From Ape-Man to Space-Baby:  
2001, An Interpretation  

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In Stanley Kubrick's 2001, A Space Odyssey, human history is divided into three epochs: the time before the invention of the tool, the time after, and the space age. At the two turning points, a mysterious rectangular object appears, which acts, indeed, as a catalyst.

In the first period, man, or ape-man, is seen at his most primordial. His existence is marked by three factors: (1) the group in which he lives: colleagues, mates, children; (2) rivalry with other groups for water and food; (3) fear of his environment. We see the tribe or band moving as a fighting unit, protecting the women and the young. We see them fighting with other bands for possession of water holes, fighting characterized by much ritualistic taunting and dancing. Finally, we see the tribe huddled together at night, grimacing at the night sounds, distrustful of the dark.

At this point, the rectangle appears and is an object of fear and wonder to the band. As they are looking up at it, the sun "dawns" over the edge of the rectangle. But this dawning is basically different from the dawns men had experienced before. The sun appeared usually over the round horizon, one natural form on another (as in the first visual image of the movie). Now the sun was dawning over a non-natural, indeed a very intellectual, produced formation: a straight edge. One of the ape-men, particularly courageous and warrior-like, watches this dawning very closely. It constitutes a rupture in the normal naturalness of his visual experience and thus opens a gap between his thinking and the natural, with which he has been hitherto in immediate contact. He has suddenly a distance from, or perspective on, his life, his immediate environment and its elements. This gap allows creativity, and contemplating this unnatural dawn, he
slowly realizes that a bone can be used as a powerful extension of his arm. He has invented the tool.

The possibilities of its use flash before his mind: the killing of game and the killing of enemies. In fact, at the next water hole, the first tool becomes the first deadly weapon: it is used in the warrior’s dance of taunting and, after the kill, in his dance of triumph. The tool has become the means of man’s self-assertion.

In triumph, he throws his bone-tool into the air, and it is transformed into a spaceship floating in space, a more complicated tool perhaps, but not essentially different. We have leaped from the beginning of an age to its end.

The humans of the year 2001 are not essentially different from the apan-men. Great nations have replaced small bands. The competition between bands for water holes has been replaced by the rivalry between America and Russia. The taunting war dance has been transformed into ruse (Russians trying to land a spaceship at the American moon station), diplomacy (the space treaties mentioned), and elaborate politeness (the meeting of Russian scientists with the American on the space station). On the trip to Jupiter, one of the astronauts will exercise by dancing around shadowboxing. Moreover, man’s new environment, space, can elicit from him fears essentially identical to those felt by the ape-man in the night. Late in the movie, an astronaut must catapult himself through space to return to his main ship; his grimace is the one we have seen in the first period of man. Finally, in spite of all advances, the band, tribe, or nation is still dependent on the courageous individual, be he warrior or astronaut.

However, although man has not changed, his situation has. He is living in space, but has not yet learned fully how to do so. His pockets let his pencils escape. The cooking machine heats the dishes so that they burn fingers. One must read the instructions carefully before using the gravity-free toilet. The sandwiches offered on excursions are only just beginning to improve. The great space station is not yet completed.

These technological annoyances point to a deeper level on which man has not integrated himself fully into space: his thinking. Although he is living in space, man still thinks as if he were on earth. On the circular, turning space station, one man asks another whether he is going up (to the moon) or down (to earth). But in space, there is no up or down! He is still thinking in earth terms. An American spaceship is labelled Pan American, but it flies far beyond the Americas. A Russian ship is labelled Aeroflot,
though it travels beyond the air. Communications are carried on through IBM, although further than the nations. The telephone of the age is still Bell, although it uses the visual as well as the auditory. Man is thinking of his life in space as a mere extension of his life on earth. The use of the Blue Danube Waltz as background music to views of spaceships flying makes us realize that we think of space phenomena in geophysical terms. The interview with the astronauts travelling to Jupiter would have included seven minutes of silence between question and answer, but they have been edited out.

This gap between thought and situation can clearly lead to disaster. In the American Revolution, the English and Hessian soldiers were defeated when they could not adapt to non-European modes of combat. In World War I, General Haig believed that no battery of machine guns could resist a good cavalry charge. His men paid the price.

The chasm between earthly thinking and space situation nearly leads to disaster in the film. Significantly, the danger arises from man's attitude towards his tools. Just as man has no adequate space thinking, so he has no adequate tool thinking.

The first bone-tool already poses the full problem:

1. It is a natural object, which is being used. It is at once both bone and tool. Man must think of it in two different ways.

2. It is an extension of the ape-man's own arm. It is, in a sense, himself. Man's tools are at once both his products and himself. They are both separate and inseparable from him. Thus man's view of his tools is inseparable from his view of himself, and vice versa. The problems posed by the relation of man to his tools are the same as those posed by his relation to his actions, his products, and even his body.

