



KUBRICK'S
CINEMA
ODYSSEY

MICHEL CHION

Translated by Claudia Gorbman

Chapter Three

Structure

2001 as it Actually Is

You are in a cinema, and you see *2001* for the first or second time. What do you see, and what do you hear? It is certainly not the same experience today as it was when the film hit movie screens for the first time.

In recounting the movie's plot, people have a tendency to rely on sources other than the film itself. First and foremost, there is Arthur C. Clarke's novel (his personal variation on the original screenplay, on which he collaborated with Kubrick), published after the film's release. Plot summaries from press releases are also called upon, as well as some other standard studies and texts.

If we wish to recount the plot of *2001* based solely on our viewing – what I shall try to do here – we must forget about these external sources. Then certain things turn out not to be clear, and it becomes more difficult to draw connections.

For example, in the summaries and commentaries, the dominant anthropoid ape is often dubbed Moonwatcher, because that is his name in the novel. The film never names him either in dialogue (for good reason!) or in titles or closing credits. There is also the issue of a 'neurosis' in Hal, caused by the contradiction between his knowledge of the real goal of the Jupiter mission (find evidence of extraterrestrial life), which he must hide from the crew, and his role of serving the crew. The film tells us nothing about this either, only that Hal *knew* and Dave and Frank *did not know*.

People also take as a given that the bedroom suite in Regency style where Dave lands at the end, and where we watch him age, is a sort of zoo cage made for him from pictures of human life that the aliens have picked up, so that he may live and be observed there without feeling homesick. But the film shows no aliens, nor does it indicate that this room is an obser-

vation chamber. The sole indication of any possibly living presence is the chaotic reverberant noise that surrounds the room for a while – suggesting that the space outside the room is perennially filled with this din – and also the final reappearance of the monolith before the aged Dave. You can say nothing more. It seems to me that any analysis of *2001* must respect its lacunary, indeterminate quality, and any interpreting you do must be accompanied with reservations. If you wish to interpret, you need to start from the literal text of the film itself.

So let us try to tell the film story that the screen actually presents to us.

After the title ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’, and a prologue showing celestial bodies in alignment, accompanied by a triumphal music cue, a second title appears: ‘The Dawn of Man’.

In a desolate landscape, we see a small clan of apes headed by a chief; their vocalisation is limited to grunting. They feed on meagre vegetation in the company of peaceful tapirs who are eating the same things. They fear attack by predators such as tigers. They defend their territory – a small watering hole – against another clan of the same species.¹

One morning, the first ape to awaken notices a black vertical slab, perfectly smooth and perpendicular, near their dwelling. He alerts his fellow creatures, and they gather around the object, to the accompaniment of a choral music cue. Soon after, as he is picking among some tapir bones, we see the leader pick up a long bone and make use of it as an instrument to shatter the animal’s skeleton and skull. The editing suggests – by means of inserted shots of the monolith and of a tapir collapsing, and the sound of the triumphal music from the opening – that from now on he will use the bone as a weapon to destroy his prey.

Later we see the same tribe eating meat; they have become carnivorous. The monolith is no longer where it had appeared.

In a battle with another clan of apes, the clan leader – the one who had the bone revelation – uses the bone to strike an enemy ape, and his companions follow suit. In a gesture of triumph, after the victory, he throws the bone skywards.

This bone, turning over and over in slow motion in the diurnal sky, is suddenly replaced by an elongated spacecraft moving through the interplanetary night. From this image the film segues to a series of shots of

objects in space revolving around the earth and moon. One of them, shaped like an arrow, moves towards a wheel-shaped orbiting space station.²

We are given to understand that the time now is 2001, although the date is mentioned only in the film's title and never comes up in the dialogue or image.

A man disembarks at the station. This is the American Heywood Floyd, later identified as the president of the National Council of Astronautics. During his stopover, in the lobby of a Hilton hotel in space, he has an interview with a Russian scientist who asks him about an American moon base that has gone mysteriously silent, and about which rumours of an epidemic are circulating. Without entirely denying the rumour, Floyd cites his obligation not to divulge sensitive information. We understand from the discussion between Floyd and the Russians that there is also a Soviet base on the moon.

