



The music of 2001: *A Space Odyssey* and the sublime object of cinema

*A música em 2001: uma
odisseia no espaço e o
objeto sublime do cinema*



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Abstract: A remarkable stylistic element of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is the innovative use of classical music. Borrowing Michel Chion's concept of anempathetic music, this study addresses two musical pieces – the *Also sprach Zarathustra* fanfare and *The Blue Danube* waltz – that present very specific narrative and formal functions, according to Lacan's concepts of the imaginary and the symbolic – the gaze, the suture, the audience and the Kantian sublime. We aim to address and develop Annette Michelson's formulation, in her seminal criticism that defines *2001* as a film of cognitive restructuring and redefinition of cinema "shape of content," by the role of music.

Keywords: music; soundtrack; sublime; spectator; psychoanalysis.

Resumo: Um elemento estilístico notável de *2001: uma odisseia no espaço* (1968) é o uso inovador da música clássica. A partir do conceito de *música anempática* de Michel Chion, postulamos que duas obras musicais, a fanfarra *Also sprach Zarathustra* e a valsa do *Danúbio Azul*, possuem funções formais e narrativas bastante específicas, a serem analisadas aqui em termos dos conceitos de Lacan do imaginário e o simbólico, o olhar, a sutura e o sublime kantiano. Nosso objetivo é abordar e desenvolver a formulação de Annette Michelson de que *2001* é um filme de reestruturação cognitiva e redefinição da "forma do conteúdo" do cinema através do papel da música.

Palavras-chave: música; trilha sonora; sublime; espectador; psicanálise.

Introduction

In a 1969 interview, Stanley Kubrick describes *2001: A Space Odyssey* as a “nonverbal experience” that avoids “intellectual verbalization and reaches the viewer’s subconscious in a way that is essentially poetic and philosophic” (KUBRICK, 2001, p. 89-90). For him, verbal language would allow the film to work on a supposedly more immediate level, closer to music or painting: “movies present the opportunity to convey complex concepts and abstractions without the traditional reliance on words” (KUBRICK, 2001, p. 90). Kubrick’s intention seems to be an expansion of the boundaries of what is commonly expressible within the limits of mainstream cinema with less verbal elements, taking after Alfred Hitchcock’s dream of “pure cinema,” especially in the use of music. In this regard, Kubrick’s project is akin to what has been discussed recently in film studies as the confluence between film theory and film philosophy, or, in Robert Pippin’s words, the idea that a film can be “considered a form of philosophical reflection” (PIPPIN, 2020, p. 5). For Stephen Mulhall, a film is not just an illustration of philosophical arguments, but they are, in themselves, “reflecting on and evaluating such views and arguments [...] they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action” (MULHALL, 2001, p. 4).

Robert Kolker assesses *2001* as two films: one being “a technological fantasy [...] a bombardment of visual stimuli that can accentuate a high or cause one” and the other, “a speculative, detailed, spectacular, pessimistic inquiry into the forms of the immediate future [...] an extension of *Dr. Strangelove* [(Stanley Kubrick, 1964)]” (KOLKER, 2001, p. 131). What determines which one of them one is watching? Curiously, for Kolker, the answer lies in the film’s format: the first is the 70 mm original release and the second are all inferior forms, such as 35 mm or home video. Despite Kolker’s medium determinism, he is right in stating that the film’s forceful stimuli lead to a more passive stance on the part of the spectator. Susan Sontag even used *2001* as an example of what she called “fascist aesthetics,” that is, a film that openly shows a “preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, and extravagant effort,” glorification of surrender, and “virile posing” (SONTAG, 1976, p. 40). For Kolker (2001, p. 143), Hollywood cinema, since the 1970’s, has developed a certain style that induces passivity, often dehumanizing or attempting to “reduce the audience to a function of the sound and images confronting them,” something that is avoided by directors such as Hitchcock or Kubrick, by giving “the audience means to step back and observe what is being done to them and why” (KOLKER, 2001, p. 143). However, the way

Kubrick does it in *2001* and what, despite the medium and conditions of viewing, would make the spectator take a more active role is still unclear. According to Kolker, the film's open structure is what denies the spectator "a passive observation in front of a predetermined set of meanings [...] asked instead to be engaged with the forms and images, and the text as a whole, and from that engagement work through a continual process of meaning, connotation, and suggestion" (KOLKER, 2001, p. 129). However, one has to ask: how can the film allow and suggest this intellectual space of interpretation? And what is the relation between the subjection of the spectator and the "nonverbal experience" Kubrick mentioned?

