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2001 a Space Odyssey

By Poole, Robert History Today, January 2001

2001 a Space Odyssey

Poole, Robert, History Today

Robert Poole explores the background of the cult 1960s film that mystified its viewers but which made life imitate art.

IN THE SPRING OF 1968, the Italian film director Franco Zeffirelli sent a telegram to Stanley Kubrick: `YOU MADE ME DREAM EYES WIDE OPEN STOP YOURS IS MUCH MORE THAN AN EXTRAORDINARY FILM THANK YOU'. Zeffirelli had just seen 2001: A Space Odyssey.

By any standards, 2001 was a phenomenal film. Four years in the making and at the time by far the most expensive film ever made at \$10.5 million, it set new standards in special effects: It was the masterwork of Stanley Kubrick, following films such as Spartacus, Lolita and Dr Strangelove, Its co-creator was Arthur C. Clarke, science fiction writer, science populariser, inventor of the communications satellite, and all-round technoprophet.

The wave of more or less sensational science fiction films of the 1950s, such as Conquest of Space, The Day the Earth Stood Still, and Forbidden Planet, had dried up in the decade of real manned space flight. But now, with the experiments over and the Apollo programme about to aim for the Moon, the prospect of a megafilm dealing with man in space made by two of the giants of the age was compelling.

What audiences were expecting was something like the future Star Wars: a spectacular space opera. What they got was something quite different. The film opens with a twenty-minute near-silent sequence headed `The Dawn of Man', showing ape-like

creatures -- hominids -- struggling for survival on the African savannah. The

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mysterious appearance of a featureless black monolith prompts them to use bones as weapons; they learn to kill to survive but, as with Cain and Abel, the first victim is one of their own kind.

Then comes Kubrick's legendary 'jump cut'. To the swelling chords and drumbeats of Strauss's 'Also Sprach Zarathustra' -- the famous '2001 music' -- the killer hominid triumphantly smashes a mammal skeleton. The bone-weapon flies into the air, turning in slow motion, to become -- an orbiting spacecraft. It is the longest cut in all of cinema: millions of years of human evolution in a single frame. We are to understand that bone and spacecraft alike are tools, marking the beginning and end of a single phase of human evolution which is about to close as mankind ventures into space. Few did understand at first. As a child, I, like countless others, sat baffled and enthralled as an incomprehensible myth of the near future was played out in wide-screen clarity.

In the year 2001 a mysterious black monolith has been uncovered on the Moon. As the Sun's rays hit it for the first time in aeons it sends a radio signal in the direction of Jupiter. It is a cosmic fire alarm, and the signal tells its makers that their hominids have reached the Moon: the experiment in assisted evolution has been successful.

The remainder of the film follows the disastrous mission of the spaceship Discovery to Jupiter to investigate the target of the radio transmission. The ship is controlled by a talking super-computer called HAL. The ship experiences unexplained technical problems. HAL starts refusing orders, explaining to astronaut Bowman: 'this mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardise it'. The other crew members are killed by computer malfunction or sabotage, and in a chilling scene Bowman, the last survivor, slowly disconnects HAL, who pleads for his existence as he regresses to cybernetic childhood.

The monolith makes its third appearance, floating in space as the Discovery nears Jupiter. The doomed Bowman leaves the ship to investigate and is sucked into the monolith on an interstellar trip evoked by a long psychedelic sequence, to emerge into a Louis XV hotel room where he rapidly ages and dies. His last vision is of the monolith once more; ours is of a glowing foetus, a 'Star Child', hanging in space before the Earth. For those who were receptive to it, the implication was that mankind's first steps into space were an evolutionary move comparable to the discovery of tools.

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