Semiotics and the Monolith from

*2001: A Space Odyssey*

# Abstract

Science fiction movies, while often seen as form of entertainment full of convoluted plot lines and corny special effects, can also lead us to ask big questions about the universe like, why are we here? The purpose of this study is to examine the signs within the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* and determine how people view the black monolith as a symbol in the movie and which view is the most common. This will be done through a content analysis of various movie reviews and interviews pertaining to the movie. The results show intelligence through evolution and/or a higher power are the most held beliefs for what the monolith symbolizes. The study also suggests that the monolith would not be able to exist as a sign on its own and that other signs including the music and its characters all add to the value of what the monolith implicates about the rise of man.

In 1968 a movie was released that would set the standard for science fiction films for years to come. That movie was *2001: A Space Odyssey*, written by the infamous sci-fi author Arthur C. Clarke and directed by the great Stanley Kubrick. *2001* helped to give a different view of the science fiction genre and showed that these films could contain a deep meaning intended to make a person think. In the movie, there is a giant, black, rectangular monolith that can be seen as a symbol for the entire plot, which one might not understand until multiple viewings of the film. This monolith quickly becomes what Communication theorists would consider a “sign” and could therefore be studied under the theory of Semiotics.

Using the theory of semiotics and various movie reviews of *2001*, this paper will discuss differing interpretations of what the black monolith is and how, as a sign, it comes to have meaning to the viewer of the film. To do this, the plot of the film will be briefly discussed to help explain what role the monolith has in the movie. After that there will be a brief history of semiotics describing what Roland Barthes, who had a great impact on the study of signs, and other theorists have to say about the theory as well as previous studies done using semiotics. From there different analyses of what the monolith symbolizes will be gathered from movie reviews and interviews as to determine what the most common interpretation for the black slab is.

# Overview of 2001

*2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) starts off before the evolution of man. The first scene contains a group of apes who gather around a strange black monolith that appears suddenly during the night. After inspecting the monolith and eventually touching it, the apes start to pick up bones and smash them on the ground, realizing that they can use these bones along with other objects around them, as tools to make their life easier. The movie then transitions to the year 2001 where another black monolith has appeared, this time on the moon. After inspecting this second monolith, scientists decide to send a crew of astronauts on a mission to Jupiter, where another obelisk has been detected orbiting the planet. Among the crew is an artificial intelligence named HAL[[1]](#footnote-1) who controls the ship while the humans on board are in a state of suspended animation.[[2]](#endnote-1)

The movie ends up focusing on the character of Dr. David Bowman who ends up being the only human to survive after HAL suffers a malfunction and instead of admitting he made a mistake, he decides that the humans are in the wrong and will deter him from completing the mission’s ultimate goal. Bowman eventually shuts down HAL and takes a small pod to study the monolith, entering into the massive object. When he is inside, his last transmission recorded by the ship is “My God, it’s full of stars” (Kubrick, 1968). The viewer then jumps to an aged Dr. Bowman in some sort of futuristic hotel room as he lies dying on his bed with one of the giant black slabs in front of his bed. Then the last scene of the movie is again of Dr. Bowman, but this time he is in the form of a fetus or “star child,” looking down on the Earth itself.

As strange as this movie sounds on paper it starts to make sense after viewing one or more times. Clarke was quoted as saying “If you understand *2001* on the first viewing, we will have failed.” He says this because the movie deals with mysteries so large, like religion and the universe itself, that no one should be able to understand it after only contemplating it once (2001).

# Literature Review

Semiotics is the study of signs and their meaning in a culture. In *A First Look at Communication Theory*, Em Griffin states that semiotics is “anything that can stand for something else.” One of the fathers of modern semiotics is Charles Sanders Pierce whose beliefs on the theory still hold true today. “In any instance of the sign relation an object is signified by a sign to a mind. One of Peirce's central tasks was that of analyzing all possible kinds of signs.”. Pierce also believed that signs have a triadic relation that consisted of the object, representamen, and the interpretenty.

Another theorist who had a tremendous impact on semiotics was Ferdinand de Saussure who actually gave the theory its name. According to Dr. Mary Klages, Saussure was a linguist and believed that ideas could not exist without language. Another way that Dr. Klages states this is that “thought is a shapeless mass, which is only ordered by language.” So in order for a person to understand a sign they would first have to be able to understand language and have the cognitive abilities to determine what the sign symbolized.