A formal element that clearly stands out in a broader analysis of Kubrick's style is the use of classical music. Kubrick commissioned, but ultimately rejected, a score by the Hollywood composer Alexander North, and from *2001* on, classical music would be an integral part of his style in all but one of his films. Regarding two particular pieces used in *2001* (*Also sprach Zarathustra* and *The Blue Danube*), both are presented in a very striking manner, as Michel Chion explains:

[the music is placed] "outside," [...] not mixing it closely in with the dialogue and sound effects, but using it in broad, autonomous swaths, often borrowed from pre-existing works, songs or classical pieces. The film's numerous *silent* scenes also give Kubrick's vision the same opacity, the same obtuse and enigmatic presence, infinitely open to interpretation, as a musical theme. (CHION, 2001, p. 90)

Kubrick will only use this kind of music over images without any kind of dialogue or sound effects in *2001*, an approach that grants music an autonomous dimension of meaning. Our aim is to find the formal mechanisms that make *2001* a simultaneously arresting and hypnotic visual spectacle and an experience that builds a space where a more active process of interpretation takes place. The autonomous dimension of the music of the film suggests that the subject of *2001* is dislocated to an "outside" position that involves the spectator, a dimension of activity located on the body as a "carnal knowledge," as Annette Michelson defines in her seminal essay on the film. For Michelson, *2001* challenges its audience as its action generates "a kind of cross-current of perception and cognitive restructuring, [and] visibly reaches, as it were, for another arena, redefining the content of cinema, its "shape of content" (MICHELSON, 2000, p. 204-205). Michelson's text has long been a milestone in *2001* criticism, and here we aim to explore, supported by Lacanian film theory, this "other arena" that redefines cinema's "shape of content," which is intimately connected with the use of those two musical pieces.

The dawn of man

Roughly speaking, the two tracks, *Also sprach Zarathustra* and *The Blue Danube*, are signifiers of the logic of desire and drive, respectively. They will always be played entirely “outside” (using Chion’s concept), a stylistic decision which provides not only a certain opacity, but a form of authority, a forcefulness that can “speak louder” than any other sound or dialogue, effectively guiding the interpretation of images.

Also sprach Zarathustra, a piece by Richard Strauss, plays over the titles and twice more throughout the film. The first time is during the early section titled *The Dawn of Man*, over a montage in which an ape discovers the use of tools. Within the narrative, this sequence comes right after the first appearance of the monolith, showing the effect the monolith has on the ape’s consciousness: playing around with the carcass of a dead animal, he picks up a large bone and discovers that it can be used as a weapon. Before the music starts, however, the monolith appears for a few seconds along with the sun and the moon, the same frame that closed the previous scene, a clear indication of the monolith’s influence. The ape then continues to use the bone and destroys the carcass with increasing force and determination, following the *crescendo* of the Strauss’ piece, which conveys the idea of a buildup from single notes to a bombastic resolution at the end. This idea of using the bone as a weapon is connected to the monolith, but Kubrick’s choices in this montage are important. The audience never sees this ape’s point of view of the monolith, for instance, which could imply his memory of the monolith in the previous scene. The spectators do not see the monolith appearing to the apes, only a very particular arrangement of the monolith with the sun and the moon, which implies an “outside” intelligence or design. This image of the monolith is not associated with a particular ape’s point of view, but a sort of absorbed internal idea of the monolith, which is also paradoxically “outside”, with an external and disembodied aspect. The monolith disappears after the sequence, which suggests that somehow it has been internalized by the apes: it no longer exists as a physical object, but it remains, first as an internal image and then sublimated in the music.

Curiously, Kubrick includes two insert shots of tapirs falling, as if to illustrate the ape’s intention in using the weapon, but he does not show us the ape killing a tapir – in fact, the audience does not even see the tapirs being hit by anything, just their bodies falling to the ground. This further indicates the quality of a mental image, one in which the subject (the ape) is absent, and so is the action (killing). The image is that of an abstract result, the idea of killing an animal. Before the

monolith, the apes have no conception of their place in the world: they only exist and react. However, after this sequence, the apes begin to see themselves as agents on the world and understand the dimension of causality, presented as the dimension of violence. According to Chion (2001, p. 143), “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”.

