OSCAR WINNER 1968:

Best Special Visual Effects

TEACHERS' NOTES

The guide is aimed at students of GCSE and A'Level Media Studies, ALevel Film Studies and GNVO Media: Communication and Production (Intermediate and Advanced).

  The guide looks at production processes, representation, intertextuality, and genre and narrative structure.

  2001: A Space Odyssey. Certi6cate 12. Running Time 141m.

MAJOR CREDITS FOR 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

 2001: A Space Odyssey 1968 (MGM)

Producer:	Stanley Kubrick
Director:	Stanley Kubrick
Screenplay:	Stanley Kubrick, Arthur C. Clarke
Directors of Photography:	Geoffrey Unsworth, John Alcott
Editor:	Ray Lovejoy
Art Directors:	Tony Masters, Harry Lange, Ernest Archer
Cast:	Keir Dullea
	Gary Lockwood
	William Sylvester
	Daniel Richter
	Douglas Rain
	Leonard Rossiter
Oscars 1968:	Best Special Visual Effects
Oscar Nominations 1968:	Best Director
	Best Original Story and Screenplay
	Best Art Direction

2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

One of the most influential films of the last 25 years, Kubrick's special effects, orchestrated by the brilliant Douglas Trumbull, have been copied and developed ever since. The Star Wars series would never have been possible without Trumbull's pioneering work. But A Space Odyssey isn't just a superb piece of technique. Based on a short story by Arthur C. Clarke, it's also a moving look at our progress as a civilisation from prehistoric times into a visionary future. HAL, the computer which tries to take over the astronauts' mission to Jupiter, is an even more relevant concept today than it was at the time. To some, the film is infuriatingly slow. T_0 others, it's an obvious masterwork One thing is certain. There's never been anything quite like it, except perhaps the Russian director Tarkovsky's Solaris.
Derek Malcolm

A SYNOPSIS

Four million years ago... A group of ape-like creatures, destined to evoke into what we know today as humans, battle against the elements and each other for survival. One day they discover a black monolith but this disappears the following day, as inexplicably as it appeared. Apparently due to sonic link with the slab, one of the apes develops an early awareness of how to use a bone as a tool and a weapon and is the first to kill a rival leader.

The bone is hurled into the air and we cut to a [2]Jst Century spacecraft on a routine mission to an orbiting space station. Under strict security, it is revealed to a select few that a major 'discovery' has been made. A group of astronauts travel to the moon and en route are told that what has been discovered, buried beneath the lunar surface, is the first positive extra-terrestrial life form, a slab similar to the one we saw in the first section of the film. On touching the monolith, they hear it emit a strange noise and then it falls silent.

Eighteen months later we join a five-man crew on board the spaceship Discovery on a mission to Jupiter. Due to a series of apparent accidents, all the crew die except the leader, Bowman. Eventually he succeeds in disconnecting the on-board computer, HAL, whom he believes is responsible for the deaths. A pre-recorded message only shown to HAL is then revealed, telling Bowman that the lunar monolith emitted a mysterious signal towards Jupiter, where his crew have been sent to investigate.

We see Bowman alone experiencing a fantastic journey of inexplicable lights and planetary surfaces

- it appears he has passed through some kind of 'stargate' into another dimension. We see him ageing in a strange room and the film closes with his reaching out to a slab at the foot of his bed and his transformation into a huge foetus-like creature which finally returns to earth.

Even from a summary it is clear that 2001: A Space Odyssey is not a conventional film. Many parts of it defy easy and rational explanation and it would appear that its director, Stanley Kubrick, intended that this should be so - as he explained to one critic 'Sometimes the truth of a thing is not so much in the think of it, but in the feel of it'. It can even be looked at as a 'visual poem' and so any interpretations of its meaning can only he at the level of suggestion. It is a film about space, not just in space.

