

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (1968)

Stanley Kubrick

OVERVIEW Following his political satire in *Dr Strangelove* (1964), Kubrick became fascinated by science fiction and began to collaborate with writer Arthur C Clarke. The two men worked together for the next four years, eventually producing a script that incorporated several of Clarke's short stories. Clarke later published a novel with the same title as the film, and the two stories differ only in emphasis. Despite the sensational visuals, there are no computer-generated effects, and whole movie was shot in the studio (the only exception being the first scene with the ape-men). The film was an instant hit with audiences, but divided critics, some of whom pronounced it 'unimaginative', 'boring' and 'plodding.' Shortly after release, it won several minor awards, but now, following decades of viewing, it is regularly judged the greatest science fiction film ever made. Most critics consider it to be Kubrick's masterpiece.

SYNOPSIS Four million years ago, a group of ape-men encounter a black monolith and fashion tools from animal bones. Shift to the modern-day where a team of scientists fly to the moon to examine the same monolith buried in a crater. Eighteen months later, another mission heads for Jupiter, guided by HAL (a super-computer) and Dr Bowman and Dr Poole. En route, HAL begins to malfunction and a struggle ensues between it/him and the human crew. The machine succeeds in killing Poole but is outwitted by Bowman, who manages to disable it. Just before landing on Jupiter, Bowman is told that his mission is to understand a radio signal sent by the monolith to Jupiter. Another shift in time and space takes us into a room, with Bowman in his space suit. He wanders through other rooms and sees several versions of himself, including an old man on a bed. When the monolith reappears at the foot of the bed, the old man reaches out for it and is transformed into a baby cocooned inside a globe of light.

MAIN CHARACTERS

HAL	HAL is a super-computer aboard the Jupiter Mission.
Bowman	Dr Bowman is one of two scientists on the mission.
Poole	Dr Poole is the other scientist on the mission.
Floyd	Dr Floyd is a scientist on an earlier mission to the moon.

STORY

Monolith The sun rises over a dry and rocky landscape, inhabited by a group of apes and wild animals, competing for food. Another group of ape-men attacks and drives the first group from its water hole. As the victorious ape-men wake in the morning, they discover a monolithic slab standing erect outside their cave. They examine it, feeling its sleek surface with their hands.

Tools Scrabbling around the remains of a dead animal, one of the hominids appears to take inspiration from the monolith and begins to use an animal bone to smash other bones. Later, while eating meat from a hunt, they use bones as weapons to kill a member of another group that has attacked them. Emboldened by this new technology, they drive the attackers away.

Space journey When a bone is tossed in the air, it becomes a satellite travelling to Clavius, which is an American outpost on the moon. Its only passenger is Dr Floyd, head of the US Council of Astronautics. Floyd breaks his long journey at Space Station 5. During the stop-over, he is welcomed by a friend, makes a call back home (on earth) and talks to his little daughter.

Secrecy Strolling through the space station, he runs into some fellow scientists, from Russia, and engages in casual conversation. When they learn that he is headed for Clavius, though, they reveal that 'strange things seem to be happening there,' including a loss of communication and possibly a mysterious epidemic. Mysteriously, Floyd says he is unable to discuss the matter.

Discovery Arriving at Clavius on the moon, Floyd speaks to a group of scientists, who are ready to undertake a study of a newly discovered artefact buried millions of years ago in a crater. Floyd mentions that rumours of an epidemic have been spread as a cover-story to ensure that they can examine the artefact away from the prying media. He also emphasises the need for complete security.

Monolith (again) Floyd and his associates travel by moon-bus to the crater and examine the artefact, which appears to have been buried on purpose. Wearing their space suits, they walk into the crater and see that it is a monolith exactly like the one that inspired the ape-men. They also examine it with their hands, as the ape-men did. When struck by sunlight, the monolith emits a deafening sound.

Jupiter mission Eighteen months later, a US space ship is on its way to Jupiter. On board are Dr Bowman and Dr Poole, both of whom had earlier been put into a deep sleep. Three other scientists and crew are still in deep sleep, lying like mummies in sarcophagi. This new version of a spacecraft is commanded by HAL, a large computer that reproduces (or mimics) human intelligence and emotions.

