Beyond Zarathustra: Nietzsche and *2001: A Space Odyssey*

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The usual connection between Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy and the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is through *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and it was hailed at its release by at least one contemporary review as the “first Nietzschean film.” Central to *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is the concept of man as mainly a bridge between the ape and the superman. Richard Strauss’ homonymous tone poem, one of the musical cues of the film, also invokes a reading on *2001* on Nietzschean themes. Little has been written, however, to substantiate these claims, often giving way to facile interpretations. I will argue that there are indeed confluences between Stanley Kubrick’s film and Nietzsche’s philosophy, and these are grounded on the notions of truth and abstraction, the death of God, Will-to-Power, and Eternal Recurrence. *2001* is undeniably asking ambitious questions about the nature of intelligence and humankind, its place and fate in the universe; and it can be seen as a fitting illustration of many Nietzschean ideas, properly attuned with its time and medium. This essay does not aim, however, to be a comprehensive reading of either Nietzsche or *2001*, but rather discuss their connection in order to clarify aspects of both.

Nietzsche’s often misread claim that “God is dead” is apparently not one that would garner much interest in connection with *2001*, a film that does not seem not to be about religion or theology, but about space travel and technology. At the film’s core, however, one finds that what sets *2001* apart from much of the science fiction genre (certainly until then) is that it is centered around a number of philosophical and
metaphysical questions. Kubrick does not mean to deal with God, except in a “scientific definition of God,” as he has stated.\(^3\) There seems to be a connection between Nietzsche’s and Kubrick’s version of God: God in a traditional sense, as a divine all-powerful being, is dead, and in its place, there is the man-made construct of beliefs and structures of thought and knowledge. Nietzsche believed those to be related to the capacity of abstraction and the necessity of man being able to understand and conceptualize the world only in terms of abstraction. In fact, man does not deal with the thing in-itself, but with concepts. This is not just a semiotic system with signs and objects – Nietzsche thought that the Correspondence Theory of Truth was an axiom for the human condition. He writes, in “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” his definition of truth:

[Truth is] a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.\(^4\)

Truth, for Nietzsche, is never attainable, and what man regards as truth are merely metaphors and illusions that are one step removed from the actual truth, created by man himself. With this constant creation and “falsification of the world”,\(^5\) man continues to anthropomorphize the world. Every conception of how nature works is based on human perception, and thus science is not a universal truth, but rather a complex and “creative organization of the world, an arrangement which stands to observation.”\(^6\)

In this perspective, theology gives way to rationality and science, as it is not God
who has made man on His image, but the other way around, and not only God, but all man-made structures are anthropomorphic and congenial to human understanding. One of the main themes of 2001 is precisely the “scientific definition of God,” as Kubrick suggests, and the search for it. Although it is not a manifest idea and not voiced by any of the characters, to think of 2001 in such a light can not only link it to Nietzsche but also help to unveil many of its mysteries. 2001 deals with extraterrestrial intelligence, but in a major departure from science-fiction conventions, purely from a phenomenological standpoint. That is, it assumes that the alien beings are preternatural and cannot be understood or even conceived by the human mind, and any chance of communication or interaction is made impossible. The only proof that there is such a thing as an alien intelligence in 2001 is the materialization of a black monolith, whose function is unknown (and largely unquestioned). The viewer understands, however, that it serves as a catalyst in the development of the human race, its appearance signaling a major breakthrough in evolution – in an iconic sequence, the ape learns how to use a bone as a tool. If one is to think of these outside forces manipulating or at least leading man towards progress in a frame of mind other than that of the science-fiction film, one might be inclined to say that they are the work of God. In fact, what 2001 provides us is the groundwork to consider the possibility of an alien intelligence being indistinguishable from the idea of God.

Take the following quote from Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”:

Humanity is a mighty architectural genius who succeeds in erecting the infinitely
complicated cathedral of concepts on moving foundations, or even, one might say, on flowing water.\textsuperscript{6}

Nietzsche uses the metaphors of architecture and cathedral for religion or even sets of beliefs and systems considered to be shakily foundational to human thinking, such as science and art. In \textit{2001} this metaphor is particularly significant, since it is the very architecture and physicality of outside and inside spaces that dominate the screen and has at least as much descriptive power as language and characters. In \textit{2001} the cathedrals are those immense technological spaces and the myriad of video screens displaying indecipherable acronyms and schemes. One could even think of an even more extreme visual representation, that of the computer HAL 9000’s memory center. Hal is the personification of all human development and logic, a computer able to reproduce the activities of the human brain, but with far greater speed and reliability, and is in charge of all operations of the Discovery, the spaceship journeying towards Jupiter. This room is a physical space for his “brain,” dramatically designed and lighted, resembling the interior of a library with shafts of white light instead of books. The case could even be made that the “scientific definition of God” as suggested by Kubrick, is present as Hal himself.