In consonance with Lacanian theory, this sequence is a version of the mirror stage, in which individuals constitute themselves as whole and take control of their body and space. The music works in the imaginary register, giving consistency to this fantasy of wholeness and power. *Also sprach Zarathustra* also suggests the logic of sublimation, in which “nothing” becomes “something,” or even “the Thing” when informed by desire – as Lacan explains in *Seminar XI* – through anamorphosis, a type of “looking awry” that causes one to see something in excess in an object. This is the process of sublimation: an object being “elevated to the dignity of the Thing” (LACAN, 1998, p. 112), and this looking awry is depicted on screen when the ape starts looking at the bones on the ground differently after the monolith’s image arises in his mental space. We may suppose then that the monolith was sublimated and an object that was nothing more than a reject – the bone – becomes now the Thing. The sequence that follows keeps this logic of sublimation and is probably one of the best illustrations of this concept in cinema: the ape throws the bone up in the air and, as it falls, the film cuts to what seems to be a satellite in space, millions of years later. In one movement, a bone – a useless thing from the dirt – is picked up from the ground and elevated to the heavens and moved forward in time.

Chion observes that the bone is still up in the air, so to speak, when another metonymic image of it soon appears: a pen, another human tool, floating in the zero gravity of a spacecraft. The first human figures appear as a flight attendant and a sleeping man, who puts the pen back in the man’s pocket. “The shot transition,” according to Chion (2001, p. 119), “has thus led from an object that falls to an object that does not fall [...]. The victory over gravity, shown in this way, produces the giddiness that characterizes the experience of the human who stands for the first time and walks”. The transition to this weightless environment shows the difference between two qualities, “things seen and things felt, between situations visually observed and those sensed haptically, between a narrative emblem and a radically formal embodiment of, spatial logic” (MICHELSON, 2001, p. 206). This moment redirects and shifts our coordinates: “We snap to attention, in a new, immediate sense of our

earth-bound state, in repossession of those coordinates, only to be suspended, again, toward other occasions and forms of recognition” (MICHELSON, 2001, p. 207). Kubrick’s *2001* instigates an awareness of human corporeality and its position in space in many of its sequences. Both Chion and Michelson, in their analyses, suggest homologies with infancy and the process of learning to walk, and they indeed identify a sense of wonder, of discovering new movements, in this initial space sequence, which is performed entirely for the spectator.

This whole space sequence is followed by Johann Strauss’ *The Blue Danube* waltz, which is – again – placed “outside” and without any kind of dialogue or sound mixed with. It works as an astonishing contrast between the futuristic images and an evocation of the past, expressing both elegance and mastery. On the outside, spaceships are revolving in time with the music, evoking the same kind of effortless movement of dancers in a ballroom waltz. David Tygel (2017) convincingly suggests that, because of its ternary form, the waltz can be considered “weightless” and a stimulus for circular movement, emphasizing Kubrick’s originality in selecting this musical cue. Inside, we see the efficiency of technicians and their instruments making sure everything is in perfect working order. At the same time, this silent image creates a certain discomfort, a sense of emptiness and luxurious coldness, a sense of something ironically missing.

The gaze and the cut

Chion’s primary example of anempathetic music – or “music whose ostensible indifference to the situation on screen, implacably continuing no matter what, creates an expressive contrast” (CHION, 2001, p. 94) – is *The Blue Danube* waltz. In my use of the term, anempathetic music indicates the presence of the Lacanian gaze. All the enjoyment involved in the movement of machines docking and coupling, is that of an unseen Other, a sinister presence who enjoys, implacably, the music. One of the examples Slavoj Žižek uses to discuss the Lacanian gaze is the panoramic wide shot of the town during one of the attacks in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (Hitchcock, 1963): a point of view initially neutral is soon subjectivized by the entrance of the birds. Thus, the gaze inscribes the subject in the picture: “the camera’s elevated eye ceases to be that of a neutral, objective onlooker gazing down upon a panoramic landscape and suddenly becomes the subjective and threatening gaze of the birds as they zero in on their prey” (ŽIZEK, 1992, p. 97). This example can be misleading because one might imagine the Lacanian gaze as coinciding with the birds’ gaze, but, as Joan Copjec reminds us, “the gaze is not clear

or penetrating, not filled with knowledge or recognition; it is clouded over and turned back on itself, absorbed in its own enjoyment” (COPJEC, 1994, p. 36). In other words, the Lacanian gaze is not threatening, but actually closer to the sequences in *2001*, in which the gaze is closed in itself, self-satisfied, and smug.