Floyd goes to the moon. In the underground base of Clavius, in the course of a meeting, he reveals to us that the epidemic rumour is a diversion, a temporary ruse whose purpose is to hide a momentous discovery. Later, we learn what it is: an object has been unearthed that was 'deliberately buried' at a site on the moon four million years ago, and which emits a very strong magnetic field. Floyd travels to the site with other scientists, and we see a monolith similar in form and size to the one seen in the episode of the prehistoric apemen. When one of the astronauts tries to take a picture of his companions grouped in front of the object, the monolith emits a strident signal, just at the moment when the sun hits it (it is the lunar dawn).

Title: 'Jupiter Mission: 18 Months Later'.

The spaceship *Discovery* has been travelling for three weeks towards Jupiter on a long mission. On board are Dave Bowman, the head of the expedition, his assistant Frank Poole and three astronauts hibernating in individual white chilled compartments, scheduled to be awakened when the expedition nears its goal. The sixth passenger is a computer, a perfected specimen of the series HAL 9000, who speaks in a synthesised male voice that is suave and refined, and who sees through red 'eyes' installed throughout the ship. Hal controls all activity on the *Discovery*, and sees to the comfort of the passengers (both awake and hibernating).

Hal asks Dave how he feels about 'some extremely odd things about this mission' (why were three of the astronauts put to sleep just before take-off, after four months of training?), but Dave does not answer. Then Hal notifies him that a unit of the ship's antenna is about to fail. Dave jets out into space in a small spherical shuttle called a pod. He then goes out into the void in his space suit, manoeuvring with jets on his backpack; he removes the part from the antenna, replaces it with a new one and brings the suspect part back into the mother ship. Frank and Dave check the unit and find no defect; their conclusion is confirmed by a counter-check made back on earth at Mission Control. Hal appears to have made an error, but he denies this and attributes the mistake to humans. Dave and Frank climb into a pod for privacy and cut audio contact with Hal; they discuss possibly disconnecting the computer if they confirm that it is malfunctioning. Unfortunately, as we later discover, they do not realise that Hal can read their lips through a porthole.

Up to this point, the film has proceeded at a peaceful, neutral rhythm that might be called objective.

Suddenly, during Frank's turn to spacewalk into the void to reinstall the antenna unit, we see his pod attack him and cut off the airflow to his space-suit. He dies. Dave goes out in a different pod to retrieve Frank's body as it turns over and over in the darkness. In his haste he neglects to put on his helmet. Hal – whom we realise has caused Frank's death by remote control – terminates the support systems for the three hibernating astronauts, who meet their demise in deathly silence.³ When Dave tries to re-enter the Discovery, Hal, with whom he is communicating by radio, refuses him entry in the name of the higher interest of the mission; Hal also reveals his awareness of Dave's intention to disconnect him. At great peril, Dave manages to gain access into the Discovery, briefly passing through the vacuum of space, into an emergency airlock. He goes to Hal's memory centre, which we had not seen until now, and manually disconnects the computer in spite of Hal's pleas. Once Hal 'dies', a prerecorded message (made before the ship left on its mission, and designed to play when the ship neared Jupiter) reveals to Dave the real purpose of the voyage:⁴ the discovery on the moon of a black monolith that is sending signals towards Jupiter, an object that has remained inert and whose function is a mystery.

This is the first 'action' sequence of *2001* in the classic sense, but it is narrated with hardly more drama than anything before or after.

A new title presents the next segment: 'Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite'.

From this point on, the film becomes much more of a 'sensory experience'.

