



Jump Cut: Montage as Metaphysics in Kubrick's *2001*

Matthew Gumpert, Boğaziçi University, matthew.gumpert@bogazici.edu.tr

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Abstract

Our first impulse is to view Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* as an *odyssey* in the Homeric manner. *Odyssey* here refers to a persistent narrative mode that continues to dominate our reception of literature and film, one that privileges continuity and coherence as formal, diegetic principles. But when viewed through the lens of Eisenstein's theory of montage, *2001*, it becomes clear, is expressly designed to challenge those principles. Rather than championing development, evolution, progress, or return (all variations on the *Odyssean* trope), Kubrick's film, I argue, is a manifesto for rupture and discontinuity, for metaphysics as montage.

Keywords: Kubrick; odyssey; cataclysm; monolith; cut; suture; syntax; Eisenstein; montage



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Matthew Gumpert

Introduction: The Odyssean Trope

Trained as I was as a classicist, my first impulse is to view Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) as an *odyssey* in the Homeric manner. On the one hand, the film's title and narrative structure, which takes the form of an epic journey, encourage us to approach it from that perspective. Kubrick has left too many signs to ignore: the protagonist of the film, our Odysseus, is an *astronaut*, that is, a *sailor of the stars*, named Bowman (let us not forget that Odysseus reveals his identity in Ithaca brandishing his famous bow); and his nemesis is the computer HAL (named Athena in earlier drafts of the screenplay), who interfaces with the crew through a single baleful eye, the eye, surely, of the Cyclops. The book version of *2001*, by Arthur C. Clarke, pushes the Homeric allegory further: the astronauts bound for Jupiter may find, we are told, "ruins a 1000 times older than Troy" (1968, p. 162); Bowman is the solitary survivor of his journey, and returns home in a ship named *Discovery*; and, just in case we did not get the message, is discovered at one point reading the *Odyssey* (1968, p. 203).

All that is material, perhaps, for another essay.

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On the other hand, the notion of an *odyssey* suggests a persistent narrative mode that continues to dominate our reception of literature and film: a critical approach that privileges continuity and coherence as formal and diegetic principles. *2001* challenges those principles; so that, instead of history, development, evolution, or progress – all variations on the *Odyssean* trope – Kubrick’s film is a study in rupture and discontinuity: an ode to cataclysm. Truth be told, the Odyssean paradigm, in its Homeric recension, is never posited as a narrative of pure continuity or development: Odysseus’ journey home, after all, is not a straight line but a circuitous, meandering path, full of delays, wrong turns, and reversals. Moreover, modern notions of development or evolution (whether individual or cultural) are to a large extent foreign to the classical epic: Homer returns to Ithaca and sets things right, vanquishing the suitors and restoring order to his kingdom; but the Odyssean Odysseus that returns to Ithaca cannot really be said to be different from the Iliadic Odysseus who fights at Troy. However, for better or worse, our readings of Homeric epic conform to an Enlightenment vision of linear progress and teleological development (both at the individual and cultural levels) that has become reflexive for most of us moderns.

This cultural tendency to think in terms of linear progress may help explain why most readings of Kubrick’s film have tended toward what I would call *diegetic* readings, borrowing from David Bordwell’s distinction in *Narration in the Fiction Film* between *mimetic* and

diegetic narrative models (1985). In other words, they tend to translate Kubrick's sequencing and arrangement of images into a linguistic form, a translation, a gloss, that smooths over difficulties. Not coincidentally, these translations are stories *about* development or linear movement. Thus, David Hoch writes that the first part of the film ("The Dawn of Man") "traces the development of consciousness from ape to man" (1971, p. 961). However, even Darwin's "tale" of evolution, to the extent that it adheres to certain narrative principles, looks more like a series of stops and starts – two steps forward, one step back, as it were – than a straight and smooth line moving inexorably from point A to point B. Hoch's analysis, one will note, depends on two of the most familiar tropes of continuity, one metaphysical, the other mimetic: in the first, that of an enduring object which changes form ("the *development* of consciousness"); in the second, that of the representation of that change as the execution of an unbroken line ("traces the development of consciousness"). In fact, there is no development in this sequence at all – whether cultural, individual, political: there is only sudden and miraculous – that is, inexplicable – transformation.

The monolith is the obvious physical marker of what intervenes, dislocates, or transforms.¹ Consider the first time we encounter it, and the ensuing triumph of one tribe of hominids over another. This is one of the great "leaps" marking the advent of "civilization."

