"The Sound of Silence" An AJ Jones painting

"The Sound of Silence": Reflections of *2001: A Space Odyssey*

Robert Castle once wrote of *2001: A Space Odyssey* that there can be "no single interpretation of the film, [and that] no single answer to the film's mysteries and meaning should prevail". He explains that "*2001* dramatizes that there are no final answers". What I believe Castle meant when he wrote this in his 2004 article titled "Interpretive Odyssey of *2001*: Of Humanity and Hyperspace" was that *2001* exists on its own in science fiction film apart from all other sci-fi for a distinct reason. Castle is arguing that this is because director Stanley Kubrick

intentionally left the film open for his audience to perceive and experience the film in their own deeply personal ways, without being swayed by anyone else's ideas or visions. Likewise, David Patterson wrote that in the minds of many film connoisseurs *2001* stands as "the quintessence of the film Rorschach" (Patterson 1). It is because of Kubrick's ambition to create something so unique that I chose his film upon which to base my painting. The casual observer may perceive that the painting contains several distinct elements that work on their own as well as in tandem with one another to attempt to form a particular theme, possibly. However, the design of the painting is such that although each of the four elements has a specific meaning in its creator's eyes, they are also open to other interpretations in a very Kubrickian fashion. In "Music, Structure and Metaphor in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey"*, Patterson discusses in length how Kubrick played with a four-part system throughout the film. To illustrate he notes the time the movie took to complete (four years); that the film is divided into four sections: *The Dawn of Man*, *The Monolith on the Moon* (even though it did not receive a title card, many still believe it could be considered a section or an "episode"), *Jupiter Mission 18 Months Forward*, and *Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite;* and finally, that the Monolith appears on screen four times (Patterson 450). Similarly, the painting I am offering also has four parts. Through this written presentation I will offer superficial explanations of how my representations of the Monolith, HAL and the Spaceman, the Pod, and the empty black background all fit together, and why I may have found each to be important.

Whether one is an experienced film critic, a student, a casual film fan, or even a newcomer to the cinema, it is clear to all who see *2001* that the Monolith is an integral part of the movie. The Monolith with its "strange, unnatural shape" is so important, argues Castle, that

"[it] becomes in the words of one writer, the greatest MacGuffin in film history". The term "MacGuffin", which refers to a filmic device that keeps the plot of a motion picture moving forward, according to openculture.com was "was coined by a screenwriter [Alfred] Hitchcock worked with named Angus MacPhail". The monolith, which Kubrick designed as being "black and inert instead of crystalline and flashing" (Baybrook 166), was placed in the top left-hand corner of my painting with the bright yellow/blue/white light shining from behind its right corner. The placement of the light is similar to the way it is first shown in the film "with the sun rising above it" (Castle) to convey the idea that it can be seen as simultaneously coming into the visual frame and leaving the visual frame at the same time. Its edges were painted in a dark grey to give it depth and shape, and also to contrast against the black, emptiness of space. The position of the monolith in the frame on a downwards angle is meant to point towards the center of the painting, bringing attention to HAL's red eye.

The design of the eye evolved from the original design into what can be seen on the canvas. During the drafting process, HAL was intended to be similar to what Kubrick had created in *2001,* as a faithful recreation of a "computer that looks out with its huge red eye, always awake" (Baybrook 173). Like the 'character', though, what ended up on the canvas was a departure from where it began. The painting attempts to portray several ideas. At the center, HALs resemblance is close to that of his film portrayal. His eye is, by and large, uniform, clean, and orderly. As HAL grows out from the center, we see growth in his design. Like the character himself, the depiction slowly becomes more chaotic, changing, evolving, "increasingly frantic" (Baybrook 173), until finally, it resembles that of a human eye. This is representative of the changes HAL goes through in the film, starting with him being *just* the AI on the *Discovery*, and

ending with his pleading with Dave to not be disconnected, as he 'speaks' with the desperation one would come to expect from a sentient, thoughtful life form. An important element in this representation is that of the astronaut. The astronaut is presented in a manner that it could be perceived as being either Poole or Bowman simultaneously. Keen audiences will notice the figures left arm, as one of HAL's tendrils can be seen wrapped around it, signifying the hold the AI has over his human charges. The tendril is menacing, symbolic of the notion that "…[HAL] is another Moonwatcher, and humans are the rival tribe at the watering hole, each side rising to kill in order to survive", and he is in the process of doing just that (Baybrook 173). This presentation in the painting could be considered as emblematic of "[an] inner struggle between man and technology" (Castle).