'A FILM BY STANLEY KUBRICK'

When someone writes a book, they can be almost the sole creative influence on the finished product. Some changes will be required by publishers and editors but in theory the book could represent the individual vision of the author. With film, the question of 'ownership' is more difficult. In the late 1950's and early 60's a group of French film critics writing for the film magazine Cahiers du Cinema developed a concept they called the 'politique des auteurs' or auteur (author) theory. This suggested that you could identify films from the distinctive features of particular directors i.e. distinguish a Hitchcock film from work by Howard Hawkes or John Ford. Unlike in the case of a novel however, so many people are involved in film production that it is more difficult to say a film reflects the views of any single individual.

WHO DOES WHAT WHEN A FILM IS MADE?

To come to some sort of decision about who is the most important single person or department in the film making process, it is useful to consider areas of responsibility and how sometimes these might overlap.

Task

Place the following jobs into what you consider to be their order of importance in the film-making process:

A)   for any film, B) for 2001.

	A	B
Castinq the main parts		
Being in charge of the lighting for a film		
Helping the actors to achieve the best		

performance possible

A   B

Producing the initial script - mainly just the
words the actors speak

Producing the shooting script - a plan of how
the script will be filmed

Arranging the financial backing for a film
backing for a film

Deciding on the order of the frames/scenes
once shooting is completed.

Designing the 'look' of a film -
building sets and choosing locations

Viewing the 'rushes' (film shot that day)
and ordering reshoots if necessary

Drawing the storyboard - the visual
shot-by-shot plan of the film

Deciding where the cameras should be
placed for a particular shot

Hearing the initial idea for a film and
deciding whether to give it a 'green light' (the go ahead)

Are your answers to A) and B) the same? If they are different, why do you think this
is so?

Place the descriptions of jobs above into column 1 next to the appropriate job title.
Watch the opening and closing titles of 2001 and complete column 2.

Job title	What they do	Individual given main credit on 2001
Director		
Producer		
Screenwriter		
Editor		
Art Director		
Cinematographer		

What makes Kubrick's films interesting in relation to this question is the level of control that he has over the finished product. In the case of 2001 he was not only producer, director and co-writer but also had a major hand in post production (what happens to the film after is has been shot e.g. editing) as well as marketing and distribution. Hence 2001 is possibly an unusual example of a single person s vision of what a specific film should be. This is unusual due to the complex nature of film making and spiralling budgets which make studio chiefs nervous about trusting creative responsibility to any single individual.

However Kubrick's own 'eccentric' method of working is also relevant here. Despite his reputation for being tyrannical on set, Kubrick could also be said to be one of the most democratic directors in recent film history. He has a strong reputation amongst actors as a perfectionist and an inspirational director but he has also provoked controversy by expecting those behind the camera to undertake different areas of production on 2001. As Kubrick himself hardly ever gave interviews, it is virtually impossible to say who really is responsible for what on 2001.

The original idea for the film draws on a short story - The Sentinel by Arthur C. Clarke but its contribution to the film is also hard to quantify. 2001 is fundamentally a visual experience. It cannot be viewed in the same way as the dispute between Orson Welles and Herman J. Mankiewicz over the script of Citizen Kane. It is not lines of dialogue that audiences remember but how these were visualised or 'realised' by Kubrick as director, who has stated that the initial story "bears about as much relation to the movie as an acorn to the resultant hill grown oak."

Task

Look at the films currently at the cinema (or on video re/ease). How many are based on novels/plays? Can you name the screen writer of any of these films? Why do you think directors are qenerally so much better known than writers - are they more important and if so, how and why?

Voluntarily, Kubrick cut 19 minutes from the film's original running time of 165 minutes, so in a way what we are left with could be termed 'the Director's Cut'. Probably the most important addition is a 'flashback' for one of the apes, emphasising the link between the bone and the monolith. Much of the removed footage contains rather slow docking and spacewalk sequences but one interesting deletion is a scene where HAL cuts the power to Poole's pod. As we do not see this in the official version, we do not necessarily appreciate HAL's half-truthfulness. When Bowman asks whether Poole can be contacted, HAL's statement 'The radio is still dead' appears to he neutral and factual, whereas without the edit, we would know that HAL was explicitly responsible for that situation.

