapon, then with flying slow-motion bones. Again and again. It's a ballet of primal violence. In the next scene, he runs off to attack another apeman at a water hole and beats him to death with his newfound weapon. It's Cain Killing Abel.

The apemen gather in family/clan tableaux to sleep for the night. The audience identifies with father, mother, or child. Strange roars assault them. At dawn, some dawn one day, they wake to discover the Force of the Universe which appears in all three segments of the film. Suddenly, worship, if not the *Lord of the Flies*' Religion of Fear, is born. This Force is concretized in an upright rectangular slab, much like a sky-scraping tombstone, computer-shaped, precise no doubt in its mathematic proportions and its magnetic transmissions. When, however, the apemen gambol fearfully, then worshipfully, orgiastically, at its base, one recalls all those C. B. DeMille epic films with believers, doubters, and testers clinging to the Golden Calf or the Foot of the Cross of the Western World.

One of the apes throws his bone into the air. Whether or not, by this moment in *2001*, the audience's acid has kicked in, this is one of the great "match cuts" in film as the whirling bone, spinning like a giant baton, traverses a million years and turns into a circling space station.

The film shifts. The music changes. A new title glows across the screen "2001." It's thirty-three technological years from where

we are in 1968. Movie time digests real time. Space stations like gigantic Ferris Wheels whirl through the void. Movie space digests real space. The audience chuckles for the first time as the space travelers converse under a Space Hilton sign; then again, as Howard Johnson's gets plugged in a free advertisement. Kubrick's set up has made the *mise en scene* all seem more futuristic than thirty-three years from now. Then we laugh, because, actually, what is so unexpected or humorous about Hilton or Johnson's still being in business next generation ? What is unexpected is the technological quotient of 2001 AD in conjunction with mid-century business which in itself is a far cry from 1901 AD. First assaulted with its own ape heritage, then with being technologically shortsighted that the future is already here, the audience laughs nervously, almost desperately, to keep up with Kubrick's careening film.

Carefully unfolding, half the film is over before the appearance of stars Keir Dullea (*David and Lisa, The Fox*) and Gary Lockwood (TV's *The Lieutenant*). Their faces offer human interest to the late mid-century audiences watching the film in 1968. The plot of the middle segment is the examination of the struggle between technology and humanity as Dullea-Lockwood pit forces against HAL, the Ultimate Computer who (definitely not *which*) talks, thinks, feels. (Add one letter up the alphabet to H-A-L and get I-B-M.)

To make a maxi-story mini, HAL revolts against the cosmic ship's crew. HAL does away with Lockwood and then tries to do away with Dullea. The interesting point is that HAL is the heavy. The computer becomes independent of its programmers. It's Mary Shelley's Frankenstein's monster all over again! HAL has read the lips of Lockwood and Dullea who plan to disconnect HAL for knowing all, seeing all, tyrannizing over all. When HAL's disobedience to the humans is corrected by Dullea who sets out to disconnect the rebel computer by releasing slot after slot, the machine coaxes in a sterile passionless almost homosexual voice: "I like you, Dave."

As Dave/Dullea continues the disconnection, the machine laments, "I think I'm losing my mind." (The members of the audience who are stoned identify themselves by laughing too

knowingly, because this movie is maybe not about outer space as much as it is about inner space.) Then the demented machine dies singing slower and slower, "Daisy, Daisy...I'm half crazy. " Melodramatic as it is, this second segment provides the film's only obvious plot as well as its only bits of satire: man versus machine; the telecast interviews ad nauseam of Astronaut Lockwood's parents basking in reflected media glory. But, hang onto that, because this middle segment is Kubrick's last offering of external phenomenal reality.

Segment three, "Jupiter and Beyond," is a race through Psychedelphia by way of Edgar Allan Poe. In one of the most vivid descents since Alice, high on mushrooms, fell down the rabbit hole, the audience with Dullea plummets through space for an unusually long sequence of cinematic time. Lights and colors speed by and flash into the viewer's eye. The ear is assaulted by the roar of the falling void. It is here, immediately upon the initial sensual involvement with the speed-falling into space beyond space that the Kubrick film begins to "mean." This psychedelic passage of rushing form devoid of intelligible matter, occurring where one expects the climax, is key to the film's statement about man technologized.

After the fall, Dullea finds himself, spacesuited *sans* space ship in a brilliantly lighted museum-like bedroom. In his red suit he shuffles through the set. With each shot he ages visibly while he encounters himself as an old Martin-Peyton type codger eating alone in the sterile Mansion of His Mind. More shuffling and he grows older. He sees himself lying on a huge bed, the forces of senility (time) stretching his skin tighter until he lies in the absolute white space like a mummy, sexless and ageless. At the foot of his bed appears the rectangular slab, the Holy Unholy Mathematical Perfect. It could be either a claimant Mephistopheles or a sheltering Saviour: Kubrick makes no commitment beyond exposition.

This is the Dullea end, but it is not the all-important coda. *Space Odyssey* is bigger than any of its characters. It is thematically ambitious, sired out of science fiction by T. S. Eliot. First of all, the orbic imagery of each segment—all that Cineramic sensation of floating through space in the planetary spheres—is picked

up in ultimate imagery of the womb as perfect orb, because on dying, the senile Dullea character, featureless as a newborn babe, fades into the featurelessness of a foetus. This foetus encased in a planetlike orb sweeps back through the expanding universe, back through space and time, to be reborn. Ultimately the screen is swept by the rolling foetal orb and the Kubrick commentary begins to emerge.

2001: A Space Odyssey is about time and space. Kubrick's awareness is to encounter these two quantities as technologized man must now encounter them more directly and more frequently. Time and space are no longer merely philosophical abstracts. He examines the short unilinear time of the Individual in terms of the long unilinear time of the Race; and both of these unilinear experiences he examines in the economy of the expanding time and space of an open-ended universe wherein seasons and planets have the cyclic time which keeps each April-Spring young while Individuals who remember past Aprils are not so cyclically renewed, but rather age in their own unilinear economy which crosscuts the circular expansion of space and space-time. He tries to invest with meaning the dis-integration of an individual existence in an age when it is becoming increasingly apparent that individual personages, integral or not, lose worth as their technological efficiency is superseded by more consistent machines; for this cult of the technological has its ethical and esthetic norm: What is efficiently accurate and consistent is moral and beautiful.

As HAL says of himself as technological marvel: "True, I am a machine; but true also, I was invented and programmed by man." This is Kubrick's comment, his way of externalizing one of the internal scarifying truths about the human condition.

As with most pop, beyond the pap lies the less obvious latent function of exposure of some truth currently pumping the culture's pulse. Kubrick takes age-old humanistic questions of life and death in space and time and re-asks them, well aware of what many do not yet perceive, that we are evolved beyond industrialization (when we've still to adjust to *its* problems) into technology, and that this revolution even more than the one of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is to have implication

to the human psyche and the human potential far more reaching than yet realized.

While Kubrick may be tightfisted with literary hints as to where his technological classic is heading and while critics may be divided, there is no question that the film is technically flawless in everything from its Cinerama miniatures to its completely undetectable process shots. The Cinerama form has finally been used to match and underscore complementary content. Kubrick and crew themselves are the almost perfect marriage of the new technology with the age-old values of humanism.

In short, MGM moguls have often splashed eleven million dollars to much more vulgar ends.

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