

The Kubrick Faq

Edited By Barry Krusch

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 Q) What are some brief insights on 2001?

DAWN OF MAN

- Opening of film dovetails neatly with end of DR. STRANGELOVE: "We'll meet again, some sunny day . . ." First image in film is of the Sun.
- DAWN OF MAN sequence in 2001 a "prequel" to DR. STRANGELOVE. Obviously, Kubrick pondered deeply the astonishing reality that idea that man was smart enough to blow up the earth, but not smart enough to stop that from happening (man doesn't want to nail himself, but he does). How could such a phenomenon occur? Beginning of 2001 attempts to show how we got fooled into heading down the wrong path. Story of man told in actions of the simians.
- "If there's a World War III, World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." Bombing ourselves back into the Stone Age.
- Sun not just light, but heat (a desert). Sun not necessarily good! Sun is positive in relation to dark, but not to desert. There, sun = negative, water = positive. Messages: a) relativity; b) need Sun AND Water to survive -- objectivity -- avoid dissection, look for integration. White = evil, black = evil, together = good (negative + negative = a positive).
- Leopard kills Zebra. (Zebra = coexistence of black and white?)
- Opening of film a twist on GARDEN OF EDEN myth. The "Garden" turned out to be a desert, and it turns out Adam was a chimp. Adam's rib isn't his, it's from a dead animal. He doesn't create a woman with it, he kills with it. The Tree of Knowledge is inanimate. The Apple eaten: meat? steel?
- Why the twist? Earth not a garden to lose, but a desert to irrigate and make a garden. We didn't lose Paradise, we failed to work for it.
- First discovery of Monolith: everything out in the open, can't miss it, can't hide. Has to be, for the apes. Has to be obvious to be seen. Second discovery of Monolith: truth is below the surface, have to dig for it. Still can't hide (from HAL), but now you're shut in (in a loop: Poole shadowboxing around periphery, space station circular like a Ferris Wheel -- loop = lack of progress, going around in circles).
- Kubrick reverses typical semiotic code: black here can be good (monolith = knowledge, or black = the stage, the platform, open possibilities, hole to jump through), white can be death, evil (bones, sterility, cold, clean = lack of diversity).
- Merging of the literal and metaphorical: Man both a literal and metaphorical chimp. Even though the answer is right in front of us, we miss it. Once the obvious is discovered, we're on our way.

- Bone right there in full view. Don't have to dig to find it. You do, however, need to de-anchor the bone from its old frame of bone-as-STRUCTURAL DEVICE and re-anchor to bone-as-WEAPON. That's something. Note: if "necessity is the mother of invention," (father?), then a primal impulse provided the intellectual energy needed to make the shift (the same combination that leads to development of the atomic bomb [cf. later match cut]).
- Bone is discovered when the chimp is cut off from the group. When in a group, listening to the music of the spheres. Alone, coming up with bad ideas (compare Jack's writings in THE SHINING, Ripper's plan in DR. STRANGELOVE). "Bad" because not thought through (since not discussed with others; no feedback).
- Chimp at first seems harmless. He's "playing" (beginning of creativity?). But he's playing with fire. It's not just that he's beating some old bones apart that inspires dread; but the knowledge of what this will lead to down ("up") the road. (Technical knowledge + impulse without correlative long-term view).
- "Dawn of Man" music plays while chimp is playing with bone. Now the "dawning" is the dawning of consciousness (the movement from unconscious to conscious, night to day, is mirrored in the movement of chimp to man [ignorance to knowledge]). Note that as Kubrick films the scene, it only "dawns on" the chimp that he CAN use the tool to destroy. What doesn't yet dawn on the chimp is why he SHOULDN'T (the "is" precedes the "ought"; technical knowledge comes easier than moral knowledge). The chimp is only smart enough to discern the obvious.
- Existence of the bone guarantees that chimps must now divide into separate, rival groups: must split apart for "survival" (even though the splitting-apart leads to DR. STRANGELOVE scenarios). In case it wasn't clear before, it is now: bone = death in more ways than one.
- Apes by water -- you'd think they'd cooperate, start agriculture. Instead, they fight over it. Don't think about future retaliation.
- The man-apes were given the use of tools by the Monolith, but they learn to kill other man-apes AFTER the Monolith has disappeared. (M.M.)
- Pro-MoonWatcher (as bone-wielder): he went first; took risk.
Con-MoonWatcher (as bone-wielder): he was the chimp who steered us up the wrong path.
- Is the chimp who touched the Monolith the same one who wielded the bone? Maybe the chimp who touched the Monolith is the one who got killed by the bone (echoes of Christianity).
- Monolith points up and down, not left and right. Vertical orientation (go deep and high, not sideways).
- Abstraction = high (in the clouds) = confusion. Concrete (desert looks like) = clarity (landscape, bare terrain).

