

2001: A Space Odyssey

A Comprehensive Nietzschean Analysis

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Introduction

2001: A Space Odyssey is perhaps one of the most well-known Nietzschean works in the history of film. Apart from the numerous tangential references to Nietzsche's body of work, such as the use of Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra* as a key piece within the soundtrack, there are clear exemplifications of Nietzsche's ideas throughout the film.

Stanley Kubrick, the film director, explicitly explores these ideas along *2001*'s three acts. The first act, *The Dawn of Man*, establishes a world of meaningless "truths", where humans are but self-glorified beasts, and where the passage of time represents a recurring fate. The second act, *Jupiter Mission*, contains the exploration of the death of God and the Übermensch, and it is the longest and most developed one. The third act, *Beyond the Infinite*, shows the metamorphosis of the chrysalis into its final form, in a surprisingly abstract and symbolic depiction of a man who embraces his fate and becomes the Übermensch.

Act I: *The Dawn of Man*

The first act of *2001* establishes an irrational world where humans are likened to pre-evolutionary apes, and where the human-constructed world of truths and reason is ultimately devoid of meaning.

The film begins with a well-known ominous sequence of planetary movements as Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra*¹ plays in the background (*2001: A Space Odyssey* 00:03:14-00:04:36). As the scene ends, what follows is a series of shots of apes in a savannah fighting tribally for the scarce resources of their surroundings. One particular tribe of apes discovers a large black monolith, and upon touching it they become enlightened with the discovery of tools (00:11:50-00:14:34). Thanks to this discovery, they are able to collect bones from the ground and use them as weapons against rival tribes, thus taking over the resources for themselves.

This beginning runs parallel to how Nietzsche begins his essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, with a similar tale of universal insignificance and arrogance:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of “world history,” but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. (Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” 114)

What Nietzsche is reflecting in this passage is the fact that even though the “clever beasts” (humans) believe that they have acquired knowledge (represented in *The Dawn of Man* by the monolith), the meaning of it is insignificant in the grand context of the universe

¹German for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, also the title of one of Nietzsche’s most famous works.

(represented by the planet scene). The “arrogant” nature of these beasts in their pursuit towards “knowing” is better reflected as these beasts become humans in the next sequence.

As the film continues, a temporal jump situates the viewer within a futuristic dance of spaceships (*2001: A Space Odyssey* 00:19:54-00:25:28) as an American diplomat makes his way to the Moon. An incident surrounded by secrecy has occurred in one of the moon bases, leading to questions from the Russian space agency. Ignoring them, the diplomat heads to the base and leads a team of astronauts towards the disturbance: another large black monolith that stands distinctly against a gray lunar landscape. The monolith, as the team discover, is emitting frequencies towards Jupiter’s orbit.

Throughout this sequence, two things become obvious: firstly, the tribal disputes of the apes have lived on as Russians and Americans wage a war of secrets and deception; and secondly, humans are still obsessed with the idea of knowing through reason. Both of these express the deep similarity between the apes and the modern humans, reflecting Nietzsche’s characterization of humans as “clever beasts”. The pursuit of knowledge, and the arrogance that surrounds it, is particularly evident in the spaceship dance, which presents a world where humans have transferred their creative energy towards the creation of enormous rational machines which now surpass their creators in every way possible.

This rational, technological world would surely earn Nietzsche’s disdain. His contempt for reason is partly developed in his work *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, where he contends that reason, rather than being the ultimate tool of human thought, is nothing more than a set of “lies”, or human-constructed truths, that live within a structure of abstractions, a “movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms” (Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” 117) which distances man from the reality of his existence. And in fact, Kubrick also presents this world as misguided. The arrogance of humans, who have expanded beyond their Earth to install scientific bases in the Moon, and who believe that they *know* (or that they at least *know how to know*) is contrasted with their perplexity

towards the monolith. This perplexity reflects the true nature of reason: it is an extremely rigid tool which fools humans into thinking they possess knowledge and keeps them from exploring their own nature.