Sometimes a femur is just a femur, but when it becomes a weapon, ape becomes human. The “Dawn of Man” sequence concludes when the ape-inventor (christened “Moon-Watcher” in Clarke’s novelistic treatment [1968: 19]) celebrates his newfound knowledge and his murderous triumph by hurling his weapon skywards. I want to focus on this moment, surely one of the more famous transitions in cinema history.

Except that it is not, properly speaking, a transition at all, which is really my point here. Critics generally cannot resist describing the scene in evolutionary terms. Hoch writes that the “transition from prehistoric man to the man of the twenty-first century is effected visually by focus on the bone... it becomes a spaceship” (1971, p.168). Herb Lightman, emphasizing the chronological, argues that the “time of the film then flashes forward to the year 2001” (1968, p. 150). Now, to the extent that Lightman’s formulation suggests linearity or movement, then one must respectfully disagree; for in Kubrick’s sequence, there is no movement forward, there is no transition, but, rather, a suturing or stitching of one frame to the next. The absolute disparity between spaceship and bone, and the lack of all gradations between them, appears to defy all relationality, be it that of anteriority (first bone, then spaceship) or etiology (from bone, spaceship). Alexander Walker calls the sequence a “transition...to a new order of life as a fragment of bone bounces up into the air...to turn into a space vehicle of the year 2001 in one

brilliant associative cut. Evolutionary progress proceeds through technological development. Man's odyssey continues" (1999, pp. 165-67). All the familiar *Odyssean* tropes are here.²

In fact, these tropes are nowhere to be found in Kubrick's film. Let us take another look. The entire rhythm of the film, if it can be said to have one, is based on discontinuity. For example, in the "Dawn of Man" sequence, temporality is incoherent: days alternate, or weeks, or seasons alternate; events spring upon us, like the tiger that leaps on the unsuspecting ape. This rhythm returns, especially in the very last sequences of "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite," in which Bowman reappears in progressively older guises. However, there is no progression here; the images overlap or intersect, so that temporality itself seems to unfold in fits and starts. At one point, we can see two Bowmans in succession, the first looking at a second, future self. Because there is no transition here, but an abrupt juxtaposition of Bowmans (young versus old), the effect is less that of evolutionary change than sudden transformation. The moment where Bowman breaks the wine glass, just before his own final transfiguration and rebirth, might be read as an emblem of this structure of (accelerated) temporality and catastrophic rupture. This event cannot be said to be primarily symbolic in the sense we generally give that term: rather than lending extra "meaning" to the plot, it marks its rhythm (that of discontinuity). The

fractured wine glass is the very sign of fracturing itself: it is the very image (like that of the monolith) of that which *intervenes*.

Indeed, one could argue that this discontinuous rhythm is central to Kubrick's entire opus: the switch from Parris Island to Vietnam in *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick, 1987); the announcement of filmic chapters or sequences, projected with almost ludicrous abruptness – a parody of the horror film jump scare, where terrible things happen “all of a sudden” – in *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980).

Monolith as Sign of Discontinuity

The monolith itself seems faintly ridiculous, even kitschy – and intentionally so (everything in Kubrick's cinema, of course, is *intentionally so*). This pillar is, by definition, *out of place*, refusing all integration into its surrounding environment. Part of this unreadability is due to its physical appearance: minimal,³ smooth, geometric, manufactured, impenetrable, and opaque,⁴ an absolute artifact that is absolutely incongruous (where does it “belong”? In the East African savanna? On the lunar surface? Orbiting Jupiter? In Bowman's bedroom?). The monolith, then, is purely semiotic, the sign of the sign itself (like the unopened letter in Poe's tale “The Purloined Letter” [Poe, 1845/2004, pp. 695-708]).⁵

The monolith is thus categorically unassimilable, something confirmed by its mode of arrival, which is that of *theophany*: it manifests in the manner of a god. Its arrival – unexpected,

unannounced – is a rift in the space-time continuum. Indeed, we never see the monolith arrive or depart; it has no diegetic life or development: it is simply *there*. (This unreadability is seductive: it is because the monolith is unreadable that it elicits countless readings. Critics are happy to oblige.⁶) Its effects, similarly, are violent, even catastrophic, or, more precisely, anastrophic: for the advent of the monolith always signals an upward, not a downward turn: ape becomes human, human becomes God (or something superhuman). There is, of course, “advancement” here, but the mode of graduation is not progression or odyssey, but rupture, violence, cataclysm. It is hardly surprising, then, that those scenes in which the monolith makes its appearance are everywhere marked by signs of discontinuity and rupture. The monolith’s theophanic aspect is heralded by the alignment of heavenly bodies, an attendant feature of its arrival; but the monolith itself always cuts through that alignment at a perpendicular angle. In the “Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite” sequence, the floating monolith rotates so that only its edge is lit; it becomes a pure line, an absolute mark.

