

‘Dear Mr. Kubrick’: Audience Responses to *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the Late 1960s

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Abstract

Stanley Kubrick’s highly unconventional Science Fiction epic *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) was one of the biggest hits of the late 1960s in the US. This success has traditionally been explained with reference to the film’s particular appeal to youth. This paper examines a wide range of letters sent to Kubrick by cinemagoers in the late 1960s, and identifies four types of audience responses to *2001*: rejection, dialogue, celebration and appropriation. The paper concludes that the largely positive letters, together with additional research on the film’s box office performance, strongly suggest that *2001* was a success with very diverse audience segments, and that an optimistic belief in the possibility of fundamental personal and social transformation may have been at the root of this success.

Key words: Audience research, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, box office performance

Let me start with a letter from a concerned American mother to Stanley Kubrick, written in August 1969, a few days after she had gone to a drive-in cinema with her husband and children to see a double bill of *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*.¹ She complains that *Pooh* ‘was not shown until 11 p.m., hours after the utterly worthless *2001* had bored the children to sleep.’ Regarding *2001*, she reports that she and her husband had in vain been looking for anything that could justify the film’s ‘length, its preceding a movie geared for children, and a hike in regular admissions prices’; what they found instead of such justification was ‘a pointless “visual experience” loosely strung together by a handful of pretentious amateurs fresh from a “trip”, and not the space variety, ... an insult to coherence, art, space age reality and purse’. She demands of Kubrick: ‘either give me some plausible explanation ... or refund the admission price of \$3.50.’ So badly affected was this woman by the whole experience that she signed her letter with ‘An Ex-movie fan’.

The audience for Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which was initially released on 70mm in Cinerama theatres (with their huge, curved screens) in April 1968 before going on general release on 35mm in January 1969, has always included an unusually large number of people (including many academics in Film Studies and other disciplines) who felt the need to express their feelings and thoughts about the film in writing. A broad spectrum of such writing, including a selection of (in most cases edited) letters sent by the film's fans and detractors to Kubrick, was published in 1970 in Jerome Agel's *The Making of Kubrick's 2001*.² These and other letters (such as the one quoted above) are now part of the Stanley Kubrick Archive in London. In this paper I examine the ways in which members of the film's initial audience, who – like that concerned mother – were neither film journalists nor film academics, responded to it.

The letter quoted above indicates some of the issues I want to address. Firstly, it is important to note that *2001* was marketed as a special movie event for the whole family, as is indicated by its appearance on a drive-in double bill with a Winnie the Pooh movie and by the higher than usual ticket price (\$3.50 for the double bill at a time when the average ticket price was \$1.42; Steinberg, p. 244). The film quickly acquired an enormous critical reputation as a unique 'visual experience', which the above letter writer both references and rejects as 'pointless'. What is more, the film failed to live up to general expectations cinemagoers had about a night out at the movies. Where that experience was expected to be engaging, many viewers joined the concerned mother in rejecting *2001* as boring; and where films were expected to tell a meaningful story, made up of a carefully integrated sequence of events, many found *2001* to be only 'loosely strung together' and incoherent. In response to this experience, both the film's detractors and its fans were willing to go out of their way to look for 'some explanation' or justification, with hundreds of them writing directly to, and thus entering into a possible dialogue with, Kubrick. Furthermore, for better or for worse, the film's impact was often felt to be profound; whereas the letter quoted above is signed by 'An Ex-movie fan', suggesting her alienation from a favourite pastime, many admirers of *2001* also described their experience of the film as life-changing and were eager to celebrate the unique qualities which allowed the film to have such a positive impact. Finally, the above letter shows that one and a half years into the film's release it was widely understood that, whatever its merits or shortcomings, *2001* could be appropriated as a psychedelic experience, the cinematic equivalent of 'a "trip", and not the space variety'.

In this paper, I first offer a brief description of the film so as to remind ourselves of its radical departures from the conventions of Hollywood storytelling. I then outline the background for my study of the *2001* letters, highlighting several assumptions that I initially shared with the existing literature about the film's reception. This is followed by an introduction to the collection of letters held at the Stanley Kubrick Archive. Referring to a wide range of letters, I

go on to discuss four types of audience responses to *2001*: rejection, dialogue, celebration and appropriation. I conclude by offering a new perspective on the film's reception, which challenges earlier assumptions (including my own).

The Film

2001: A Space Odyssey tells the story of the impact of alien artifacts – black rectangular slabs (or monoliths) placed on Earth, the Moon and near Jupiter – on man-apes and human beings, bringing about two evolutionary leaps: the transition from pre-human to human, and from human to post-human (or superhuman). Within this larger story are contained four smaller tales. Firstly, there is a man-ape's discovery of the possibility to use a bone as a tool, and his deployment of this tool to kill animals and the leader of a rival tribe. Secondly, millions of years later in the 21st century, there is the American government's paternalistic concern for the impact that the news of the discovery of an alien artifact (another monolith) on the Moon could have on the Earth's population, and its attempt to explore the trail left by the extraterrestrials while keeping their existence secret even from the astronauts doing the exploring. Thirdly, there is the artificial intelligence and surprisingly complex psychology of the central computer of the spaceship sent to Jupiter and its puzzling breakdown which starts with misleading error messages and culminates in the murder of all but one of the astronauts on board the ship and the remaining astronaut's 'killing' of the computer. Finally, there is the surviving astronaut's utterly mysterious encounter with alien technology near Jupiter and what appears to be a dazzling journey across space and time which results in his final transformation into a foetus, a 'Star Child', floating back in space towards the Earth.