Everything functions so flawlessly in these sequences, almost as an advertisement for space travel in the 21st century, selling the idea of mastery via technology, a fantasy partially sutured by the use of “anempathetic music.” If most film music works on the imaginary register, suturing or giving consistency to the images on screen and the subjectivity of the characters, the *Blue Danube* can be considered as having yet another quality, belonging to the symbolic, as this piece is not attached to any specific subjectivity – it is the machinery itself.

Thus, the function of *The Blue Danube* here is to appease, to pacify, and to cover a traumatic cut, that ellipsis which omits millions of years of human history and leads the spectator quite traumatically to the future, as by magic. The jarring aspect of a cut has been naturalized in cinematographic language precisely to make it invisible and soften its force. In *2001*, Kubrick “strips the cut naked: the cut becomes a device of commutation,” (CHION, 2001, p. 81) a pun on the French word for a light switch – *commutateur* – to evoke this quality of something appearing out of nothing. “Film editing,” Chion writes, “can be seen not only as a way of constructing or stitching together, but also as a series of commutations that make a visual state disappear instantaneously [...] to replace it with another that means the complete erasure of the first” (CHION, 2001, p. 112). Thus, the future appears “commuted,” with no memory of the past, by omitting any traces of culture or history. Apart from some brand names (such as Pan Am and Howard Johnson’s), nothing would connect their culture to ours. In this cut, all human history and culture are deemed expendable and put aside, except for the achievements of science and technology that have led to space travel.

In this section, this cut also appears metaphorically as a schism between the scenes, with a more playful aspect (i.e., those with *The Blue Danube* and Floyd’s call to his daughter), and the more plot-driven ones, involving the American cover-up of the discovery of the monolith on the moon. For spectators in 1968, to watch Floyd deflect enquiries of Russian colleagues would have evoked Cold War tensions. Today, one might think about a certain fundamental impasse in the noncommunication of these dialogue scenes, replete with repetitive, empty, and banal dialogue. Even when the astronauts are discussing, even if obliquely, the possibility of extraterrestrial intelligence, their concerns are very far from metaphysics. If anything remains from

the sequence with the apes in a manifest way, it is how the mastery of an environment has not rid humans of anxiety or fundamentally changed their organization into tribes competing for advantages.

With the cut, the dimension of violence is sublimated into a social organization that privileges a form of communication that barely conceals suppressed animosities. In the reality of *2001*, nobody does any thinking because their machines do it for them – in fact, amusingly, the only “thinking” anyone seems to do in these sequences is when Floyd is reading the instructions for the zero-gravity toilet. Therefore, every frame of *2001* is virtually filled with screens presenting acronyms, formulas, numbers, and diagrams. It is not the case that anyone ever looks at them, but this meaningless data offers a sort of reassurance that the universe is measurable by scientific instruments. This is the same logic that underlies the banality of the dialogue: the limit of what humans know and can know is already in plain sight. Also, this fact elucidates why culture in this world only appears in the form of in-flight entertainment playing in the background – and, of course, music. Everything that is not related to an explicit rationality and a totalizing homogeneity has been omitted from this future. Considering this, it is not surprising that *The Blue Danube* waltz is the musical piece that characterizes these sequences, as it comes to signify a certain repetitiousness and mindlessness, which is the logic of the drive.

Thereafter, we are introduced to the supercomputer HAL 9000, who personifies the notion of closed circuit of drive that the waltz had signified before. Visually, HAL is represented by his camera-eye, but his disembodied voice retains that same “outside” feature as the waltz. Chion (2001, p. 101) defines it as *acousmètre*: a character that “exists as an acoustic or invisible voice, with no place and supposedly able to see all, know all, and do all”. Before, we have associated the spaceships and their screens with the soothing rhythm of the waltz, now we associate them with HAL’s voice and its ubiquitous presence. In a sense, the self-satisfaction and mindless repetition of the two spaceflights with *The Blue Danube* will be present in – transmuted into – HAL’s voice.

