

Catcher in the Milky-Way

BY PAUL SCHRADER

2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Directed and produced by Stanley Kubrick. Screenplay by Stanley Kubrick and Arthur Clark from a story by Arthur Clark. Starring Keir Dullea and Gary Lockwood. Now showing at the Eastbrook Theater.

An interview with Stanley Kubrick in the September *Playboy* confirms our worst suspicions about his extrastellar extravaganza 2001: *A Space Odyssey*: that for all its beauty and vaticination, *Space Odyssey* is pretentious and sophomoric, or worse yet, a put-on.

In *Playboy* Kubrick aphorizes at great length about the Absolute Evil, the Fate of Man, and the Destiny of the Human Race. The creator of *Paths of Glory*, *Spartacus*, *Lolita*, and *Dr Strangelove*, already considered American film's finest director and darkest humorist, now is in contention for top sci-fi-prophet and — although the competition is tough here — leading pop metaphysician. He certainly has done his homework. He mixes elbows with physicists, astronomers, physiologists, and biologists of all nationalities, wielding such terms as “cryobiology,” “time-space warp,” “calciptylaxis,” “time dilation factor.” And he leaves no doubt as to on whose shoulders rests this Fate of Mankind. He concludes:

the destruction of this planet would have no significance on a cosmic scale; to an observer in the Andromeda nebulae, the sign of our extinction would be no more than a match flaring for a second in the heavens; and if that match does blaze in the darkness, there will be none to mourn a race that used a power that could have lit a beacon in the stars to light its funeral pyre. The choice is ours.

There is a danger of taking such interviews too seriously. *Playboy* is not known for the high quality of its interviews, and it wouldn't be the first time someone has put *Playboy* on. The interview may simply be a devious promo for Kubrick's money-losing *Space Odyssey*. Yet there is something in the tone of this interview, as well as in *Space Odyssey*, which suggests that Kubrick is passing a crucial point in his career, a point past which we will continue to get quality but no masterpieces.

This Stanley Kubrick, caught in the mire of pretentious metaphysics, is not the Stanley Kubrick we thought we knew, the Stanley Kubrick of *Lolita*, the *Wunderkind* who bucked the studio heads and won. Some would say Kubrick has been perverted by the “American system;” others would contend that the real Stanley Kubrick had finally stood up. But these explanations are probably too intertwined to make much of a difference anyway.

What does make a difference, for Stanley Kubrick and every other American film-maker, is that Kubrick doesn't have to be in this mire, that his ideas are not indigenous to the conundrums he espouses. He wasn't driven into the Slough of *Angst* by an ineluctable artistic compulsion, nor by finances, but by a fault that doesn't appear to be a fault at all: the overpowering need to make a Great Contribution.

Kubrick's case is not unique in American films, but it does represent a new kind of sellout, not for money, but for the semblance of meaning. This trend, which gained highbrow acceptance with Lumet's *Pawnbroker*, overtook the “young generation” with Nichols' *Graduate*, has now enveloped America's finest director.

