Time and Space

A Paper on Kubrick's Technique in *2001: A Space Odyssey*
UC Davis Fall 2015
FMS 001: Intro to Film Studies

by
Aditya Nirgun

Bordwell and Thompson's *Film* Art outlines "narrative time" as the cause-and-effect and chronology in a film created by the relationships between plot duration, story duration, and screen duration[1]. Stanley Kubrick takes these relationships and distorts them to the extreme using masterful and significant film techniques in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). This film contains some of the most iconic and influential film moments in history, setting the standard for science fiction and laying the ground for a space-age, pop-culture aesthetic in film that carried well into the late 70s with Star Wars. Cultural influence aside, this film contains some of Kubrick's most famed cuts, transitions, effects, and shots purposed to create an altered sense of time and reality. These techniques can be analyzed on several levels of significance in terms of narrative, story, deviation from linear time, literary symbolism and production. Kubrick's work has both dense allegory and calculated intention, thus providing us with a film that is perfect for holistic and specific analysis, especially with regards to the presentation of time in film.

2001 is comprised of 4 main intervals in time separated by proportionately massive leaps in chronological time. The film presents us with a story duration that presumably begins in the pre-photon darkness of a chaotic, newly-born universe and extends through billions of years of evolution until we come to the human era of space travel and AI before the timeline itself ceases to be important in the final chapter. This film stands to be an example of a narrative time scale of mind boggling proportions. The most memorable moments in the film surround Kubrick's ability to knit these events together in seamless and meaningful ways using innovative and thought-provoking filming techniques. There are several chronological transitions in the film that are given a certain supreme and mystical importance through employing the simple technique of

the match cut. When faced with two visually similar shots one after another, the viewer is led to draw contextual and symbolic connections between the subjects in the shots[1]. This is a very elegant and unobtrusive way of introducing an intellectual reaction in the audience and presenting an otherwise obscure juxtaposition. The match cut of the bone falling to the spaceship cruising through space is one of the most famous match cuts in the history of film. It is the perfect example of a cut that creates a crucial implication between two objects, the bone and the spaceship. The bone represents a useful tool to the ape kind, bringing times of plenty and dominance over other tribes. A victorious throw of the bone after the killing of a competing ape cuts to a shot of a spaceship approaching a larger wheel-like space station. We are now looking at a very different scene taking place millions and millions years later but the comparison is clear, we are still witnessing a tool in action. The juxtaposition between the violent fight scene prior and the ethereal and majestic space tools lead me to believe Kubrick is making larger commentary on the evolution of war and weaponry, making an undeniable reference to how the brutality of hand to hand combat has transformed into the silent aggression of the Cold War and the Space Race, major world events that were unfolding during the production of this film (the US landed on the moon one year and two months after the release of this film). As jarring and continuity-breaking as this cut is, it perfectly demonstrates how time exists as a very significant dimension in reality. Our entire narrative changes within a single frame and it is the most incredible, most unexpected cause-and-effect any one person could imagine.

A film that can put the advancement of human civilization into perspective regarding the timescale of the entire universe has done more to alter the audience's sense of time, not only in

the movie but in their own reality, than any film I've ever watched. But Kubrick doesn't stop there. When Bowman enters the portal near Jupiter, he is taken on a trippy and barely decipherable lightshow adventure until he reaches a Louis XVI bedroom where he lives and dies within the screentime of a couple minutes before transforming into a star child and returning to Earth. The sequences in this last part of the film are entirely in the realm of either no time or distorted time. The famous stargate scene is a memorable and very elaborate visual segment in the movie that attempted to recreate a cosmic, reality-shattering psychedelic experience for the audience. Kubrick worked on this sequence with Douglas Trumbull, who was inspired by early computer animator John Whitney[2]. The process centered around slit-scan photography combined with a moving platform camera. A wall of colored gel patterns and artwork moved behind a slit as the camera, shutter open, traveled toward the slit on a moving track[3]. The process very much involved the bending of time and space, which happens to be the kind of experience Bowman is subject to in the scene. On another level, even we, the audience, are subject to a distortion in time due to the lack of any sort of narrative or chronological time during the portal scene. To remind us of the narrative, we are only shown the occasional interspersed stills of Bowman's face in terror as his mind clearly fails to comprehend the sights and sensations. Based on only what we see, Bowman could've been in that portal for hours or even years in storytime. It may even be pointless to assume any amount of time that passed as time itself may not have been applicable in that dimension. Kubrick masterfully creates this ambiguity in the relationship between story time and screen time to create an effect of distorted narrative that elevates the audience's understanding beyond simple chronological order and into this new cinematic experience in a timeless reality. This sets us up perfectly for the bedroom sequence in

which the aging of Bowman occurs in a strange, multilinear fashion. This effect is created with the aid of several shots at varying vantages that allow Kubrick to shift time non-linearly within spaces outside the frame. For example, we watch Bowman as he first arrives spot himself outside the pod and standing in the room. Then the camera switches to a close-up on the standing Bowman's face, revealing signs of serious aging, and then an over-the-shoulder shot back to the other corner of the room reveals that the pod, and the Bowman inside, has completely disappeared. This kind of sleight of hand switching between main subjects in the sequence makes us forfeit our idea of the subject as a physical character. Unlike normal physical reality, there is no reaction or cause-and-effect because the viewing Bowman simply disappears as an older one is revealed, a very eerie and mysterious way of representing passing time. This must have been a very jarring and unconventional film technique during the release of this movie and it no doubt had a mixed reception among audiences. These techniques, however, did pave the way for and inspire many filmmakers to begin experimenting with unconventional and distorted time.

It is clear Kubrick's ambition was to create the most comprehensive film experience audiences had ever seen at the time. Beginning at the earliest possible point on the timeline of our universe and extending to far past our own lives, we are shown an entire universe that is not real but very well could be someday. The effect this creates is not one of relatability or casual visual entertainment but a grand experience of awe and, in response to the current increasing pace of human discovery, terror. To me, this film makes it clear that one of the most vast and uncharted realms of exploration is actually the intangible dimension of time. The title itself is a nod to this

idea. The story has very little to do with an actual odyssey through physical space, the only traveling being the journey to Jupiter which was pretty much skipped over anyway. The story is ironically more of a time odyssey, given the 4 parts separated by huge expanses of chronological time. Even the pacing of the shots in the film distorts time for viewers. Lots of screen time is dedicated to focusing on the repetitive functions of computers and advanced technology. It really gives the impression of an almost mystical yet mechanical synchronicity in the 2001 universe. The film insists on keeping its own time and rhythm, leaving the audience to either tune in or be left out.

Work Cited

Bordwell, David and Thompson, Kristin "Film Art: An Introduction" Eighth Edition. 2004. Print

Ebert, Roger "2001 - The Monolith and the Message." rogerebert.com. April 21, 1968. Web. [http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/2001-the-monolith-and-the-message].

Anonymous "2001: A Space Odyssey (film)" Wikipedia. 31 October 2015. Web. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001:_A_Space_Odyssey_(film)].

Hess, John P. "Slit Scan: Recreating the Star Gate from Stanley Kubrick's "2001" Using Legos." FilmmakerIQ.com. Web. [http://filmmakeriq.com/lessons/slit-scan-recreating-the-stargate-sequence-from-stanley-kubricks-2001-using-legos/].