Near Jupiter and its moons floating in space, we see the reappearance of a monolith like the previous one, but 'horizontal';⁵ its size is impossible to gauge. It seems to welcome and guide Dave who is carried along in his spherical pod on a stellar trip. Through his eyes we are subjected to dizzying perspectives; we see galaxies, novas, cosmic and organic phenomena of indeterminate scale; we fly over grandiose landscapes in magical colours. Suddenly the trip is over; the pod and Dave inside, in his spacesuit, are now in the middle of what looks like a luxury hotel suite decorated in Regency style; it is comfortable and hermetically enclosed, but surrounded by some sort of cosmic noise.

Through a striking series of eyeline matches, we think three times that another person is present, but each time it is Dave, markedly older, in this space where he lives, eats and ages, apparently without ever having a single living contact. Finally he lies as a very old man on the bed, about to die, when the monolith appears, standing at the foot of the bed, and he stretches his hand out toward it. A large, glowing foetus takes his place on the bed.

While we hear the same triumphal music that had accompanied the ape's discovery of the 'tool', this perfectly formed male foetus with its eyes open, itself as huge as a planet and resembling a baby Dave, approaches the planet earth and slowly turns its eyes toward us ...



'The End', to the sound of Strauss's 'Blue Danube' Waltz.

The spectator leaving the cinema does not have the sense of having seen a finished, resolved, gap-free film. S/he has the impression that the film could go on, with more developments, other parts.

This impression is not created solely by the enigmatic character of certain story events, but also by the spectator's constant awareness of *form*, a form both strongly foregrounded and replete with rifts and absences. It is a form that consists of detached parts, and is a major aspect of the originality of *2001*.

Segmentation on Display

The question of whether and how a film is divided into parts, and whether and how the segmentation is marked, lies at the heart of film narrative. A narration or representation does not at all have the same meaning if it makes a display of its divisions – in acts, scenes, tableaux, songs, tunes, entrances, book chapters, comic strips, and so on, as is the case with almost all genres in existence before film⁶ – or if it covers them up. In fact, the cinema is perhaps the first major popular narrative–representational genre in history that, at one stage of its evolution (the classical sound film), worked to completely hide its divisions, and avoided marking them consciously for the audience, thereby changing the rules of the game.⁷

As a rule, the silent film tended to foreground its segmentation, in sequences and/or acts, via a set of practices that included intertitles, the use of monochrome tints that differed according to the type of scene, musical accompaniment by individual numbers strung together, and so on – while the sound film tended to hide them. During the 60s, two directors contributed to marking the division of films into parts and scenes, in an attempt to deal with form 'out in the open'. One was Sergio Leone, whose Westerns were like Verdi operas. The other, with *2001*, was Stanley Kubrick. Only in the 80s and especially the 90s did the foregrounding of a film's structure, particularly through play with titles, become almost commonplace in popular cinema as well as in 'auteur' films.⁸

The problem of the construction of *2001* in two, three, four or *n* parts is not just a minor one, since it orders our understanding of the film and the effects it produces. More than any of Kubrick's previous or subsequent

films, this film announces its divisions in every way possible: with titles, with an almost totally new crop of characters in each section, with an intermission accompanied by music (Ligeti's *Atmosphères*) in the film's original release, and with pieces of music deployed in wide swaths, which succeed in cutting the film into very recognisable chunks (for example, the 'Blue Danube' Waltz begins with the first vision of the future and ends on the spaceship's arrival at the station).

But what is important is that the points where the different division markers occur do not always coincide. This non-coincidence among the breaks, depending on which segmentation criteria you choose, gives the film a stimulant effect. We are obliged to choose what makes sense and how it makes sense. This non-coinciding makes the viewer actively compare, find symmetries, be on the lookout for 'rhymes'.

Two, Three or Four Parts?

If you go by the intermission that was part of the original version, *2001* is a *two-part* film. When you work on *2001* from a video copy, or from the film projected in a modern cinema, you tend to forget that originally the film, which was longer than average, once had an intermission. The spell of the story was maintained with Ligeti's *Atmosphères* piped throughout the auditorium and foyer; the music was actually recorded on to the magnetic strip of the 70mm film and played from the projector.