REPRESENTATION - HUMAN V MACHINE

Films regarded as part of the science fiction genre are often associated with new technology. Frequently they explore how machines might help mankind* to develop and what role they might play in our future.

Task

Look at the list of films below and consider:

a)   What machines do/are used for in the film.

b)   What this tells us about how humans relate to them.
          * Demolition Man   * Blade Runner   * Alien
                          *The Terminator   * Star Wars

What made 2001 particularly disturbing on its initial release was its refusal to adopt sci-fi's conventional role for technology. The film suggests that machines do not necessarily do what they are told all the time and that mankind is not inevitably progressing to greater wisdom. We are accustomed now to visions of the future where machines may even be our enemies determined to alter the course of human evolution for their benefit (Terminator I & II) or are so similar to humankind that we cannot tell what is machine and what is not (Blade Runner). However in 1968 this kind of vision of the future had only really been shared amongst the fans of written science fiction rather than fllm-goers.

  *NB. The term 'mankind' is used to refer to the human species irrespective of gender. Interestingly women play only minor and subservient roles in the film - there seems to be little conception of women as potential officers/leaders in the 2Ist Century.

Task
W'hat do the following events tell us about mankind's relationship to machines?

*   Bowman burning his hands on the cooker

*   The lunar explorers covering their ears, trying to blot out the signal from the monolith, although they are still wearing helmets

*   The nature of Floyd's shuttle journey: movie, food, hostess

*   The realisation that the only way to check HAL is to refer to its twin 9000 series

Both Clarke and Kubrick are very interested in artificial intelligences and in 2001 the HAL 9000 computer seems almost more human than the astronauts it serves. Originally HAL was going to be a 'female' computer called Athena and many viewers still assume that the dialogue (spoken by actor Douglas Rain) is intended to be feminine. This would make - HAL not just the sole female protagonist but also one of the most powerful characters in the film. Rain did not know how his lines were to be used as they were all recorded and then edited out of sequence. It could be said that HAL's ambiguous motivation in asking Bowman about his feelings on the mission shows Kubrick's lack of control over the narrative or it may be that HAL really is 'working up' his 'crew psychology report. What is bard for the viewer is to pinpoint precisely the moment at which HAL decides to sabotage the mission and exactly why he/she/it does so. It seems that in Kubrick's vision, human life counts for little. Audiences typically feel little empathy for the characters (the ability to put ourselves 'in their shoes').

A SENSE OF ALIENATION

Whilst Kubrick wants a sensual response from his audience, he is also looking for an intellectual one. He disrupts filmic conventions to remind his audience that they should be thinking about what they are experiencing. Kubrick as Co-writer prevents us from identifying too closely with the protagonists by using a cast without big stars who speak dialogue that is often very banal. In fact there is no dialogue at all in the first half hour or so - almost unheard of in a film aimed at a mainstream audience. The use of a jump-cut between the bone being thrown into the air and the spaceship (we actually see a bomb platform, though this may not be clear on first viewing) is another alienation device, it challenges the viewer to make a connection of meaning between the first kill and its ultimate extension - the rather dull, normalised prospect of nuclear obliteration.

	HAL	Bowman	Poole
proud			
curious			
helpful			
protective			
loving			
worried			

Kubrick uses music to complement the prevailing mood but also to contrast with it and signal other underlying meanings. After many months he dropped a purpose-written score in favour of the contrast of space age technology and known orchestral themes, thereby linking past, present and future but also insisting on the potential beauty of space travel (which goes unappreciated by the crews). Sound is used to create drama (e.g. the heavy breathing of' Poole/Bowman in space) but at other times sound is cut completely to convey the absolute vacuum and isolation in deep space. The narrative momentum also seems ponderous and slow at times, despite the number of' deaths, which makes the viewer question the meaning of what is in front of them, rather than being swept along by a fast-paced storyline.

