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# Houston, We Have a Problem: Humanity & Home in *2001: A Space Odyssey*

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## **Abstract**

Stanley Kubrick's watershed film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is epic in its undertaking. In just under three hours, Kubrick attempts to capture the totality of human history, beginning before the evolution of humankind as we know it and ending in a kind of post-physical dream space. The question of the environment's role weighs heavily throughout, as humankind becomes increasingly divorced from the Earth and begins a love affair with the wider universe. This affair is, of course, mediated. It is possible only because of suits and ships, tools invented by and for humans that allow them to exist within environments that are fundamentally hostile and foreign. By placing the film in conversation with James Gibson's article, "The Environment to be Perceived" and Greta Gaard's essay, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" among others, this paper explores the importance of the environment within *2001*. In doing so, it becomes clear that, while it is often held up as a spectacle of technology because of both its form and its content, the film ultimately argues against the divorce of humankind from the natural environment.

*Keywords:* Environmental cinema, technology, ecofeminism, Stanley Kubrick, film criticism, film analysis, philosophy

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Stanley Kubrick's watershed film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is epic in its undertaking. In just under three hours, Kubrick attempts to capture the totality of human history, beginning before the evolution of humankind as we know it and ending in a kind of post-physical dream space. The question of the environment's role weighs heavily throughout, as humankind becomes increasingly divorced from the Earth and begins a love affair with the wider universe. This affair is, of course, mediated. It is possible only because of suits and ships, tools invented by and for humans that allow them to exist within environments that are fundamentally hostile and foreign. By placing the film in conversation with James Gibson's article, "The Environment to be Perceived," among others, I will explore the importance of the environment within *2001*. In doing so, I will prove that, contrary to how things may appear, the film ultimately argues against the divorce of humankind from the natural environment.

One of the earliest scenes in the film depicts the transformation of a tool into an environment. After Kubrick's prehistoric, ape-looking humanoids are visited by a mysterious monolith that seems to bestow upon them the knowledge of tools, they go on to dominate their rival clan, wielding bones as weapons. As one humanoid tosses his bone into the air in celebration, we watch it spin, traveling up, up, up into the air, and then begin to fall. As it descends, Kubrick cuts and we get a graphic match. The bone becomes the spaceship. In "The Environment to be Perceived," Gibson writes:

When in use, a tool is a sort of extension of the hand, almost an attachment to it or a part of the user's own body, and thus is no longer a part of the environment of the user. But when not in use, the tool is simply a detached object of the environment, graspable and portable, to be sure, but nevertheless external to the observer. This *capacity to attach something to the body* suggests that the boundary between the animal and the

environment is not fixed at the surface of the skin but can shift. More generally it suggests that the absolute duality of “objective” and “subjective” is false. When we consider the affordances of things, we escape this philosophical dichotomy (35).

This very eloquently sums up the complex relationship between user, tool, and environment that exists in *2001*. Tools exist both within and without—they are things capable of fluctuating in their relationship to both the user and the environment, cleaving to either one or the other depending on the situation. *2001* introduces a third option: for the tool to become the environment itself, rather than simply a part of it.

The tool has become not just a thing to be used but a necessity for survival. It is no longer something to be grasped but somewhere to reside. It is important to note this spatial shift, that humans are now entirely contained within the tool they have created. It is as though it has gobbled them up. At the risk of belaboring the point, it is also important to note the shift within the subject/object relationship between tools and humans. This development of a tool into an environment further upends the dualism Gibson describes. This calls to mind Greta Gaard’s essay, “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism,” in which she examines several dualisms as they relate to the experience of women, queer people, and people of color. While this is a film devoid of all three, the transformation of this tool is, in a way, a queering of it. The space ship, even as much as it could be said to represent the domination of white men, the rich, the West, etc., is also a queer space, a space that conquers dualisms. It does stand in contrast to nature, which Gaard argues is inherently feminine (116), and it is somewhat phallic, but its appearance belies its function. While it might look like a phallus, it is a womb space: it contains life within it and cultivates that life, protecting it from an otherwise hostile external environment.