Kubrick’s strategic use of sound at these critical moments contributes to the sense of cataclysm, or violent rupture. The crescendo of choral tones that announce and accompany the monolith’s appearances is brutally truncated without warning as one scene shifts to the next.

The film’s penultimate sequence, in which we seem to watch Bowman’s entire life race

by in a matter of minutes, is dominated by the principles of discontinuity and incongruity. The oft-discussed décor – retrieved perhaps from the archives of Bowman’s culture, or from his own life, by the aliens, we assume, hiding behind the “set,” needs no explanation.⁷ Of course, like the monolith, it may mean a great deal, or a great many things (emblem of desuetude, or decadence, man’s infancy as an *ancien régime*, soon to be convulsed by revolution, etc.). But, like the monolith itself, which appears at the foot of Bowman’s deathbed/cradle (and like the space pod it supplants), it remains above all an image of the incongruous (and, again, its very inexplicability generates endless explanations). That nothing could be more out of place is thus an explanation enough for its presence.

Showing versus Telling

Kubrick wanted *2001* to be about images and music, not words.⁸ The first spoken words are pronounced 40 minutes into the film, and there is less than 40 minutes of dialogue in the entire epic. (The inaugural utterance is not without import: “Here you are, sir,” spoken by a flight attendant to Dr. Floyd upon his arrival at the space station; a phrase that might be construed as Kubrick’s compressed version of evolution, from hominid to twenty-first-century humankind, as simple *phanesis*: and *here you are, voilà!*) Thus, the critic finds it necessary to translate those images and that music back into words. (That *2001* is as close as Kubrick ever got to making a silent film may help to explain why it favors, like many of the silent films that

came before it, the logic of montage or, more broadly, visual sequencing.) It is also well known that there was originally a voice-over for parts of the film, which Kubrick ultimately decided to dispense with (Benson, 2018, pp. 349–357; LoBrutto, 1997, pp. 405–408). Music, which plays such a significant role in Kubrick’s film, might also be considered a mode of commentary without words. In fact, Kubrick commissioned Alex North to compose an original score but abandoned it in post-production (Benson, 2018, pp. 301-304; Ordway & Lange, 1982: 240). Such a score, designed expressly for the movie, might have too easily constituted a “commentary,” fodder for the critical. Instead, Kubrick thought of his movie itself as a “machine ballet” (Walker, 1971, pp. 235-40), a musical sequence. Kubrick’s efforts to delay the publication of the literary treatment of the screenplay, co-written with Arthur C. Clarke, are also noteworthy. The novel (appearing in July 1968), based on the screenplay, was refused approval by Kubrick until just before the film’s release.⁹ That novelization disavows the cataclysmic or discontinuous mode of the film by offering explanations, transitions, etc., where there are none in the film.¹⁰ Kubrick himself acknowledges the distinct mimetic modes of novel and film in his interview with Gelmis: “The novel attempts to explain things much more explicitly than the film, which is inevitable in a verbal medium” (39).¹¹

Critical readings of *2001* tend to replace the missing narrative voice-over with

metacritical commentary. See, to name a few influential readings, Chion's *Kubrick's Cinema Odyssey* (pp. 90-94), Krämer's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (pp. 57-63, 66-70), and Kolker's "Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*" (pp. 10-15). Of course, such critical readings include Kubrick's own remarks, as well as Clarke's novel. Clarke's narrator informs us that the ship that figures in the jump cut from the prehistoric bone is, in fact, a nuclear weapon orbiting the earth (13-15), thereby authorizing or naturalizing the parallel and, as it were, taking some of the jump out of the jump cut.

Bordwell relies on a distinction borrowed from Aristotle's *Poetics*: the contrast between the modes of telling (diegesis) and showing (mimesis). In his reading of the term, one might indeed suggest that Kubrick's *2001* offers an almost pure demonstration of mimesis.¹² However, Kubrick's film problematizes many mimetic assumptions. The oft-cited paradox of the camera functioning as an implicit observer of a pre-filmic event, from Dreyer's 1928 *The Passion of Joan of Arc* to Nolan's 2026 adaptation of the *Odyssey* (a paradox exploited brilliantly in Watkins' 1964 made-for-television movie *Culloden*), is stretched to the limit in *2001*, with its vastly divergent settings, both in terms of time and space.¹³ It is almost as if Kubrick made *2001* a test case for Bazin's theory (best expressed in his essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image") of the camera as impersonal or indifferent observer.