Music and the empty signifier

Also sprach Zarathustra and *The Blue Danube* will only play again in the closing moments of the film, so we must properly address the context in which they appear. So far, the two appearances of the monolith have been followed by a György Ligeti’s *Requiem* movement: the Kyrie, a polyphonic choral in which voices gradually grow shriller and louder, reaching a climax with a shot of the orbital conjunction of the

sun and the moon, from which Kubrick abruptly cuts to silence both times. In sharp contrast, the last appearance of the monolith at the very end does not cause anxiety but it is a welcome, ordering, presence: it is in fact a resolution to the discontinuity of the Stargate sequence. Strauss music takes us back to the triumphant moment of the ape discovering the tool, or the birth of the human spirit. For Susan White, the Louis XVI décor represents for Kubrick “the ability of culture to cover the shadow of its own brutality with a layer of reason and decoration” (WHITE, 2006, p. 141), a shadow that rises again in the 20th century. White questions Kubrick’s use of Strauss’ *Also sprach Zarathustra* considering its associations with German fascism:

Is his use of Strauss’s music a reappropriation, or is the sense of majesty imparted by the piece finally just ironic? In any event, one cannot witness the “magical” birth of the star child, to the strains of Zarathustra’s eerily beautiful fanfare, without some trepidation and, indeed, a questioning of Kubrick’s own reading of his work. (WHITE, 2006, p. 141)

Kubrick was so certainly aware of the power and implications of setting images to music in order to cause an effect that this motif became part of the text of his next film. In *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), the protagonist Alex undergoes an experimental treatment that consists in showing violent films to a subject and making them feel physically ill so that, by association, their willingness to commit crimes would be suppressed. What the experimenters ignore is that the incidental music they use to accompany the film of a Nazi rally is Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and then, by Pavlovian association, this piece itself makes Alex violently ill. In an early sequence, after a night of senseless violence and rape, Alex returns home and only truly enjoys himself when listening to Beethoven in his stereo, and the music here is mixed much like in *2001*, completely “outside.” When we understand that all the previous music in this film works in the imaginary register, that is, provides consistency to the subject’s fantasy, this is the moment when music also starts to work within the symbolic.

In *Clockwork Orange*, Kubrick seems to critique the idea that classical music – and, consequently, high culture – can be a positive value, since both Alex (representing deviancy) and Fred, the government official (representing social institutions), seem to appreciate it. The music in *Clockwork Orange* is notoriously and even tastelessly appropriated, as it is the case of the song *Singin’ in the Rain*, sung by Alex while raping a character. Kubrick seems to espouse the view that music (not just Beethoven or *Ode to Joy*) is an “empty signifier” that can empower whatever political message one desires. Throughout the film, the version of the fourth movement of Beethoven’s Ninth

Symphony played is a distorted or vulgarized rendition with synthesizers by Wendy Carlos, with the famous “Turkish march” section that prominently contrasts with the beatific *Ode to Joy*. At the very end of the film, however, this rendition gives way to a full orchestrated choral version of the final bars of the symphony. It perfectly parallels Alex’s redemption and his apparent acceptance in society while privately he still fantasizes his deviant dreams. The subject’s relation to music is much more direct in *Clockwork Orange* because of the spectator’s identification with the character of Alex, but there are significant correspondences with the music in *2001*.

