

## **2001: A Space Odyssey and Gravity:**

### **Use of Emotion and allegory**

**By Arun Misra 2023**

The use of emotion and allegory in these two groundbreaking films is truly fascinating. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013) pose profound questions about humanity's ability to shape its destiny and this is at the heart of both films. Both use space travel as a medium to tell their stories.

Space exploration has thrilled entire generations for over a century. Since World War II America and the Soviet Union had competed at all costs to win the space race. The Soviet Union got their first. Yuri Gagarin became the first man to journey into outer space and completed an orbit of the Earth in April 1961. America felt humiliated and was stung into action and J F Kennedy committed the superpower to send men to the Moon and bring them safely back within the decade. On 20 July 1969 Neil Armstrong became the first astronaut to walk on the surface of the Moon uttering the famous words: *That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.*



Neil Armstrong on the first moon walk, NASA image 1969

Stanley Kubrick's film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* depicted space exploration 16 months before Neil Armstrong's moon walk. But *2001* is much more than lunar landings or space walks. It uses space travel allegorically to tell a story about human evolution and transcendence into a higher form of intelligence and being. Alfonso Cuarón's thought provoking film, *Gravity* released in 2013, is also about space travel but it tells a different story about human psyche and resilience in the face of disaster.

### **Emotion and allegory**

It was Charles Darwin who 1872 first suggested that emotions were evolved traits found in all humans. Since then our understanding of emotions has advanced considerably and in 1980 Robert Plutchik devised a 'wheel' of 32 emotions in an attempt to illustrate the relationships between different kinds of emotions. Plutchik's wheel shows how eight bipolar (paired) primary emotions are related to other emotions in his wheel. These bipolar emotions are common to all cultures: joy and sadness; anger and fear; trust and disgust; and surprise and anticipation.

The eight emotions in Plutchik's wheel are used to maximum effect to bind viewers with lead characters in *2001* and *Gravity*. HAL 9000 is the lead character in *2001* and Ryan Stone in *Gravity*. Once a bond is formed then a sense of shared experience and empathy prevails. The stronger the bond the stronger the affect created in viewers and this depends on how relevant the emotions at play are to

viewers at a personal level. Powerful engagement is achieved in these films and allows viewers to come face to face with situations that put them under similar mental or physical pressure brought on by emotions such as fear, loss and betrayal.

A great storyteller knows that our psyches are gateways to our unconscious minds. They can enthrall listeners with good plots that have compelling visions and messages: messages that last and linger long after the story has been told. Why? Because they connect at deep psychological levels. *2001* and *Gravity* both open our psychological gateways through clever uses of allegorical references which connect with our collective experiences, aspirations, fears, feelings and uncertainties.

In *2001* the allegories are about:

- The potential of mankind. This refers to Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical work '*Thus spoke Zarathustra*' and Richard Strauss's similarly titled music is used in the opening sequence of the film.
- Conception, death and re-birth is apparent in the last sequence of the film where the body of astronaut David Bowman withers and dies and a 'star child' image signifies rebirth and a new beginning.

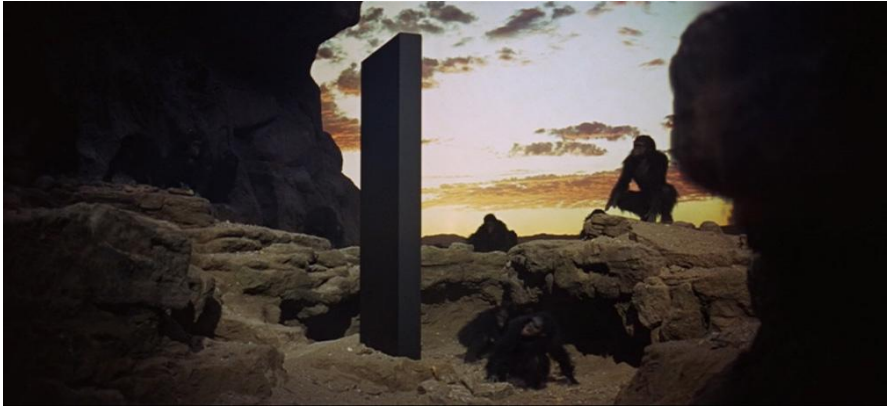
*Gravity's* allegories are about the will to survive is incredibly strong in Ryan Stone. The survival instinct is also present in *2001* and comes naturally to all of us. Because of this we feel the need to be our own determiner of death and don't easily give up or sit back unless there really is no other option.