While it would be easy to read this moment as a celebration of the advances of humankind (after all, we have gone from shrieking apes to explorers of the cosmos), it is imbued with an air of the eerie and the sinister. We go from a widely recognizable, emphatically natural environment to one devoid of humanity. It is important that after the cut we see the *ship*, not the people within it. The cut comes not as the bone reaches its crest, as you might expect, but after it begins to fall. This seems to suggest that the moment in history that we are about to witness in which humans are space explorers, is not the “peak” (figuratively and literally) of history that it might seem to be. In fact, it very well may be humanity’s downfall. We hear the wind whistling past the bone as it soars through the air, but once Kubrick cuts to the ship all goes silent. He has, brilliantly, made the intangible medium of our survival, air, tangible in this scene. We can hear the lack of air, the silent hostility of space. This emphasis on air and breathing continues throughout the film. While some might characterize it as silent, it is in actuality filled with the sounds of breathing as they echo around the inside of a space helmet and the high-pitched whistle of oxygen as it is pumped into chrome hallways. It brings to mind Peter Sloterdijk’s “Gas Warfare—or: The Atmoterrorist Model.” Atmoterrorism is, as its name suggests, terrifying because it targets not our bodies but the air that we breathe. It makes a livable environment suddenly unlivable, and this is all the more terrifying because we so rarely even think about air. It is always just there: invisible, without taste or smell or (usually) sound. In *2001*, humankind has divorced itself from the natural environment of the Earth and willfully relocated to the inherently inhospitable environment of outer space, mediated by these tools. And, even though it can be assumed that other people still live on Earth, this shift has split humankind. Never again will all people be united in living on the same planet. Perhaps that was a mistake.

There is something else profoundly inhuman present in *2001*: HAL. HAL is a supercomputer with human characteristics, including a “personality” and the ability to speak, that controls the spacecraft Discovery One on its journey to Jupiter. HAL, in many ways, resembles modern-day robots like Alexa, Siri, GPS systems, etc. After a glitch, HAL begins to go haywire, killing multiple crewmembers in an attempt to take full control of the ship. Dave Bowman, the last remaining astronaut, eventually enters HAL’s processor (essentially his brain), and shuts him down from the inside. Even though HAL lacks a physical form, the ship itself functions as his body. He controls nearly every part of it except for, interestingly, his brain. Just as we cannot directly control our brains neither can HAL. This “body” furthers the idea of the space ship as a human womb. However, HAL is for one, emphatically male, and instead of cultivating those enwombed within his “body,” he kills them. Thus, HAL and Discovery One is a perversion of the human womb. This aligns with the prior analysis suggesting that all these advancements have bankrupted humanity, divorcing it from its environment and its true nature.

As Dave shuts HAL down from within, HAL begs for his life in an eerie monotone, even going as far as to express fear, claim to “feel” things, and refer to his central processor as his “mind.” All of this serves to characterize HAL as a human-like being, just as the apes were human-like beings. But, while the apes were one step behind, HAL is one step ahead. He is an attempt to fully fuse tool, user, and environment into one, a kind of Frankenstein’s monster. This attempt, obviously, results in disaster, and thus furthers the argument that in trying so hard to move forward, humanity is taking steps back.

The brain space that Dave occupies is bathed in red light, resembling blood. The walls are lined with perfectly repetitive rectangular “cells,” which recall human cells. Perhaps the most unnerving feature of this room is HAL’s single, watchful eye, the only piece of a face that HAL

possesses. He breaks the fourth wall, watching us as we watch him, placing us in Dave's position as much as confronting us with the reality of a technological advancement in which we are all complicit. Two circles on the top of Dave's helmet resemble unseeing, reptilian eyes, further emphasizing how outer space and its trappings divorce humans from their own humanity. We view him often from above or below, foreshortening his body into something crumpled and strange, something not very much resembling a human body. These angles are made possible by the ship's lack of gravity, another unseen yet constantly-present force on Earth, like air. It is literally a force of nature which space lacks.

We watch as HAL regresses in his function, eventually singing a song that he first learned when he was initially programmed. It is interesting that only in "death" do we see this human side of HAL. Perhaps this implies that our humanity can only be revealed after we have stripped away the computers, the suits, the ships. In fact, a revelation does occur after the "death" of HAL. A video message plays, informing Dave of the true nature of his mission, which has been hidden from him and the rest of the crew all this time. HAL was the only one who truly knew what was going on, and it is only by abandoning technology and returning to humanity (for it is a human that relays this message) that Dave learns the truth. The fact that only HAL knew the true nature of the mission implies that a greater rift has emerged in humankind. Technology has become a force not just for physical separation, but for deception and distrust.

