2001 - A Space Odyssey: Crash Course Film Criticism #15

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=KEEnap_h8cs
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/KEEnap_h8cs

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

[Intro Music]

Well, here we are. The last episode of Crash Course: Film Criticism. So, to round out the series, it is time to talk about a film that is known for being both profound and timeless. Occasionally, a film comes along that touches something so deep within the collective human experience that it seems to exist outside of time. Often these films dare us to see something in new and unexpected ways. In 1968, a movie that is arguably a modern masterpiece was released, and it continues to reward multiple viewings and interpretations five decades after it first hit the screen. It's time to travel back to our old future with "2001: A Space Odyssey". "2001: A Space Odyssey" was dreamt up by director Stanley Kubrick and science fiction writer, Arthur C. Clarke. On the heels of his savagely satirical nuclear war comedy, "Dr. Strangelove, or How I Stopped Worrying And Learned To Love The Bomb", Kubrick was eager to expand his canvas. He wanted to tackle a film that would burrow deep into the viewer's subconscious, he wanted to make a modern myth.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

"To create a work of are which would arouse the emotions of wonder, awe...[and] even, if appropriate, terror". Years before, Clarke had written a short story called "The Sentinel" about the discovery of an alien buried under the moon's surface millions of years ago. This sentinel acted as a kind of tripwire, once humans had become technologically advanced enough to discover it, the object would warn distant aliens of our existence. From that idea, Kubrick saw an opportunity to explore some of the most profound themes in human history; the limits and consequences of technology, the nature of existence, and the evolution of humans: past, present, and future. Working from an outline base on Clarke's short story, Kubrick and his co-writer developed a screenplay and a novel simultaneously. They settled on an unconventional structure that breaks the story into four distinct sections. The first, called The Dawn Of Man, follows a group of prehistoric man-apes as they struggle to survive. They fight over food with plant eating Tapers, and spar over a watering hole with a rival group. Then one day, they discover a mysterious object. A tall, black, perfectly rectangular slab of something standing on the plains, a monolith. Soon after this meeting, the man-apes get the idea to use broken bones as tools to hunt with and weapons to fight and kill with, conquering their hunger, and their rivals. The chief man-ape then throws a bone into the air and as it rotates, the film cuts to a shot of a space ship mid flight. The second section of the film, which has no title card, follows Doctor Haywood Floyd, played by William Silvester, an American scientist traveling to the moon. Once he arrives at the moon base he reminds his colleagues of the need for secrecy and travels with them to a hidden creator, where they've excavated another monolith, buried eons ago under the lunar surface. Not long after Floyd approaches the slab and touches it, the alien object emits a loud, and painful sound. The tripwire has been activated. Then we move into the films third section titled, Jupiter Mission. It's 18 months later and we've swapped protagonists again. This part of the story follows a group of astronauts and their supercomputer, Hal, who may or may not be sentient, on a long distance mission to Jupiter. You eventually will learn that there is a connection to the monolith on the moon, but the exact nature of this is never explained.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

We follow two of the astronauts, Frank Poole, played by Gary Lockwood, and Dave Bowman, played by (?~4:06), as they work with how to oversee the space flight. Meanwhile, their scientist colleagues hibernate in little pod beds. When Dave and Frank uncover what they think may be a dangerous glitch in Hal, they secretly plan to shut him down and continue the mission on their own, but Hal finds out. He kills Frank and the sleeping scientists, forcing Dave to make his way into the heart of the ship and painstakingly destroy the supercomputer. Finally, we reach section four. Dave's ship arrives in Jupiter's orbit, where he discovers at least one more monolith floating in space. After investigating, Dave finds himself whisked away on a psychedelic, perhaps even inter-dimensional journey through space and time. He ends up an old man in the most Kubrick room ever built, with baroque furniture and a glowing floor, and when he dies, Dave transcends the material realm and becomes a now-iconic star baby. The last shots of the film show the star baby returning to Earth and turning to the camera before the film cuts to black.

(Exhales) That's a lot to chew on. One way critics have analyzed 2001 is to look for patterns between the film's four sections to understand what the story could be trying to tell us. The first clear pattern involves change or evolution. You might notice how many times birthdays are referenced. The film begins with a section called 'The Dawn of Man', basically the birth of humans. Once we jump to our future on the Moon, Haywood Floyd calls his daughter to wish her a happy birthday.

Can't you think of anything else you want for your birthday?

Then, once we're aboard the Jupiter mission, Frank Poole gets a message from home wishing him a happy birthday.

Hello, Frank.
Happy birthday, darling.
Happy birthday. Many happy returns of the day.

And Hal discusses his birth, as it were.

I became operational at the H-A-L plant in Urbana, Illinois on the 12th of January, 1992.

Finally, when we reach the final room with Dave Bowman, he turns into a newborn star baby. The film seems intensely interested in when and how things evolve, as well as the consequences those changes unleash.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Technology clearly plays a vital role in the progress of this film, too. It's the man-ape's discovery of simple tools that paves the way for everything it follows. This reading is underlined by one of the most famous cuts in cinema history, when Kubrick and his editor, Ray Lovejoy, cut from the man-ape's spinning bone tool to the spacecraft flying among the stars.

This single cut not only carries us tens of thousands of years into the future, but implies all the technological advancement of those years, the wrong turns, the dead ends, and the triumphs. Kubrick seems to suggest that humans evolved not just along with, but because of, technology, and the monoliths present a question of technology, too. Are they there to cause technological leaps forward, or are they there to witness those leaps?