The film tells its story in a most unusual manner. It is divided into four parts, separated by titles and/or drastic spatio-temporal shifts. Many of the causal connections between the four parts remain implicit and ambiguous as do the causal connections between many events within each part. What is more, the film emphasises spectacular vistas, the meticulous design and spectacular display of pre-historic or futuristic costumes, sets and locations, the leisurely delineation of physical movement, in particular the movement of vehicles and people in the weightlessness of space, and unexpected juxtapositions of images with classical or atonal music as well as sound effects and silence; all of this takes precedence over dialogue, expressive performance and character development. In particular, during the space flight sequences, set design, camera angles and the actors' positioning and movement aim to induce a feeling of disorientation or spatial disconnection in the spectator, whereby categories such as 'up' and 'down' are called into question. Similarly, the so-called 'Star Gate' sequence depicting the surviving astronaut's journey across space and time uses a range of techniques which create an often highly abstract impression of movement across, or of static displays of,

celestial formations and alien 'landscapes', thus evoking the radical otherness of the astronaut's experience.

Background to the Present Study

My academic interest in audience responses to this highly unusual film was first roused when about ten years ago I started doing in-depth research for a book about the New Hollywood of the years 1967-76, in which I wanted to focus on the biggest hits at the American box office. To my surprise, I found that *2001* was among the biggest hits of the late 1960s; indeed, only one film released in 1968 made more money (this was Barbra Streisand's film debut *Funny Girl*; Krämer 2005, p. 107). How was this possible? From reading a lot of material about American cinema during this period and about the films of Stanley Kubrick I got the impression that the film's success happened in a roundabout way: Initially rejected by many critics and also by audiences, *2001* belatedly found a following when, a few months after its initial release date, young people started to attend in ever greater numbers, watching the film repeatedly, often under the influence of drugs (see LoBrutto, pp. 310-17, and Palmer).

This impression guided my own initial research on the making, marketing and reception of *2001*, which I first wrote up in 2003, making use of scripts and press clippings files in American archives and of the wide range of materials in Agel's *The Making of Kubrick's 2001*. The first half of the resulting paper was presented at a conference on widescreen cinema in 2003, the second half at the 2009 annual MeCCSA conference (Krämer 2003 and 2009). The basic argument of this work was that Kubrick received funding for *2001* in 1965 because he presented it to MGM as a mainstream event movie. Despite the radical transformation the project had undergone by the spring of 1968, for its initial 70mm 'roadshow' release in Cinerama theatres MGM marketed the film as a traditional Hollywood blockbuster, suitable for the whole family. Because the advertising made promises that the film did not keep (the trailer, for example, suggested that it was full of action), and because no effort was made to provide prospective audiences with a framework within which they might be able to process what the film actually had to offer, the immediate result was great disappointment and frustration on the part of both reviewers and regular cinemagoers. However, after a while several critics reconsidered their original rejection of the film and published much more positive accounts, while young cinemagoers began to focus their attention on the psychedelic qualities of *2001*, especially the Star Gate sequence, and, what is more, MGM finally re-launched the film with a new advertising campaign using the tagline 'The Ultimate Trip'. The positive impact of these factors on ticket sales meant that when the film went on general release on 35mm in 1969 and when it was re-released on 70mm in 1970 it continued to draw substantial audiences, so that by 1972 it had become one of the twenty highest grossing films of all time in the US – while also being considered by critics as one of the best films ever made.

This is the context for my in-depth study of the letters about *2001* that people wrote to Kubrick in the late 1960s. When embarking on this study, I aimed to find out on precisely what grounds people had rejected the film, or how, alternatively, they had been able to adjust to its unique qualities and make sense of and enjoy the film, in the process perhaps experiencing *2001* as a truly momentous cinematic event.

Fan Letters at the Stanley Kubrick Archive

The recently opened Stanley Kubrick Archive at the University of the Arts London contains the filmmaker's vast personal collection of material relating to his work. While the process of cataloguing is still going on, students and scholars have already generously been given access to some of the papers and artefacts making up the collection. Among the items are five boxes of so-called 'fan letters', mostly addressed to Kubrick. I looked through three of the five boxes, which contain hundreds of letters dated from 1968 onwards (and I expect the other two boxes to contain more of the same). The majority of these letters are responses to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, mostly written soon after the film's release; however, a substantial number of these letters on *2001* were written years - in a few cases as much as a decade - later. The second largest group of letters is responding to the release of *A Clockwork Orange* in 1971 and 1972; quite a few of these reference the writer's previous viewing of *2001*. Quite possibly, there is enough material here to chart responses to *2001* across the whole decade after its release, but in this paper I will concentrate on the late 1960s.

Letters vary in length from a few lines to several pages, and letter writers include pre-teen children as well as youths and adults, men as well as women, regular cinemagoers as well as a few fellow film professionals, Americans as well as a few people from other countries (mostly, it would seem, from the UK, where Kubrick had mainly been working and living since the early 1960s). A substantial number of correspondents had artistic or professional objectives of some kind. These included young people asking Kubrick for advice and support for the amateur film projects they were working on; in some cases these projects had been directly inspired by *2001*. There also were people working in the film industry who - impressed by his films - offered their services to Kubrick, and film fans who had no professional experience but wanted to work for Kubrick nonetheless. Another group of letter writers was primarily concerned with getting a signed picture or a prop from *2001*. However, most correspondents had no such ulterior motives, but simply wanted to articulate their observations, opinions, feelings and ideas about Kubrick's work.³ These are the letters which the following discussion is mainly based upon.⁴

The Role of Authorship, Critics and Marketing

It is worth noting how unusual it is that so many people wrote to the filmmaker behind a big Hollywood blockbuster. *2001* was obviously widely understood not so much as a product of Hollywood but as the personal creation of this one man. Almost all letter writers held Kubrick personally responsible for the film. For example, one correspondent writes: 'it is the only motion picture ever made that so utterly bears the mark of a single man – of a single mind.'⁵ It is very rare to find acknowledgments of the collaborative nature of filmmaking, as in one letter declaring that 'you and your staff are geniuses',⁶ or in the letter from a Rhode Island mother of three, demanding an explanation of the film 'from you or the gentleman who wrote the screenplay' (Kubrick collaborated with Science Fiction author Arthur C. Clarke on the script).⁷ Only a few letters are addressed to MGM, despite the fact that the studio's name and logo – and thus its ultimate responsibility for *2001* - were displayed both at the very beginning of the film and in the advertising. That it was indeed possible to hold the studio responsible, rather than Kubrick, is indicated by the following statement: 'My faith in MGM has been totally destroyed (sic).'⁸ Yet, most correspondents addressed their letters to Kubrick as the film's creator, echoing the film's reviews which tended to emphasise his authorship.⁹