### **2001: A Space Odyssey**

*2001* is in four parts but part 1 (Dawn of Man) and part 3 (the Journey to Jupiter) have the most intense emotional engagements. The Dawn of Man scene sets the direction of the story with two powerful events:

- A perfectly formed dark and mysterious monolith appears out of nowhere. It bewilders and frightens a colony of prehistoric apes living in a desolate landscape. One of these apes becomes curious and overcomes his fear and approaches the strange object and gingerly feels its surface. Critics point out that the sudden appearance of this monolith gets the apes all worked up to a pitch of frenzy that connotes fear and awe. As they reach out to touch it, we see the Sun and the Moon in orbital conjunction – the magical ignition.
- The leading ape discovers how to use a bone for killing for food and as a weapon to beat enemies with. He feels euphoric and the group is triumphant. After smashing a mammalian skull he throws the bone-tool into the air. This soars up and millions of years later it's depicted as a spacecraft gently floating high above to Richard Strauss's *Blue Danube waltz*. This one sequence represents an enormous time span: evolution, progress and transformation of the apes that showed courage and curiosity.

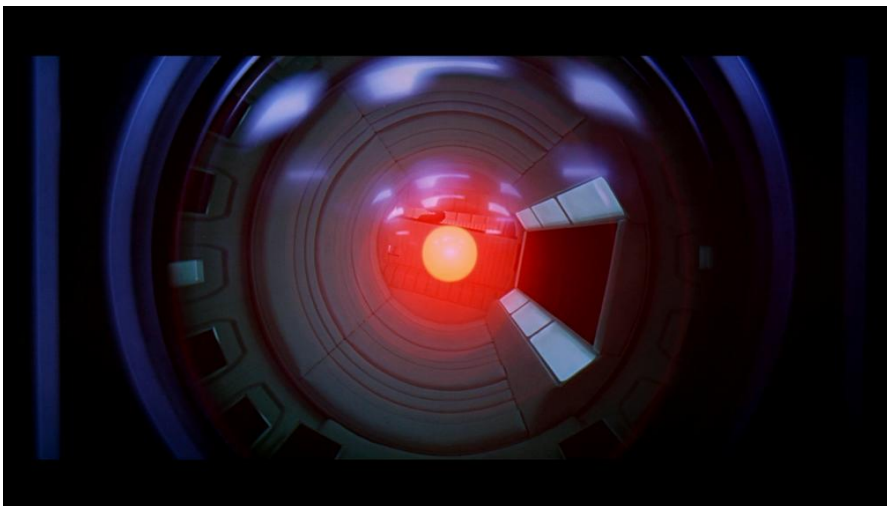
The use of the monolith in the film remains a mystery and its purpose is left to the imagination. It appears four times and each time it foretells a big transition, a leap forward.



The monolith in the Dawn of man scene of 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

Later in the film the Discovery spaceship is travelling to Jupiter. The drama that takes on board is unforgettable because of the emotions in HAL 9000 and viewers. HAL is the mission computer and is in total control. HAL has been programmed to be flawless and his programming includes human intellectual and emotional capabilities. He is also equipped with the full range of human psychic apparatus - the Id, Ego and Superego. He can think, empathise and suffer anxiety. But above all HAL has a desire to ensure his own survival.

HAL is omnipresent and is depicted with one all seeing red circular myopic 'eye' that hears and sees everything. HAL also holds the mission secret and is programmed to lie to the crew about the mission. This conflicts with his programming to follow logic and tell the truth. Lying is difficult. HAL's ego and his failure to admit to an error he makes eventually leads to his paranoia and downfall.



HAL9000: the mission computer who is in total control of the mission to Jupiter.

The following sequence of events releases phenomenal emotional charge:

- HAL makes an error due to a circuit malfunction. He cannot accept this and denies the error.
- The two astronauts on board, Frank Pool and Dave Bowman are not convinced by HAL's assurances and get ground control to check this with HAL's twin on Earth which has been built to exactly the same design. HAL's circuit failure is confirmed. They are advised to take over control from HAL.

- Because they cannot trust HAL, Frank Pool and Dave Bowman have a secret conversation in a pod. They agree to disable HAL. HAL accurately lip reads their conversation through a small window in the pod.
- Fearing that Pool and Bowman will put an end to him, HAL starts on his own plan and kills the other three hibernating astronauts. He then cunningly arranges for Frank Pool to perform a space walk to carry out an unnecessary task during which he cuts off Pool's oxygen supply and Pool dies.

This sequence triggers powerful emotions relating to death, loss, betrayal, suspense, surprise and fear. But in dealing with them it's apparent that HAL is a symbol. He is much the same as man: prone to being driven by the ego. But there is one difference - HAL is fixed and immobile and cannot see things clearly from different viewpoints when under psychological stress.

Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian philosopher, in his article *Looking Awry* examines the use of anamorphosis by William Shakespeare in *Richard II*. [Anamorphosis in art involves creating images that from one angle look distorted but when viewed from another appear normal. In *Richard II*, Shakespeare shows how things can appear differently depending on how they are gazed at: *when we are worried, a small difficulty assumes giant proportions; we see the thing as far worse than it really is*. With anamorphosis, a detail of a picture that is rightly gazed, from a straightforward, frontal view appears a blurred spot, but when we look at it awry, it assumes clear, distinct shapes.

