

Movie: 2001, A Space Odyssey (1968)

Synopsis

Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001, A Space Odyssey* is classic science-fiction thriller based on the seminal book of Arthur C. Clarke's *Odyssey* trilogy. The film opens in primitive Africa, with early primates in conflict over food and water. A chance encounter between one hominid and a black monolith of extraterrestrial origin catalyzes the species's discovery of tools as instruments to aid survival and implement destruction. Millions of years later, in 1999, humans colonizing the moon discover a similar black monolith suspected to provide a potential link between humans and an alien species. Word of the monolith's occurrence is promptly quenched out of fear of xenophobic thoughts and actions interfering with alien contact. Two years later, a US spaceship, *Discovery One*, and its six member crew (5 humans, plus the HAL9000 computer) are sent on a nondescript mission to Jupiter. HAL – the Heuristically programmed Algorithmic computer – is marketed as foolproof and incapable of making errors and is tasked with two objectives: a) to accurately relay information to the ship's crew and ground staff and b) to conceal the true objective of the mission as regards alien contact. When HAL finds his two orders in conflict – to be accurate in conveying information while denying the mission's role in investigating alien contact – he decides that the crew is expendable and should be eliminated in order to remain congruent in these objectives.

How the movie relates to the field of psychiatry

Artificial intelligence has long been used in science fiction as a window into human nature, as well as a device to question what minimum attributes and qualities sufficiently constitute sentience, humanity, and life. By extension, exploration of these themes often probes ethical quandaries regarding autonomy, subservience, and basic rights.

As a crew member, HAL is ostensibly tasked with aiding *Discovery One's* human crew in performing their mission, while simultaneously concealing from them the true nature of their quest. This deception was programmed by HAL's creators based on data that demonstrated that humans engaging alien species are prone to xenophobic thoughts and actions which may serve to undermine extraterrestrial contact. HAL's stated design parameters supposedly make it "inerrant," as it was created to analyze the outcomes of many thousands of possible scenarios before aiding in decision making. Notably, HAL's analytics can be performed extremely rapidly, however the logic it is imbued is of no other form than that of its programmers. HAL's conflict with the crew and, indeed, the nature of its duplicity are presented as a mirror of human behavior: one of aggression and instinctual self-preservation. Kubrick and Clarke use this to suggest that - much as the ape-people used tools to dominate their enemies in order to carve the path of evolution to become space explorer – that HAL represents a parallel evolutionary process whereby man has developed tools with the capacity become sentient. Formerly a device of man's reckoning, these machines have been created with the logic and instinct of man. In fact, it has been suggested that HAL develops an awareness that mankind has reached its evolutionary

limit in becoming a servile species, critically dependent on technology to advance its own ends. HAL reasons that in space, the capabilities of man pale in comparison to that of machine, and begins to believe not just that it is critically adapted to this environment, but that logically, it, too, must be alive. This pits man versus machine into competition to determine species' destiny. In similar conflict as the ape-men over resources, HAL and the crew are forced into competition for control of space, and HAL demonstrates no moral or ethical hesitation toward elimination of the crew, in essence representing sociopathic tendency.

Christopher Massa, Anthony Tobia, MD, Copyright © 2016 Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. All rights reserved.