Sound is no more fixed than thought, though sounds can be distinguished from each other, and hence associated with ideas. Sounds then serve as signifiers for the ideas which are their signifieds. Signs, in this view, are both material/physical (like sound) and intellectual (like ideas).

One of the most important theorists of semiotics would have to be Roland Barthes. Barthes was interested in many different forms of the theory, but he focused most of his time researching how signs affected a mass audience using media. Roland Barthes has been a huge asset in understanding the world of signs. To do my study of the monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, I will be focusing mainly on his major tenets of the theory.

# Theory Concepts

**Signifier and Signified.** Barthes says that a sign is a combination of signifier and signified and has used a bottle of French wine as an example. The signifier in this situation would be a picture of the bottle and the signified would be wine (2006). According to Em Griffin,

The signifier isn’t a sign of the signified. Rather, they work together in an inseparable bond to form a unified sign. (Griffin, 2006)

So this means that the bottle doesn’t symbolize wine, a bottle by itself is a bottle and could contain any liquid. In order to be a sign, the signified, which *is* wine, must be combined with the signifier, the bottle.

**Signs Always Belong to a System.** As a sign, something such as the monolith from *2001* would not mean anything to the audience if it were by itself. There has to be other signs around in order for it to have meaning, and these signs together become a system. Roland Barthes tried to find a way to show how all semiotic systems were alike, calling the process taxonomy.

In a system there is very little room for something new since the signified and signifier of a sign has to have a common meaning to everyone,

Barthes believed that the significant semiotic systems of a culture lock in the status quo. The mythology that surrounds a society’s crucial signs displays the world as it is today [. . .].

**Second-Order Systems.** Roland Barthes goes on to say that that signs will truly become mythic when they are accepted as “a second-order semiological system—built off a preexisting sign system” and become part of a worldview.

Whether it deals with alphabetical or pictorial writing, myth wants to see in them only a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of a first semiological chain.

A myth occurs when a sign from the first semiological system becomes merely a signifier in the second. An example of this would be Barthes bottle of wine. Barthes says that when a different emphasis is placed on the signifier wine, it becomes a new signifier (2006). This in turn means that the signified changes can become something different, like a tasty new wine and is an easy way to create a desire for the product and maintain the status quo (2006).

# Previous Studies

There have been numerous other studies using the theory of semiotics. Leontiev (2006) believes that while animals have experienced a morphological evolution, humans have evolved socially:

Man’s relationship with nature is mediated by his relationship with society. He is

always able to draw from the storehouse of social experience, and, therefore, does

not need to experience everything firsthand […].

He believes that there are “natural” processes where an individual interacts with the world around them, and “socialized” processes where that individual is taught to use tools and signs, also referred to as psychological tools, in order to better understand the external world (2006). This occurs even though the tools are not experienced directly by the individual’s interactions with the world around them (2006).

Another study found that signs are not just a human invention, since a type of African monkey uses vocal symbols to alert others that a predator is near by and if a “tutor” were in fact to use the symbol otherwise, the adolescent learning would then be confused and not learn to run when a predator is nearby after the warning has been sounded. It is thought that symbols like these naturally occur when they are socially effective and self-generated (2007).

There have also been many studies done concerning the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey.* One that deals briefly with the movie is *Immediate Man: the Symbolic Environment of Fanaticism* by Christine Nystrom (2002). She says that in today’s society we are striving to become “immediate,” in other words, living for the present. This can be seen by looking at instant food, instant weight loss and even instant religion (2002). She says that when looking at *2001*, the star child shown at the end of the movie stands as a symbol for living in the moment and becoming childlike, since children live in the present more than anyone (2002). She argues that while becoming childlike can seem like a good thing, with curiosity and love, it can also be bad because “if we return to childhood, we do not return as we left it,” we now have control of technologies, like nuclear bombs, that have the “capacity to shatter the globe.” She says this in response to the end of Arthur C. Clarke’s book version of *2001* which ends with the star child “play[ing], for toys with nuclear armed satellites.”

Michael Nofz & Phil Vendy (2002) used the HAL 9000 super computer from *2001* to study the communication of artificial intelligence and argued that computer-generated emotions might suggest actual consciousness, seeing that they are so realistic. A different article by John Izod (2000) says that symbols used in cinema depicting an “imagined future,” that the viewer will likely never experience, can actually help an individual grow in self-awareness by “bringing a text into being [through interpretation] rather than disinterring a pre-existing object.”