Beyond the infinite: the sublime

Throughout *2001*, Kubrick avoided audience identification with any of the characters, deliberately not developing their personalities and blurring distinctions between the astronauts Dave and Frank. While Part 2 follows the bureaucrat Floyd, his character does not even get a close-up, and soon disappears. The only close-ups in the movie, in fact, are of Dave and HAL, and, significantly, all point-of-view shots are HAL’s. If Part 3 presents a subject, it is none other than HAL itself, for it is the only character that shows any desire. Kubrick often locates abuse of power and violence not with the failure of an individual to fit in, but in the opposite, in fanaticism. HAL’s revolt, like Private Pyle’s in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), is a result of an overidentification with the superegoic ideological machine. The pivotal moment that turns him from an infallible supercomputer to a desiring subject occurs when, during a conversation with Dave, HAL expresses certain mistrust and suspicions about the mission. During this dialogue, he mistakenly detects an error that will cause his deactivation, showing that he has become a figure of excessive desire and not mindless as everyone else. The sense that HAL seems more human than the human characters is distinct because we can see desire in him – and, in turn, such desire creates a monstrous and contradictory figure that must be eliminated. HAL’s slow death at the hands of Dave, who gradually disables his higher brain functions, is long and painful: he is a being pleading for his life. While the audience might feel triumphant at the beginning of the sequence, when Dave finally gets back on board and confronts HAL, this feeling soon shifts to pathos as the computer pleads for his life. In his dying moments, HAL’s speech reverts to a pre-recorded message that only makes him sound more human, a demented brain regressing to infancy. The audience never gets anything quite so personal from any of the human characters. His pathetic song, *Daisy Bell (Bicycle Built for Two)*, the only piece of diegetic music in the film, finally encapsulates HAL’s humanity, as it were.

Thus, when the film follows Dave, the only surviving member of Discovery, in Part 4, he is nothing more than an audience surrogate, and *2001* shifts from a representational to a presentational mode. If the music before worked on the imaginary and symbolic registers, the music of the Stargate sequence – Ligeti's atonal *Atmospheres*, a part of which was used in the film's overture – alludes to Lacan's third register, the real. As Dave travels through the Stargate, he becomes the point of perspective, taking in all the psychedelic lights, shapes, and solarized vistas. Scott Bukatman addresses the Stargate sequence considering this identification:

Through the prevalence of such temporally distended special effects sequences, science fiction clearly participates in the presentational mode of cinematic discourse. Audiences may use a diegetic human figure as a provisional guide through the immensities of alien space, but this character does not serve to defuse or anchor the spectator's own phenomenological experience. [...] [The Stargate] is explicitly directed right at the viewer [...]. Close-ups of [...] the astronaut, do not reintegrate us into fictional (representational) space; and neither do they situate Dave as a psychologized subject meant to focus audience identification. (BUKATMAN, 1999, p. 260-261)

The Stargate sequence ends with Dave's eye, firstly with strange colors and then normal ones, as if he had been disembodied and then reconstituted again as an eye, in a Louis XVI-style room at the end of the universe, at the end of time. For both Bukatman and Michelson, the purpose of this journey is assuming the position of phenomenological knowledge:

Experience as Vision ends in the exploration of seeing. The film's reflexive strategy assumes the eye as ultimate agent of consciousness, reminding us, as every phenomenological esthetic, [...] that art develops from the concern with "things seen to that of seeing itself". (MICHELSON, 2000, p. 210)

The second half of the sequence marks a transition from the experience of seeing to the experience of being seen. Dave might have constituted himself as an eye, but his vision is discontinuous to the traditional shot reverse shot technique. In each successive shot, the astronaut occupies the space that was previously in his field of vision until he is able to move about the room. He is aware of the presence of another, but his gaze cannot meet this other presence, as the presence is himself in another point in time. Moreover, the distorted and muffled voices² on the soundtrack

² Actually, Ligeti's musical piece *Aventures* with an altered pitch.

and the unsettling lighting in the room suggest an observation cage. The audience does not know whether he is being observed by an actual other – the extraterrestrial intelligence behind the monolith – or himself in another point in time, but the fact is that he moved from seeing to being seen. In a traditional shot reverse shot, stability is required. In the reverse shot, Dave would appear as if in a mirror and that would unify the field and establish his subjectivity, however, it is not what happens here., For the reverse shot, Dave is seen from the back in the empty space he had occupied in the previous shot. In a sense, this is the same operation seen in the shot from *The Birds* mentioned by Žižek. Where we expect the field to be unified and stable, here another presence appears in the picture and disrupts the formation of a stable subject to be formed.