This intermission, no longer practised today,⁹ maintained suspense by interrupting the film in the middle of the most 'dramatic' episode, and at a point particularly pregnant with questions about its characters, dialogue, and conflicts: what does Hal 'think' about what he is 'seeing' through the pod porthole? Is he going to be unplugged? More specifically, the break comes right after the shot of the silent mouths of Poole and Bowman, seen in a subjective shot through Hal's eye. We are watching both an illustration and an inversion of the *acousmètre*.¹⁰ Hal is a voice without a mouth, through whose eye we see mouths without voices.

One critic came up with this amusing theory:

Much of the critical hostility to *Space Odyssey* originated in the theater lobby during intermission. Critics (some of whom seemed to dislike movies and

wish they were more like books) met their friends and found that nobody was able to verbalize what the film, so far, had 'meant'.¹¹

If you go by the section titles only, *2001* is in *three* parts. According to this scheme, the first part includes both the apemen and Floyd. There is something idiotic about this, for the most striking division of *2001* occurs where no title is shown to mark it, in the elliptical cut from the bone to the spacecraft. But it is here that the segmentation exercise becomes meaningful: if there *weren't* those deliberately pompous introductory phrases – 'The Dawn of Man', 'Jupiter Mission', 'Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite' – the absence of a title at the exact moment of that dramatic cut would not have the power that it does have to transport us. It is entirely because of those words that this cut, this absence, becomes the unstated and unmarked division upon which the entire film is constructed. There is no unsaid except in the space of the said.

If we calculate according to the film's temporal ellipses, we also have three blocks, since there are only two jumps in time. The first is a hiatus of several million years, the other is a year and a half – apart from the fact that, in the last sequences of the cosmic trip and the room, time gets diluted and lost. So there too, the specific designation of 'eighteen months later' prepares us for something further on, when Dave is carried 'beyond the infinite', the loss of temporal scale and the blurring of different ages in one and the same character. Again, the said creating the unsaid.

Finally, if we take narrative segmentation as our principal criterion, which is the one most frequently invoked by critics, we have *four* parts: the apes and the monolith; Heywood Floyd's mission; the Discovery mission eighteen months later; and Bowman's trip 'beyond the infinite' (with the understanding that Bowman is the only character to appear in more than one section).

We could also segment the film according to any number of other criteria: appearances of the monolith, statements of specific musical pieces (no one piece appears in all of the film's time periods), the relation between dialogue scenes and those with no dialogue, sequences with and without titles. And all these segmentation schemes underscore what they cannot contain and name. All the precise details supplied in *2001* create

imprecision; all its plenitude creates voids, stimulating the play of rhymes, repetitions, parallels, echoes.

Here I shall adopt the division into four parts (see the table on page 61), framed by two brief supplementary and symmetrical sections. At the beginning, behind the brief opening titles, there is the alignment of celestial bodies, and at the end the confrontation between planet earth and the Star Child. The symmetry between the introduction and the coda is reinforced by the use of the same music from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

'The Dawn of Man' has all the earmarks of a classical prologue, in the false-etymological sense sometimes given to this term (that which precedes the word)¹² since it shows a species of evolved apes deprived of speech.

The next sequence is at once one of the visual highlights of the film, and an intentionally long, dragging prologue for the section that follows it. It alternates two types of scenes: a sort of visual amusement park in slow motion to the symphonic accents of the 'Blue Danube' Waltz, and dialogue scenes that are extremely static, as Kubrick is sometimes inclined towards. The character Heywood Floyd is the main thread weaving through this part, present in every scene.

The third section, which revolves around the voyage of the Discovery, is the longest, at fifty-seven minutes, and the closest in spirit to the classical cinema, which by no means detracts from its originality. It has characters, conflicts, suspense, a 'rebellion', an ordeal, and so on. This long section in turn functions retroactively like a long prologue to what follows.