This is not a small claim when applied in the domain of textual studies since the

reach of a symbol can extend far beyond the single image alone and may well incorporate an entire narrative. This is the case, for example, in Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), in which the entire journey is a symbol not only of the individual human life cycle extended beyond death into immortality, but also for an imagined future history of the human soul.

A study has also been done concerning the score from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Timothy Scheurer (1998) studied how music in the sci-fi genre introduces various aspects of the film including the technology in question, encounters with aliens and the hero/heroine and can actually be seen as a formula. Scheurer says that in *2001: A Space Odyssey,* the music follows this formula to an extent but the use of an all classical score instead of one composed especially for the film creates areas where the music doesn’t resemble that of the formulaic sci-fi score (1998). Many of the songs from the film start off quiet and gradually build or consist of a fugue, which is sort of like a round (ex. row your boat), symbolizing points in the movie where technology is either a “springboard of creativity” or a trap that is “moribund complacen[t] and routine.” Scheurer also says that certain pieces chosen for the film help give it feeling, “but their intensity and the fact that they do not match the action on the screen force one to view the images on the screen differently.”

# Research Questions

RQ1: How is the monolith from 2001 interpreted as a sign and what interpretation is

the most common?

RQ2: How are the signs in 2001 related as a system?

RQ3: What are the signifier and signified of the monolith?

# Research Method

This study was conducted using a content analysis of movie reviews concerning *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The reasoning to use movie reviews was so that the opinions gathered would be somewhat random. Everything from top critics, like Roger Ebert, to those that are unknown, like bloggers, were utilized. Only movie reviews that talked about the monolith and its meaning were used. Twelve reviews were chosen using websites like rottentomatoes.com and the movie review query engine as well as metaphilm.com and epinions.com. The articles were not from any specific time period either; reviews have been used from the year that the movie came out all the way up till the present. When they were written is not as important as what the interpretation of the monolith is within the review. Also included in this content analysis were two interviews from individuals that had seen the film numerous times since its release in 1968 as a means to get a more detailed response.

# Results

The monolith can be interpreted to mean a variety of different things as a “sign” in the movie. In his 1968 review of *2001*, Roger Ebert said that the final scene represents how man will eventually outgrow his machines and will become the child of a new race, just as the apes became the child form of humans at the beginning of the film. Ebert went on to write a review of the movie again over 30 years later in 1997:

[*2001: A Space Odyssey*] says to us: We became men when we learned to think. Our minds have given us the tools to understand where we live and who we are. Now it is time to move on to the next step, to know that we live not on a planet but among the stars, and that we are not flesh but intelligence.

This common interpretation of intelligence can come in many forms though. Examples of this come from two people I interviewed on April 17, 2006.

One looks at the monolith in a strictly religious sense. She believed that the monolith is supposed to symbolize heaven since David Bowman’s last words upon entering it were “My God, it’s full of stars.” She would look at it as if it was actually God and he was helping us on our way to understand the universe. The other saw it as a test. He thought that maybe the obelisks were created by a higher intelligence, such as an alien race, that placed them to be found at crucial points during our evolution.

There are other opinions of what the monoliths mean. In a review from 1968, Penelope Gilliatt said that they could symbolize curiosity since the slabs drove the apes to pick up the bones and convinced humans to trek out to Jupiter. She also considered the possibility that the monoliths stand simply for the forces of change (1968).

Another interpretation is a bit less hopeful. During the year of its release, there was another review of the movie by Hunter, Kaplan, and Jaszi that stated that the monoliths essentially control man’s evolution and are observing us constantly (1968).

Man's progress is not of his own making, but a function of the monolith -- man cannot predict, therefore, the ensuing stages of his own evolution. [. . .] In its statement that man cannot control his destiny, *2001* is antihumanistic -- this also in the concept that what we consider humanity is actually a finite set of traits reproducible by machines.

This opinion shows how varied the meaning of the monolith as a sign can be.

In a review from the actual year of 2001, Robert Poole says that “For those who were receptive to it, the implication was that mankind's first steps into space were an evolutionary move comparable to the discovery of tools.” He then goes on to say that the story is actually quite religious, but instead of God, aliens are the ones helping us to find redemption and that there was even a reporting of a man running towards the screen yelling “It’s God,” when the black obelisk appeared.