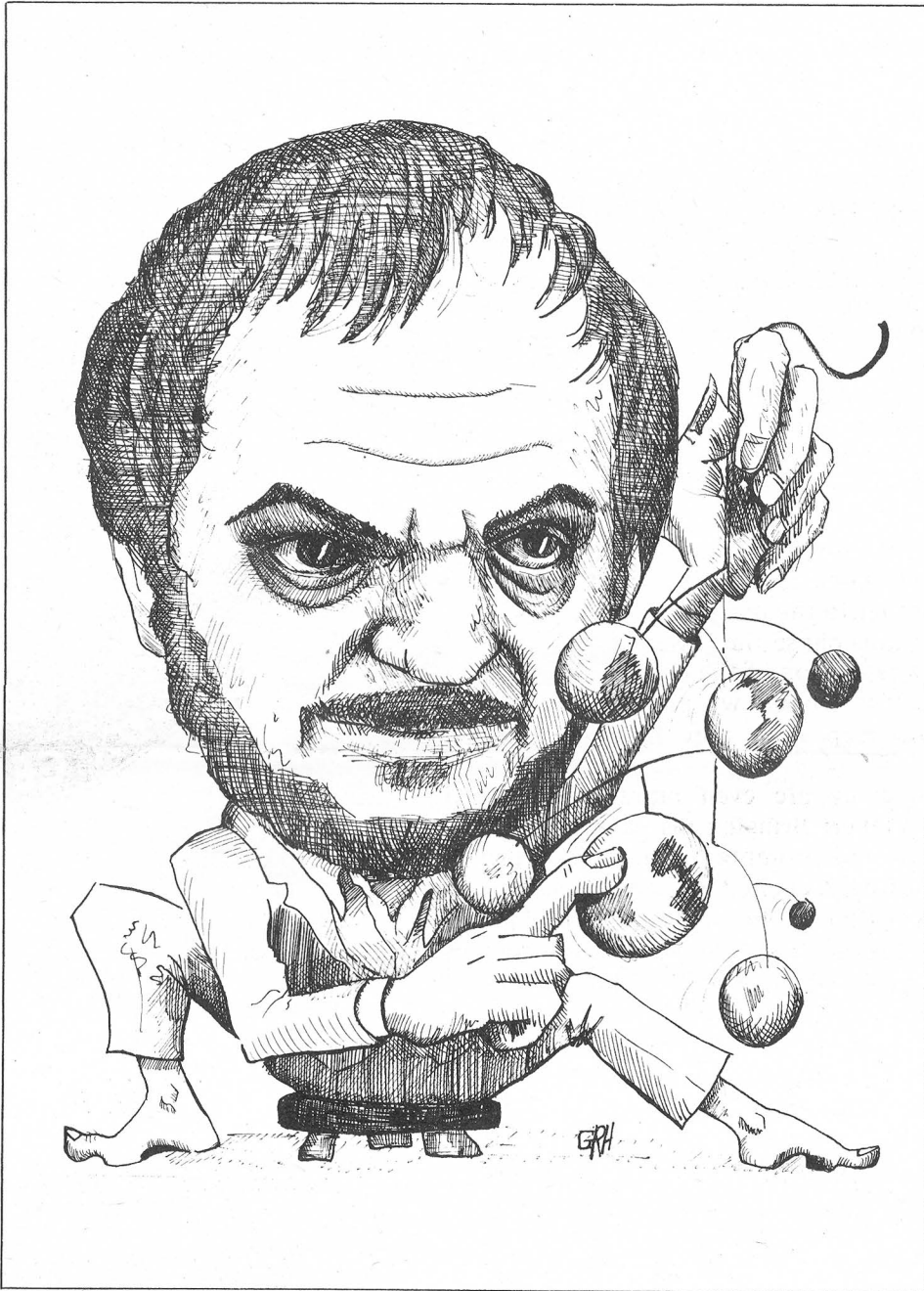
The charge that Kubrick is selling out implies that Kubrick has something to sell. That he does. Kubrick, age 40, having just completed his sixth major feature, is

already the possessor of certain “Kubrick trademarks” which separate him from lesser lights. Kubrick has a rich and imaginative pictorial sense. Formerly a photographer for *Look* magazine, he has an instinctive feel for scenes which are not only believable, but often more poignant than the real thing. Not having served in the military, he created a grisly, more-real-than-factual story of war-time existence in *Paths of Glory*. Although he had not previously inspected a jet, the cockpit Kubrick designed for *Dr Strangelove*'s doomed bomber seemed too real. Kubrick's imaginative structures — especially when they are machines — capture our hopes and fears for the future.

Another Kubrick trait — and a desperately needed one — is his tinted sense

not have one cockpit to design, but six spaceships. He doted on every detail of the future, from the shape of the spaceship's plastic glasses to man's eventual encounter with extraterrestrial intelligences. He solicited the help of sci-fi writer Arthur Clark as well as the world's major scientists. Kubrick was at home in his own world.