The fourth, entitled 'Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite', is the first to retain a character from a previous part, but he utters not a word, nor does he act in a way that affects the plot. His fate totally taken in hand, Dave Bowman figures only as a captive representative of the human species, and as an open eye.

The brief image of the 'astral foetus' (I call it thus with reference to the essay by Jean-Paul Dumont and Jean Monod) or the Star Child, as the original screenplay calls it, can well be considered in turn like . . . an overture.

In fact, with *2001*, each part is subtended by the idea of an *after* and ends with a beginning: the beginning of man, the awakening of the monolith on the moon, the revelation to Dave of the monolith and therefore another species besides man, the possible beginning of a new species of superman.

I have spoken of the general form, but we must not ignore the story rhythm and the film's tone, at once both familiar and epic. On this point let me propose a parallel with a Russian writer whose name may perhaps surprise the reader.

A Cinema of Discontinuum

To approach the question of narrative and form in Kubrick, we might learn from the example of Tolstoy. André Gide wrote in his journal about *War and Peace* that, in the process of providing descriptions to the minutest details, Tolstoy lined up his chapters like so many static dioramas, dioramas lacking in the art of the significant detail, of cause and effect, of perspective. This criticism has more to it than other more adulatory assessments. Tolstoy's flattening, with neither perspective nor chiaroscuro, of a dense reality on to a surface crowded with details, arises from a certain philosophy of history, of war and determinism. The author clearly articulates this philosophy in a little-read essay that constitutes the end of his novel. For him, the *ridiculous character* is the one who convinces himself that he has control over the course of events – the Emperor Napoleon in person, or in any case Napoleon as the writer makes him move and act; while the *positive character*, embodied by General Kutuzov, is the one who understands the illusion that produces this pretence and who, letting himself be carried by the course of things with apparent fatalism, reaches a mastery of another order.

Here are three points in common between Tolstoy and Kubrick, who are otherwise so different: their common interest in Napoleon, and more generally in war and illusions of strategy; their critique of voluntarism (that is, the belief that if you do something as well as you can, it will produce the desired result); and last, on the level of style, the cold, hard light they love to cast on all they depict.

The strong differences between them emerge on the level of form. While Tolstoy approaches the novel as an infinitely extensible framework, Kubrick manipulates this equalisation of details for a formal effect linked to the rhythm and tempo of cinema. For Kubrick, the 'by the menu' quality of certain parts emphasises all the more pointedly the violence of any ruptures or wrenchings that occur during the implacable course of the film.

And while a novel can be read, leafed through or devoured altogether in whatever rhythms its reader decides on, in the cinema it is the director who turns the pages at the speed *he* chooses. Kubrick's cinema, with its very calculated tempo and its cruel editing, as if cut by a razor, turns those pages with an authority that cannot be argued with. This 'turning', especially in many passages of *2001*, is the shot transitions.

It is difficult to make these edits feel any more 'imposed' in a film than they are in *2001*, just as it is difficult to highlight as much as Kubrick does the impression that a film is a stitched-together juxtaposition of scenes in succession. And on the vertical axis,¹³ the superimposing of music on to images in *2001* can seem forced, rigid and graceless, but you have to either take it or leave it. Not because the music is all drawn from pre-existing concert works (Bernard Eisenschitz remarked that this practice is as old as cinema itself), but rather because of the way the superimposing is done. The music is *exhibited*, and is rarely mixed with sound effects, more rarely still with dialogue; it refuses to melt in or make common cause with other soundtrack elements.

