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Rezension: Understanding Kubrick's 2001 : a space odyssey

Spiegel, Simon

Abstract: According to Fenwick, his essay collection is meant to offer a 'third way' of approaching the director's oeuvre, by combining the two approaches 'and to begin to arrive at a more rounded and complete scholarly perspective'. [...] Dru Jeffries looks at Jack Kirby's more or less forgotten comic adaptation of 2001. For Jaunas, this mirrors one of the film's main concerns: 'Humankind's becoming-machine is presented as a human tendency that leads them to rely on technology to gain control, but which, when brought to its logical conclusion, eventually suppresses their own [...] subjectivity, thereby threatening their very humanity'.

Other titles: Rezension von Fenwick, James (Hg.) (2018): Understanding Kubrick's 2001 : a space odyssey. Representation and interpretation

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Journal Article

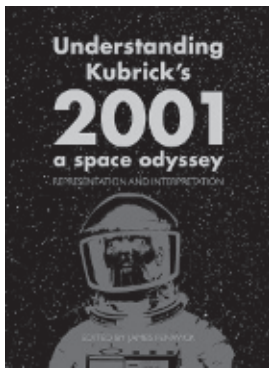
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of the fantasy field, with a refreshing refusal to consider J.R.R. Tolkien as in any sense an epochal figure.

Cawthorn's shortcomings as a draughtsman are sometimes evident in *The Man and His Art*, but there are still an impressive number of beautiful and haunting pieces collected here. When he put his mind to it – or when fortune struck – Cawthorn's work is pure gold, like the iconic half-shaded bust of Elric in his dragon helm which has become almost synonymous with the character. While Cawthorn is unlikely to escape the shadow of his more famous younger friend Moorcock, much as John Tenniel is unlikely ever to escape his association with Lewis Carroll, there's much in this collection, both graphic art and prose, that rewards attention.



James Fenwick, ed. *Understanding Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey* (Intellect, 2018, 260pp, £20)

Reviewed by Simon Spiegel (University of Zurich)

There is no doubt that *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is a seminal work in the history of sf cinema. Literature on it has never been scarce; in fact, *2001* has already been called the movie on which most has been written about. Whether this is true or not, there is hardly an aspect of *2001* that has not yet been covered. Still, the 50th anniversary of its original release in 1968

has triggered a new wave of publications. Among these new books, James Fenwick's collection is certainly the one that is most clearly targeted at a scholarly audience.

As Fenwick notes in his introduction, academic engagement with Kubrick's oeuvre has undergone a remarkable shift in recent years. Kubrick was notorious for avoiding public appearances and giving very few interviews. This and the dominating trends in film studies led to the interesting situation that the work of a director who in many ways seemed like the perfect embodiment of an *auteur* was mainly approached 'from semiotic, structuralist and formalist frameworks'. The *auteur* was – quite fittingly from this theoretical perspective – only accessible through the film text.

This changed quite dramatically when the Stanley Kubrick Archive at the University of Arts in London opened in 2007. Kubrick was an obsessive hoarder who hardly threw anything away, and the archive provided researchers with vast amounts of new material. This led to a new 'empirical turn' in Kubrick scholarship characterized by extensive archival research. A recent and (in the context of

2001) important example of this new approach is Michael Benson's *Space Odyssey: Stanley Kubrick, Arthur C. Clarke, and the Making of a Masterpiece* (2018), an extensive 'making-of' for the film that covers the unusual production in great detail and sheds new light on how Kubrick interacted with his various collaborators. According to Fenwick, his essay collection is meant to offer a 'third way' of approaching the director's oeuvre, by combining the two approaches 'and to begin to arrive at a more rounded and complete scholarly perspective'.

The book is divided into six parts titled Narrative and Adaptation, Performance, Technology, Masculinity and the Astronaut, Visual Spectacle, and Production. The grouping of the texts seems at times to be a bit forced, but each part starts with a useful introduction that contextualizes the chapters and gives a brief overview of existing research.

The first part comprises three chapters. Simone Odino focuses on the genesis of *2001* and relies heavily on archive material. He traces how Kubrick looked for a suitable subject for a new film after *Dr Strangelove* (1964) and even briefly considered making a film for the UN before collaborating with Arthur C. Clarke. It is to his credit that he is able to come up with new details on the pre-history of *2001* not already covered by Benson. While not earth-shattering, Odino's argument that *2001* grew out of Kubrick's concern with nuclear warfare is an interesting one. The relationship between Clarke's novel and Kubrick's film is at the heart of Suparno Banerjee's chapter. It is a classic example of a textual analysis which, after a long theoretical prologue, leads to a rather pedestrian comparison of novel and film. Banerjee's main point is that both texts should be treated as independent works and not as adaptation or novelization. This is certainly convincing but it is not new. Finally, Dru Jeffries looks at Jack Kirby's more or less forgotten comic adaptation of *2001*. While Jeffries stresses that Kirby takes Kubrick's film only as a starting point, he gives only a rough impression of what the comic is about. It is also a shame that his chapter lacks any illustrations. Most readers will have seen Kubrick's movie, but only a few will know Kirby's comic. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that, in their strengths and weaknesses, these first three chapters stand for the volume as a whole. If a film has already been covered as extensively as *2001*, it is very difficult to come up with genuinely new lines of analysis. For readers already steeped in its exegesis, there is therefore little to be gained from the chapters that choose more traditional, hermeneutic approaches. Banerjee's contribution is a case in point.