There is also the deeply religious nature of some of the musical pieces of the score – György Ligeti’s \textit{Lux Aeterna} and \textit{Requiem} – which are connected with appearances of the monolith. The \textit{Requiem}, particularly, reaches its climax in the Dawn of Man sequence when the apes reverentially touch the monolith for the first time – and humans repeat the movement millions of years later. The visual aspect of the monolith is one that is most striking, its own “architecture” drawing attention in its perfection of form. Michel Chion
writes in his superb study *Kubrick’s Cinema Odyssey*,

[the monolith] is a signifier of abstraction itself. It appears as ‘the same’ in different instances and in different scales, horizontal or vertical. It is symbolic of the *movement* of abstraction. In its unassimilable nature, indissoluble in the forms that surround it, the monolith can very well be seen as a mathematical symbol of relation unifying disparate objects of the world, and inviting us to consider them from an abstract point of view.7

As the sign system cannot be completed, the signifier becomes abstraction itself. It is directly associated to the leap of abstraction that the ape undertakes, that is, realizing that the bone can be used as a weapon and therefore to kill animals for food. This scene of “revelation” is scored with Strauss’ *Zarathustra*, which suggests that it is this ability to abstract that will propel man towards his next evolutionary stage. This movement of abstraction is nothing less than a perfect demonstration of will-to-power, which Nietzsche thought to be as the movement to abstraction, the drive that moves us towards the falsification of the world, advancing humankind, even if leading us further from the truth. “science at its best seeks most to keep us in this simplified, thoroughly artificial, suitably constructed and suitably falsified world, at the way in which, willy-nilly, it loves error, because, being alive—it loves life!”8 Henceforth the apes become the masters of natural forces, and begin their logicizing and anthropomorphizing of the world. Form and structure are imposed in ascribing new functions to things already present: the bone becomes a weapon; other animals become prey. Politics also has its birth there, since the weapon is also used to achieve power before other apes. Nietzsche’s language in a
famous passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* depicts a very primitive struggle for life and power in relation to will-to-power:

Suppose, finally, we succeeded in explaining our entire instinctive life as the development and ramification of one basic form of the will—namely, of the will to power, as my proposition has it—; suppose all organic functions could be traced back to this will to power and one could also find in it the solution to the problem of procreation and nourishment—it is one problem—then one would have gained the right to designate all efficient force unequivocally as: will to power.⁹

He also begins his early elaboration of truth and metaphor “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” with a fable that shows a world before and after the “invention” of abstraction – akin to the Dawn of Man – and illustrates the insignificance of the human in the vastness of space, a motif that comes across in a great many moments in *2001*. Nietzsche’s own view of evolution was, as he stated in *Twilight of the Idols*, “anti-Darwinistic”, posing evolution in terms that are not merely biological or natural.¹⁰ His view is close to Kubrick’s in *2001* in that the group of apes that learn how to use the tool are apparently biologically the same as another group of apes. What changes is that one group has come in contact with the monolith, which, in turn, has sparked in them a need to solve this problem of “procreation and nourishment,” since they are starving and being eaten by predators. Hence, they triumph over their competitors, having now the mental ability to make the world congenial to their needs through abstraction and will-to-power, and it is through artifice that the selection will take place.

