

2001 Revisited

1968

In a previous issue of the *Fifth Estate* critic Thomas Haroldson airily dismissed Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" as a "crashing bore." One wishes critics like Mr. Haroldson could be just as easily dismissed, critics who confuse art forms. If one is to criticize art, it is necessary one has a theory of art on which to base his criticisms.

Art may be divided into two categories: the sensual arts which are directly dependent upon the senses of the perceiver (painting, music, sculpture, and to some degree, the dance); and the literary -arts which bypass the senses and exist in the intellect of the perceiver. For example, a symphony cannot exist without the ear to hear it; without the sense of hearing, music has no meaning. But a poem, on the other hand, may be perceived visually (read), audially (heard), or felt (printed in Braille); the poem as a piece of art exists in the mind of the perceiver, regardless of how it is perceived.

Sensational and literary arts are not mutually exclusive. Crossbreeding takes place, and a new art form is developed. What is drama, for instance, other than sensational literature? This brings us to film, and to 2001.

Cinema (a generic term, like fiction) can exist either sensorially or literally. To differentiate between the two forms, the sensational cinema we will call "film," whereas the term "movie" will apply to the literary cinema. 2001 is a film masterpiece. In it, Kubrick explores a metaphysical experience in purely visual terms. Far from being the "crashing bore" Mr. Haroldson would have us believe, 2001 becomes a truly exciting experience for the viewer who is prepared to do a little thinking.

Briefly, the plot of the film is this: in the midst of a group of primitive, toolless ape-humans appears a large metallic slab which, when touched by the apemen transmits intelligence so that the ape-men may evolve into space-traveling humans. Four million years later, in the year 2001, a similar slab is discovered forty feet beneath the surface of the moon. When touched by sunlight, the slab emits a shrieking signal toward Jupiter. To find out who, or what, left the slab on the moon, five astronauts (three in suspended animation) are sent to Jupiter. However, the purpose of the mission is unknown to all except Hal, the computer who runs the ship. Midway in the flight, Hal decides the mission is too important to be jeopardized by mere humans, so he asserts himself, killing four of the five. The final astronaut manages to tame Hal and, in doing so, learns the reason why he is going to Jupiter.-

To this point, everything in the film has been scarily realistic. In the final portion of the film, however, reality is altered, distorted, destroyed as the astronaut reaches his destination and his destiny. In orbit around Jupiter, he emerges from the giant spaceship in his one-man "pod," preparing to land on the planet. Also in orbit, cavorting playfully around the spaceship and the pod, is a third slab, which suddenly disappears. The astronaut and his pod are drawn after the slab. What follows is a long, extremely beautiful psychedelic sequence as the astronaut travels outside the universe as we know it, finally stopping somewhere "beyond the infinite" (and not, as Mr. Haroldson thinks, on Jupiter).

The landing site is an antique bedroom, obviously an hallucination of the astronaut. In this bedroom, he encounters himself twice, each time growing older until finally, in bed and extremely old, he dies, reaching out toward the slab (or should we say Slab?) standing at the foot of the bed. Upon his death, the astronaut is transformed into an incredibly beautiful (and, by implication—his eyes are wide open—extremely wise) fetus and sent back to Earth. The final scene in the film shows the fetus looking down at the Earth, with no signs of the technical advances of man which dominate the early part of the film. The question is not, "Where is he?" but, "When is he?"

Along the odyssey, we have a plethora of exciting visual images: Space Station 5 and the Pan American spaceship literally dancing to the strains of the Blue Danube (with the female figure, the space station, doing the leading); a stewardess walking up the wall and across the ceiling of a moonship; the solarized surface of that final planet. And, like a skilled tapestry weaver, Kubrick fills his screen with a multitude of details which reveal much about his humans: weary space travelers can spend the night in the Orbiter Hilton, or enjoy a meal in Howard Johnson's Earthlight Room; the food eaten by the deep space astronauts comes from the kitchen's of Betty Crocker; the well-dressed man in "2001" does not wear a necktie, but a small medallion at the throat.

"2001" will frighten you. Not for what it shows, but for what it does not show. There are no meaningful relationships at all in the film: no lovers, no friends. All relationships are at the business or professional level. Each human is in his own "one man pod." Scary.

Why is "2001" a film masterpiece? Because it could not exist in any other medium. It is pure film, an experience related in visual terms that defy verbal explanations, as opposed to a movie in which the experience is related verbally. Its metaphysical aspects are, to say the very least, thought provoking; its beauty indescribable. Above all, "2001: A Space Odyssey" must be seen.

fifth Estate

2001 Revisited
1968

<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/54-may-16-31-1968/2001-revisited>
Fifth Estate #54, May 16-31, 1968

fiftheastate.anarchistlibraries.net