THEMES AND MESSAGES

2001 had been so long expected, running months over schedule and hugely over budget, that there was a strong sense of anticipation at its opening. However, the film that Kubrick released was not what people expected. Critics wavered - 'somewhere between hypnotic and immensely boring' (New Yorker) and 'plodding' and 'confusing' (Pauline Kael), and audiences emerging from cinemas in 1968 knew they had experienced something never seen before but most were not exactly sure what. There were elements of a recognisable story but how did they fit together? What was the link between the apes and the spacecraft? What is the meaning of the monoliths? Why does HAL kill the crew? What does Bowman actually experience when he is alone and what is the significance of the giant foetus/baby of the closing frames? The film raises as many questions as it answers and still provokes critical debate today as to what its 'message' might be.

Kubrick himself stated that "Space is one of the great themes of our age, yet, it is one still almost untouched by serious art and literature... It is time to break away from the cliches of Monsters and Madmen. There will be dangers in space but there will also be wonder, adventure, beauty, opportunity and sources of knowledge that will transform our civilisation."

Task
Place the following suggestions of the film's main theme in order of importance or add suggestions of your own. Note down as much evidence as you can both to support and disprove each statement.

1   An attempt to predict what life will be like in the year 2001.

2   Showing mankind's tendency to kill despite years of evolution.

3   Is there intelligent extra-terrestrial life? What might it be like?

4   "A visual experience, one that bypasses verbalised pigeonholing and directly penetrates the subconscious." (Kubrick)

S A psychedelic exploration of drug-induced hallucinations

6   Why mankind would start to explore unknown worlds. (a provisional working title was 'Journey Beyond the Stars')

7   "It is a scientifically-based yet dramatic attempt to explore the infinite possibilities that space travel now opens to mankind. " (Kubrick)

8   'The influence of extra -terrestrials on human evolution.

9   What could happen if machines are given too much power.

10   A journey (or 'Odyssey) of mankind towards ultimate self knowledge.

INTERTEXTUALITY & GENRE

One of the most interesting aspects of 2001 is its development of ideas and images from previous scifi films and its influence on subsequent ones. The term used to discuss relationships between texts (taking 'text' to refer to visual media as well as written texts) is intertextuality.

As a fanatical consumer of films, Kubrick is known to spend hours watching films on similar subjects prior to any production. Before making 2001, he viewed and reviewed Things to Come, War of the Worlds, Forbidden Planet, The Day the Earth Stood Still and George Pal's 1950 classic Destination Moon, which Kubrick felt still did not manage to capture what space flight would actually be like. He was also unhappy with the portrayal of extra-terrestrials, which still seemed even in the best of these films, to draw upon a tradition of men dressed up in unconvincing costumes. He felt that this was one of the reasons why some audiences, particularly female ones, found it difficult to take the genre of science fiction seriously. It seemed logical to him that aliens of superior intelligence would appear in a form unfamiliar to us, rather than in humanoid or flying-saucer style.
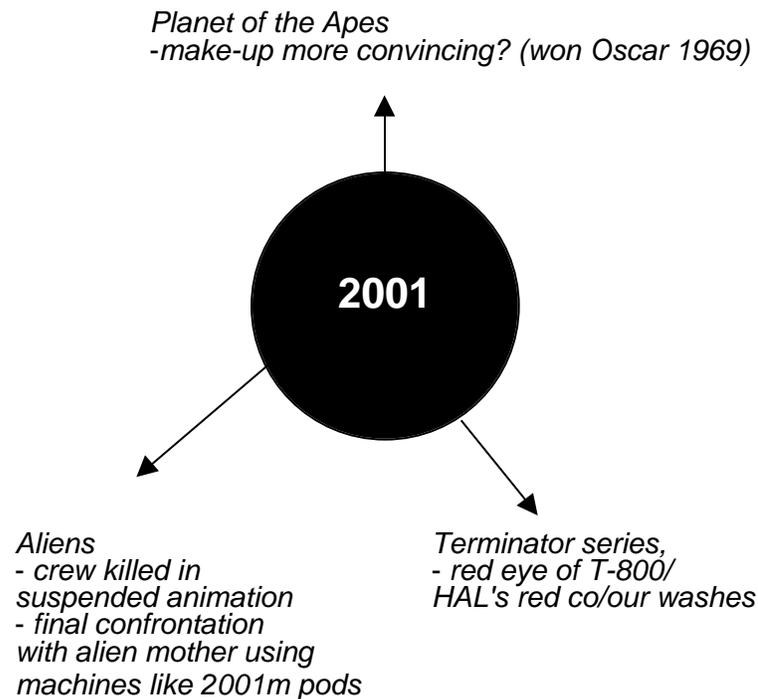
One main reason that his futuristic vision has not dated much is that despite the title and minor cultural references like the Pan-Am shuttle, there is little to tie the film explicitly to a particular time. Any film is dateable by trends in haircuts and clothing but by keeping the extra-terrestrial presence enigmatic, the film has had a much