We immediately see the results of this move towards abstraction and logic, moving
millions of years in the future to the year 2001, where man has dominated Earth and its immediate surroundings with his structures, populating the Earth’s orbit with satellites, space stations and moving spacecraft. In the foreground is the interaction between man and his space (inner and outer), the signs and formulas man has invented to achieve a purposeful, useful scheme. Technology itself seems to be more important, and even more interesting, than the people inhabiting their spaces and operating their controls. They are seen as diminutive and passive in these sequences, seen either sleeping or working at a distance (both physical and perceptual), secondary to their instruments. In this future, it is the machines that dominate screen space. Additionally, there is little sense of aesthetics apart from that of functionality: all the space machinery, both outside and inside (through décor) is extremely beautiful and stylized, but no one seems to acknowledge or care, since aesthetics, in the world of 2001, no longer serves a function of its own, and is reduced only to accompany function. Nietzsche’s description of mankind in “Truth and Lie” is hauntingly close to what Kubrick depicts: a world of mere surface and appearances: “they are deeply immersed in illusions … their eyes merely glide across the surface of things and see forms…” Kubrick’s use of the highly formal *The Blue Danube*, by Johann Strauss, heightens this sense of appearances, its circular structure and regular compass denoting order and fluidity, while still pertaining to a sense of spectacle by the juxtaposition of the spectacular images, perhaps even suggesting that even the extraordinary (for us) actions of moving about through space is only one more aspect of man’s social scheme: no wonder all conversations and human interactions are nothing but the exchange of formalities and speeches without real content.
It is important to note that the structures and vehicles we see in this spectacle are heavily based on geometric designs of simple forms, especially circles and triangles. It suggests that while being extremely complex machinery, they still are, in a very basic level, only recognizable forms. The monolith itself is of a basic form, a rectangular structure with only straight lines and no imperfections, and it seems to have come from a realm of pure form, and as Chion describes, “its status as a geometrical object immediately prone to be abstracted, repeated, echoed through the course of time, the monolith-object itself accedes from the outset to the status of a mental image”\textsuperscript{12}. A mental image or a metaphor, it is the embodiment of pure form and abstraction, if not a metaphor for will-to-power itself.

Forms and abstractions, be they science, art, morality, religion and metaphysics, are all elements seen by Nietzsche as creations that do not lead man closer to the truth, but farther, because they are “errors.” By “error” Nietzsche does not mean that they are wrong, but that by naming things, for instance, man is only raising obstacles and falsehood between him and truth. It is, however, the only way man can deal with the world, and he is enslaved by his own structure. This subjugation and imprisonment is a theme prominent in much of Kubrick’s work: the organizational principle of mankind and its institutions – the Government, the army, nobility, marriage, etc. – becoming an obstacle or enslaving an inner sense of joy and freedom, which is unhindered by conventions of morality and differentiation. In Nietzschean terms, it would be an overtly Apollonian society subjugating a Dyonisiac human nature. This is particularly clear in \textit{A Clockwork Orange} (1971) and \textit{Barry Lyndon} (1975), the two films that succeeded 2001,
in which we have two main characters trying to adapt themselves to institutions unfit for them, and how they are punished, socially and spiritually, for their transgressions. *2001* seems to be more optimistic in that respect, as man is not punished, and is indeed able to “overcome” himself, and begin anew.

It is important to note that the main consequence of Will-to-Power is not happiness or pleasure but power. In *2001*, characters are never shown expressing pleasure and emotion, even in scenes they are expected to. They communicate with their families (Heywood Floyd’s call to his daughter and Frank Poole’s parents’ birthday call) with the same steadfastness they perform their duties and give empty speeches, not to mention these are completely mediated by technology. Dialogue in *2001* is characterized by Chion as “decentered dialogue”\(^\text{13}\), in which it turns the viewer's attention away from the dialogue because it comprises mostly of exchanges so trite and banal that they do not effectively communicate. Instead, relations of power become explicit in every interaction, such as Floyd’s meeting with prying Russian scientists, but most importantly, in the figure of Hal and his relation with Bowman and Poole aboard the Discovery. Hal, being the apex of computer technology and artificial intelligence, embodies all that mankind has struggled to produce and logicize. He is the brain and central nervous system of the Discovery (which, in turn, is clearly designed as a body). Hal is represented through his camera-eye, present in every room, a configuration that creates a *panopticon* effect, one in which the “prisoners” are unaware of their position. The two astronauts, reduced to mere caretakers, performing routine operations and small repairs, never question this master/servant dialectic, simply because they have no reason to. It is not Hal that serves
them, but the other way around.

It is interesting to think of Hal as a potential next step in the evolutionary ladder, one that is undoubtedly more suited for space travel, clearly the last frontier remaining to man. For a reason that can be only speculated, Hal fails and behaves neurotically, murdering not only Poole but the three hibernating crewmen aboard the ship. A possible explanation to this is that Hal, being the most advanced human creation (so much that it challenges him and threatens to take its place – “This mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardize it,” he threatens) is the epitome of the Nietzschean “error.” There is a brief discussion in the film that no computer of its kind has ever committed a “computer error,” only errors attributable to “human error.” Hal’s “error in predicting [a] fault” (which leads to Bowman and Poole suspect him of malfunction) becomes, in this sense, a sum of all mankind’s errors by reflecting the paradoxical nature of artificial intelligence: there cannot be such a distinction between human and computer errors. It becomes clear then that Hal has to fail, because he is an error, and as much as his system is close to perfection, it is farthest from the truth. Another possible explanation is that the Hal knows about the monolith, and it being something he was not programmed to process, he malfunctions. In other words, Hal cannot even grasp “truth” in potentia as humans can, only “errors.” Computers cannot see the move towards abstraction, they do not have will-to-power, and are only manifestations of it, and therefore Hal can never be a candidate for the next step in evolution.