- The bone goes UP. UP = "progress"? (But "what goes up must come down"). Watch for the precise moment when Kubrick cuts from bone to satellite, and focus on the directional motion of the bone.

DAY OF MAN

Space Station/Moon

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- The switch from Richard Strauss to Johann Strauss (on the downbeat of the bone) is a marvelous pun, and makes me think of the dance tunes with which the Convalescent in Zarathustra celebrates his "invalidity."

(G.A.)

- Stewardess returns Poole's pen ("the pen is mightier than the sword"). Moonwatcher's bone comes back (theme of circularity -- boomerang -- karma -- what goes out comes back in [see also THE SHINING -- throw ball against the wall, it comes back]). Note that here this "coming back" is not obvious; the tool changes form. Bone then, pen now. This shift in form hides what's really going on. Have to see below surface to get closer to "reality."
- Design of spaceships: organic form, inorganic materials = fusion of organic with inorganic.
- Banality of dialogue matches quality of food. "Garbage in, garbage out."
- Hypothesis: World finally achieved cooperation (Russians together with Americans on space station), and was given their reward.
- Floyd's conversation with daughter: he does not say "I love you" at the end.

(M.C.)

- Floyd's daughter says "yes" repeatedly, much like Molly Bloom on the final page of Joyce's ULYSSES.
- Floyd's daughter: Mommy's gone shopping, Daddy's at work, the babysitter/sister is in the bathroom. And what does she want for a birthday present? 1) A telephone (even though they have "lots of telephones," according to Floyd). To this Floyd says "no". 2) A pet (e.g. a "bushbaby" [bush + baby = return to roots + return to roots]). To this Floyd says "we'll have to see about that" (i.e. "no"?). But maybe only one of them sees.

The parent-celebrating-child's-birthday-electronically theme is seen from the other point of view later on, when Poole is similarly congratulated. (The parent's "Happy Birthday" song in that scene foreshadows HAL's later "Daisy Daisy.") [Note that with his sunglasses on (indoors, so doubly shielded from the sun) Poole sees even less than Floyd. "18 months" (two birth-cycles [generations?] later, the Child is more removed than the Parent. Apparently, we've learned well.

-- There is, implicit in the idea that an American child in a future society could ask for a bushbaby as a birthday present, a notion of `human technological triumph over nature' . . .
(C.C.)

-- Floyd is "missing the party."

-- Floyd's speech: he and the person introducing him "go around in circles."

-- "You know, that was an excellent speech you gave us, Heywood. . . I'm sure it beefed up morale a helluva lot."

Here are five statements Floyd made in that speech:

- 1) The cover story of an epidemic might cause concern and anxiety to relatives and friends.
- 2) Floyd found the cover story "personally embarrassing."
- 3) The truth could not be presented to the public without adequate "conditioning" of said public.
- 4) The cover story would be maintained "as long as deemed necessary by the Council."
- 5) "Formal security oaths" would be obtained in writing from "everyone who has any knowledge of the event," including the scientist complimenting Floyd.

-- On the ceiling, aimed at Floyd's audience, are cameras.

-- On one of the ship's readout screens, the phrase "TERM DIAG." "Terminal diagnosis"?

-- Floyd and his companions to the moon are lit as though the blood was drained out of their bodies.

-- "Well, how about a little coffee?" Coffee is the beverage that wakes you up after you've been dozing.

-- The sun is not shown striking the monolith when the astronauts are near it.

(G.A.)