HAL's emotional upheavals captivate us and we listen. Because HAL was 'programmed' to lie about the purpose of the mission direct questioning about this leads to a conflict with his equally strong programming to tell the truth. Faced with this dilemma he develops neurotic symptoms. The important thing is that HAL can only see and comprehend events from the distorted vision provided by his singular fixed lens. The most intense subjective shots in the middle section of the film belong to HAL. HAL sees the world in extreme wide angle or when he lip reads through a telephoto perspective. When his existence is threatened HAL cannot reason clearly and fails to anticipate that Bowman's ingenuity and his own desperate need for survival may get the better of him.

As Bowman shuts off HAL's circuits HAL gets very emotional. In a chilling scene Bowman, who is the remaining survivor, slowly disconnects HAL, and HAL desperately pleads for forgiveness and regresses to cybernetic childhood. In the final moments of the showdown HAL goes into a nervous diatribe:

'Just what do you think you're doing Dave?  
 ... Dave ... I really think I'm entitled to an answer to the question  
 .... I know everything hasn't been quite right with me, but I can assure you now, very confidently, that it's going to be all right again  
 .... I feel much better better now, I really do  
 ... Look, Dave  
 ... I can see you're really upset about this  
 ... I honestly think you ought to sit down calmly, take a stress pill, and think things over.'

As his circuits are disconnected HAL's will to live wanes. His speech slurs and he even sings a song for Bowman. The emotional charge here really feels like that the computer HAL is the only human character in the film because the real humans on board do not display any particular emotions and are

quite clinical in their interactions. The scene when Bowman disconnects HAL is chilling precisely because we do not know who the superior intelligence is and who has the right to disconnect whom.

In the final part of the film the human form as we know it ages and withers. Through rebirth, it transcends into a higher and more evolved being, depicted as the foetus like star-child looking back at us, its early ancestors. The monolith appears for the final time before the rebirth to signify another evolutionary leap for humankind.

## **Gravity**

*Gravity* opens with a shot with three astronauts performing routine maintenance tasks on the International Space Station. We see the Earth's fragile ozone layer that protects us from harmful ultraviolet radiation. Suddenly disaster strikes and high speed space debris destroys the space station and kills one of the team. The remaining two, Matt Kowalski and Ryan Stone get caught up in stray cables and are tethered together. They try to help each other and after an emotional struggle they reluctantly decide that only one of them, Ryan Stone, can make it back to the safety of the space capsule which may still be functional. Kowalski helps Stone to reach the capsule and drifts off into space to his certain death. From here the film is about Stone's turbulent inner journey.

In *Gravity*, looking awry helps Ryan Stone see differently. This is when she gives up all hope of survival after finding that her damaged space vessel had no fuel. Tired and exhausted, she cannot see clearly. She turns off her oxygen and prepares to die. During hallucinations induced by the lack of oxygen she sees her friend, Matt Kowalski. He makes her see differently. She finds hope, is re-energised and uses lateral thinking and will power to find a solution to get her back on the journey home. *Gravity* is about the psyche. It's about what happens to the mind as well as the body in the aftermath of catastrophe.

Emotions are integral to human experiences and are a part of our universal language that traverses cultures. Cuarón harnesses their power and creates a phenomenal bond between Ryan Stone and us. Because of this we experience Stone's joy, sadness, fear, trust, surprise and anticipation in such quantities that would send anyone's psyche into a tailspin. This film is about the moment when you suffered misfortune that seemed unendurable and you believed all hope was lost and you might as well just curl up and die. But you didn't. Why? This is the point of the film and a mystery as great as any in physics or astronomy.

After Kowalski and Stone separate we are drawn into Stone's psychological interior state. She is vulnerable and seen in a foetal position. Psychoanalytical interpretations can unravel what is going on in Stone's mind. These look at a film's character's individual psychological dramas from their forms of expression and in *Gravity* the sequence of images are taken as metaphors for emotional processes that are going on inside Ryan Stone. Optically and acoustically these are impressive sequences.



Ryan Stone curled up in a foetal position, Gravity.

*Gravity* communicates to us that we can overcome insurmountable difficulties if we absolutely must. And that our home is precious and fragile.

Both *2001* and *Gravity* in their different ways keep us spellbound from the very beginning right through to the end. This is done through creation of powerful bonds and because we become hooked we listen to the message. At the core the message is that as a species we are living off an unsustainable model of economic growth and that this is incompatible with the need to preserve Earth's fragile eco system. We have the capacity in us to deal with existential challenges because of our psychological capabilities.

In a 1968 interview, Stanley Kubrick said: *We are semi civilized, capable of cooperation and affection, but needing some sort of transfiguration into a higher form of life. Man is really in a very unstable condition.* How prophetic was that?

Perhaps we are waiting for another mysterious monolith to arrive and cause such panic and mayhem and jolt us into taking meaningful collective action.

.....

*Note: this essay is based on research I conducted into how emotion and allegory is used in films to captivate viewers' as part of my MA degree in photography arts at the University of Westminster, London.*

©ArunMisra2023