HAL A journalist interviews HAL, who speaks with pride about his work. The newsman then interviews Dr Bowman, who states that HAL's 'genuine' emotions have been programmed. HAL plays chess with Bowman, wishes him happy birthday and also has a man-to-man talk about his concerns for the mission.

Technical fault That conversation is cut off when HAL reports a technical fault with an antenna unit. In a complicated and dangerous exercise, Bowman goes outside the core unit to fix the problem but finds there is no fault. HAL recommends that they reinstall the antennae, but Mission Control reports that their own computer shows that HAL is wrong about the fault. The overconfident HAL claims the problem is down to human error. Worried that HAL is malfunctioning, Bowman and Poole talk secretly and decide that they must disable the computer. HAL is able to follow their conversation by lip-reading.

HAL revolts When Poole goes outside to replace the antenna unit, HAL cuts off his oxygen supply and causes him to drift off into space. When Bowman attempts to rescue his associate, HAL kills the three crew men in suspended animation. Having lost Poole's body, Bowman comes back to the ship, but HAL won't allow him to enter. HAL says that Bowman's plan to unplug him threatens the success of the mission and he can't permit that.

HAL extinguished Bowman manages to enter the ship through an emergency door and starts to disconnect HAL's electrical circuits. HAL admits that he's made some poor decisions recently and attempts to persuade Bowman that he must halt his plan. Bowman doesn't listen and HAL grows increasingly anxious about his/its own welfare. As Bowman disconnects more and more circuits, HAL's voice grows laboured, incoherent and, eventually, extinct.

Bowman's mission When the job is finished, Bowman hears a pre-corded message explaining that his mission is to discover the origin and purpose of the radio signal sent by the monolith to Jupiter. As Bowman approaches Jupiter, he sees yet another monolith, which is larger and orbits the earth. On his descent to the star, he sees a fantastic light display and several strange landscapes before landing up in a bedroom decorated in neo-classical style.

Back to the beginning Still in his bright red space suit, he wanders through other, similar rooms and encounters himself in various guises. As an older man, he sits down to eat dinner and then sees an even older version of himself lying on his death bed. The monolith appears at the foot of his bed, and he attempts to stretch out a hand. At that moment, he becomes an unborn baby inside a transparent pod that circles the earth.

THEMES

Humanity Although the themes of the film are intentionally elusive, the primary focus is certainly on human evolution, with all its flaws and glory. The arc of the story stretches from first hominids and their discovery of tool-making, approximately 2.6 million years ago, to the development of space travel

to the moon and then to HAL and travel to Jupiter. Against the backdrop of this mind-boggling time-scale, there is also the more intimate process of a single individual, especially in the final scenes when Bowman sees himself as an old man who turns into a baby.

We usually think of 'evolution' as inherently positive, a transition from lower to higher life forms with ever increasing levels of intelligence. However, as the film shows, evolution can be viewed from a more scientific perspective, in which we follow the development of life over time, shorn of any ethical judgement or comparisons. Indeed, one of the striking elements in the film is the stability of human habits and attitudes, even in the advanced stages that create computers and space ships. For example, Dr Floyd behaves like any mid-twentieth-century traveller when he takes time out from his busy journey to call home. Floyd uses a credit card for his 'video telephone' call, but otherwise the scene could be from the 1950s. Other signs of a world that has changed slowly are the icon on the telephone booth, the Howard Johnson's Earthlight Room and the Hilton Space Station. Later, Bowman talks to his parents on his birthday and receives their blessings, while the camera sweeps over the other crew members in deep sleep. HAL, of course, is all too-human, despite his manifold circuits. Many interpretations of the film have considered it an expression of optimism regarding humanity, while others comment on its sinister, apocalyptic tone. While both views have merit, it can also be argued that the film endorses neither and simply dramatises the history of humanity from apes to astronauts. Details and emphases have altered in that long history, but the fundamental nature of hominids has remained remarkably stable.