-- At the TMA-1 site, as the handheld camera is following Floyd around, you can catch a glimpse of Kubrick, holding the camera and looking in the viewfinder, reflected in Floyd's visor. Kubrick gets to "shoot" Floyd and "expose" him at the same time. Now let's see what develops . . .

(B.T./B.K.)

Discovery 1

-- There is no ceiling and no floor, because the room is always

- turning. (M.M.)
- Astronaut food looks like baby food.
 - Note: food is getting blander and blander, from the savage (eating raw flesh) to the bland (indistinguishable sandwiches) to the ridiculous (paste), reflecting the personality of its consumers. Interior life revealed by exterior life, or "you are what you eat."
 - Bowman burns fingers; a sign, like the zero-g toilet, that a closed design process inevitably leads to "bugs." He got "burned."
 - HAL wins the chess game (beats Poole). HAL will always win in a closed, finite system. In an open system, humanity can prevail; that is, IF humans have retained their humanity -- and if they make sure the system remains open.
 - While watching his parents on TV, Poole is as horizontal as the mummies which flank him, other than a slight elevation of the head.
 - Poole jogging: hamster in the exercise wheel. (P.B., p. 121)
 - HAL: "I'm sorry, Frank, but I think you missed it." (P.B., p. 144)
 - DAVID (David vs. Goliath) BOWMAN (Ulysses was an archer). Bowman kills the Cyclops (HAL has one eye [tunnel-vision? Seeing only at one level? Only seeing one interpretation as legitimate?]).
 - HAL's view is, literally, "warped."
 - HAL: "There can be no question about it." HAL a) has no doubts, and b) has no doubt that his lack of doubt is unproblematic (he's "incapable of error").
 - HAL's birthday: "The 12th of January, 1992." $12 + 1$ (January) + 21 ($1 + 9 + 9 + 2$) = 12121. A palindrome. The same thing forwards as backwards. Symmetry.
 - Bowman draws ("back to the drawing board"). His drawing is of almost childlike simplicity. Simple to us, but for him, in his culture, a "great leap for(back)ward." This is irony so subtle it's gasping for air.
 - Man must return to childhood to become a superman. Bowman = "boy-man." (M.W.)
 - Astronauts in closed pod attempt to beat HAL at his own game -- and they fail.
 - HAL knew what was on Jupiter. Wanted to fight to receive the honor. The human spirit beat the mechanical "spirit."
 - HAL made a mistake, and that's what made him "human." (Kubrick proves computer erred by contrasting the Space HAL's answer with the Earth HAL's answer. One of them had to be wrong). (Also: HAL's ingenuity at reading lips, curiosity at seeing Bowman's picture).

DUSK OF MAN

- Hibernating astronauts: the reduction to absurdity (reduction ad absurdum) of man in 2001. The only thing separating these people from death is the shape of a line on a graph!
- Hibernating astronauts: sleep becomes death with a machine at the helm.
- Pod turning to murder = machines "turning on" man. (G.A.)
- Careening pod: HAL throwing away the murder weapon. (P.B., p. 128)
- Everyman/Hero leaves spacecraft to save his companion; goes out to take the risk, so impulsively that he leaves his helmet behind (also, error, trust). Does something "stupid" that we "rational" people would not do. Has faith in himself and his fellow man. Ultimately, conquers obstacle. This entitles him to receive insight.
- The tiny pod holding up Frank's body like Mary in the Pieta, and the giant ship Discovery just sitting there in space like some giant God who isn't appeased by Dave's offering. Really cool. (A.F.)
- Bowman has to let go of death for life. (M.W.)
- Bowman has to go outside the system to break into it. It is only when Bowman is outside the system that the system reveals itself to him. (The word "RAD" flashes on the screen as Bowman goes to save Poole).
- Bowman achieves his cosmic destiny by regaining the violence, the anger, which his numbed colleagues seem to have abandoned. (P.B., p. 145)
- 2001 "breaks" at the literal level here: HAL could have killed Bowman quickly by depressurizing Discovery; Bowman wouldn't have had time to put his suit on. Notice the quick cut from tube to ship, Bowman suited. This breakage may have been intentional, as if to say, "in the REAL world, you may not be so lucky." (ala DR. STRANGELOVE).
- Bowman blown into the tube: this subliminally echoes our most primal memory -- leaving a safe, warm environment to be blown out into a hostile one. Here, however, Bowman wills his own birth by flipping the switches that will explode him into a very frightening situation. (This contrasts with an earlier image of Bowman emerging from the pod to retrieve the AE-35 unit, safely suited, slowly emerging).
- Inside HAL's brain: red.
- HAL's brain: tiny monoliths (many, broken up, not unified). When HAL loses the Monoliths, he dies.
- In disconnecting HAL, Bowman, in essence (on behalf of humanity),