Vincent Jaunas, in his article "Acting out of the World: The Distancing and Underplaying of the Main Actors in 2001: A Space Odyssey and Eyes Wide Shut" argues a similar point, stating "that humans' dependency on machines has disconnected them from their bodies and from the organic aspect of life" due to their "excessive reliance on technology". However, Russel Hinton brings forth another interesting, albeit obvious, point that HAL needs his human counterparts as much as they need him. He argues that it is this knowledge, coupled with HAL's secret directives that cause a form of schizophrenia in the AI, changing it, as illustrated in the painting by HAL's evolution. With this in mind, while the tendril holding the astronaut may seem menacing, it can also be seen as HAL's last-ditch effort at self-preservation. Kubrick suggested he believed that "As our machines smarten up, we will dumb down" (Bizony). Dave is indeed a representation of this idea. However, HAL still has a dependence on him. Kubrick showed in *2001* that although humans were close to that point in his film, they were not there yet. The white shading around

the astronaut is subtly vital as it, like so many other elements in the painting, could be interpreted as having a double meaning. Like the Monolith I wanted to give the impression that the astronaut could be seen as trying to float towards and trying to float away from the Monolith and the Space Pod, which sits at the bottom right of the painting. The astronaut floats with the "absence of gravity destabilizing normal visual biases" (Rowe 48). Rowe states that the effects in the film were not intended to be "simply viewed but visually experienced by the filmgoer, in a form of perceptual engagement" (49). The painting attempts to mimic that sentiment.

Similar to the eye, ever present and bright in the center, I wanted to bring attention to the Pod in several different ways. First, I accentuated the black glass which created another sort of eye, detached from HAL, but also an extension of him at the same time. Secondly, I used very bright white, and very soft grey to contrast the outside background. The purpose of the pod was, understandably, to allow Poole and Bowman to travel safely outside the confines of the Discovery. However, an argument can also be made concerning the pod being a personification of HAL, with its giant eye and two articulating arms. Lending credence to this theory is the fact that HAL even uses the pod to detach Poole's breathing apparatus, killing him and standing him in space. The arm in the painting extends out, and in keeping with the theme of duality and perspective, can be seen as either reaching for the astronaut or having just let the astronaut go, leaving them to float in space, which is the last, final element of the painting itself.

The background of the painting was one of the only design elements that did not change from the initial conception. The intention was always to have a pure black background which was faithful to the aesthetic Kubrick was trying to achieve. In Kubrick's eyes, the verbal exchanges by his characters were less important to the script. Kubrick believed it was the space around and

between that was important. Kubrick, unlike many other filmmakers "[demoted] language to the abyss of form, abandoning a half-century's reliance on diegetic language for narrative progression" (Baybrook 167). The absence of stars, planets, comets, or meteorites was purposeful for this design, as they were for his. What I may have been attempting to achieve with this depiction, and what I believe Kubrick could have been aiming for as well, was a commentary on the lonely, emptiness of space. This background seems to convey how equally disconnected Poole, Bowman, and HAL are from their world and the audience. Essentially, the painting could be implying through the background that 'space' is not welcoming. The parts between the design elements are unsettling, evoking in viewers an uneasiness as if something is perhaps missing. I would argue that the background is possibly the most crucial part of the painting, as it is in this darkness that the most remain said through what it is not saying, the "Sound of Silence", as it were.

As all the elements come together, the theme of the painting becomes something that is best left up to the perception of its viewers. Like Kubrick, I may offer natural explanations to what the painting may mean, but also caution that "no single interpretation" should be considered correct, including my own. Loren PQ Baybrook writes, "[Kubrick] once told his own apprentice, Steven Spielberg, never to offer a "definitive thematic statement" of one's film" (164), and in keeping with this my painting exists as a commentary, as entertainment, as a poignant criticism, and as complete rubbish, all at the same time, with the 'final' judgement resting in the eyes of the beholder.

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