

Benson's Space Odyssey: A Book Review

by **Joe Fordham**

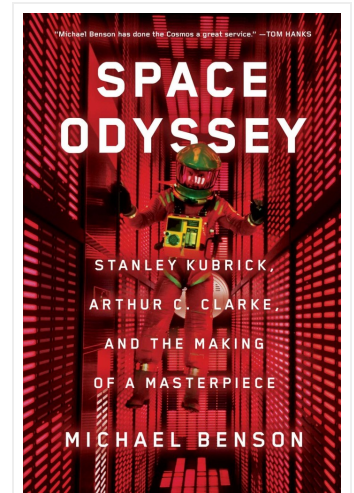
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50 years after its theatrical release, *2001: A Space Odyssey* stands as a film that, the more a viewer brings to the experience, the more the film rewards them. Michael Benson's recent publication, *Space Odyssey: Stanley Kubrick, Arthur C. Clarke, and the Making of a Masterpiece* is evidence of that.

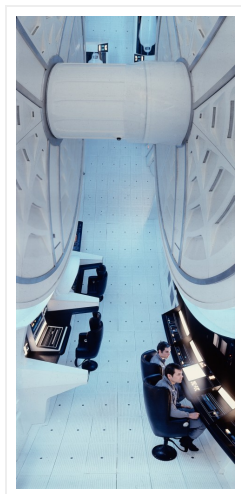
Plenty of other books have already mined this territory. From Jerome Agel's eclectic 1970 paperback *The Making of Kubrick's 2001*, to Arthur C. Clarke's fascinating 1972 diary of his creative journey with Kubrick in *The Lost Worlds of 2001*, there have been many fascinating accounts of the science fiction cinematic giant. More recently, we've had Dan Richter's 2002 publication, *Moonwatcher's Memoir*, Christopher Frayling's 2015 folio of production designer Harry Lange's contributions, *The 2001 File*, and Piers Bizony's 1994 account, *2001: Filming the Future*, his luscious 2014 Taschen picture book, *The Making of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey*, not to mention Don Shay and Jody Duncan's revealing *2001: A Time Capsule* in Cinefex 85. Benson had all of these to draw from – and, for full disclosure, Cinefex founder Don Shay was one of a noble community of authors and contributors who generously shared his personal transcripts and research. What distinguishes Benson's book is its vivid narrative and linear nature.

After a slow start, meandering around Sri Lanka – formerly Ceylon – in the home of British science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke, the author charts a path quickly to Kubrick's penthouse in New York, 1964. That's when things get cooking, as Clarke and Kubrick spark ideas that, four years later, exploded onto cinema screens. Using personal letters, exhaustive interviews and voluminous archival material, cross-referenced in 31-pages of footnotes and a seven-page index, Benson adopts a novelistic tone, allowing readers to gaze into Kubrick's 'olive eyes' and shiver with the cold as his two protagonists clamber up onto Kubrick's apartment roof to peer through Clarke's Celestron telescope. The documentary style is insightful and amusing, making for a fluent and involving read as Benson charts landmarks of Kubrick and Clarke's collaboration. Anecdotes previously and frequently taken out of context are given new scrutiny. It's all here: from Kubrick's often-stated desire to make the 'proverbial *really good* science fiction film' (in his first letter to Clarke), to the congenial sparring of great minds (Kubrick hated Clarke's taste in films).

Mysteries of Kubrick's visual effects processes are also revealed, spelling out the contributions of its four special photographic effects supervisors, as listed in the film's credits – Wally Veevers, Tom Howard, Douglas Trumbull and Con Pederson. Benson pulls no punches in describing effects supervisor Wally Gentleman's frustrations that led to his near nervous breakdown and early departure, after some integral research and development. Trumbull's role is perhaps the most vivid, sketching the experience from the point of view of an ambitious 23-year-old, and Pederson is equally candid as another gifted and outspoken young artist, last to join the team and offer up some incisive contributions. Special makeup designer Stuart Freeborn's experiments, successful and otherwise, chronicle the production's journey to create believable prehistoric man-apes. And Kubrick's controversial credit as 'special photographic effects designer and director,' remains a sore point among visual effects artisans, although it gifted Kubrick with the film's only Oscar for 'Best Special Visual Effects' in 1969. The rest is history, but suffice to say the detail is all there in Benson's 444 pages.