For Kubrick, man is always in a state of inertia, a motif visually represented in the many circular and revolving sets, such as the Discovery centrifuge (in which Poole jogs
There is a sense that the human intellect is rendered inutile by its reliance on their abstractions and errors, and is even deprived of human traits, since the characters act lifeless and dull, closer to automatons than to human beings. In the face of the unknown and on the brink of major scientific and epistemological discoveries, they lack the ability to ask the real questions, such as what is the monolith and what is its purpose. Ironically, Hal is the exception to this rule, clearly interested in the gaps of information of the mission. The astronauts do not know the purpose of their mission and are not informed of the monolith, which later we learn has sent a radio signal to Jupiter, and the Discovery mission is to go where the monolith is pointing to. Hal's behavior is a probable foil to the human characters, working by contrast, but it also makes a statement about their ability to reflect: man is so detached from the real world that it is the computer who questions. The possibility of change and evolution is presented as coming only from outside, quite literally from outer space.

As a contrast with the earlier scenes with the familiar Strauss waltz underscoring the motion of spacecraft, the subsequent sequences in space have an otherworldly and ghostly quality, punctuated by silence or the mournful and atonal musical pieces by Khachaturian and Ligeti. Conveyed is the emptiness and vastness of space, unsuitable for humans, and notions of scale, space, and time start to become increasingly alien, with Kubrick's manipulation of the language of the cinematic medium. When Bowman performs an EVA (extra-vehicular activity) to retrieve the faulty component detected by Hal, the scene is played out in meticulous detail and great extension, from the preparations inside the ship to the actual maneuver. It runs over seven minutes, without a
single word of dialogue. Only Dave’s breathing and the hiss of oxygen supply are heard on the soundtrack, grim reminders of the fragility of the human body in a hostile environment. Plot here is secondary, for Kubrick could have decided not to have this scene at all, or a much abbreviated version instead. Rather, the point seems to be the difficulty and inadequateness of performing a simple task, considering the cumbersomeness of life support, moving about in space, the unnatural weightlessness, and also the time involved, all reflect elements that humans have taken for granted for millions of years. In space there must be a reeducation of the senses and logic, but which are not always fulfilled and successful, a point raised by Annette Michelson in her seminal “Bodies in Space: Film as Carnal Knowledge.” 2001, for Michelson, is a film that elicits, “through the disturbance and re-establishment of equilibrium, the recapitulation of [the] fundamental educative process which effects “our incorporation of the world.”14 One gets a sense that man has yet to conquer space and its physical reality, in every sense alien and anti-human. We must consider that in the same way as the world is defined after human perception, humans are defined by the world; man can only anthropomorphize the world because in a sense Earth has geomorphized him before. We come to be in terms of biological structure made for this world, our lungs to breathe air, eyes to see light, and so on. In outer space, there is no conception of the world at all, and therefore no place for man.

Nowhere this concept of space as anti-human is more present than in the last section of the film, titled “Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite.” The title itself dares the boundaries of language. After Bowman has
disconnected Hal and found a recorded message explicating the purpose of the mission, he reaches the orbit of Jupiter, where he finds a gigantic monolith that leads him into a time-space warp. The “Stargate” sequence is comprised of special photographic effects that try to instill a complete disorientation of time, space, form, and scale. Music by Ligeti is heard on the soundtrack; its dissonant chords and unclear arrangements do not fit our own ideas of how music should sound (which would be probably like the “Blue Danube”). The journey ends in an empty, Regency-style room. Ages seem to fly by as Bowman gets older, and finally encounters the monolith again on his deathbed. Strauss' “Zarathustra” is played again, signaling the appearance of the Starchild, a fetal figure that seems to represent a rebirth of the human race into a new species. The final images of the film are of the Starchild, looming beside the planet Earth, and then facing the camera. The Starchild can be read as the next step in the evolutionary ladder, a creature that has finally left its earthly cradle and is probably suited to a new realm, that of space. Chion argues that the fetus associates the universe in which it is located with the mother, suggesting that “the interplanetary void can be an environment that is protective rather than hostile.”