Several letters demonstrate that at least some sections of *2001*'s audience were aware of the divided responses of reviewers. For example, a rabbi from Rochester wrote: 'The local movie critics were enthusiastic but a bit confused.'¹⁰ A fifteen year old schoolboy was so concerned about the film's critical reception that he kept 'a record of reviews that *2001* has received, mostly from New York publications. I am happy to announce that 33 are excellent, which is much more than the reviews that were not so good.'¹¹ Indeed, some letter writers felt that they had to defend the film against what they perceived as unfair or misguided critical attacks; hence one fourteen year old boy wrote: 'Course you know what the critics said. Well, I say down with the critics.'¹² Another letter writer stated: 'For the life of me, I cannot understand why the critics (all of which I read ...) haven't stood up and shouted with enthusiasm in their reviews.'¹³ In this way, the critical controversy surrounding *2001* could become a part of cinemagoers' experience of the film which extended beyond actual viewing(s) into, in some cases, extended periods of recollection, reflection and discussion.

However, arguably more important than audience members' familiarity with reviews was their initial exposure to the film's poster, trailer, advertisements and the surrounding publicity. The letters written to Kubrick indicate how successful MGM's initial family-oriented marketing campaign was in getting children and parents to see *2001*, leading, as we have already seen, to severe disappointment in some cases, but also to extremely positive responses. A particularly striking example of the former is a letter from a father, telling Kubrick that his eleven year old daughter had bought four tickets for *2001* as a present for her parents' wedding anniversary. After the film 'she cried because she felt she wasted' her money (the

considerable sum of \$14).¹⁴ By contrast, a letter from England, signed by several family members, stated: 'the whole family feel they want you to know how much your film ... was appreciated by us, in every way.'¹⁵ The idea that *2001* could be a valuable shared family experience also shows up in a letter from a twenty-one year old man: 'I am now in the process of getting my parents to see the movie so that I can discuss it with them.'¹⁶ A pastor writing to Kubrick went as far as to 'recommend [*2001*] for families, especially those with teenage youngsters', because unlike many 'violent' movies *2001* provided 'fine, wholesome entertainment.'¹⁷

The many letters Kubrick received from children indicate that in addition to family outings, school trips to the cinema seem to have been quite common. Thus, a young girl (of perhaps 10 years) wrote: 'My class and I went to see (*2001*) ... We enjoyed it very much but we didn't understand ...' – and here she provides a long list of puzzling elements in the film.¹⁸ Another girl reported that after '(m)ost of our biology class viewed your film', they now 'would like to hold a large, organized discussion', presumably with permission and support from their teacher.¹⁹ There also is a letter from a thirteen year old boy who had seen *2001* six times and was now 'writing a research paper about it.'²⁰ This suggests that MGM's promotion of *2001* as, among many other things, an educational experience made a significant impact on children's exposure and responses to the film.

More generally, we can note that the marketing campaign for *2001* succeeded in attracting a surprisingly diverse range of cinemagoers to the film. Many of them found *2001* exceedingly difficult to deal with, and while some felt inspired by these difficulties to enter into a dialogue with the filmmaker, others felt the need to express their outright rejection of the film.

Rejection

Given the in some respects quite misleading advertising for *2001*, it is surprising that Kubrick did not receive many complaints about the fact that the film failed to deliver on the explicit or implicit promises it made. The only such complaint I have found so far is contained in a somewhat ambiguous letter which may or may not be making fun of Kubrick and his movie; the correspondent wrote: 'I would have to say that, in all honesty, the advertising campaign that preceded this picture was, to say the least, *deceitful*.'²¹ Instead of commenting specifically on the advertising, disappointed cinemagoers articulated a more general criticism, namely that the film failed to meet the basic expectations audiences would bring to any film they paid for at the box office.

We have already seen this in the letter cited at the beginning of this paper. Another example is a woman who, after expressing her 'deep disappointment and disgust', wrote: 'You expect to see something either amusing, informative or with an interesting plot and this movie had

NOTHING to offer'; instead of 'colorful space scenes', the film delivered disturbing 'color explosions'.²² While the film thus lacked humour, educational value, a coherent and engaging story and pleasing visual spectacle, the main complaint in this letter – as in many others – concerns not so much the absence of certain qualities but the presence of a profound and challenging mystery. Instead of merely stating that '(t)he plot was sadly lacking', this woman goes on to write that the film 'made no sense to me.' Indeed, she reports, 'I was relieved during the intermission ... to hear it made no sense to others either.' This would seem to suggest that the absence of 'plot' and 'sense' could easily be experienced as a direct challenge posed by the film (or the filmmaker); the woman hints at the possibility that she might be expected to be able to make sense of the film, which is why she is 'relieved' when her inability to do so is shared by others.

Other letter writers were more explicit about feeling that the film posed an unfair and possibly demeaning challenge to them. Thus, a letter from a nineteen year old woman revolved around the difficulty of making sense of the film, and instead of simply seeing fault with the film and the filmmaker, she took it very personally: '[the film] is beyond my understanding'; 'I think you were trying to tell us something about life, but what it is, I just can't determine'; '[t]he movie made no sense to me at all'.²³ She concludes: 'You wrote and directed a picture far above the understanding of us ordinary people.' Since, it is implied, cinemagoing is an ordinary experience, creating a film that makes most cinemagoers feel inadequate is rather devious in the eyes of this correspondent.