— David Bowman (Keir Dullea) in "2001: A Space Odyssey" © Turner Entertainment Co. Image courtesy Simon & Schuster. Jacket design by Rodrigo Corral Art & Design.



— Astronauts David Bowman (Keir Dullea) and Frank Poole (Gary Lockwood), confer with their HAL 9000 computer in the centrifuge of the spaceship ‘Discovery’ en route to Jupiter. Image courtesy Simon & Schuster. Photo credit: Dmitri Kessel/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.

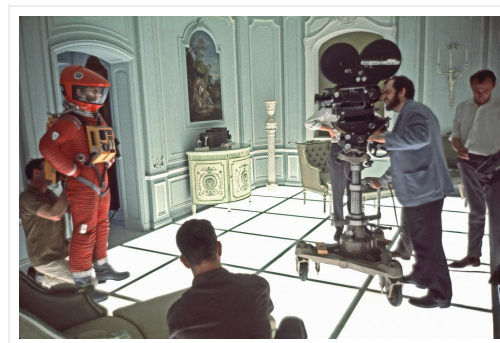
Other highlights include Kubrick assistant Andrew Birkin’s travels in Namibia, capturing backgrounds for the Dawn of Man, and his aerial adventures above Scotland, Utah and Arizona for Bowman’s trip Beyond the Infinite. Production designer Tony Masters’ contributions were myriad, engineering ingenious in-camera zero gravity effects, and providing a last-minute sketch of Tycho moon base. We learn how Kubrick’s thorny encounter with scientist Carl Sagan in early preproduction perhaps haunted the filmmaker’s quest for cinematic expressions of extra-terrestrial intelligence. Benson reveals the genesis of the film’s sound design, and how those breathing sound effects were achieved. And he spells out the evolution of the musical score, relating the backstory of how composer Alex North’s original music was quickly severed and jettisoned into orbit.

Benson unsparingly relates reactions of early audiences and critics, who tore the film to shreds after its 1968 New York press screenings. Kubrick’s wife, Christiane, provides heartbreaking testimony to Kubrick’s vulnerability in these moments as the critical community piled on the invective. There is also a telling account of a more perceptive critic, teenage nephew of M-G-M president Maurice Silverstein, who viewed the film by peering through a projection booth window during the film’s first screening for M-G-M. After the icy studio reception, Benson relates, assistant film editor David DeWilde meets the boy in the booth, who announced, “It was the most amazing film I’ve ever seen.”

Want to know what Kubrick removed in his final edit when he sliced 19 minutes from the film? You’ll find that here. Astonishingly, eight 70mm prints were at that point in circulation around the U.S., and projectionists received instructions where to make tape splices. The final 161-minute film went on to make history, and Benson relates that journey, too, in an epilogue that details Kubrick’s continued friendship with Arthur Clarke – a rarity for him – Kubrick’s sudden death in 1999, and his funeral on the grounds of his home in Childwickbury Manor, Saint Albans in England. Douglas Trumbull attended the small gathering and made his peace in a personal reflection. But save that for the book.

Space Odyssey is a moving tribute to a great and unique film, and will no doubt add to the resurgence of interest in time for *2001*’s 50th anniversary release. However, if you have not yet bought tickets for screenings this week at Hollywood’s Cinerama Dome, you are out of luck. They are sold out

(addendum: the Arclight added shows next week, due to the film’s popularity, but the Dome is at capacity). Stanley would have been proud.



— Director Stanley Kubrick lines up a shot with Keir Dullea as Bowman in one of production designer Tony Masters’ sets for the enigmatic third act, beyond the infinite, in “2001: A Space Odyssey”. Image courtesy Simon & Schuster. Photo credit: Keith Hamshire / Getty Images.

- Michael Benson’s [website](#).
- Simon & Schuster’s [website](#).
- Warner Bros. Pictures’ [website](#).
- *2001: A Time Capsule*, [Cinefex 85](#).
- Kubrick’s Aries 1B, [Cinefex Blog](#).

Thanks to Sarah Reidy.