'lays down the bone' (sort of like putting aside one's sidearm when entering a temple) before passing through the Stargate . . . (G.A.)

NIGHT OF MAN

- As the Jupiter monolith (the crossbar of the "crucifix") turns edge-wise from the light, it becomes invisible. (G.A.) [Note that the logical progression from surface to depth is invisibility: can't "see" it at all, even if you've dig for it and hit it]
- Journey through Infinite: He's being fed all the knowledge of the Universe -- and he can barely take it (trembling, almost shattered).
- That psychedelically colored, blinking, astounded eye of Bowman's, so much in contrast to the eye of HAL . . . (G.A.)
- 18th Century decor at end: must go backward to go forward? We took the wrong turn back in the 18th century (pre-Industrial Revolution), so now we have to backtrack to get back to the right fork? (Compare myth of THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR. Goes into the maze, but carries a thread with him so he can go back in case he takes a wrong turn; compare that myth with the end of THE SHINING).
- "Charge: \$1.70": 170 first three digits of 1700 (beginning of 18th Century).
- By volunteering for the mission, Dave Bowman risks going to Jupiter and losing all human contact -- which is exactly what happens. (J.B.)
- The room is a cage. The room is a cradle. (C.P.)
- 18th Century decor: that move in the 18th Century was the one that nearly got us checkmated in the 20th -- well worth analyzing.
- At first, Bowman wears the suit. But once he learns he doesn't need it, he sheds it.
- The Last Supper: finally, the food looks good!
- Four times monolith appears:
 - When ape-man learns to use bone as tool.
 - When astronauts on moon examine monolith.
 - When Bowman approaches Jupiter.
 - When Bowman is reborn.
- (J.A., p. 290)
- Shape of monolith: a piece of the puzzle -- you only see a little knowledge at a time -- just enough to get you to the next level.
- Shape of monolith: a brick (building material).

- Shape of monolith: a tablet (e.g. Ten Commandments). (P.G)
- Shape of monolith: a door.
 - William Blake: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite."
 - Confucius: "The way out is through the door."

(J.A., p. 289)
- "Alien noises" in the background: "alien" may refer to alien CONCEPTS.
- 1 Corinthians 14:10 -- "There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification."
- If you concatenate the three images where the Monolith has been touched (by Moonwatcher, Floyd, and [almost] by Bowman, I think the meaning of the rhyme becomes clear -- the young apeman, the middle-aged astronaut, and the dying man (the ancient, immanent father of the Starchild) are a portrait of the human race in the metaphor of a personal life -- which makes the image of the Starchild itself almost like a massive musical chord, the necessary resolution of it all.

(G.A.)
- End of film: twist on the VIRGIN BIRTH myth. Here, not only no Father, but no Mother.
- The human race ends at the end of 2001. Just as it begins at the beginning. The Starchild is not human.

(G.A.)
- The film ends when all relevant events that might be recorded by the eye or film have ended.

(J.Z.)
- REVELATION 10:4 -- "And when the seven thunders had uttered their voices, I was about to write: and I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not."
- "Progression" of man; close to earth to away from earth (Myth of ANTAEUS). At end of film Starchild is "coming back to Earth"? Has to leave Earth to understand why must go back to Earth (going backward to go forward). This reverses the direction of the film up to this point, from leaving roots to returning to them. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."
- MATTHEW 18:

"At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. . . .

And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.

For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. . . ."

- The feeling that, post-Starchild, Floyd will be right there in the thick of it, holding his daughter high above his head as she turns seven.