Nietzsche's idea of *eternal recurrence* is present too throughout this act. Walther Ziegler, a German author who explores and summarizes different philosophical perspectives, explains that, for Nietzsche, "[the universe] will, in the infinite course of time, necessarily arrange and rearrange itself into precisely the same patterns and configurations over and over again, forever" (Ziegler, *Nietzsche In 60 Minutes* 95-96). What this means is that progress is merely an illusion: as humans believe to have found peace, secrets and deceit are still commonplace; and as humans believe to have "conquered space", its mysteries are just as inscrutable as before. The recurrence of the monolith, which will make yet another appearance at the beginning of the last act, represents a symbol of the circular passage of time that Nietzsche describes. Humans encounter the monolith over and over, and each time they do, they are fooled into thinking they have made great progress through their use of reason, whilst in reality these encounters keep on happening along an infinite scale of time.

The title of the act is particularly eloquent to this illusion of progress. Whereas humans believe they have made *progress* along history, acquiring unimaginable technological advances, both Kubrick and Nietzsche remind that this framework pertains only to the *dawn* of man. As Kubrick transitions into the second act, technology (and by analogy, reason) becomes man's antagonist in the path beyond his dawn.

Act II: *Jupiter Mission*

The second act of *2001* exposes how the death of both God and reason is the birth of the Übermensch. This is perhaps the most developed act, whose main tension is the struggle

between the artificial intelligence *HAL 9000* and the spaceship maintenance worker Dave Bowman. Arguably, this struggle is analogous to that of humans against God, and the consequent emergence of the *Übermensch*. It is also worth discussing how certain Marxist ideas are used by Kubrick in representing the tyranny of a rational God over humans. Even if Marx's ideas might be seen as a departure from Nietzsche, a chronological review of the death of God makes it clear that Nietzsche's understanding of religion is markedly influenced by 19th-century irreligious thought, where Marx's views on religion had made a significant impact.

In his pursuit towards understanding religion's power over man, Marx investigates how the notion of God itself has materialized within human consciousness. He exposes his findings, which to a large extent stem from Feuerbach's ideas, at the beginning of *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: "Religion is indeed man's self-consciousness and self-awareness so long as he has not found himself" (Marx 53). What Marx means is that humans have projected their own sense of being onto the idea of God, and in doing so, have lost themselves. They have given so much power to this "fantastic realization" of themselves that it now holds power over them. This is particularly important, because it means that, in order to return this power to the realm of reality, humans cannot settle with "killing" God – they also need to reaffirm their self-consciousness by themselves, without any more crutches or aids.

Whilst Marx explores the notion of God and its materialization in human thought, Nietzsche mainly develops his idea of the death of God and what comes afterwards. He does so partly within his work *The Gay Science*, where his famous quote, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 181), represents the idea that God is not only dead, but that the act of killing him has been carried out by us, humans. Ziegler phrases Nietzsche's overarching question as "What happens when nihilism gains the ascendancy and the spiritual shelter provided by religion is irrecoverably

lost?” (Ziegler, *Nietzsche In 60 Minutes* 9), and summarizes the philosopher’s answer by explaining that God has been killed by the advent of the Enlightenment and of reason, and that the structure of morals provided by religion is no longer viable for humans.

These two powerful thoughts on the advent of God, and the death of God are profoundly connected. Indeed, Marx’s idea that “if we succeed in abolishing [religion], energies will be set free which can be applied to tackling and solving the real problems of Man’s life on earth” (Ziegler, *Marx In 60 Minutes* 32), as Ziegler phrases it, bears great resemblance to Nietzsche’s idea that abolishing religion has the potential to lead humans towards the solution to the death of God. Nietzsche’s ideas provide a model of a human that, upon ridding himself of God (and of this fantastic realization that both him and Marx heavily criticize), adopts a set of principles that guide him towards reaffirming his self-consciousness, a step that had already been established by Marx as necessary. This man is the *Übermensch*, a vision of an individual who trusts their impulses and their body and not only their reason, and who unleashes their creative freedom instead of surrendering to a society of comfort.

Before proceeding to the analysis of *Jupiter Mission* under a Nietzschean lens, there is one more key element from Nietzsche’s theory of man that must be considered: the idea of reason, as opposed to intuition, as a fundamental characteristic of the *Übermensch*. As exposed in the analysis of the first act, the illusion of reason draws humans away from their reality. Nietzsche’s characterization of reason in *On truth and lies* as a “host of metaphors” is contrasted with that which drives the *Übermensch*: an instinct of self-growth, an understanding of one’s own emotions and a desire to outlive and to overcome.