Technology It is also clear that the primary driver of human evolution is/was technology. This is evident in the dramatic opening sequence, when the ape-men learn how to use a bone as a tool, and it continues with the development of super-computers in the rest of the film. Again, as with evolution, the film does not make an explicit statement about technology but merely exposes its potential danger. It is significant that the ape-men use the bone not to dig food out of a tree trunk (or some other benign use) but to kill their enemies. The super-computer HAL is also a killer. He murders three of the deep-sleeping crew members, sends Poole to certain death and tries to eliminate Bowman. Even if technology is not lethal, it poses a danger through its ability to control humans. This possibility is at the core of the struggle between Bowman and HAL, which gives the film its dramatic energy. HAL threatens to take over the ship, and Bowman only just manages to thwart him. Again, the film presents this competition in subtle terms. HAL, the perfect machine, makes a mistake, proving that he is as prone to error as the humans who built him. In fact, HAL is so human that he suffers an emotional crisis because (as Kubrick himself put it) 'he could not accept evidence of his own fallibility.' In the end, man triumphs over machine, reversing the conclusion to the director's previous film (*Dr Strangelove*). Perhaps he wanted to counterbalance the terror of nuclear war with a message of hope.

Quest The last words heard in the film (in the pre-recorded message played by Bowman after disconnecting HAL) are: 'Its [the monolith's] origin and purpose are still a total mystery.' Indeed, the theme of a quest pervades the entire story. Although the scientists are investigating the monolith, the film's use of allegory and symbolism suggest that they are searching for the meaning of human life. Here, the film's spectacular cinematography is crucial in creating a sense of wonder and searching. We see glorious terrestrial scenes of the sun rising over the monolith and other scenes of space, with kaleidoscopic patterns of changing colours and lights. Even mundane shots (such as Dr Floyd on the telephone) include numinous images, such as planets floating in deep space, in the background. The music, too, featuring tracks of contemplative compositions, contributes to this atmosphere of the quest. From the beginning, the film is driven by questions: What is going on at Clavius? Is it an epidemic? No, but what is that artefact found buried in a crater? At the end, we ask, what is that radio signal sent by the monolith? No answers are provided. Instead, the film presents only the search for them. But that curiosity, the restless mental energy, the need for discovery, from tools to computers, from the ape-men to the astronauts, is itself surely the secret of life.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dr Floyd Dr Floyd is not a memorable character, though he plays a major role in the first half of the story. Genial, informal but still in charge, he seems to represent a typical government scientist or advisor, someone you might like but not someone you can share your intimate thoughts with.

Dad Dr Floyd is the top space scientist in America, but he is shown as little different to the average man and father. This is illustrated (perhaps announced too blatantly) in his first scene when he reaches a stopover on his way to Clavius. The first thing he does, after passing through security, is to

call home. His wife is out, so he talks with his little daughter, a sweet child, who asks if he will be home in time for her party. Floyd, like so many other fathers before him, excuses himself from her big event. 'Sorry, I'm travelling,' he says. 'Be sure to tell Mommy that I called.' Floyd is an everyman, resembling the lead actor in the TV program 'Father Knows Best'. He is no mad scientist.

Professional Following that scene, when he bumps into some Russian scientist friends, Floyd displays another aspect of his character. While he was open and warm with his daughter, he becomes secretive and cagey when his friends ask about the 'strange happenings' on Clavius. Twice he says that he's 'not at liberty to discuss that.' This tense scene leads into another, when he addresses a group of American scientists. Again, at first, with the American flag prominent beside him, he is relaxed and speaks conversationally with his colleagues. Then he changes tone and reassures them that the cover-story about the epidemic on Clavius is a necessary security measure. He closes by urging them to accept the need for 'absolute secrecy.' This is Dr Floyd the professional bureaucrat, who reassures his colleagues and, to be blunt, tells them to follow orders.

HAL HAL is often said to be the main character in the story. Represented by a red glass plate with a glowing yellow eye in the centre, and speaking in a monotone androgynous voice, he is certainly an unforgettable and eerie presence. He is, of course, supremely intelligent but also calm, confident and reassuring. Only at the end do his sinister qualities emerge.