Another review says again that the monoliths are of extraterrestrial origin placed to help transition beings to a “higher order.” It is also mentioned in this review that there is a similarity between how the man-ape reaches out to touch the monolith and painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo depicting man touching hands with God. Dirks also notes that the monolith would be akin to man eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge, but sticks mainly with the thought that the monolith is of extraterrestrial origin.

Jeffery Overstreet says in his review of *2001* that the prominent theme in the movie:

Is that humanity tends to use its advanced intelligence (which might be a gift or a natural progression, but the arrival of the monolith suggests the former) to invent and utilize powerful tools for its own advancement.

Jeffery states that the monolith could be a deity, angle, or even “an agent from some manipulative alien race” but whatever it is, it is interested in providing humans with “higher levels of understanding.”

Mike Bracken says that the monoliths appear to cause an evolutionary leap and is therefore the bringer of evolution for our species (2000). He also states that another interpretation might be that of the superman theory, which states that man can only evolve after he has become free from moralities that have been created by those around him (2000). This is different since the other interpretations have been seen with the monolith giving man something, where the superman theory implies that it actually takes something away in order for us to change.

A very interesting view of the monolith is that it is the embodiment of enigma.

The human need for explanation is what drives discovery and progression. The Monolith is the objectification of this need, and the characters who share screen-space with it are drawn instinctively to it.

In this review it is believed that since there is no mention of extraterrestrials in the film that the monolith is not of alien origin, and if anything it is most likely supposed to symbolize God or evolution, depending on which way you lean (2005). In a similar analysis, Derek Smith from apollomovieguide.com says

I take [the monoliths] to represent a new level of human understanding and accomplishment as each new discovery shows the advantages and problems of progression.

In a review that didn’t find the movie to be one of the greatest sci-fi epics of all time, the monolith is mentioned very briefly and thought of “as the key to possible life on planets other than Earth” which is an altogether different understanding of the black slab. The interesting thing about this interpretation is that it is not far off from that given in the novel version of *2001* by Arthur C. Clarke.

# Discussion

There are numerous interpretations of what the monolith does or does not signify, but the most recurring theme is that it stands for some sort of intelligence. Be it our own intelligence coming into play through something such as evolution or curiosity, or a form of intelligence that is being handed down to us by a greater power. Two of the most common interpretations from above deal with evolution and/or a higher power, namely some sort of advanced alien race that is watching over us. These two analyses are often found together but are usually slightly modified. Another major interpretation is that of a religious since, where the monolith is some sort of embodiment or symbol of God. It is not surprising to see that two of the major views are between evolution and God, seeing how much of the public is split between these two explanations of how man came into this world. There are other interesting clarifications on what the monolith symbolizes such as a key to unlocking life on other planets and curiosity or change, but most seem to stick within the view that it symbolizes the bringer of evolution or a sign from a higher power, either alien or Godly. The fact that so many questions are left unanswered in *2001: A Space Odyssey* really leaves it up to the individual viewer to decide what the monoliths represent.

When we look back at what Leontiev had to say about semiotics we can see that the monolith could have both “natural” and “social” elements. With the monolith symbolizing a natural process, we see apes and men that are experiencing the monolith firsthand and learning about its secrets directly. Looking at it in a social context, we could say that the monolith is enlightening the characters with experiences that aliens or even a God has witnessed before. Also, as Rebeiro states above, animals also create their own signs. While the apes in *2001* are not real, the bones that they find can be used as weapons could be seen as a sign to real apes. The bone is the signifier and pain as a result is the signified.

In order to find out how the monolith would be considered a sign through semiotics, we must establish what its signifier and signified are. The signifier of the monolith would be the giant black rectangular structure itself. The signified is the bringing of intelligence to a primitive species or whatever other interpretation may be given to it. When placed together we see the monolith as a sign that would be recognized by anyone who has seen and contemplated the movie.

Throughout the movie there are many signs that help to support the monolith in *2001*. The music becomes a sign because it gives a sense of what is happening in the movie. It gives the content of certain scenes a great feeling of importance, like when the monolith is seen for the first time by the apes as the sun rises. In his 1997 review of the film Roger Ebert said that “The music is associated in the film with the first entry of man's consciousness into the universe.” The music can also give a sense of beauty to something as mundane as a spaceship docking which was an incredible sight for people to see in the late sixties.