By the end of the film, Kubrick has returned us to a human environment. Dave, after investigating another monolith, is transported through a wormhole. Still in his pod, he arrives at a strange and dreamlike space. Although it is odd and surreal, it is the most recognizably human environment we have seen throughout the film. It is a bedroom, an intimate space recognizable to all, in which people engage in emphatically human activities, namely sleep and sex. This

stands in sharp contrast to the hibernation pods we saw aboard Discovery One. Even something as simple and fundamental as sleep was twisted in the name of science and advancement. No sex or sexuality is visible throughout the film, which is a testament to how the natural has been ignored and elided, as has the feminine (as Gaard links sex and sensuality to women and nature). The room itself is very feminine, with a plush headboard and French furniture. This stands in stark contrast to the heavy, masculine aesthetics of the spaceships.

The bedroom is decorated in a classical style, with Greco-Roman statuary and paintings lining the walls. A desk stands against the wall. We do not see art anywhere else in the film, it is an element of the human that has been disregarded, supposedly in the name of science. Obviously, the discovery of tools is a critical moment in human history, but so is the creation of ancient cave paintings. It is worth mentioning, too, that cave paintings all depict the everyday lives of ancient humans. Art is how we reflect on what makes us human, and to lose that seems to be to lose our humanity itself. It is fitting, then, that such an artful film is being made about the subject. The desk is an interesting icon because it invites creation, but there is no chair in front of it and its roll-top is shut. It is as though it has been retired, as though the written word has been replaced entirely by image. This implies a cycle: the discovery of cave painting, the rise of the written word, followed by its decline, and then its replacement again with image. The space pod seems extremely out of place in this bedroom, as though it is an invader, which, of course, it is. We see the room from extreme, uncomfortable angles. A fisheye lens is used so it seems as though we are viewing the room from inside a helmet, like Dave is. The movie screen is almost like a space helmet—it is a mediating tool that keeps us removed from the environment beyond it.

An older version of Dave appears across the room, still dressed in his spacesuit, unable to exist within the natural human environment he is meant to exist within. Somehow, Dave comes to occupy this body, and this jump cannot be explained by science. There is an emphasis in this scene on mystery. We never get clear answers about how any of this happens. We never truly find out what this place is. This is a reminder that we cannot become all-knowing beings. We are limited by our humanity. We see a bathroom, again the first one we see in the film. Even something as simple as using the restroom or bathing has been lost to technology and efficiency. Dave sees his reflection in a mirror and seems shocked by his appearance as well as by the mirror itself. For all the glass in the ship, there was no mirror, no place for literal self-reflection.

Back in the bedroom, Dave catches sight of an even older version of himself, sitting and eating at a table. Time appears to be collapsing, and Dave is confronted with his own mortality at breakneck speed. Eating is, again, another simple, human action that disappeared in the shadow of technology. Dave sits below a painting depicting an outdoor scene, a reminder of the Earth he left behind. Throughout the scene, we continue to hear Dave's breathing as it echoes inside his helmet. It reminds the audience that Dave is still inside his own little artificial world, even within this new environment in which it is safe to breathe. This even older version of Dave turns to look at him, as well as at us. He breaks the fourth wall, just as HAL did, and we are once again in Dave's shoes. We are confronted with our own mortality as it walks toward us, even as we are still wearing a space helmet, trying to hide from it.

Once again, Dave somehow enters this new body, and that incessant breathing ceases. It is a relief. Dave has returned to the land of the human, breathing air and having a glass of wine. But, this is not a normal environment by any means. It is spiritual and dreamy. When Dave breaks a glass, we immediately feel as if he has disrupted the entire universe, and perhaps he has.

Finally, Dave sees himself as an old man on his deathbed. That shattered glass becomes a shattered body. His humanity is revealed in death, just like HAL's. He lifts a hand, pointing to something we cannot see: another monolith, appearing before him in death. In this moment, the gesture of his hand resembles the one made by God in Michaelangelo's "The Creation of Adam." He is not just human anymore, but a godlike or Christlike figure now sent to save the rest of humankind. True enlightenment has come, not from science, but from humanity. He disappears and is replaced by a fetus, encased in a glowing womb, which brings us back to the idea of these created environments as wombs rather than tools. That infant approaches the Earth, harkening the return of humanity to its original environment. Even though the monoliths supposedly drove the development of humanity, this final monolith brings us back to the start. After all, the title of the film is *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and at the end of an odyssey, the hero always returns home.

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