Jupiter Mission confounds Nietzsche’s two enemies, God and reason, into a single entity, *HAL*. Kubrick establishes *HAL* as an artificial intelligence in command of a ship flying towards Jupiter in a secretive mission surrounded by mystery. While the viewer is aware of the reason behind this voyage (the discovery of the frequencies from the lunar monolith), the crew of the ship is not. *HAL*, the artificial intelligence in command, is not

only a rational being, he is in fact *the most rational being* that humanity has ever conceived. This is made clear by his introduction as a machine that can “mimic most of the activities of the human brain, and with incalculably greater speed and reliability” (2001: *A Space Odyssey* 01:01:09). *HAL*’s rationality derives from a human attempt to detach reason even more from the human experience. With him aboard the ship, reason is no longer an internal structure of preconceived thoughts that reduces the scope of the crewmen’s understanding; it is now an external pressure for them to accept some supposed *realities*, which are in fact misconstructions of true reality. This externalization is just one more step in the hegemony of reason over humans.

However, *HAL* is not only the epitome of reason, but is also a representation of God. This interpretation is supported by imagery, such as the many scenes where *HAL*’s “eye” (a camera system) is filmed in extremely close-up shots with an intention of portraying it as God’s all-seeing, merciless eye. *HAL* controls every aspect of the spaceship, even the lives of the travelers themselves, and can wield his power at will, as he in fact does when he murders the cryogenized scientists aboard the ship, as well as Dave’s crewmate.

HAL is not merely a technological reproduction of God: within *Jupiter Mission*, *HAL* is God. He was created in the same way Marx describes, following Feuerbach’s inverted self-consciousness: he is created by humans as a projection of their own consciousness, as a fantastic and ideal “mimic” of what humans supposedly are. He has, following Marx’s thesis, gained power over those humans: he controls life and death, and he even manipulates the crew’s thoughts². It is key to understand that *HAL*, however, has no physical power: he is merely present in thought, and has no moving mechanisms. His power, just like God’s, is exerted through ideas, and not through physical presence.

²In one instance, for example, *HAL* falsely convinces the crew that a component of the spaceship is faulty, and forces them to replace it.

*HAL's nemesis, Dave Bowman, is portrayed by Kubrick as a budding Übermensch. Dave is a creative man, as he is depicted several times drawing the world around him as a way of overlaying his own sensory interpretations on top of what he sees.*³ (*2001: A Space Odyssey* 01:06:53). Dave represents man's intuitive rebellion against reason, and thus is a metaphor of the path towards the Übermensch. This path, however, is long and winding, and Dave, in his transformation towards intuition and away from reason, suffers the loss of his crewmate, upon which he still tries to be rational and suppress his emotions, a path which soon proves to be contrary to his true humanity. He is a courageous man too, who does not fear his fate and does not hesitate in taking tragic actions to struggle for his life, such as his desperate (and ultimately successful) attempt to return to the spaceship by launching himself across empty, deadly, cold space. (01:49:10) Nonetheless, he succeeds in his tragic pursuit. He starts disconnecting *HAL*, who begs for his own life. Dave, however, has already learned to embrace his own emotions of deep anger and grief, and does not concede to what might have been the logical choice. He does not surrender his humanity to reason anymore, and thus he ends *HAL's* life. This action represents his transformation into the Übermensch as he ends the tyranny of God and reason.

Act III: Beyond the Infinite

The final act of *2001, Beyond the Infinite*, represents the birth of the Übermensch and its first steps in the world. As a brief and highly metaphorical act, the meanings extracted from it are perhaps less evident than for the previous acts. Nonetheless, there are clear exemplifications of at least two of Nietzsche's ideas: the *amor fati* (or love of one's own fate), the rejection of reason, and the *eternal recurrence*, which once again makes an appearance in the closing sequences of the film.

³These interpretations are termed "renderings" by *HAL*, who fails to understand the profoundly human aspect of art.

The act begins as Dave's ship ventures into the mysterious target of the frequencies, which happens to be a planetary-sized black monolith in Jupiter's orbit, identical in shape and appearance (although of starkly different dimensions) to the previous two monoliths. As explored in the first act, the recurrence of this motif is a reflection of the cyclical nature of time. Indeed, the universe has arranged into "precisely the same patterns and configurations over and over again" (see page 4), so the motif of the monolith keeps on appearing.

