

# 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

Directed by Stanley Kubrick  
Produced by Stanley Kubrick  
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
Released in 1968

The search for origin, understanding, and purpose will continue as long as man has left on Earth. Director Stanley Kubrick and co-writer Arthur C. Clarke arrive at some conclusions of feeling, but not of thought, in one of the most extraordinary films of the 20th Century.

As an adventure movie, a sci-fi movie, as any kind of movie, *2001* is something fresh, for its time. Some critics find it as pretentious as Kubrick, himself, but others greatly admire its innovative risks—sparse dialogue, no conclusion, a bizarrely eclectic classical score. The first fifteen minutes have nothing to do with space and the film's most sympathetic and endearing character is nothing more than a disembodied voice and a trackball-eye.

High marks go to the design of the spacesuits, the ape costumes, centrifuge space stations, supercomputers without blinking lights, the painstaking model work, the scenes of intrigue between HAL and the crew, space with no sound, and the fifth-dimensional Christmas light show that Dave screams through.

Considering how intelligent Kubrick is, modifying all hairstyles and clothing so they reflected neither the '60s nor any other period would have greatly aided the establishment of a new world, one that didn't resemble a galactic outpost of Swingin' London. It's an obvious step. Worse, the product placement is egregious. AT&T, Pan Am, Hilton, and Howard Johnson's flash their logos, and Kubrick collects some change to make his film, thinking, perhaps, that such references connect the world of today with the projected future he sees for us. But in these station breaks, verisimilitude is compromised. Throwing into the mix a few fictional enterprises, new businesses of the future, would have helped. As it stands, these product placements don't pull us into a new and fantastic world, but anchor us to the one we wanted to leave for a few hours.

More than an obscure quest to Know, *2001* is about the monolith. Why some extraterrestrial power would want apathetic ape to evolve into spacefaring man is a mystery on top of that in the fore—how does the monolith manage such a persuasive hum? The wonder is better left unexplained, because any attempt to invest it with definite meaning would be as preposterous as the story, itself. And, for that matter, it would be inconsistent with the tone of the film. The search is always more interesting than the discovery.

A million-year struggle begins with the transformation of one ape. Just getting him to stand up straight was challenging enough but now, at last, a man called Dave is taken at point of death and regenerated. He's the Star Child, resembling a fetus in the sky. Just what is special about his new understanding of life is left vague. The aliens could be transforming the human race, man by man, into beings of their kind, in their version of intermarriage. Maybe they're seeking unto themselves a new race of jesters. It's fun to speculate.

Kubrick does get a lot right about technology. Most of his time filming was spent overcoming the physical realm—set design, visual effects, and the like. Along the way he made some astute decisions concerning what Everyman, not just the Star Child, would see in 2001—wide screen televisions and cameras that don't click.

One ambiguous plot point could have a definite answer. HAL kills off the crew, but can't finish Dave off. He journeys through the space-time portal and winds up under house arrest. The question is, was HAL really failing or did he, being the only entity aware of the mission's purpose, decide that involving humans in it would be a mistake? The simplest explanation is that HAL is embarrassed about his error and moves to defend himself lest the astronauts lose faith in him and decide to pull the plug. It's self-preservation. On the other hand, the HAL 9000 computers have a perfect operational record. Maybe HAL knew the communications unit was fine, but concocted a story of its imminent failure so he could get the astronauts suspicious about HAL's reliability, which would justify HAL's paranoia. That's self-justification. After all, a computer should prove ideal at compartmentalized thinking.

Before matters become contentious and the astronauts plot against HAL, the computer asks Dave if he's really dedicating himself to the mission. Even then HAL is looking to take his act solo—he either doubts the crew can take care of business or he wants all the glory of discovering alien life for himself. It's during this same conversation with Dave that HAL projects the communications unit is due to fail.

Invested with human emotions, he may also feel guilt. So, without any threat, he can't act. He can't kill the five crew members without justification, even if he would like to. But if it's an issue of self-defense, if he feels threatened and that he must respond in kind, HAL can kill without hesitation.