In Roger Ebert's Great Films review, he considers how the monolith could have affected human evolution in this story. He says, "I have always felt that the smooth artificial surfaces and right angles of the monolith, which was obviously made by intelligent beings, triggered the realization that intelligence could be used to shape the objects of the world." As we move into the second section, technology surrounds the characters and carries them into space. Kubrick stages elaborate set pieces depicting space shuttles docking and space stations spinning to simulate Earth-like gravity, and the

deliberate pace of all of this stands in stark contrast to the chaos of the man-ape lives.

To create these gorgeous sequences, both outside and inside the spacecraft, Kubrick relied on a mix of old and new cinematic technologies. Front projection and carefully crafted modelwork created the spaceflight sequences as the ships dance among the stars to Johann Strauss' "Blue Danube". And to create the interior of the spinning station, Kubrick commissioned a giant ferris wheel-like set that would actually rotate, letting characters appear to be walking or jogging up the walls. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of all this technology is that none of it is designed to draw attention to itself.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Kubrick wasn't interested in making a fantastical space opera. Instead, his chief concern seems to be creating as closely as possible the way space travel might actually happen. That was stranger and more fascinating than anything he could invent. Some people have criticized the film for being overly interested in technology at the expense of fully developed characters, and it's true, we don't learn much about the inner life of Floyd or Dave or anyone else, but as American film scholar Carrol L. Fry argues, that may be the point. In both the Moon and Jupiter mission sections of the film, technology has outstripped character relationships. Specifically, he writes, "The film repeatedly invites us to see the contrast between the sophistication of technology and the banality of human conversation." From Floyd's empty dialogue with his daughter and beaurocratic pleasantries on the Moon, to most of the conversations between Dave and Frank on the ship, spoken words reveal very little about the characters.

Now are you sure you won't change your mind about that drink?

I'm positive. I really must be going.

Well, what do you think?

I'm not sure. What do you think?

On the flip side, there's so much time and attention paid to the elaborate spaceship docking procedures, their labyrinthian interiors, and the panels of buttons, knobs, and computer screens that control them. None of this is an accident on Kubrick's part. In fact, it builds his case that technological advances might doom interpersonal relationships.

Fry points out that the film's most interesting and complex character is the supercomputer, Hal, and Hal becomes the ultimate extension of this anti-tech argument when he starts killing the human characters on screen. This calls attention to another pattern within the movie: territorial disputes that lead to violence.

Just like the man-ape killing its rival over the watering hole and Floyd politely sparring with his Russian counterparts, here we get a battle between Dave and Hall.

Open the pod bay doors, Hal.
I'm sorry, Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that.

And when Dave finally succeeds in shutting down Hal, the computer begs him to stop and ultimately regresses to a more basic machine.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

I'm a prey. I'm a prey, Dave.

Kubrick seems to be saying that Dave has to destroy this incredibly sophisticated computer to move into the film's final transcendent section, and it's this last section that invites the widest variety of opinions and readings.

Bowman's ship arrives at Jupiter to find the planet perfectly in line with another monolith and several other terrestrial bodies. The monolith, which is also a recurring pattern in the film, is often presented as a solid piece of material, a barrier. In the Dawn of Man section, Kubrick holds a wide shot or several minutes as he observes the man-apes tentatively approach the monolith until one dares to touch it. Once it's deemed safe, they all crowd around it. This image echoes the shot off Floyd and his fellow scientists gathered around their monolith for a photograph. In the film's final section, however, Kubrick presents the monolith as a kind of doorway, and it's through this doorway that Dave begins his fantastical journey.

The colors flash and strange landscapes whiz by and are cut with shots of Dave's face inside his spacesuit distorting as he travels through the cosmos. As the image becomes more abstract, Kubrick keeps cutting back to extreme closeups of Dave's eye, grounding us in his point of view. This is Dave's experience, he seems to remind us, and once Dave is in the baroque room and the film cuts forward in time toward his death, each cut continues to pivot off Dave's perception. He looks into the room and sees himself as an old man with white hair. That older Dave hoists himself up and walks over to look for the original Dave, but can't find him. Then, when old Dave looks back into the room, he sees a really old Dave lying in bed. That Dave looks past the foot of the bed to see the monolith, once again appearing as a kind of doorway, and then an interesting change happens. We get the monolith's point of view looking back at the bed and we see a glowing ball of energy with some kind of baby in it. This series of cuts seem to suggest that Dave might have become the monolith or at least entered it.

===== (12:00) to (13:39) =====

Whatever the case, humanity seems to have been called to this room over the eons through time and space so that we, through Dave, might be reborn. In the film's last shot, as the Dave star baby creature looms over Earth and turns toward us, its eyes appear older, soulful, and intelligent, and as it looks right into the camera, it seems aware of us. It also seems to have abandoned technology altogether, able to travel vast distances without the need for pods, ships, or simulated gravity.

Technology may have been an essential part of human evolution, but perhaps the only way we can move on to this next level is by conquering technology and letting it go, somehow. Whether we look at it as an examination of the dangers of technology or a thought experiment centered on human evolution, there's no doubt that 2001: A Space Odyssey is a stunning achievement of visual design and unconventional storytelling, and, on top of all that, it's an engaging, watchable film made by a director at the peak of his powers. Kubrick was able to use cinema to explore some of the deepest questions facing humankind in ways only a movie can.

I'm Michael Aranda, and this has been CrashCourse: Film Criticism.

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