longer shelf life than films made then or even later in the seventies e.g. Logan's Run.

Task

As you watch the film, use a spidergram to note what other films it reminds you of and why? You might consider:

*   E. T * StarGate * Star Trek * Apollo 13' * Close Encounters of the Third Kind

Planet of the Apes
-make-up more convincing? (won Oscar 1969)

2001

Aliens
- crew killed in
suspended animation
- final confrontation
with alien mother using
machines like 2001m pods

Terminator series,
- red eye of T-800/
HAL's red co/our washes

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Most films follow certain basic structuring principles, which audiences have grown used to and now expect. For example, the end of a film is often indicated by the camera drawing away from the main subject (and often moving upwards), easing the audience back to reality, reflecting a gentle withdrawal from the fictional world of the film. If a director chooses to disrupt those expectations, this probably signals a deliberate attempt to make the audience think.

Some underlying structures in film making reflect commercial influences. Conventionally, most film scripts are divided into three sections or 'Acts' with specific features in each one. It can be difficult to persuade major Hollywood producers to
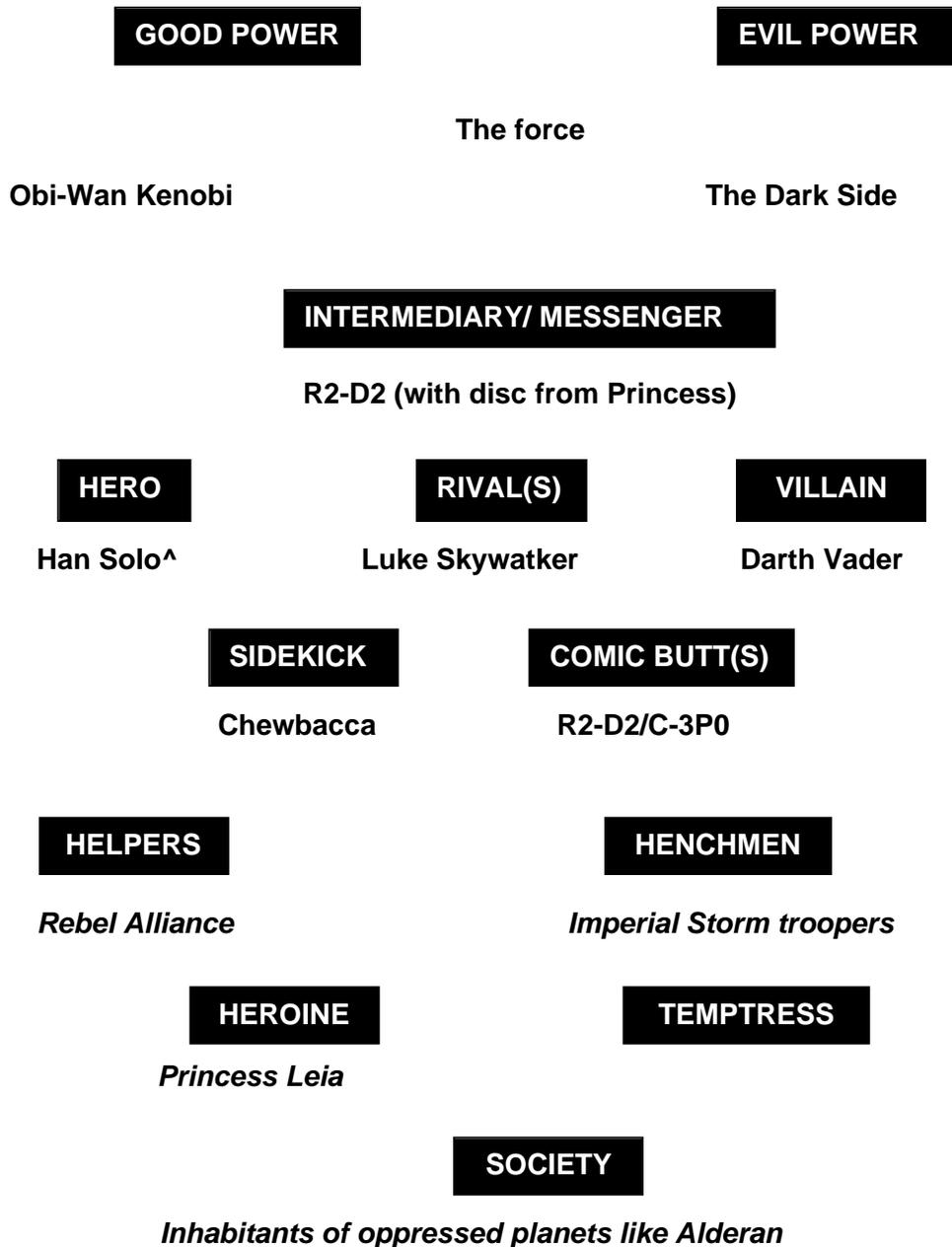
fund projects which do not follow the expected pattern. A single large-scale failure can bankrupt a studio and make a director (and also producer) unemployable. Hence the major studios tend to play safe and stick to what they know is successful.

