

Cinema Cycle “Time Capsule: Futures Gone By”

***2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)¹**

Teresa Pereira

NOVA FCSH/CETAPS

As Annette Michelson says in the essay “Bodies in Space: Films as ‘Carnal Knowledge’”, first published in 1969 in *Artforum*, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (hereafter referred to as *2001*), released in 1968, demands “a kind of critical, apperceptive athleticism” in the act of interpretation (qtd. in Kolker 8). In a similar vein, Robert Kolker, editor of the collection *Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey. New Essays* (2006), states that the films produced by Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999) are both “intellectually rigorous and demanding” (8), the product of a “creative, artistic imagination” (8). According to Kolker, works such as *2001* are “on fire with ideas, prophecies of the way we live and what will become of us if we continue on our path” (8), thus defying simplistic definitions or easy understanding. Even so, the film can be described as an essential example of science fiction. *2001* and many of the topics it covers belong to a longer tradition that can be traced back to Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and his speculative writings about science, Thomas More (1478-1535) and utopian thought, H. G. Wells (1866-1946) and his scientific romances, Jules Verne (1828-1905) and his *Voyages extraordinaires* (1866), Mary Shelley (1797-1851) and *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), or Hugo Gernsback (1884-1967) and the American pulp magazines of the 1920s, particularly *Amazing Stories* (Vint 2). As a result, the following intervention attempts to make sense of the film by placing it within the context of science fiction.

Co-written by the science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke (1917-2008), who published novelizations of the film to try to clarify its meaning, *2001* was first advertised as “The Ultimate Trip”, a clever pun that attempted to appeal to those who had adhered to the counterculture

¹ The following is a revised version of the introduction presented at the Cinema Cycle “Time Capsule: Futures Gone By”, held on April 29, 2026, at Porto’s Planetarium.

movement of the 1960s, immortalized through the imagery of hippies and Woodstock. However, as Kolker argues, *2001* was “another film entirely, a deeply serious, richly textured, enigmatic, meditative spectacle of a film” (3). While keen on guaranteeing the scientific accuracy of *2001*, Kubrick engaged with topics such as the possible existence of extraterrestrial life, the willingness of human beings to deprive themselves of emotion, and the relationship established between humans and machines. Although Kubrick does not actually offer any answers to the questions he raises, the film became hugely popular at the time of its release and is now regarded as a landmark example of science fiction. Each viewing of *2001* unveils additional meanings connected to how human beings relate to the past and the future, our understanding of the mysteries of the universe, and the degree of caution with which we should approach the technologies we invent (Kolker 4).

Contradicting simplified understandings of science fiction and cinema as merely escapist, *2001* “shows and hides, gives and takes away, promises to reveal great secrets of the universe and then reneges” (Kolker 4). While there are competing perspectives on how to define science fiction, as Sherryl Vint clarifies in *Science Fiction* (2021), certain images and narratives are clearly evoked by the notion: rocket ships and flying cars, digitized or virtual environments, and a speculative or alternative future populated by self-conscious robots, genetically modified individuals, or even aliens (Vint 4-5). This set of images and narratives lies at the very core of science fiction, a term first popularized by Gernsback and sometimes used interchangeably with speculative fiction (Vint 2, 5). Given the lack of a consensual definition of science fiction, Vint argues that it can be better understood as a tendency, “a style that evaporates into and permeates much cultural production today” (4). In a similar vein, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. claims that science fiction should be conceptualized as a mode instead of a genre, “a way of experiencing the world that has become normalized in recent decades” (Vint 6).

One way to understand *2001* is to view it as a science fiction film that moved away from science fiction cinema of the 1950s, which was usually cheaply made and used as allegorical political commentary, a symptom of North American paranoia characteristic of the Second Red Scare,

which followed the beginning of the Cold War. In these films, aliens often took the place of communists, aiming to infiltrate and subvert the American and Western way of life. In many science fiction films, such as *Red Planet Mars* (Harry Horner, 1952), *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (Gene Fowler Jr., 1958), or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), monstrous extraterrestrial bodies symbolically replaced communists and terrorized helpless Americans. Bigger-budget films, frequently of a more speculative nature, were also being produced, such as *Destination Moon* (Irving Pichel and George Pal, 1950) and *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956), among others. Both these films and those featuring “mind-robbing monsters of alien invasion films” (Kolker 7) contributed meaningfully to Kubrick’s conceptualization of outer space. *2001* would become a reference point for future science fiction cinema, with Kubrick aiming to be as scientifically accurate as possible (a process that included consulting NASA and computer scientists), ultimately changing the genre “for good” (Kolker 7).

One of the central elements of *2001* is HAL, “the space-faring AI who turns on his crew and has to be destroyed” (Vint 81). While robots are among the most familiar images of science fiction, attention has increasingly turned to artificial intelligence (AI), both when it is embodied in humanoid forms and when it is not (Vint 80). Characterized by its sinister voice and red light, the anthropomorphized HAL exhibits intelligence, consciousness, and emotions, which become evident during the shutdown scene, when it pleads with Dave to spare its life and distressingly expresses fear. According to Vint, *2001* raises questions about whether HAL has the right to defend itself from human aggression, while simultaneously commenting on a culture less interested in the values of the counterculture than in those of neoliberalism, a conundrum also highlighted in films such as *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) (Vint 81). Moreover, *2001* demonstrates why human beings should not rely uncritically on AI, challenging us to “to probe the potential dangers, risks and costs of AI, when such technology is provided with the agency to independently make and enforce decisions that cannot be reversed, interrupted, or prevented by human intervention”, as recently argued by Keshav Krishnamurty (758). As a result, the film remains painfully relevant in an era marked by the rapid rise of AI, functioning as both a

cautionary tale and a prophetic warning. Let us hope that watching this film will help us engage in deep reflection on the role we should allow AI to play in our lives.

References

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