3. Man's tools, just as his actions, are also greater than himself. The tools he inherits from the past generation (thus, a bone) must be assimilated by him, and also form him. The tools he himself invents have implications he could never have foreseen. The thrown bone becomes the flying spaceship. Any moment is thus a combination of influence from the past, present creativity, and a dawning realization of the implications of the new.

4. Man is uncomfortable with the dualisms necessarily attending his relationship to his tools. Firstly, he wants to take the credit for their accomplishments, so to speak. The warrior feels he has killed the enemy, even if he used a bone-weapon. Secondly, he fears the tool separating itself
from him; he fears its becoming environment or, even more, hostile environment.

The movie shows us that man is as unconscious of these problems as he is of space. The little sub-spaceships on the main ship are called “pods.” The main ship thus becomes a vast tree or bush in which man lives. When an astronaut in one of the pods must re-enter the main ship, he uses large caliper-like extensions of the pod to open a door labelled “manual.” Man has no tool language because man has no special thinking about tools.

This gap between thinking and situation becomes acute in the case of the great computer, HAL. HAL has been programmed to be human in order that the astronauts might have a more comfortable trip. Even earlier, the new computer had been treated as a human child; it was taught to sing “Daisy, Daisy.” When in the interview, the astronauts are asked whether HAL has human emotions, they admit their ignorance. Their thinking has not grasped their situation.

The humanizing of HAL is an attempt to resolve the dualism between man and his tools. That it is a bad solution becomes clear. The apparent coincidence that the immediately following letters of H, A, and I spell IBM is expressive: from IBM to HAL is a step backwards. The marked obsequiousness of HAL shows what a thin premise holds this whole system together.

The revolt of HAL, in which all but one of the space travellers are killed, is suppressed by lobotomizing him, so to speak. The “humanity” of HAL is deprogrammed: HAL returns to being a tool, and the surviving astronaut uses it. The dangers of wrong tool thinking are realized, and a more correct thinking and conduct emerge.

But this is only a beginning. The astronaut is traveling towards Jupiter (!) because a mysterious rectangular object has been uncovered on the moon. When the sun rose over the object, the object emitted signals towards Jupiter. The astronauts were then sent on their unprecedented voyage to that planet.

As the astronaut nears Jupiter, he encounters the rectangle, moving freely in space. The ease and beauty of the rectangle’s movements are impressive. As he contemplates it, the sun again rises over the rectangle, and just as the ape-man, the astronaut is plunged into a new consciousness.

First, he is radically disoriented in a sort of light show. He loses all bearings, all his accustomed points of repair. He can only perceive, and all is new, wonderful, and strange.
Suddenly, he is in his pod in a strange room with glowing floors and ceilings and Louis XVI furniture (just before the Revolution!). He sees himself, and he is old. He becomes that old self, wanders through the usual-unusual apartment, and meets himself again, as older. He becomes that yet older self and sits down to eat, with cumbersome knife and fork (so different from the straws of 2001). He reaches for a glass, his water-holding tool, and it falls and breaks. He then sees himself as very ancient, lying on his deathbed. When he becomes his oldest self, he is reaching for the rectangle at the foot of the bed, when he dies.

Space replaces the room. We see the earth floating and then the corresponding orb of a fetal sack. The astronaut has been reborn in space, and the movie ends.

Birth is an important theme of the movie. The daughter of the American scientist has just had a birthday when he “calls” her. One of the astronauts has a birthday en route for which his parents have prepared a broadcast in advance to account for the time lag, as the astronauts keep earth time. The lone astronaut has survived by ejecting himself birth-like through space from his pod to the main spaceship.

Now he experiences a new kind of birth. The old man has died, and a new one is reborn. The space age has a space man. He will be capable of space living and thinking.

The movie sees that new life and consciousness as a perfect integration of man, his tools or work, and his environment. The ape-man was jogged into a new consciousness by the non-naturalness of the straight edge of the rectangle against the sun. For the astronaut, the rectangle produces very different visual impressions. His own ship is an ungainly mass of knobs, antennae, handles, and hatches. We have seen an astronaut fly out in a pod to just one of these complicated surface sections to make repairs.

The rectangle, on the other hand, is perfectly and beautifully smooth; it is beyond the dualism of tool and user, beyond the need for external adjustment and repair. It is homogeneous; at once self, means, and act.

The spaceship is lumbering and ungainly, fit only for very limited maneuvers. The rectangle is perfectly free and easy, dynamically integrated into its space environment.

The rectangle remains as much a mystery for us as for the ape-man. We know only that it is a catalyst for our change of consciousness and the point to which we tend. It offers us a vision of the time when man will be one with his works and environment and thus, and only thus, the true
controller of his destiny. Man will and must arrive at the point he has reserved for Jupiter, the highest of the many gods.

The traveller requires courage, but of a special kind. The main astronaut is typically brave, the extension of the ancient warrior. He is always in command. When he shoots himself through space back to the main ship, he conquers his fears of the dangers he knows well. At the end, radically disoriented, courage of this sort is not enough, or is rather not to the point. The courage of the warrior must be sublimated into that of the baby: the sensitive creator in a new universe.

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