Bordwell notes that the “implicit observer” theory is a frequent justification for “continuity editing,” the idea that an implicit witness, turning from one detail to another, “remains on the same side of the axis of action or ‘180-degree line’” (1985, p.9). The idea that filmic cutting could represent a “spectator watching a street encounter and casting his glance from one participant to another” (Bordwell, 1985, p.9), with its presupposition of a unified observer and event, is an unwieldy proposition in *2001*’s interstellar, indeterminate, and interstitial landscapes (who is this spectator; where do they stand?). Those who would try to rescue the implicit observer theory by positing an “ideally mobile observer” (10) would find their theory stretched to the limit in *2001*, where we would require an all-seeing, omnipresent, and eternal observer.

A Diegetic Interlude

Of course, we need not subscribe to the fiction of an implicit and ideally mobile observer. As Bordwell notes, what we see in a film is also designed to be apprehended as a staged composition, a *mise-en-scène* announcing the hand of an artist or director (see Tomasulo’s 1981 essay on the staging of space in *Citizen Kane*). This would seem to be particularly the case for a “machine ballet” like *2001* set in extraordinary or fantastical landscapes (outer space, prehistoric Africa). Indeed, if one were to continue speaking in the diegetic mode and attempt to turn Kubrick’s film into a story *about* something, one could easily argue that the theme of

directorial intervention itself is that something. Not only does *2001* everywhere present itself as an artificial construction, a *mise-en-scène*, in large part, of special effects¹⁴, but it would seem to be *about* evolution itself *as* a special effect, a staged construction that betrays the hand of a Director more powerful and mysterious than Kubrick himself.¹⁵ Hence the emphasis on artificial spaces as stages or incubators, especially in the bedroom scenes, which appear to be set in some neutral space, furnished with Louis XVI furniture, but resting on a plexiglass-and-incandescent floor. But one could argue that the same kind of artificiality is found in those scenes where “realism” would seem to be called for, as in the “Dawn of Man” sequences. However, the desert is actually a stage, and the humans in monkey suits are not completely convincing. Nothing moves in the background of these sequences; in fact, Kubrick used glass transparencies here, projected from in front of the performers (Baxter, 1997, p. 219) onto a (Sinar) screen made of a polarized material (the kind of substance used for road signs to be seen at night), which reflected light to the viewer with almost equal intensity.¹⁶ The result is an unnaturally bright sequence without shadows.¹⁷ To return, again, to a possible diegesis, the “point” here is that the desert of Africa is as much a laboratory or set (Kubrick’s, God’s, the aliens’) as Bowman’s mystic bedroom.

Aristotle on Mimesis

To return to Aristotle on mimesis in the *Poetics*, the philosopher argues, in essence, that

we enjoy mimesis because we learn from it; we learn from it, so it is usually understood, because mimesis teaches us about equivalences. Aristotle (1968) wonders why humans love imitations; his answer is: the pleasure of learning. His conclusion is in chapter 4 of the *Poetics*:

The proof of this point is what actually happens in life. For there are some things that distress us when we see them in reality, but the most accurate representations of the same thing we view with pleasure – as, for example, the forms of the most despised animals and corpses... Thus men find pleasure in viewing representations because it turns out that they learn and infer what each thing is – for example, that this particular object [*houtos*] is that kind of object [*ekeinos*] (1448b10-20).

Certain aspects of this passage have been neglected. First, Aristotle's paradigm of mimesis is a specifically dramatic, theatrical, or specular scenario. The viewer's pleasure stems from an awareness that what is seen is not, in fact, the real thing. There is pleasure, but there is also the possibility of fear and disgust. Everything depends on distinguishing the likeness from the original. Second, the pleasure afforded the viewer is contingent upon an act of pivoting or rupture, conceptually speaking: we swerve, Aristotle claims, from one thing to another, i.e., from a representation (present before us) to an idea (which must be inferred). Inference itself is a kind of pivoting: we move from object *a* (whether *petit* or *grand*, apologies to Lacan), the particular object represented (*houtos*), to object *b*, the general category with which object *a* is identified, or by which it is classified (*ekeinos*). The drama or violence of this movement, or the pivoting between a "this" (*houtos*) and a "that" (*ekeinos*), has not been fully appreciated; similarly, I am suggesting that critics have underestimated the violence of the cut that jumps

from femur to spaceship, *Australopithecus africanus* to *Homo sapiens*.