This line of argument is also evident in the letter from the Rhode Island mother quoted earlier. She writes: 'Now, Sir, I am a high school graduate of normal or slightly above normal intelligence and so is my husband', and yet 'we didn't understand a thing'.²⁴ In other words, despite her considerable education, this woman is made to feel quite stupid – and, as she points out repeatedly, she is paying for this dubious privilege. However, rather than simply rejecting the film and asking for her money back, she demands an explanation of what is going on in the film, and what its overall objective is: 'Was this picture intended to be simply a space travelogue or was it like a piece of modern art? Each person looks at it and gives it his own interpretation?' Getting answers to her questions is of vital importance for this woman: 'I've been able to think of practically nothing else for two days now and I still can't figure it out so please help me before I loose [sic] my mind'.²⁵ Thus, the letter moves from outright rejection to entering into a dialogue with the filmmaker.

Dialogue

Letters asking Kubrick about particular details in, or the overall meaning of, the film, often offering the writers' own interpretations, are much more numerous than outright rejections. They vary enormously in length and complexity. At one end of the spectrum, a youngster from

New Jersey merely wrote: 'The last part of the movie I and my whole family didn't understand. What was going on?'²⁶ At the other end, correspondents contemplated the mysteries of *2001* over several pages. Some letter writers – such as the Rhode Island mother – seemed to address their questions and ideas only to Kubrick, while others made it clear that they were already engaged in ongoing discussions of the film at school, with their friends or with their family, and now wanted to include Kubrick in these discussions.

We have already come across letters from children referencing discussions of the film at school. In one case, the letter writer wants a straightforward answer to certain unresolved issues: 'Would you please explain to us what you are trying to say to us ...?'²⁷ This is very different from the above mentioned letter about the staging of a formal discussion in a biology class, specifically about 'evolution and the central figure of God throughout the whole movie': 'We were wondering if you [had] any discussion sheets available for groups interested in analysing the film.'²⁸ Here, the expectation is not that Kubrick will provide clearcut answers but that he may provide some structure for the discussion, and also perhaps more food for thought.

In some cases, letter writers offered extensive interpretations of the film, wanting Kubrick to confirm their ideas or to arbitrate between conflicting approaches. Thus, one correspondent reported on long discussions with friends, giving him 'several sleepless nights', because they were not able to decide between four rival interpretations (focused on the film's ending): '(I) would appreciate your telling us if any of us is correct and if not, then just what is the correct version?'²⁹ Other letter writers simply presented their, in some cases, extensive and highly complex interpretations to Kubrick, without expecting confirmation. Sometimes, such correspondents set their own reflections against the responses of others: 'you wouldn't believe some of the interpretations of it I've heard! They range all the way from "... The whole thing was a series of disconnected vignettes just like the early Cinerama spectaculars" to "It was about the Second Coming...".'³⁰ Alternatively, letter writers focused only on their own response. One man interpreted the film both at 'The Freudian Level' and at 'The Religious Level'.³¹ A second man offered a formal dissection of the narrative (isolating four parts: 'Introduction', 'The plot thickens', 'Crisis' and 'Resolution') from the perspective of Jungian dream analysis.³² These and other correspondents appear to have seen their analytical letters to Kubrick as a fitting response to the film that Kubrick had given to them; in return for a complex film experience, they offered Kubrick a complex meditation on that experience. The question whether it was even legitimate to go beyond such an exchange and ask Kubrick directly about the film's meaning, was the focus of one letter dealing with both the nature of art and *2001*'s 'theological' dimension ('the theme of man touching Heaven'): 'I realize that many artists consider it an insult to ask "What does it mean?" ... This I do not ask you. I only ask if my idea can logically be derived from the content of the film.'³³

There was one legitimate source, though, for answering questions about the film's mysteries, namely the Arthur C. Clarke novel which had been written parallel to the development of the film's script and was published in conjunction with the film's release. During the first year or so of the film's release, there were surprisingly few letters mentioning the novel; indeed, so far I have come across only one, from a NASA astronaut: 'Though I enjoyed the film very much ..., I was somewhat confused by the meaning of the third part. This was cleared up when I read the book.'³⁴ By the early 70s, it had become much more common for fans of the film to fill in some of the blanks through careful study of the novel, and also of further writings by Arthur C. Clarke about *2001*.³⁵ In the late 60s, though, correspondents were more likely to look for explanations in other print sources. Thus, a South African woman, who was both impressed with and confused by the film, wrote: 'I went all the way back to buy a programme', which was, however, 'useless containing nothing but brightly coloured pictures.'³⁶ Another letter writer was able to make sense of *2001* partly by noting 'a striking resemblance to Arthur Clarke's *Childhood's End*'.³⁷

Thus, the dialogue that the film's fans entered into with Kubrick could be extended to Clarke (indeed some people wrote directly to him).³⁸ At the same time, it is worth noting that reading material related to the film was not only part of people's conversational exchange with its makers, but also seems to have served as an extension of the viewing experience. Many admirers of the film returned to movie theatres for repeat viewings while also collecting related artifacts which, presumably, allowed them to engage with the film without having to leave their homes. For example, a fourteen year old boy noted: 'I have collected everything I could find on the movie.'³⁹ Another boy reported that he had watched *2001* – 'the best movie I ever saw' – four times, had already bought the soundtrack album and would soon purchase the novel; he even had 'a model of the "moon bus"'.⁴⁰ We might say that, rather than establishing a dialogue with the makers, the primary motivation of these fans was to find different ways to celebrate Kubrick's movie.