As the spacecraft approaches the monolith, a choir of disharmonic voices takes over the soundtrack at the same time as a stream of incoherent flashes fills the screen (*2001: A Space Odyssey* 2:01:56-2:11:26). The sounds get progressively more distorted until the scene reaches a point of total visual and auditory absurdity. This sequence, lasting about ten minutes, is one of the most startling to witness and difficult to interpret in the entire work. Nonetheless, following the Nietzschean line of enquiry, there is a clear parallel with the following passage in *On Truth and Lies*, part of Nietzsche's hopeful concluding remarks for the essay:

That immense framework and planking of concepts to which the needy man clings his whole life long in order to preserve himself is nothing but a scaffolding and toy for the most audacious feats of the liberated intellect. And when it smashes this framework to pieces, throws it into confusion, and puts it back together in an ironic fashion, pairing the most alien things and separating the closest, it is demonstrating that it has no need of these makeshifts of indigence and that it will now be guided by intuitions rather than by concepts. (Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" 122)

It seems as though Kubrick, upon the death of the rational god at the end of the second act, is ready to "smash this framework into pieces" within the film. This framework is the intricate network of concepts that make up *reason*, and once it is discarded, Nietzsche

argues that what comes next is to “[pair] the most alien things and separating the closest”, as a demonstration that humans did not need that structured framework in the first place. Indeed, Kubrick puts together a scene with no apparent rational coherence, but with a great intuitive value: he is capable of transmitting Nietzsche’s complex philosophical ideas through a scene that would be classified as nonsensical if fitted into a framework of reason. This sequence also serves to show that Dave, the budding Übermensch, who is watching these flashing lights, has finally discarded reason as a tool to perceive and understand the universe.

When Dave wakes up, he finds himself inside his space capsule staring through the window at an elegantly decorated, abundantly lit room. This room is perhaps a representation of Dave’s transitional state, and its calmness contrasts strongly with the breakthrough of discarding reason in the previous scene. The room sequence illustrates another concept from Nietzsche: *amor fati*. The significance of this Latin phrase, meaning “love of one’s destiny”, is captured by Ziegler as a necessity to “accept and embrace life even where it is seen to harbour no ‘higher meaning’ beyond itself” (Ziegler, *Nietzsche In 60 Minutes* 93). To represent this, Kubrick depicts several scenes where Dave observes an older version of himself, embracing his future self. In each of these scenes, Dave’s older version ends as the scene’s main subject, making subtle time jumps that illustrate the meaninglessness of Dave’s life as he spends the entirety of it within the four walls of this room. He has embraced the fact that his life does not have an ultimate meaning, and is happy to accept this fate.

As Dave’s oldest self exhales his last breath, the monolith makes one last appearance, standing across him inside the room. Dave’s human body is suddenly replaced by the *Star Child*, a fetus made of light that symbolizes his metaphorical rebirth into the Übermensch. The Star Child is seen in the final scene as a celestial body approaching the Earth, as the soundtrack returns to the initial theme, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, in one last nod to the

eternal recurrence. The Star Child stares directly into the audience, and the film concludes (*2001: A Space Odyssey* 2:18:02-2:20:33).

Kubrick's avoidance towards a concrete depiction of the *Übermensch* in society is evident throughout this last act, and particularly in the last scene. Instead of depicting how a human following the principles of the *Übermensch* would act in our world, Kubrick opts for an abstract representation of the transformation towards it. This avoidance illustrates the fact that, while Nietzsche's ideas are very powerful, they are ultimately based around the idea of the individual, and bear little consideration to the whole of society. Nevertheless, the case for the *Übermensch* from an individualistic perspective is clearly presented in this act too, especially with regard to the opposition to reason and the meaninglessness of existence.

Conclusions

It is reasonable to conclude that Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* presents a case for the *Übermensch*, a constantly overcoming being who understands and loves his own fate, as a fundamentally human response to the death of God and reason. He does so within Nietzsche's vision of the human world, an irrelevant collection of narcissistic beings who dare to believe for an instant that they have unlocked the secrets of the universe, but who are oblivious to the eternally recurring and ultimately meaningless nature of existence. As the protagonist of the film, Dave Bowman, becomes aware of this meaninglessness, he begins walking towards the principles of the *Übermensch*. Kubrick is also able to present Nietzsche's thesis that reason and intuition are in permanent struggle over man's consciousness, and that our deliberate rejection of intuition shapes our own collective self-repression. In *2001*, man's intuition wages war against God and reason, which are merged in *Jupiter Mission* as the single enemy of man, and the victory of intuition above both its enemies represents the final birth of the *Übermensch*.

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