The pleasure Aristotle attaches to learning at 1448n10-20 is commonly parsed as an appreciation of likeness; that object *a* is like or equal to object *b*. Hence, the passage is traditionally paired with statements Aristotle makes in the *Poetics* and elsewhere on metaphor as a form of association or linkage of dissimilar things (see, above all, chapter 21) – a mode of swerving or suturing from one object to another. “Metaphor is the transference of a name,” declares Aristotle [21.7.10]; a transference that tethers one thing (a *particular* thing, the *comparandum*) to another thing (something universal or generic, the *comparatum*). So at *Iliad* 22.139-44 Homer (1951) compares Achilles (a particular subject) to a hawk (any hawk, a generic hawk): “As when in the mountains a hawk, the swiftest of all birds, swoops in easily upon a trembling dove; the dove flies before him but the hawk follows close, screaming, and dives again and again in his eagerness to take her; so Achilles went raging on, closing in on Hector.” The whole problem lies in this tethering. Aristotle is certainly not arguing for true identity or equivalence. In fact, a closer look at the passage above suggests that mimesis – and indeed, metaphor itself – operates as a form of dislocation or rupture; it takes place in the seam or separation between categories or cognitive entities (“this,” *houtos*, and “that,” *ekeinos*), or the movement back and forth between them. Aristotle’s vision of mimesis is less a system of equivalences than a pre-filmic theory of cutting or splicing.

Back to the Bone

I want to suggest that the famous jump cut from bone to spaceship is a textbook illustration of the pleasures and perils of mimetic learning in the Aristotelian sense. That cut is almost always read as the mark of an equation or identity, a pure cinematic metaphor that compresses and elides the vast, especially temporal, differences that separate *entity a* (bone) from *entity b* (spaceship): time. In this simplistic model, *bone = spaceship*.

However, such a reading ignores or omits what is crucial to this sequence: its drama, its theatricality, its dissonance. There is a reason why the bone is dropping down, and the ship is moving sideways; there is a reason why the cut is awkward, why “he could have done that better.” It helps to remind us that this is a cut, in fact, from one thing to another thing, and that these things, which may appear to be alike, are also different. In this model, then, *bone ≠ spaceship*.

Mimesis and Montage

Similarly, Eisenstein’s theory of *montage* frames it (pun intended) as a form of cutting or splicing. Beyond these parallels, several aspects of Kubrick’s film, already cited, might encourage us to talk about *2001* in terms of montage: above all, the fact that it is as close as Kubrick ever got to making a silent film; to the fact that it favors, like many of the silent films that came before it, the logic of montage or, more broadly, visual sequencing.¹⁸

According to Bordwell, Eisenstein's notion of montage is, in essence, an expressionist theory. For the Soviet filmmaker, who rejects the "implicit observer" theory, film shots, above all, express emotion and are designed to have an almost visceral impact on the viewer. Bordwell (1985, p.13) emphasizes Eisenstein's notion of "attraction" as "a unit of spectatorial impact, gauged by its ability to administer perceptual and emotional shocks" (1974, p.78). The relevance of this idea to *2001*, with its recurrent jump cuts (and jump scares), both visual (femur to spaceship, the dying Bowman to newborn Star Child, the staccato succession of progressively older Bowmans in the Louis XVI room sequence) and aural (the earsplitting radio signal emitted without warning by the lunar monolith, Kubrick's predilection for sudden shifts from silence to music, such as Ligeti's *Requiem*, with the first appearance of the monolith at the watering hole, or music to silence, such as Strauss' *Blue Danube* in the space docking sequence), is clear. Also relevant is what Bordwell calls Eisenstein's "dialectical approach" (14), in which he claims that "graphic composition and other visual factors could create a conflict that would 'explode' into 'the conflict between shots'" (1974, p. 14).¹⁹

The following passages are taken from Eisenstein's essay "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram." The director's discussion of montage begins by understanding it as a form of filmic *syntax*: montage is a linkage of shot syntagms. Eisenstein declares that "Cinematography is, first and foremost, montage" (1949, p. 28). He compares the "language"

of montage to the “copulative” “hieroglyphs” (pp. 29-30) of Japanese ideograms, in which “a dog + a mouth = to ‘bark,’” or “a mouth + a child = ‘to scream’” p. (30). Eisenstein argues that this is exactly what we do in making and watching cinema: “combining shots that are *depictive*, single in meaning, and neutral in content, into *intellectual* structures and series” (30). Another analog borrowed from Japanese culture by Eisenstein is the *haiku*. Consider the following poem by Kyoroku: “It is early dawn. / The castle is surrounded / By the cries of wild ducks” (pp. 30-31). Moreover, Eisenstein concludes: “From our point of view, these are montage phrases. Shot list.” (p. 32).