Celebration

The largest group of letters on *2001* is neither rejecting the film, nor entering into a dialogue with Kubrick about the film's meaning; instead these letters focus on the writers' often transformative cinematic experience of *2001*, the film's important place in their lives and its unique qualities. Of course, many letters focusing on interpretations also have this celebratory dimension, and we have already seen that even some of the people rejecting the film clearly experienced it as an important event (occupying their thoughts and giving them sleepless nights). Yet, it is to letters primarily designed to celebrate the film that I now turn.

To begin with, many correspondents signalled the extraordinary nature of their experience of *2001* by stating that this was their first 'fan letter', indeed their first letter of any kind to someone in the entertainment industry. For example, a Radcliffe student opened her letter with the comment: 'I have never written a "fan letter" of this sort before but it seems that in a time of general artistic, social, political, etc. deterioration, some thing of such excellence should not go unremarked.'⁴¹ Another writer concluded his letter with a 'PS': '*2001* is the greatest motion picture ever produced – and this is the only fan letter I ever expect to write.'⁴²

When it comes to describing what made their experiences of the film, and the film itself, so special, the letter writers touched on a number of related themes. Most narrowly, *2001* was described as a great Science Fiction film elevating the whole genre, or, more broadly, as a great film demonstrating that the cinema can reach the level of the older arts. Thus, a fourteen year old boy wrote: 'It's about time somebody made a film about the true science-fiction of today. After a while you get sick of seeing nothing but giant monsters from outa place.'⁴³ What letter writers seemed to appreciate most about the Science Fiction of *2001* was the 'scientifically accurate description' of the future which allowed them to experience that future.⁴⁴ One correspondent stated: 'Being young enough to look forward to 2001 as the prime of my life, I must thank you for giving me a glimpse of what terror and beauty may await us in that year.'⁴⁵ Another one elaborated that experiencing 'the world of tomorrow' gave a purpose to present day endeavours, because 'that world is the one we will build one day.'⁴⁶ The idea that the film's engagement with human history allowed viewers to find more meaning in their lives was shared by other letter writers. For example, one man described *2001* as 'a brief but complete history of the development of Man, together with a glimpse of his possible future development', which was based on a view of mankind, which the writer shared, 'as struggling toward an ideal, rather than the mud-bound materialists I see each day.'⁴⁷

While many correspondents thus celebrated *2001* as the ultimate Science Fiction epic, others argued that the film transcended its genre. One young woman stated: 'We recognized it as more than a science fiction story but rather a personal statement concerning your philosophy of life.'⁴⁸ By making 'this "thinking man's movie"', Kubrick was seen to transcend the limitations of genre cinema and enter the realm of art. Indeed, for some writers *2001* was the first film they had seen to realise cinema's artistic potential: 'It is, at least to me, the first movie to be a true art form.'⁴⁹ Similarly, for another correspondent *2001* captured the very essence of the filmic medium: 'I had the definite impression that for the first time in my life I had truly seen a "motion picture".'⁵⁰ A central quality of art – including the art of film – so abundantly present in *2001* according to its admirers, was beauty. One man wrote about 'such overpowering and breathtaking beauty that ... I am at a loss at describing the feeling.'⁵¹ Similarly, one woman was so overwhelmed by this 'most beautiful picture I have ever seen' that she was inspired to write a poem about it.⁵²

In the case of some correspondents, both the film's aesthetic qualities and the immense scope of its narrative contributed to particularly powerful, even life-changing experiences which sometimes were described in terms of rebirth (as was, of course, the story of the film itself, especially the ending). Some writers simply noted that the film made them feel alive: 'Your movie has given me *many* moments which I seek out in my life – moments of feeling alive.'⁵³ This correspondent linked his aliveness to the 'exciting new territories' opened up by the film, and went on to ask: 'how many times must I be born to realize what I am?' A rabbi's letter noted that the film had 'profoundly' affected him: 'In your own fantastic way of exploring a past world, you have opened up a new world.'⁵⁴ Encountering such a new world could lead to decisions about the rest of one's life (even if it is doubtful whether such decisions were actually carried out). Thus, an eleven year old boy declared: 'After seeing *2001: A Space Odyssey*, I have decided to become a spacecraft designer.'⁵⁵

In the light of the intensity and grandeur of many people's encounters with *2001*, it is perhaps not surprising that some equated viewing the film with a spiritual experience (sometimes in conjunction with offering a theological interpretation of the film's story). One pastor noted that, despite the fact that he 'did not fully understand' the film, 'the impression I carried with me as I left the theatre was that life begins with the infinite (God), and ends in the same manner.'⁵⁶ It is ambiguous whether he is commenting on what he perceives to be the film's message, or whether viewing the film actually brought him closer to God – or perhaps both. Another correspondent wrote: 'Bless you for your spiritual poem. ... You have created the aura of love in every frame.'⁵⁷ Once again, this does not appear to be a statement merely about the film's content, but also about the writer's experience of a transcendent love. What is arguably the most complex letter I have examined so far ends with the question: 'How can man now be content to consider the trivial and mundane, when you have shown them a world full of stars, a world beyond the infinite?'⁵⁸ Before reaching this concluding question, the writer states: 'with *2001* you may have quite possibly saved any number of spiritual and physical lives. For it is within the power of a film such as yours to give people a reason to go on living.'

Thus, in celebrating *2001*, the film's admirers quite frequently made extreme claims concerning its uniqueness, its visionary qualities, its artistry and beauty, its spirituality and its life-affirming, life-changing and life-saving powers. Such claims certainly appear to reflect the extraordinary nature of their experiences of the film. Indeed, reading such claims, I have found it difficult not to be affected myself; in many cases, I got caught up in the depth of feeling and thoughtfulness so much in evidence in many of the letters.