Savvy HAL is smart, capable of directing and, if necessary, correcting faults in the complex mission undertaken by the astronauts. When the problem with the antenna unit arises, and an initial test by Bowman and Poole reveals no fault, HAL has a ready solution. In his reassuringly bland voice, he admits that 'it is puzzling'. Then he recommends that the unit be reinstalled and allowed to fail (as he has predicted it will). 'Then it should be a simple matter to track down the cause,' he says in conclusion. Bowman is sceptical and checks with mission control on earth, but they endorse the recovery plan proposed by the little glowing yellow light. This scene shows us that HAL is considered as authoritative as the space command centre on earth. Later, after we learn that he has made an error, we can appreciate his skill in persuading the crew to follow his advice, against their own better judgement. HAL is not only intelligent, he is also savvy.

Confident During HAL's first appearance, as an interviewee of a TV journalist on earth, he expresses his unshakable confidence in his capability to direct the mission. The journalist describes HAL as the most advanced example of intelligent machines, one that can match 'most of the activities of the human brain and with greater speed and reliability.' He speaks directly to HAL and asks if his enormous responsibility in supervising the mission, especially the 'men in hibernation, ever cause him to worry or lose confidence. 'Let me put it this way,' says the calm HAL, 'the 9000 series is the most reliable computer ever made...we are all incapable of error.' When HAL is next asked if he is ever frustrated by his dependence of humans, he says, 'Not in the slightest bit. I enjoy working with people. I have a stimulating relationship with Dr Poole and Dr Bowman.' His personality is not unlike Dr Floyd's. Both are authoritative and yet affable.

Mendacious Genial though he is, HAL can also be stubborn, even mendacious. This element is revealed when the struggle between him and Bowman reaches a critical stage. HAL has just switched off the oxygen to the sleeping astronauts, and Bowman returns from his unsuccessful attempt to retrieve Poole's body from space. When Bowman guides his pod into a docking bay, he finds the doors locked and asks HAL to unlock them. Now, a different kind of HAL speaks, though in the same monotone. 'I'm sorry Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that,' he says. Bowman wants to know why and HAL explains that he knows about the plan to disconnect him. Then he adds that 'the mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardize it.' Bowman says he can get in through the emergency air lock, but a self-satisfied HAL points that without his space helmet he won't survive. Bowman does survive, but HAL has done his best to kill him.

Bowman Dave Bowman is an intense young man with a fixed stare and clear blue eyes. As an astronaut aboard an important space mission, we assume he is intelligent, even-tempered and reliable. Indeed, he is all those things, plus a touch artistic since he fills the long hours on the space ship by sketching on a pad.

Trusting Dave Bowman is not a suspicious person. He does not question what he is told or doubt the integrity of his associates. His instinct to trust others is illustrated in an early conversation with HAL. The super computer is a little uneasy about 'certain things' associated with the Jupiter mission, for example, the extreme secrecy and the separate training for the scientists put into deep sleep. As

HAL expresses his misgivings, Bowman listens sympathetically, his mouth in a slight smile and his eyes attentive. He doesn't argue with HAL's suspicions, but he dismisses them with a bit of mockery when he asks if HAL is preparing his 'psychology report.' Bowman is not worried by HAL or anyone's anxieties. He trusts that the mission, its crew and machines, will function as instructed.

Determined Even when he expresses trust in others, Bowman's face is taut. Not necessarily nervous, but intensely focused. The inner strength hinted at by his facial features is displayed during his fight to the death with the renegade HAL. His determination is at its peak when HAL locks him out of the space ship, forcing him to take the dangerous route of entering the vessel through the emergency airlock without his helmet. Knowing he would die if he remained inside for long, he manages to blow the electrical circuits on the rear of his pod, allowing the force to throw him directly inside the airlock. He seals the airlock, grabs a helmet and proceeds toward the main frame of the ship, where he disconnects HAL's many circuits, one by one. HAL begs him to stop, but he knows that he must prevent HAL from taking over the entire mission. He will not be deterred.



(HAL)



(Bowman inside the pod)



(The ape-men inspect the monolith)