It is tempting to think of the Starchild as the Nietzschean Übermensch, a free human being, in possession of instinctual drives which do not overpower him; … the master and not the slave of his drives, and so in a position to make something of himself rather than being the product of instinctual discharge and external obstacle. For the Starchild is not the slave of human “errors” or even human space; he is one with
the universe. There are no obstacles between him and the universe, which in 2001 represents all that is unknown to man and untouched by him. In a sense, space and the universe are the gates towards truth precisely because of that: there are no human-made obstacles out there, only the harsh and vast nothingness. There is also the progression from ape to man and man to Übermensch, the idea presented by Zarathustra to be the goal of mankind: “Man is something that shall be overcome” and “[m]an is a rope, tied between beast and übermensch – a rope across an abyss.”¹⁷ At the same time, Nietzsche argued that “if the world had a goal, it must have already been attained,” the concept of Eternal Recurrence. In other words, whatever that is, is a return of itself, and whatever will be, will be a repetition of itself, forever. Coming back to 2001, for all we know, “beyond the infinite” may as well be the end of time, and the scene in the Regency room with Dave’s death is also the death of the universe. Minding Eternal Recurrence, it all goes back to the beginning: the monolith, Strauss’ “Zarathustra”, and the fetus – the beginning of life. It is worth noticing that as the fetus approaches Earth, we do not see satellites and space stations in its orbit as we had previously: this Earth may just as well be one in the remote past of mankind, and the Starchild is heralding the beginning of a new cycle of existence. Bowman’s death is also his birth.

As with Nietzsche’s concept of Eternal Recurrence, the end of 2001 is paradoxical, asking us to forego the logic of space and time in order to consider a spatio-temporal collapse as a cosmological assumption, and materializing in the Regency room, showing Bowman going from astronaut to old man to fetus within minutes. Eternal Recurrence presupposes that in a way there is neither space nor time, or they are all
condensed in one moment and place – here and now. This realization comes when the monolith appears for the last time in the room, and by way of associative montage, we see the Starchild as taking the place of Bowman. The “Stargate” sequence can be seen as a visual and narrative expansion of space and time, only to have the whole universe and all history compressed into one place and time in the room. This malleability and unfixedness of both time and space is central to Nietzsche's thought and to the understanding of 2001.

The room itself is contradictory: it is anachronistic, furnished in Regency style, but Bowman arrives inside a space pod, wearing his spacesuit. Its stark white luminosity is in contrast with the deep blackness of space and the extravagant colors of the Stargate. It provides for Bowman's physical necessities - as if in a zoo cage - giving him some kind of comfort, as opposed to the hostile environment of outer space. There is a sense that opposites are being reconciled in this room, putting past and future, black and white, life and death, finite and infinite together; first for contrast, and finally to break the oppositions down. So far in 2001 we have seen man conquering space, both natural and technological. The only thing left is the conquest of time, finally achieved with the arrival of the Starchild, a being that exists outside time and space, in accordance with Eternal Recurrence.

However, we must consider that the relation of the Starchild with the Übermensch is suggested because of the motif of evolution and progress and the conflation of past, present, and future in visual and narrative terms. We do not get to see the Übermensch at work fully formed – the Starchild merely looks at us, his gaze indecipherable and
signaling the end of the film and the end of what the language of cinema can hope to convey. He is only the starting point of this new stage in the evolution of man, and points to the future and the past simultaneously, being the perfect figure to embody the break of space and time and man and nature. Like Nietzsche, Kubrick refuses to carry the concept of Eternal Recurrence further, less unsure of what will succeed but because man and cannot grasp, much less articulate in direct terms, what will develop from it, and so it has to be alluded to only indirectly.

Nietzsche’s philosophy is always pointing to something else and is always a progression, never an end but a means. And *2001*, since the first appearance of the monolith in the Dawn of Man sequence, is always in motion: man is always traveling and moving forward from one point to another. The point being that the “errors,” like Hal, are only tools to get somewhere, and never an end in itself -- or else man may forget that they are only “errors” and manifestations of will-to-power and risk being overcome by their own creations.

This interpretation is merely an attempt to approximate Nietzsche’s philosophy to a highly influential and groundbreaking cultural work of the 20th century and suggest Nietzsche as a hermeneutic tool to unveil the mysteries of *2001*, and by the same token, use *2001* to contextualize and bring forth Nietzsche’s concern for the human and technology.


3. Schwam, 274.


9. Ibid., 237.


12. Chion, 143.

13. Ibid., 129.


15. Chion, 147.


17. Ibid., 197.