In terms of Kubrick's virtues never has he succeeded so well as he does in *Space Odyssey*. Never has there been a film which so vividly gives the *feel* of space, nor a science-fiction film which so realistically carries humans into a computer era. And never has Kubrick's humor been so darkly delicious. HAL 9000, the empathetic computer, has both the sly humor of *Lolita* and the ribald laughter of *Dr Strangelove*. It is HAL who quite



of humor. Kubrick's black chuckles appeared on the screen before the film industry fully realized that Blake Edwards-type funnies can only alleviate Stanley Kramer-type dilemmas, and that if one was to respond to current fears it must be in a humorous manner — not the coy snickers of Alfred Hitchcock — but the robust convulsions of Slim Pickens as he rides *Dr Strangelove*'s Doomsday Bomb to apocalypse. Kubrick is careful not to overplay his humor. When *Lolita* kisses hubby Humbert Humbert as momma Haze looks on, we know the secret and the depth of that perverted, funny relationship. The humor of *Dr Strangelove* was not, as some suggested, uncontrolled, but vacillated cleverly between the faculty of the newspapers and the reality of our fears.

2001: *A Space Odyssey* marks the high — and low — point of Kubrick's career. Kubrick spent five years (the previous five years includes all of Kubrick's major features) researching, planning, and producing *Space Odyssey*. Kubrick now had the confidence of the financiers: time and expense seemed unlimited (the budget eventually totalled \$10.5 million).

Space Odyssey offered Kubrick a free hand at everything he was good at. He did

sincerely informs his human partners, “I enjoy working with people,” but later decides that “this mission is too important to allow you to jeopardize it.” Later HAL, being disconnected for his malfeasance, sings in a wavering voice (like a phonograph losing its power):

Daisy, Daisy
I'm half crazy,
All for the love of you.

But *Space Odyssey* also offered Kubrick a free hand at everything he was poor at. This film is a watershed of Kubrick's career: all of his vices and virtues have their day.

There has always been the jejune edge to Kubrick's thinking. One senses that Kubrick feels intellectually inadequate and needs to *impress* the viewer either with the amount of his knowledge (researching *Space Odyssey* for years), the size of his ambitions, or the depth of his despair. An early Kubrick feature, *Fear and Desire*, thrust its theme (war=evil; love=good) home with such relentless clumsiness that the viewer was not exactly red-sore from the experience, but numb and bored. As Kubrick's experience increased, so did his ability to disguise his emotions in artistic finesse. He filmed an

international custard-pie fight in *Dr Strangelove*'s War Room, but had the perceptiveness to excise it, sensing where satire ended and thematic pretentiousness began.

The faults of *Space Odyssey* are attributable to the fact the Kubrick is unwilling to give structure to his emotions (McLuhan would call them “probes”), or to put in philosophical context ideas which have metaphysical connotations. There are three plots in *Space Odyssey* and they never mix. There is the story of the slabs and contact from outer space, there is the story of HAL's thwarted revolt (to me, the most interesting of the three), and the story of astronaut Dave Bowman's immersion (reincarnation, if you will) into the cosmos. Being the multi-sensual people we are today, three plots are all right; but they should at least try to produce a unified effect, even if in contradiction. The plots of *Space Odyssey* only succeed in baffling each other, and if you will carefully analyze the relationships of the three plots you will find there is none beyond the fact that they are all connected with the same space journey. Added to this there is a “Dawn of Man” opening which connects with none of the plots (the slab which spooks the apes can't be the same one which is uncovered on the moon).

Interspersed with the vices of Kubrick the Pop Metaphysician are the virtues of the Imaginative Kubrick gone wrong: gimmickry. Certain Kubrick creations (21st century phone communications, simulated vegetables) are only included for their “cute” effect. Most of the dialogue could also be dismissed as gimmickry except that it's not cute, it's boring: only TV situation comedies could rival *Space Odyssey* for conversational fatuity.