In this sequence, the character of Dave is not dissolved, as he was never fully subjectivized, but the very notion of audience identification with a character collapses. The scene interrupts the suture and creates a loop that will only close in the final shot when the Starchild meets the audience's gaze. Michelson (2000, p. 210) describes the room as the “Man's last Motel stop on the journey towards disembodiment and renaissance”, and it is a kind of womb, waiting for Dave's body to wither and die, before the monolith appears and the Starchild is born in the final act of childbirth. Dave is reborn to the sound of *Also sprach Zarathustra* and, as the film fades to black, the Starchild hovers next to Earth, looking directly at us. Regarding the passage from desire to drive, Žižek states:

Scopic drive always designates such a closing of the loop whereby I get caught in the picture I'm looking at, lose distance toward it; as such, it is never a simple reversal of desire to see into a passive mode. “Making oneself seen” is inherent to the very act of seeing: drive is the loop which connects them. The ultimate exemplifications of drive are therefore the visual and temporal paradoxes which materialize the nonsensical, “impossible” vicious circle: Escher's two hands drawing each other or the waterfall which runs in a closed *perpetuum-mobile*; the time-travel loop whereby I visit the past in order to create myself (to organize the coupling of my parents). (ŽIZEK, 1993, p. 198)

In *2001*, the spectator completes the loop. In our view, *2001* is not so much the story of an astronaut that goes to the end of the universe and returns to Earth as a super-being, as it is in Clarke's novel. Rather, it is the story of how the spectator becomes that next being. We can see ourselves “inside” the picture because we also belong to it. Comparing the monolith to a blank movie screen has become

a commonplace and, indeed, in the final moments of *2001*, that object seems to lose its previous hardness and opacity, as the camera approaches the monolith, moving to the “inside” of it before cutting to the orbit of the Earth and the Starchild, suggesting the crossing of a barrier.

To make this idea clearer, this scene can be compared to the pivotal scene at the end of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), in which Thorwald, the murderer whom the protagonist Jeff Jefferies had been observing throughout the film, turns his gaze back at him. A commonly held view is that the film screen, while making the world visible to us, makes us, spectators, invisible. For Pippin, *Rear Window* criticizes this idea, as there is “something insufficient, deformed, about the way Jeff ‘watches’ his little films” (PIPPIN, 2020, p. 24), which is emblematic regarding his distance and resistance in his relationships, especially with his fiancée. The moment Thorwald looks across the courtyard, through his window, and meets Jeff’s gaze, who has been watching as if he were invisible, provides an ethical understanding on watching films related to crossing the barrier of the screen. For Pippin, Thorwald’s gaze and his subsequent question – “What do you want from me?” – represent Hitchcock’s need for “a kind of cinematic involvement, an interpretive one” (PIPPIN, 2020, p. 44). Similarly to Jeff, the audience feels seen and involved in the dimension of our passive watching. For Michelson, in *2001*, we find a similar relocation of the “terrain upon which things happen” in respect to spectatorship:

They happen, ultimately, not only on the screen but somewhere between screen and spectator. It is the area defined and constantly traversed by our active restructuring and reconstitution, through an experience of “outer” space, of the “inner” space of the body. Kubrick’s film, its action generating a kind of cross-current of perception and cognitive restructuring, visibly reaches, as it were, for another arena, redefining the content of cinema, its “shape of content”. (MICHELSON, 2000, p. 204–205)

The Starchild’s final gaze drives home this concept of a relocation and reconstitution of the very field of spectatorship, in which spectator and screen are not separate, and goes further than Hitchcock because we do not see ourselves in the character, but, as Michelson suggests, we are aware of our own selves watching.

This moment of seeing ourselves watching is analogous to Kant’s description of the sublime. For Kant (2009), the sublime involves two moments: displeasure followed by pleasure. The mind is first confronted with the boundlessness of nature, some “chaos” that is “violent to our imagination” (KANT, 2009, p. 521), and then

pleasure emerges as the mind is able to elevate itself and see this boundlessness from above. The pleasure is a form of self-satisfaction, as the mind feels displeasure in chaos but pleasure as it is able to comprehend it. Kant (2009, p, 522) states that “our imagination strives to progress towards infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea”. This distance – or scalar adjustment – is consequential: our intellect cannot understand the infinite, only the concept of infinity. Because of this distance, we are able to see *2001* as sublime in the Kantian sense, as that subjective experience not only pointing *outward* from our senses and experience, but inward, revealing the own transcendence of the mind. For Kant, this is a movement of elevation, a movement that is ultimately self-regarded, as the mind can establish its superiority over the boundlessness and infinity of nature.