In 1928 theorist Vladimir Propp produced an analysis of Russian folk tales called The Morphology of the Folk Tale. In this, he identified a limited number of patterns of characters and plots in well-known stories that could be used to classify virtually every type of folk tale. Although he was writing explicitly about literature, Propp's theories have been usefully extended to apply to film. One of Propp's more interesting ideas was related to a highlighting of character types, which he found in most popular stories. The pleasure derived by a film audience is also related to certain character types. If audiences find characters ambiguous or enigmatic and find it difficult to decide how they fit their expectations, they may articulate 'I find this disturbing' or 'I need to think about this' since 'I don't like this'. A downbeat audience reaction on leaving the cinema equates with critical reviews, a negative 'word-of-mouth' reputation and consequently lower box-office receipts. The pressure on producers to avoid ambiguous characters is as powerful as the pressure to avoid unhappy endings.

Most of Propp's categories are fairly clear, except perhaps 'society' which refers to the characters in the background - often these are the people for whom the hero is fighting. The intermediary/messenger' role often involves a special object or talisman, which has symbolic power.

The following diagram sets out the main categories which Propp identified as common to most stories. The example used is a film clearly influenced by 2001 - Star Wars. One of the reasons why audiences found Star Wars satisfying was that it met their expectations about characters narrative roles. The way that Star Wars fits the model reflects the interest of writer/director George Lucas in underlying relationships between people - he has a degree in Anthropology. 2001 also had an interest in how mankind has developed but takes a much more enigmatic approach to its subject.

The following is a possible interpretation* of Star Wars using the Propp model of character roles

GOOD POWER   **EVIL POWER**

The force

Obi-Wan Kenobi   **The Dark Side**

INTERMEDIARY/ MESSENGER

R2-D2 (with disc from Princess)