Appropriation

I want to finish by briefly looking at a fourth response strategy, which according to newspaper reports at the time was widely adopted by youth audiences and was certainly encouraged by the revamped marketing campaign centring on the tagline 'The Ultimate Trip'. Here *2001* was appropriated as a mind-expanding, psychedelic experience, and its viewing enhanced through the consumption of mind-altering substances. We can only find traces of this in the letters sent to Kubrick. For example, one correspondent offered the following characterisation of the film: 'Anthropological, camp, McLuhan, cybernetic, psychedelic, religious.'⁵⁹ Another writer reported: 'A friend of mine calls your film "a mind-expander", a fitting tribute, I think.'⁶⁰ A third writer described the film as a 'psychedelic roller-coaster'.⁶¹ So far I have not seen a single letter from 1968 or 1969 mentioning the correspondent's drug use during viewings of *2001*, or the fact that substances were being smoked or ingested by other people in the auditorium.

A few years later, however, the connection between drugs and Kubrick's film appears to have been so well-established that a self-confessed drug user could write to Kubrick with a lengthy description of a vivid 'acid trip' he had had, which he felt could be turned into a movie: 'I thought you would be the best one to take it to because your (sic) a genius with such far out things.'⁶²

Whether drug use was indeed widespread during screenings of *2001* during the first one a half years or so of its initial release remains an open question. I hope to have shown, though, that such chemical enhancement of the viewing experience was by no means an essential requirement for those who wanted to enjoy and make sense of the film. Quite on the contrary, the letters sent to Kubrick demonstrate that all kinds of people managed to have very different kinds of intense experiences with the film without the help of drugs.

Conclusion

My analysis has focused on four types of responses to *2001*: rejection, dialogue, celebration and appropriation. Since *2001* was initially marketed as a spectacular adventure for the whole family in line with traditional Hollywood entertainment, many letter writers were unable to reconcile the actual experience of the film with their expectations and rejected it outright as incomprehensible and boring (a sentiment shared by some professional critics). A second, and larger, group of letter writers experienced the film as a challenge posed to them by Kubrick, whose high public profile as an artist encouraged them to see the film as the opening statement in a dialogue, to which they responded – without necessarily expecting an answer – by offering their own reflections on the film's possible meaning and purpose to Kubrick (a strategy later adopted by many academics). A third group of writers – by far the largest – wished simply to articulate the profound impact the film had made on them and to celebrate

the unique qualities which enabled the film to make such an impact. Curiously, in letters from the late 1960s, there is no direct evidence at all for the fourth type of response – the drug-enhanced appropriation of the film as a psychedelic experience –, which has been the subject of so much writing about the film.

These results have, quite unexpectedly, forced me to re-consider the broader argument about the making, marketing and reception of *2001* which, as mentioned earlier, provided the background for my study of the letters written to Kubrick. While the letter writers are not necessarily representative of the cinema audience in general, it is remarkable that the large majority are very positive about the film, including older people, women and children, three groups one might have expected to be particularly alienated from it (because of, among other things, its alleged countercultural association, its focus on science and technology, and its thematic and formal sophistication). Furthermore, judging by the rarity of letters commenting on misleading advertising, and by the many letters indicating that watching *2001* was quite often a very positive experience shared by parents and children (or by children and teachers), we have to conclude that MGM's initial marketing of the film as family entertainment suitable for everyone had considerable success rather than being a disastrous miscalculation.

Additional research confirms this conclusion. The film industry trade press and other papers tracked *2001*'s box office performance closely, and a constant flow of MGM press releases informed the media about the film's financial progress. What emerges from these reports is that as a roadshow, that is a film initially shown in only a few luxurious big city cinemas at raised ticket prices with bookable seats and all the trappings of a night out at a 'legitimate theatre' (a souvenir programme, an orchestral overture and an intermission), *2001* performed very well throughout 1968. It had an exceptionally large number of advance ticket sales before it was released, and its immediate box office success upon its release in April was so impressive that early reports suggested it might eventually even rival the two biggest hits in MGM history: *Dr. Zhivago* (released already in 1965, but still playing in 1968) and *Gone With the Wind* (originally released in 1939, yet on a hugely successful re-release in 1967/68).⁶³ By the end of the year, *2001* had earned \$8.5 million in rentals from only 125 cinemas, and came eleventh in *Variety*'s list of the top grossing films of 1968 (Steinberg, p. 26). Once the film went on general release in 1969, on 35mm at regular prices in a large number of cinemas all over the US, it was able to reach those audiences who had not previously had a chance to buy tickets for it, and both these new audiences and some members of the original audience who came back to see the film again (and again) turned *2001* into a major hit. By the end of 1969 it had added \$6m to its rentals, and while it did not reach the extreme heights of box office performance scaled by *Dr. Zhivago* and the 1967/68 re-release of *Gone With the Wind*, *Variety* now ranked *2001* among the fifty top grossing films of all time in the US.⁶⁴

Taking into account the broad spectrum of people who wrote to Kubrick about *2001* and the fact that roadshows had traditionally appealed to all-encompassing family audiences (cp. Hall 2002), we can conclude, I think, that across 1968 and 1969 the film succeeded with most audience segments, rather than depending solely, or mainly, on the repeat attendance of youthful fans (who, in any case, were reported to have stayed away from 35mm screenings in 1969).⁶⁵ However, from early on the trade press began to focus its reporting on the presence of young people in the audience for *2001*, on their special interest in the Star Gate sequence and their allegedly widespread consumption of hallucinogenic drugs during screenings.⁶⁶ It is, I think, mainly in response to such reporting – rather than in response to actual audience research – that MGM eventually introduced a more psychedelic marketing campaign ('The Ultimate Trip'), but this only happened for the film's 70mm re-launch in April 1970, by which time *2001* had already been playing in cinemas for two years.⁶⁷

I want to argue, then, that irrespective of its close association with youth and the counterculture, *2001: A Space Odyssey* was a massive hit with mainstream audiences, including the people whose letters to Kubrick I have analysed. This brings me to my final point. The response of the school children, mothers, priests, students and all the others who wrote to Kubrick about *2001* in the late 1960s was not only largely positive but also, as we have seen, overwhelmingly optimistic. The letter writers understood the film to be hopeful about the future, showing the amazing promise of future developments and the enormous potential of humankind yet to be realised.