In fact, we might consider the whole Stargate sequence as an illustration of the experience of the Kantian sublime, in clear contrast to the Kantian beauty in the early sequences accompanied by *The Blue Danube*, in which human creations are in harmony with nature. The Stargate sequence has two distinct moments: first there is the panoply of lights and shapes and colors at the beginning, which throw the mind in disarray, cause displeasure or anxiety; then a second, much slower moment in which we start recognizing landscapes, or elements of landscapes, such an ocean or a mountain. It progressively becomes more manageable and understandable. This is similar to Kant’s description of the sublime: the judgment of the sublime “is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it, or at least at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality” (KANT, 2009, p. 244). That is why, for Kant, an ocean or a large river evokes sublimity: because of its magnitude, as it dwarfs the intellect. In *2001*, these are the “least” estranging images, and thus we are led to think that the other (the geometrical shapes of the beginning) are the truly “chaotic”, the ones of displeasure. And as we move to the more recognizable images, that is analogous to the mind reaching some sort of understanding, some recognition of what it is seeing. For Kant, the boundlessness of nature dwarfs the subject and causes displeasure, and only in a second moment the mind is able to perceive and hold this boundlessness as the idea of infinity, in an elevation of the mind. Dave’s journey ends in the hotel room – in the eye that has seen too much – and, as we undergo this final cognitive restructuring, the feeling of suspension of the rest of the scene is due to a deferment of pleasure (the final stage of the sublime described by Kant). This sense of disarray is clearly represented in the

music by Ligeti's *Atmospheres*: a displeasure only to be lifted in a subsequent stage, with the pleasure of the repetition of the familiar fanfare and waltz at the very end.

Regarding an early moment of the film, for Michelson, the spectator considers himself the subject of *2001*, the “meeting place of a multiplicity of spaces, depths and scales, his eye their agent of reconciliation, his body the focal point of a multi-dimensional, poly-spatial Cosmos” (MICHELSON, 2000, p. 210). By the end of the film, the spectator is elevated by Strauss’ fanfare and the Starchild’s returning gaze makes him see himself as a sublime object. This focal shift is the passage from desire to drive and the introduction of the realm of ethics. As in Hitchcock’s example above, when Jeff is thrown out from his own window – and becomes, so to speak, a stain in his own picture, part of his own observed film screen – man’s journey through space in *2001* – the desire for a mysterious Thing – loops back, returns to Earth, and returns to the spectator. This dimension of closing a loop was not lost on Kubrick, as it is explicit both in the film’s title (*Odyssey*) and the name of the character (Bowman). The realm of ethics, thus, is in the realization of being seen within a larger picture of the cosmos; that is, outer space is not the field of desire, a place for humanity to conquer, but a place where humanity already is, in which we exist, or – more precisely – in which we can see ourselves in. Therefore, Kubrick achieves his goal of creating a “nonverbal experience,” a process that, for Michelson, is maieutic:

The intensified and progressively intimate consciousness of one’s physicality provides the intimation of that physicality as the ground of consciousness. The film’s “action” is felt, and we are “where the action is”. Its “meaning” or “sense” is sensed, and its content is the body’s perceptive awaking to itself”. (MICHELSON, 2000, p. 209)

In Kolker’s ideal screening of *2001*, as the final notes of *Also sprach Zarathustra* play and the Starchild fades to black, we have but a few seconds of silence and darkness before the house lights turn on and we get up from our chairs. *The Blue Danube* starts again over the credits, very similar to the reprise of *Singin’ in the Rain* at the end of *A Clockwork Orange*. As we start to get up from our seats, we feel again the limits and weight of our bodies, but a reminder of the effect of weightlessness and suspension of *2001* remains connected to Strauss’ waltz, and for a moment, almost interactively, we are like that flight attendant in zero gravity, taking her first steps. The “body’s perceptive awakening to itself” suggested by Michelson takes place in our perception of our own bodies – a body changed and charged with *jouissance*. In a sense, when critics talk about how hard it is, after Kubrick, to hear Strauss’ waltz

and not think of spaceships, this is what they mean, for it is one of the ways *2001* remains with the spectator within the dimension of drive. In these moments after the end of the film but before the spectator leaves the theater, Michelson's "carnal knowledge" truly emerges, representing the end of the spectators' odyssey and their return to the world outside the film.

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