Other signs include the actual characters in the movie. The apes at the beginning are there to symbolize man before he gained his intelligence, while the humans were used to show how little we still know about the universe and how much we have to learn. The star child at the end of the movie depicts what is yet to come. The tools used by these different species are even part of the movies semiotic system. When confronted by the monolith, the apes use bones as weapons whereas man builds a spaceship to traverse great distances. These tools have their uses but they are something that we eventually need to get over, since we can become so reliant on technology. The star child in the final scenes of the movie doesn’t have any tools because it has no need for them, again symbolizing things that have yet to pass.

The sign in the movie that is most likely to establish the status quo would have to be HAL. HAL is the artificial intelligence on the ship and throughout the plot reaffirms most people’s fear of what created intelligence might be capable of. Halfway through the film HAL goes crazy and kills all but one of the crew. This is a concern for most people when the thought of a “smart computer” is entered into the equation. Just look at other sci-fi movies like *The Terminator* (1984) or *The Matrix* (1999). The theme of violence also permeates the movie. First the apes use to learn tools to defend themselves and kill other animals for food, and then the tools themselves (HAL) become violent and learn to kill. In the end the monolith brings about a change that doesn’t result in a being learning to be destructive, but in a way the exact opposite.

With the monolith, there is the potential for many second-order systems. One of these could actually be the notion of religion or an interfering alien. The original signifier was the monolith and the signified was the gaining of intelligence. The secondary signifier would still be the monolith, but the signified would change to the notion that the monolith is God or even an unseen alien species that is tampering with our evolution.

Another example would be how the monolith has been portrayed in the media. There was at one time a commercial that showed a black monolith floating through space that had the same music as *2001* playing in the background. When the monolith-like object turned around it was actually a cell phone. There have also been parodies of the obelisk in various movies, which makes it hard to keep the original meaning of the sign. The use of the monolith in this fashion gives the signifier, the monolith; a whole new signified and complicates the meaning by showing the sign to a greater group of people that may have never seen the movie. The music itself could and has become part of a second order semiotic system. “Also Sprach Zarathustra” by Richard Strauss was a relatively unknown song before *2001* was made and is now well know by almost all. When heard, most people probably suspect that a giant black obelisk is going to be seen relatively soon, especially if the song is used on television or film.

# Limitations

One of the biggest limitations with this study is that it is merely about opinion, so there is not a single precise answer for the meaning of the monolith. This also means that my own opinions about *2001: A Space Odyssey* have crept into the paper. While trying to keep them from creeping into the research, my views towards the film may have led me to choose reviews that agreed with my own assertions instead of being completely unbiased.

Another limitation was the fact that I only had 10 movie reviews and two interviews for my results. Had I more time, I would have used upwards of fifty or more in order to get a clear image of what the monolith symbolized in the heart of the public. I also wanted to get the viewpoint of someone who was just watching the film for the first time. This way I could have compared it more closely to that of someone who had seen it numerous times and whose opinion of the meaning behind the slabs may have changed.

# Conclusion

This paper has shown how the monolith from *2001* can be studied as a sign through the theory of semiotics. Numerous studies have been done concerning Kubrick’s masterpiece yet there is much that can still be studied. New generations are viewing the film and coming to their own conclusions. Everything from the music to HAL’s communication style have already been studied but there is still room to learn more about the nuances that have been left in the film such as the stark color patterns and the trip unique looking hotel room that Dr. Bowman finds himself in after a trip “Beyond the Infinite.”

*2001: A Space Odyssey* is an extremely complicated movie to grasp. It doesn’t help that absolutely no answers are given at the end of the film; it is entirely left up to the viewer. While there has been some small consensus of what aspects of the film such as the monolith are supposed to signify, everyone who sees it will have their own take and that is what makes the film such a classic. Arthur C. Clarke once said about the movie:

What I meant was, of course, that because we were dealing with the mystery of the Universe, and with powers and forces greater than man's comprehension, then by definition they could not be totally understandable. Yet there is at least one logical structure--and sometimes more than one--behind everything that happens on the screen in *2001*, and the ending does not consist of random enigmas, some simple-minded critics to the contrary. (You will find my interpretation in the novel; it is not necessarily Kubrick's. Nor is his necessarily the "right" one--whatever that means.)

Even those that wrote the script and shot the movie have interpretations that are merely there own which is what always happens in art, you may inject meaning into a painting or film, but that meaning will be distorted and changed by every viewer who sees it. *2001* is a question without answers just as every question asking, “why are we here?” will be for the rest of time.

1. HAL = Heuristically Programmed Algorithmic Computer [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. HAL became live and functional in 1992. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)