<i>Section</i>	<i>Music</i>	<i>Dialogue</i>
Opening credits 2'	<i>Zarathustra</i>	no
A. The Dawn of Man: 14'	no	cries
	<i>Requiem</i> (A2)	no
	no	cries
	<i>Zarathustra</i> (A3)	no
B. (no title): 33'		
Voyage to space station	'Blue Danube' Waltz (B1)	no
At the station	no	yes
Voyage to the moon	'Blue Danube' (B3)	pronounced, not heard
Floyd's speech	no	yes
To the monolith	<i>Lux aeterna</i> (B5)	no
	no	yes
	<i>Lux aeterna</i> (B5)	no
The visit to the monolith	<i>Requiem</i>	no

C. Jupiter Mission 18 months**later:** 57'

31' 15"; Intermission; 25' 45"

Exposition	<i>Gayaneh</i> (C1)	no
	no	yes
	<i>Gayaneh</i> (C3)	yes
The drama I		yes
INTERMISSION	<i>Atmosphères</i>	
The drama II	no	yes

D. Jupiter and Beyond the**Infinite:** 22' 25"

Cosmic trip	<i>Requiem</i> (D1),	
	<i>Atmosphères</i> (D2-4)	no
The bedroom	no	
	<i>Zarathustra</i> (D7)	no
End	<i>Zarathustra</i> (D8)	
End credits 3' 53"	'Blue Danube'	

In sum, Kubrick does everything possible to render the film a *discontinuum* – in the image of the famous black monolith, whose obtuse and irrefutable presence causes rupture in the scenes where it enters, for it never integrates into its environment – neither with the natural animal setting at the beginning, nor with the human setting of the central episode, nor finally with the cosmic universe of the end.

The monolith and the structure of the film are thus intimately related.

Notes

- 1 The viewer is not supposed to know that these images are supposedly emblematic of an epoch of drought on earth that put the existence of the apes in jeopardy; this is what the voice-over commentary, which was ultimately omitted, was to explain. It might give the apes a specificity: *these* apes live by a small pond. The same goes for the sparseness of the vegetation.

- 2 The shots of the large wheel being approached by the arrowlike spacecraft, called Orion in the screenplay, clearly suggest sexual penetration.
- 3 Hal's 'responsibility' can be deduced only from a succession of dire warnings flashing on control monitors (see below).
- 4 In the novel, it is clearly established that the three astronauts in hibernation were put in that state because, unlike Dave and Frank, they knew the secret mission. In the film, nothing gives us this information and a sentence in the speech recorded by Floyd even seems to contradict this thesis.
- 5 Horizontal obviously in relation to the film frame; we are, after all, in space.
- 6 Even if Wagner abolished divisions of his operas into choruses, arias and so on, he retained and even emphasised the division by acts, going so far as to specify by what manner the curtain must fall at the end of each, and what music to play at the end of the intermissions to bring the audience back into the auditorium.
- 7 Fade-outs are almost always calculated to be perceived subliminally, so the audience does not have time to realise that the film is moving to another segment.
- 8 To cite only films of the 90s: David Fincher's *Seven* (1995), with titles indicating the passing days; Lars von Trier's 1996 *Breaking the Waves*, which has chapter headings; Wayne Wang's *Smoke* (1995, written by Paul Auster); and the works of Pascale Ferran including *Petits arrangements avec les morts* (1994) and Arnaud Desplechin's *Comment je me suis disputé ... (ma vie sexuelle)* (1996).
- 9 Except sometimes in Switzerland and Italy, where films are routinely shown with a break in the middle. Intermissions were an established custom in France at the time, but primarily for films longer than two hours, in the large cinemas and the prestige first-run houses. So *2001's* intermission was culturally overdetermined, as it emphasised the operative aspect of the film. In recent years, an intermission (lasting a mere two minutes, during which Ligeti's *Atmosphères* was played) was restored for the DVD release from Warner Bros.
- 10 See my theory of the *acousmètre* – a character who talks but remains invisible, an acousmatic master and being (this word plays on both the

French *maître* and *être*) – in my book *The Voice in Cinema*, and also later in this book.

- 11 William Kloman, quoted in Agel, p. 302.
- 12 In fact, a 'prologue' is actually the moment when one 'speaks before' (the beginning of the action, and addressing the spectator), as in Greek drama or in Shakespeare (for example, *Romeo and Juliet* or *Troilus and Cressida*).
- 13 In the sense in which 'vertical' is used in western classical music: referring to harmony.