CONGRUENCE

-- INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

- When Human touches Monolith the second time, he touches through a coating. Now secondhand, not direct.
- HAL: Artificial intelligence.
- HAL/IBM connection.
- Banal dialogue.
- "I'm really not at liberty to discuss this."
- Talking to daughter and parents through screen.
- Lip-reading.

-- EYES

- Leopard
- HAL
- Pod
- Bowman
- Starchild

-- LYING

- Cover story on base.
- Astronauts not told purpose of mission.
- Hal lies to astronauts.

-- LACK OF AWE IN THE PRESENCE OF THE AWESOME

- Floyd has no reaction to spinning Earth in the phone booth.
- Astronaut photos in front of monolith (contrast with ape reaction).
- [X deliberately planted Y] "How about a little coffee?"

-- MURDERS

- By MoonWatcher
- By HAL
- By Bowman
- By the Monolith?

-- BIRTHDAYS

- Man
- Floyd's daughter
- Poole
- HAL
- StarChild

ISOLATION IMAGERY

A pervasive theme of - for lack of a better word - loneliness in Space Odyssey. Many of the physical compositions of the frame are based on isolating one figure (ship, computer, human being, Child). Although the earlier prehistoric scenes are often violent, all relations are physical, "bunched up," tight, close. All latter glimpses of man are set against cold sterile, often near-blinding white backgrounds which contrast a lone figure with its/his expansive surroundings. The human zoo scene is a good example, but an even clearer one for me is the Poole jogging scene. The music playing during that scene to me expresses the great loneliness of an expansive, infinite space.

(D.Z.)

WEIGHTLESSNESS IMAGERY

One possible theory I would like to advance (with very little evidence to back it up) is that Kubrick suggests a parallel between 'physical weight' and 'moral weight' through the visual elements of the film. The film's earliest 'amoral' act is immediately followed by the celebrated slow-motion shot of a bone club in free-fall, cutting to the weightless free-fall of a military satellite in orbit around the earth. In the film's most morally-ambiguous passage -- the death of HAL 9000 -- Bowman also is floating in the weightlessness of the Discovery: his passage from the centrifugal carousel to HAL's central processor is intended, I would suggest, to show that his act of murder possesses little moral weight when viewed in the context of a wider violence that is inherent in the human condition.

(C.C.)

GENERAL

- Alignment of planets along axis: think of what had to be true for 2001 to be made -- Kubrick had to have had major success prior to that point to get the funding for such an expensive film, the studio

had to be headed by someone who wasn't a "bean counter," the nation had to be in the midst of sending a man to the moon (thus making the topic of space "hot"), and America's consciousness had to be totally twisted from the 50's mentality that infects even DR. STRANGELOVE, a 1964 film. Yet, every four million years or so, planets DO align on an axis.

- In my opinion, what makes 2001 pure art is that the message and the medium are inextricably bound together. The "story" that 2001 conveys cannot be so done in any other medium -- it is pure cinema. It is not a simple narrative that can be put in words, nor is it something that can be done with still images, sounds, music or any other artistic medium . . .

(J.H.T.)

- If 2001 were a font, it would be Helvetica. (quoted by R.C.)
- Surface of film is outer space, depth of film is inner space.
- Radical film: use of sound especially -- abstract images -- no dialogue at end. (Lao Tzu: "[T]he sage . . . spreads doctrines without words . . ." [A SOURCE BOOK IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY, p. 140]. "Of that which we cannot speak, we must be silent." Showing, not telling.
- In 2001, time is noticeable by its absence. The forces behind the monoliths are able to span the millennia between ape and space travel, and by the final scenes (of Bowman's retirement), time has become irrelevant.

(R.V.)

- First words of the film: "Here you are, sir."
- Last word of the film: "mystery."
- Twist on Nietzsche: Man can't go it alone. Existentialism + Theology, not just Existentialism.
- Almost utter submergence of the "female" principle [or soft vs. hard or warm vs. cold or "yin" vs. "yang", for a more neutral formulation] (except huddling of apes in beginning): warmth, caring, nurturing, real physical contact, "down to earth" etc. GONE. Child and Parents viewed through a TV screen. Women in film made robotic, just like the men.
- At end of film Starchild is looking directly at us.

(Compiled by B.K.)