Eisenstein is interested in the way syntax stretches linkages and distorts equivalences, while ultimately affirming a synthetic and unified vision. In “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram” Eisenstein speaks of the “disproportionate depiction” of an event, as in a close-up, where, in “making an eye twice as large as a man’s full figure,” and by “combining these monstrous incongruities,” we “collect the disintegrated event into one whole, but in *our* aspect” (1949, p. 34). Eisenstein compares this technique to a child drawing a picture of lighting a stove, in which the match is the same size as the stove. A grotesque vision, but one that is paradoxically realistic, in giving the match the proper importance it possesses in the act.

When we replace the match and the stove with the bone and the spaceship, we may begin to see how Eisenstein's attempt to construct a filmic syntax through montage helps us see Kubrick's *2001* as a film about discontinuity, not continuity.

This becomes all the more apparent when Eisenstein attempts to distance himself from prior theories of montage that privilege continuity and seamlessness as a defining principle of syntax, as in Pudovkin's writings. Here is how he paraphrases Lev Kuleshov's "traditional analysis" of montage: "A shot. A single piece of celluloid. A tiny rectangular frame in which there is, organized in some way, a piece of an event. 'Cemented together, these shots form montage. When this is done in an appropriate rhythm, *of course!* (1949, p. 36).²⁰ What Eisenstein wants, in montage, is, on the contrary, an inappropriate rhythm – such as, I would suggest, we find in the famous jump-cut in *2001*. Thus, Eisenstein distances himself from critics like Pudovkin (1929, p. 37) who emphasize montage as a form of linkage. Eisenstein makes this clear in a famous organic analogy:

The shot is by no means an *element* of montage. The shot is a montage *cell*. Just as cells in their division form a phenomenon of another order, the organism or embryo, so, on the other side of the dialectical leap from the shot, there is montage. By what, then, is montage characterized and, consequently, its cell – the shot? By collision. By the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other. By conflict. By collision (1949, p. 37).

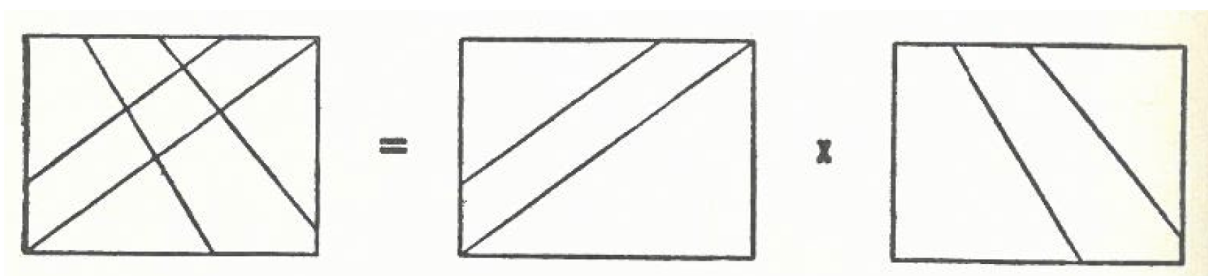
I would therefore argue that collision is clearly a better way of understanding Kubrick's *2001*, and its rhythm and/or syntax, than linkage or evolution.

In “The Cinematic Principle and the Ideogram,” Eisenstein compares this conflictual notion of montage, what he calls *collision*, or sometimes *attraction*, to a theater *without transitions* – as in the Japanese Kabuki theater. In the play *Narukami* (1742), for example, the actor “must change from drunkenness to madness. This transition is solved by a mechanical cut” (1949, p. 42). Eisenstein also mentions the Kabuki tradition of “disintegrated” acting, in which individual body parts are isolated; he compares this to a “breaking-up into shots” (p. 43) – i.e., montage editing. Finally, he draws an analogy between the slow tempo in the Japanese theater, a “disintegration of the process of movement,” and cinematic “slow-motion.”