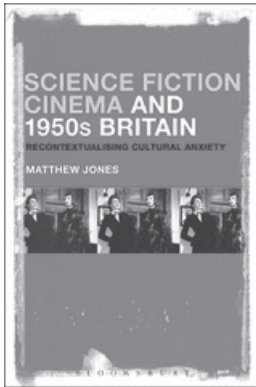
The second part, though, is something of an exception insofar as it treats a subject that has seen little research so far – acting. Acting is one of the notoriously weak spots in film studies because it is very difficult to write about it in a theoretically informed way. Yet Kubrick, who has been accused of

encouraging both wooden, emotionless acting (2001) and complete overacting (*The Shining* [1980]), is an interesting touchstone here. The two chapters focusing on this topic highlight the director's unusual approach toward acting, which does not conform to traditional Hollywood naturalism. Fenwick's own contribution focuses on Dan Richter, the mime who not only played the ape, Moon Watcher, but was also responsible for the choreography of the whole 'Dawn of Man' sequence. Richter has already covered much of this in his own *Moonwatcher's Memoirs* (2002), and Fenwick's new contribution is to give more detail on Richter's training in the American Mime Theatre, which aimed toward a realism where every movement was psychologically motivated. Fenwick sees this approach not only in the beginning of 2001 but also in later films by Kubrick, for example the first meeting between Barry and Lady Lyndon in *Barry Lyndon* (1975). Vincent Jaunas, on the other hand, argues that the actors in the later parts of the film constantly downplay the physicality of their bodies and perform many movements in a mechanistic way. For Jaunas, this mirrors one of the film's main concerns: 'Humankind's becoming-machine is presented as a human tendency that leads them to rely on technology to gain control, but which, when brought to its logical conclusion, eventually suppresses their own [...] subjectivity, thereby threatening their very humanity'.

While these two chapters partially succeed in opening up new avenues for research, several other authors deliver more or less sophisticated rehashes of points that have been made before. Kubrick's strong affinities with the sublime – not only, but especially in 2001 – are well established. Rachel Walisko's treatment of the subject is nevertheless rewarding to read. In contrast, Antoine Balga-Prévost's chapter, which has another go at the film's relationship with technology, is a typical example of restating the obvious in a more fanciful way, sometimes bordering on the obscure. On top of that, he also manages to wrongly call the cut from bone to spaceship, arguably the most famous match cut in the history of film, a jump cut.

Fenwick's declared aim is to establish a third way in Kubrick scholarship. It is probably fair to say that his volume does not completely achieve this goal. Most contributions can be quite clearly classified as either traditional hermeneutic analysis or as more archive-based, and very few succeed in or even attempt a synthesis. It is also only logical that it is (for the most part) the authors who rely on archival research who are able to come up with genuinely new information. How much a reader gets out of *Understanding Kubrick's 2001* will depend largely on how knowledgeable he or she already is about the movie. For Kubrick experts, there is only the occasional nugget to be found. This is also true for Filippo Ulivieri's chronology of the film's production that concludes the book. Ulivieri is one of the leading experts on Kubrick, and his chapter is the result of

quite intensive labour, but for anyone who has already read Benson's volume, it has little to offer.



Matthew Jones, *Science Fiction Cinema and 1950s Britain: Recontextualizing Cultural Anxiety* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 240pp, £28.99)

Reviewed by Sara Wenger (Virginia Tech)

In this study, Matthew Jones re-examines various topics of debate from mid-twentieth century Britain and questions the public responses to sf films of the time. By placing prominent topics such as race and immigration, nuclear technology and communism alongside the discourses surrounding prominent sf films of the 1950s,

Jones showcases the complicated nature of post-war Britain without falling victim to essentializing narratives. Pamphlets, posters and advertisements that accompanied the release of the films serve as the text's primary sources, including material from *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), *Quatermass II* (1957), *Behemoth the Sea Monster* (1959), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and many more. These materials helped frame the films in their initial release and shape how the public – and scholars – came to understand sf from this era.

Jones highlights how Britons were not a monolithic group, organizing chapters into sections that address the same overarching issue but approach public debates through contrasting perspectives. For example, Part A discusses 'Communist Infiltration and Indoctrination', with the first chapter analyzing British hostility to communism and its subsequent effect on sf films at the time. Meanwhile, the succeeding chapter flips this narrative, turning to more tolerant discussions around communism presented to the 1950s British public.

For Jones, nothing is assumed to be as simple as it appears. In each chapter, Jones utilizes sf films outside of the British canon: one of the two films discussed is British while the other is American. The British public's reception is neither the same nor situated within the same geopolitical realm as their American counterparts. For instance, the fears and anxieties that were (assumed to be) prevalent in British society at the time would be inherently different culturally, socially and geographically to those located across the Atlantic. Furthermore, as the British economy struggled to regain its footing after World War Two, the United States was experiencing increased financial prosperity. The United States utilized its (comparative) stability to expand its hold across the globe, whereas the reach of Britain remained in retreat. Not only do these things matter

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