It is not such a shame that Kubrick lost control of his film, that's been done often enough, but that he has constructed such an elaborate sham-shield to protect his film, his viewers, and himself. What explanation does Kubrick offer for this disjointed, at times downright silly, picture show? First he says it's not about people — only 40 of the film's 195 minutes contain dialogue. But somebody had to make it and somebody has to see it. Why is Kubrick pontificating to *Playboy* readers about something that isn't going to concern them? But that isn't exactly it, Kubrick goes on, he didn't intend to convey the message of *Space Odyssey* “in words.” He has escaped “verbalized pigeonholing.” Doesn't it seem strange that *Space Odyssey* need only be justified in terms of pictures when captions like “Dawn of Man” appear on the screen? Kubrick had no qualms about saying things effectively in words in *Lolita*, *Dr Strangelove*, and even in the *Playboy* interview, but now he demands an immunity no other film has received — that it not be judged in verbal terms. By jumping on the McLuhan bandwagon he can ward off the slings and arrows of the verbal critics (especially the “New York Critics” — the only ones who had the guts to say he made a \$10.5 million booboo). Not only is he safe, he's hip.

Kubrick goes on to defend his film and his thinking by impressing the *Playboy* interviewer with the tenuous fate of mankind (not a hard task). *Space Odyssey* deals with events of such great moment (contact with extraterrestrial life, absorption into the principle of the universe) that it must be a great film. One has to grant that the subject is of great moment, but this does not mean that Kubrick has a monopoly over man's approach to that moment. I, personally, would like to be equipped with a richer philosophical and religious mechanism than either of Kubrick's astronauts. And as a last argument Kubrick resorts to loaded words. What, in Kubrick's name, does have “significance on a cosmic scale”? I dare say that on a cosmic scale 2001: *A Space Odyssey* is as unimportant

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as anything else.

What has happened to Stanley Kubrick, and what has happened to many of us — and increasingly the young — is that we have become so despondent over the world's sorry state that we have become more receptive to mass-media solutions. Kubrick hits the dilemma, perhaps unconsciously, when he says: “If man really sat back and thought about his impending termination and his terrifying insignificance and aloneness in the cosmos, he would surely go mad, or succumb to a numbing sense of futility.” Kubrick, like most of us, has sat back and thought about man's insignificance and aloneness, but rather than go mad or succumb to a numbing sense of futility, he succumbed to a numbing sense of importance.

Man's plight is so great, his hope so

small that ordinary solutions will not do the trick; we need outsized answers that seem meaningful. Hung up on man's impotence, hung up on the need to Say Something, Stanley Kubrick takes the facile route out, throws himself in the arms of McLuhan and calls it salvation. But the answer is slick, easy, and mass-media (perhaps it's no coincidence that Time-Life owns a large share of *Space Odyssey*). McLuhan did not create Man's Despair; he will not alleviate it. McLuhan may be able to cure HAL 9000's malady, but he's shown no indication that he has the solution to Stanley Kubrick's problem. Just like *The Pawnbroker* is not about “love,” and *The Graduate* is not about the “generation gap,” so *Space Odyssey* is not about man's “impending termination.” It's about the type of straws men will grasp for when the

panic's on.

A tragic consequence of Kubrick's journey into outer space is that, in America, directors do not make big films and return to little ones, do not work with stars and return to unknowns, do not play with the apocalypse and return to the commonplace. Once a film-maker has opted out for *Catcher in the Milky-Way*, he is not about to revert to a “man speaking to men.” Kubrick is now working on a super-spectacular on the life of Napoleon. The film has not yet been completed but it seems safe to assume that Kubrick will again make some “big” statements which will, no matter how refined pictorially, stick in our craw just like the big phony statements from *Space Odyssey*.