This contrasts sharply with what has become the standard interpretation of *2001* in Kubrick criticism, which frames the film through the alleged pessimism of Kubrick's whole oeuvre (see, for example, the recent analyses of *2001* in Cocks, Diedrick and Perusek; Kolker; Naremore; and Rhodes). This interpretation emphasises the fact that in *2001* the very emergence of humankind is identified with the murderous use of tools, and that the most sophisticated human tool presented in the film – the HAL 9000 computer – turns into a murderer. Kubrick critics also like to argue that the humans in the film are more machine-like than HAL and that life in the year 2001 is generally portrayed as dehumanised. Finally, the very ambiguity of the final image of the Star Child turning to look straight at the camera does not inspire critics with great confidence in the benevolence of the creature's intentions and future actions. These are all perfectly valid and indeed often very compelling interpretive moves – which makes it all the more astonishing that letter writers in the late 1960s, and perhaps the film's original mainstream audiences in general, went against much of the filmic evidence presented to them and insisted on an optimistic reading of the film's story and imagery, often articulated through the idea of rebirth, that is a radical transformation which moves characters in the film, and also the audience watching the film, to a higher level of existence.

This optimism requires an explanation. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that the year of the film's initial release, 1968, more than any other year in recent history (except for 1989), was experienced by many people at the time, both in the US and elsewhere, as a potentially truly transformative historical moment. Thus, the widely shared experience of 2001 as a transformative event may have been facilitated by the film's storyline about the birth and rebirth of humanity working in conjunction with intense public debates about the power of art, technology and social movements to change the world. In any case, for many people in the audience, 2001's radical departure from Hollywood conventions and its story about the radical transformation of humankind gave rise to the perception that they themselves had been changed for the better by the film and to the intensified hope that the society, indeed the whole world, they lived in could be changed for the better as well.

Biographical Note

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¹ Letter contained in the as yet uncatalogued 'Fan Letters' boxes (in box 2, like all the other letters I am quoting in this essay) at the Stanley Kubrick Archive (SKA), University of the Arts London. The name of the author is known to me but to protect the anonymity of this and other correspondents, I will identify particular letters with reference to their date and the correspondents' home town; here 11 August 1969, West Palm Beach.

² The letters are on pp. 170-92. Agel does give the names of most of the correspondents.

³ Kubrick made considerable efforts to deal with these letters. At the very least, he seems to have instructed his assistant to send form letters thanking the writers for their comments. As there were two or three different form letters to choose from, it is likely that Kubrick did in fact read all his correspondence and selected the appropriate response which was then processed by his assistant. In quite a few instances, Kubrick himself composed a brief note or even a substantial letter in response to the mail he received.

⁴ While I looked through three of the five fan mail boxes in the collection, I only took notes on the first two. I fully expect that the patterns I discerned are replicated in the mail contained in the remaining boxes.

⁵ Letter dated 4 May 1968, Santa Monica; printed in Agel, pp. 189-92.

⁶ Letter dated 25 June 1968, Atlanta.

⁷ Letter dated 4 June 1968, Central Falls, Rhode Island. At least one of the letters in the Kubrick collection (dated 5 September 1968, Milwaukee) was addressed directly to Arthur C.

Clarke, who presumably copied it for Kubrick. A few letters were addressed to MGM rather than to Kubrick.

⁸ Letter dated 17 June 1968, Lutherville, Maryland; printed in Agel, p. 173.

⁹ One letter writer takes a humorous approach to the issue of authorship: 'The only possible human excuse I could think of is that your film was actually directed by HAL 9000. However, I am convinced that "he" would have done much better.' Letter dated 7 November 1968, Buenos Aires.

¹⁰ Letter dated 21 October 1968, Rochester.

¹¹ Letter dated 19 June 1968, Flushing, New York; printed in Agel, pp. 181-2.

¹² Letter dated 30 September 1968, Hayward, California; printed in Agel, p. 187. Another letter writer rejected critical opinion because in her eyes it was far too positive: 'Cue magazine said it [2001] was mentally stimulating and brilliantly conceived, but that doesn't tell us very much. Perhaps the critic himself didn't understand the picture, so he wrote nothing of real value to read.' Letter dated 9 June 1968, College Point, New York; printed in Agel, p. 175.

¹³ Undated letter, New York City, in Agel, p. 176.

¹⁴ Letter dated 8 May 1968, Brooklyn.

¹⁵ Undated letter, Burnley, Lancashire.

¹⁶ Letter dated 10 July 1968, Brooklyn.

¹⁷ Letter dated 14 June 1968, St. Louis, Missouri.

¹⁸ Letter dated 10 February 1969, Bowie, Maryland.

¹⁹ Letter dated 27 November 1968, Dubuque, Iowa.

²⁰ Letter dated 10 January 1969, Pittsburgh. Cp. undated letter from a fourteen year old boy in Duncanville, Texas, announcing that he and his friends 'are going to make our own realistic space movie for our speech class.'

²¹ Letter from North Miami Beach in Agel, p. 179. Emphasis in the original.

²² Letter dated 17 June 1968, Lutherville, Maryland; printed in Agel, p. 173.

²³ Letter dated 9 June 1968, College Point, New York; printed in Agel, p. 175.

²⁴ Letter dated 4 June 1968, Central Falls, Rhode Island.

²⁵ Cp. letter dated 24 July 1968, Johannesburg, South Africa: 'I feel very strongly that perhaps for us lesser mortals a short explanation at the beginning of the production would have been an idea. Please send me a short explanation of what your were trying to say.'

²⁶ Undated letter, Highland Park, New Jersey. Cp. undated letter from an eleven year old boy from Birmingham Farms, Michigan: 'I enjoyed it very much up until the last 20 minutes. Could you explain it to me?'