In “A Dialectical Approach to Film Form,” Eisenstein pursues the idea of montage as collision further.” Montage, Eisenstein argues, “is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots – shots even opposite to one another” (1949, p. 49) – a technique that illustrates what he calls the “dramatic” principle. Eisenstein goes as far as to suggest that this dramatic principle of collision is the very basis of filmic illusion. We must resist the popular view that insists on film as a process of invisible transitions, smooth linkages – what he calls *blending*: “We know that the phenomenon of movement in film resides in the fact that the motionless images of a moving body, following one another, blend into an appearance of motion by showing them sequentially at a required speed. This popularized description of what

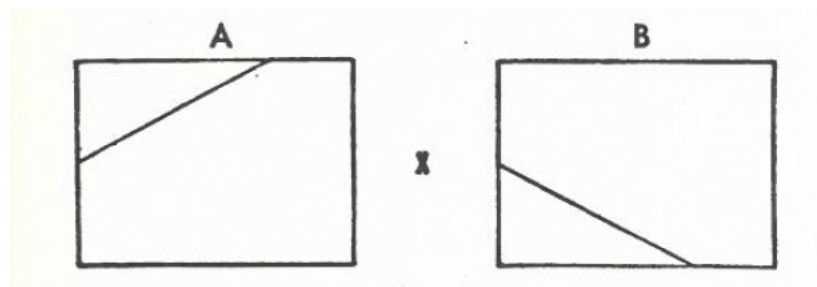
happens as a *blending* has its share of responsibility for the popular miscomprehension of the nature of montage” (p. 49). For Eisenstein, the traditional visual explanation of the illusion of movement is inaccurate: “For, in fact, each sequential element is perceived not *next* to each other, but on *top* of each other. For the idea (or sensation) of movement arises from the process of superimposing on the retained impression of the object’s first position, a newly visible further position of the object” (p. 49).

Thus we return to the famous jump-cut – so awkward, so jagged. Try to superimpose the frame with the spaceship upon the frame with the femur that immediately precedes it. Eisenstein experiments with just these kinds of awkward superimpositions in “A Dialectical Approach.” He calls these kinds of montage sequences “*visual counterpoint*” (1949, p. 52), in which successive frames create “graphic conflict” (p. 54) instead of smooth transitions, or repetitions, as in the following illustrations (p. 54):

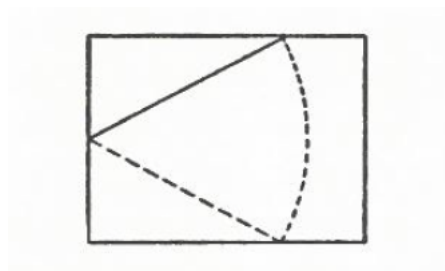


This kind of montage juxtaposition can create the kind of “attraction” Bordwell emphasizes; montage is a rhetorical instrument with shock value. Eisenstein speaks of “*Emotional combinations*,” achieved by what he calls “*Association montage*” (p. 57). In

association montage, the subjects of shots A and B may be disparate, with different positions in their respective frames (p. 57):



But the result of their combination in a montage sequence -



- will be the “*dynamization of the subject*” (p. 57), not just spatially on the screen, but, for the spectator as well, from a psychological perspective. In other words, spatial dynamization is coincident with “emotional dynamization.”

Now, to say that *2001* relies on the effects of spatial and emotional *dynamization* is to say that it is built upon the logic of montage; that its guiding principle is the jump cut. A film built upon such principles cannot be said, in traditional terms, to either *be* a story, or *tell* one. In narratological terms, then, *2001* challenges the old formal laws governing good storytelling:

linearity, sequentiality, continuity, causality, teleology. These are not only formal principles, but diegetic truths, even thematic verities. But such verities cannot survive a universe built on montage. What about the story, then, that *2001* tells? *2001*, we have to conclude, is not a film about the journey that brings Odysseus, the Bow-Man, back home (or a new version thereof); its paradigm is not the odyssey/*Odyssey*, but the jump cut – not simply as a formal principle, but a metaphysical one.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ To the extent that my essay builds on previous Kubrick scholarship it is allied to Jacob Wamberg's notion of "paleofuturism" in his essay "Monolith in a Hollow: Paleofuturism and Earth Art in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*" (2020) which views the monolith not as traditional symbol (locus or vehicle of meaning), but as visible juncture between past and future.

² Kubrick himself, it should be noted, speaks, in an interview with Joseph Gelmis, of "evolutionary progression" (p. 34) in the film (Gelmis 1970, p. 34).

³ Kubrick, in the Gelmis interview, calls it "a pretty fair example of 'minimal art'" (1970, p. 37).

⁴ Note that Clarke's monolith, in the novelistic version, is transparent or crystalline (1968, p. 19).

⁵ The plot of Poe's "The Purloined Letter," and the chaos it unleashes, depends entirely on the itinerary of an apparently compromising letter which is never opened; the letter's power flows from its identity *qua* letter: it is the sign of a letter. (See Lacan, 2006.)

⁶ Lightman wants us, he says, to read the monolith "allegorically" (1968, p. 147).