²⁷ Letter dated 10 February 1969, Bowie, Maryland.

²⁸ Letter dated 27 November 1968, Dubuque, Iowa.

²⁹ Undated letter, North Augusta, South Carolina.

³⁰ Letter dated 25 October 1968, Wichita, Kansas; printed in Agel, pp. 172-3.

³¹ Letter from Los Angeles in Agel, pp. 178-9. Cp. letter dated 29 May 1968, San Bernardino; this one offers an overall interpretation of the film equating space exploration with the exploration of the mind, and also notes the sexual symbolism of the Star Gate sequence.

³² Letter dated 31 May 1968, Malibu, California. Kubrick replied on 19 June: 'Thank you for your fascinating note. You are very perceptive, indeed.' Letter and reply printed in Agel, pp. 182-3. Cp. additional long analytical letters in Agel, pp. 179-80, 188-9, 189-92.

³³ Letter dated 20 July 1968, Wichita, Kansas.

³⁴ Letter printed in Agel, p. 172.

³⁵ This is illustrated by a number of letters in box 1. Also see, in box 2, letter dated 9 June 1977, Hammond, Louisiana.

³⁶ Letter dated 24 July 1968, Johannesburg, South Africa.

³⁷ Letter dated 25 October 1968, Wichita Kansas, printed in Agel, pp. 172-3.

³⁸ See letter dated 5 September 1968, Milwaukee.

³⁹ Letter dated 19 May 1968, no place.

⁴⁰ Letter dated 17 December 1970, Sunnyvale, California. Cp. undated letter, Columbus, Ohio, also probably from the early 1970s; the letter writer reports that he has seen the film several times, read both the novel and Agel's book as well as owning various records related to the film. He asks whether there will be a '8mm souvenir edition of the film'. Cp. letter dated 12 January 1969 by a 5th grader from Duluth, Minnesota, who asks Kubrick whether he has 'a tape of the whole film' (referring, presumably, to a video recording), while also suggesting that excerpts of the film should be made available on 8mm.

⁴¹ Letter dated 3 August 1968, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁴² Letter dated 30 June 1968, Sacramento. Cp. letter dated 22 July 1968, Lafleche, Canada; the correspondent mentions that it is her first ever letter to a 'show business' personality.

⁴³ Letter dated 30 September 1968, Hayward, California; printed in Agel, p. 187.

⁴⁴ Undated letter, Cambridge, Massachusetts; printed in Agel, p. 184.

⁴⁵ Undated letter, Atlanta, Georgia; printed in Agel, p. 172.

⁴⁶ Letter dated 22 July 1968, Lafleche, Canada.

⁴⁷ Letter dated 25 October 1968, Wichita, Kansas; printed (and slightly corrected) in Agel, pp. 172-3.

⁴⁸ Letter dated 25 August 1968, Louisville, Kentucky.

⁴⁹ Letter dated 15 April 1968, Fort Lee, New Jersey; printed in Agel, pp. 186-7 (here the letter is listed as being from Leonia, New Jersey).

⁵⁰ Letter dated 4 May 1968, Santa Monica; printed in Agel, pp. 189-92.

⁵¹ Letter dated 20 July 1968, Wichita, Kansas.

⁵² Undated letter in Agel, p. 184.

⁵³ Letter dated 15 April 1968, Fort Lee, New Jersey; printed in Agel, pp. 186-7 (here the letter is listed as being from Leonia, New Jersey).

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- ⁵⁴ Letter dated 21 October 1968, Rochester, New York.
- ⁵⁵ Letter dated 1 September 1968, Mulvane, Kansas.
- ⁵⁶ Letter dated 14 June 1968, St. Louis, Missouri.
- ⁵⁷ Letter dated 29 May 1968, San Bernardino.
- ⁵⁸ Letter dated 4 May 1968, Santa Monica; printed in Agel, pp. 189-92.
- ⁵⁹ Undated letter from Detroit; printed in Agel, pp. 171-2.
- ⁶⁰ Cp. letter dated 26 March 1969, New Malden, Surrey.
- ⁶¹ Letter dated 20 July 1968, Wichita, Kansas.
- ⁶² Letter dated 30 October 1972, Milwaukee.
- ⁶³ "Odyssey" on Time; O'Brien Comes Home', *Film and Television Daily*, 27 March 1968, p. 3; Charles McHarry's 'On the Town' column, *New York Daily News*, 25 March 1968, unpaginated clipping in 'New York – Misc. Newspaper Publicity' folder, in box '2001 New York U.S. Reviews & Publicity', SKA; 'MGM's "2001" Takes Top N[ew] Y[ork] B[ox] O[ffice] Grosses', *Hollywood Reporter*, 15 April 1968, unpaginated clipping in '2001 Newspapers Publicity' box, SKA; MGM press releases dated 9 May 1968 and 19 June 1968, also in '2001 Newspapers Publicity' box.
- ⁶⁴ 'All-Time Boxoffice Champs', *Variety*, 7 January 1970, p. 25.
- ⁶⁵ '2001: In 35mm Version', *Variety*, 15 January, 1969; unpaginated clipping in press clippings file on *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Performing Arts Research Centre, New York Public Library; 'Back to 70m [sic], Six-Track Stereo, 2001 Displays Fast Legs With Young Mob', *Variety*, 8 April 1970, p. 6.
- ⁶⁶ 'Kubrick's Sure "2001" to Click', *Variety*, 10 April 1968, pp. 5, 24; "'2001" Draws Repeat and Recant Notices, Also a Quasi-Hippie Public', *Variety*, 15 May 1968, unpaginated clipping in 'Variety' folder in unlabelled boxes, SKA; Stuart Byron, "'Space": Box Office Moon-Shot', *Variety*, 29 January 1969, pp. 5, 19.
- ⁶⁷ Jack Ano, 'New York Scene' column, *Film Bulletin*, 6 April 1970, p. 6.