⁷ In Clarke (1968) it appears to be inspired by 1950s television sitcoms.

⁸ Kubrick describes *2001* as "basically a visual, nonverbal expression" (Gelmis, 1970, p. 34).

⁹ The screenplay is, in fact, based on a number of works by Clarke, including *Childhood's end* (1954) and "The sentinel" (1948).

¹⁰ Note the following passages from section 1 (entitled "Primeval Night"), chapter 2 ("The New Rock"), all of which serve to smooth over the ruptures, fill in the silences and gaps, with explanations or exegeses. Our hominid-protagonist, Moon-Watcher, wakes up one fateful night to discover the monolith which, in this version of events, is given a history; it is, explicitly *put* in its place: "Never in his life . . . had he heard a sound like this . . . this was a continuous crunching noise, that grew steadily louder. It seemed that some enormous beast was moving through the night, making no attempt at concealment, and ignoring all obstacles" (1968, p. 18); "And then there came a sound which Moon-Watcher could not possibly have identified, for it had never been heard before in the history of the world. It was the clank of metal upon stone . . . Moon-Watcher came face to face with the New Rock when he led the tribe down the river in the first light of morning" (p. 19). Clarke's monoliths, like his explanations, are, we have already seen, transparent. They are also endowed, explicitly, with sentience; they are, in effect, characters: "Neither it," Clarke writes, "nor its replicas scattered across half the globe, expected to succeed" (p. 25). Other moments in the novel function, similarly, to explain what remains unexplained in the film: in chapter 6, a summary of human evolution,

from ape to nuclear humanity, is helpfully provided (pp. 35-37); chapter 7 begins: “No matter how many times you left earth, Haywood Floyd told himself, the excitement never really paled” (p. 41); the presence of the space pod in the “anonymous hotel suite” (p. 208) where Bowman finds himself before his final transformation, remains just as stubbornly incongruous in the novel as it is in the film, but in the novel that incongruity is neutralized precisely by being identified as such: “The only incongruous element in the scene - and that certainly a major one - was the space pod itself” (p. 209).

¹¹ Here is NPR critic Bob Mondello, on a 2018 segment of *All Things Considered*, on the tension, not only between novel and film, but Clarke and Kubrick: “Kubrick wanted to tell the story not with words but with majestic, peripheral-vision-filling images. To screenwriter Clarke's immense annoyance, the director got rid of explanatory voiceovers, kept dialogue mostly inconsequential, spelled nothing out.”

¹² Bordwell is interested specifically in mimesis as *process*, in other words, as *narration*. Note the long line of film theorists who have sought to develop a filmic narratology, from Bordwell to Maureen Turim (1989), Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (1974), and Christian Metz (1974).

¹³ See Pudovkin's 1929 *Film technique*. In his interview with Gelmis, Kubrick explicitly endorses Pudovkin's work, precisely because it argues that “editing was the aspect of the film art form which was completely unique” (Gelmis, 1970, p. 46). One notes that Pudovkin was a pupil of Lev Kuleshov, and that both were indebted to the formalism of the 1920s filmmakers.

¹⁴ See Douglas Trumbell's “Creating Special Effects for *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1996).

¹⁵ Tomasulo (1981, pp. 50-54) makes a similar point with regard to *Citizen Kane* as an obviously staged construction, one that calls attention to its artifice (and by extension artificer).

¹⁶ Trumbell refers to the background for the “Dawn of Man” sequence as “front-projected 8 x 10 Ektachrome transparencies” (1996, p. 163).

¹⁷ “Kubrick and his designers incorporate banks of pure white light into their sets as a recurring motif throughout the film, such as the walls of the briefing room on the moon, the floor of Bowman's baroque-style apartment suite in the “stargate” sequence, and the entire interior of the earth-orbiting space station. This has the effect of creating a cold, even light that eliminates all shadows and allows Kubrick to objectively examine his subjects like they were exhibits in a museum” (Beyl, 2022).

¹⁸ Another recurrent motif in the critical response to the film; see p. 4 above.

¹⁹ Kubrick's own take on Eisenstein, from the Gelmis interview: “Eisenstein's greatest achievement is the beautiful composition of his shots and his editing. But as far as content is concerned, his films are silly” (Gelmis, 1970, p. 46).

²⁰ Note the “Kuleshov effect,” referring to the creation of meaning and impact through the juxtaposition of shots. Compare, also, montage and suture as understood in the Lacanian sense: see Jean-Pierre Oudart's essay “La Suture” (1969).

²⁰ For more on Kubrick's shot style, see Ransom (2010) and Fenwick (2024).