HERO   **RIVAL(S)**   **VILLAIN**

Han Solo^   **Luke Skywatker**   **Darth Vader**

SIDEKICK   **COMIC BUTT(S)**

Chewbacca   **R2-D2/C-3P0**

HELPERS   **HENCHMEN**

Rebel Alliance   *Imperial Storm troopers*

HEROINE   **TEMPTRESS**

Princess Leia

SOCIETY

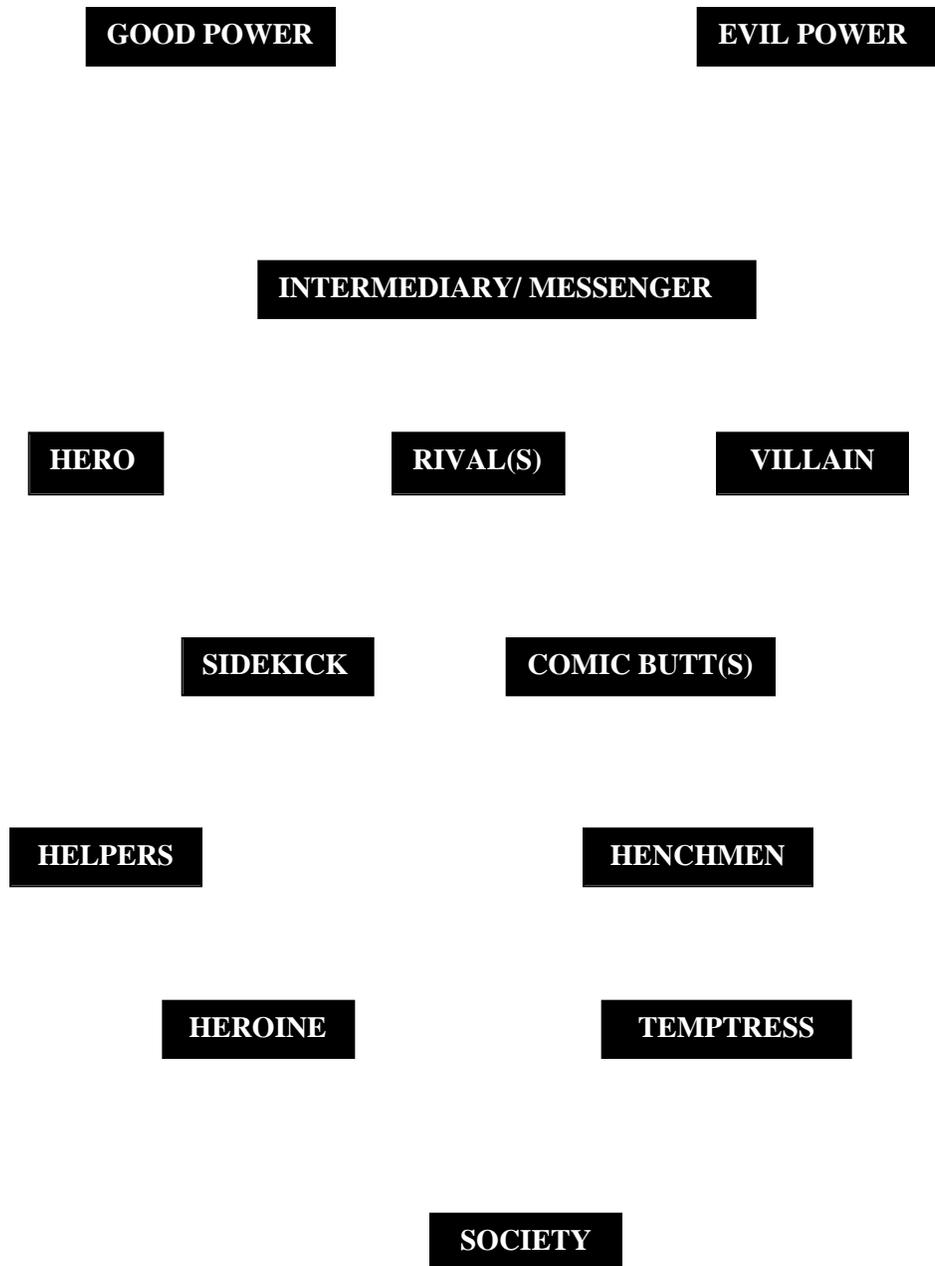*Inhabitants of oppressed planets like Alderan*

*An alternative interpretation is quoted on page 10 of the Ten Films That Shook The World study guide on Apocalypse Now.
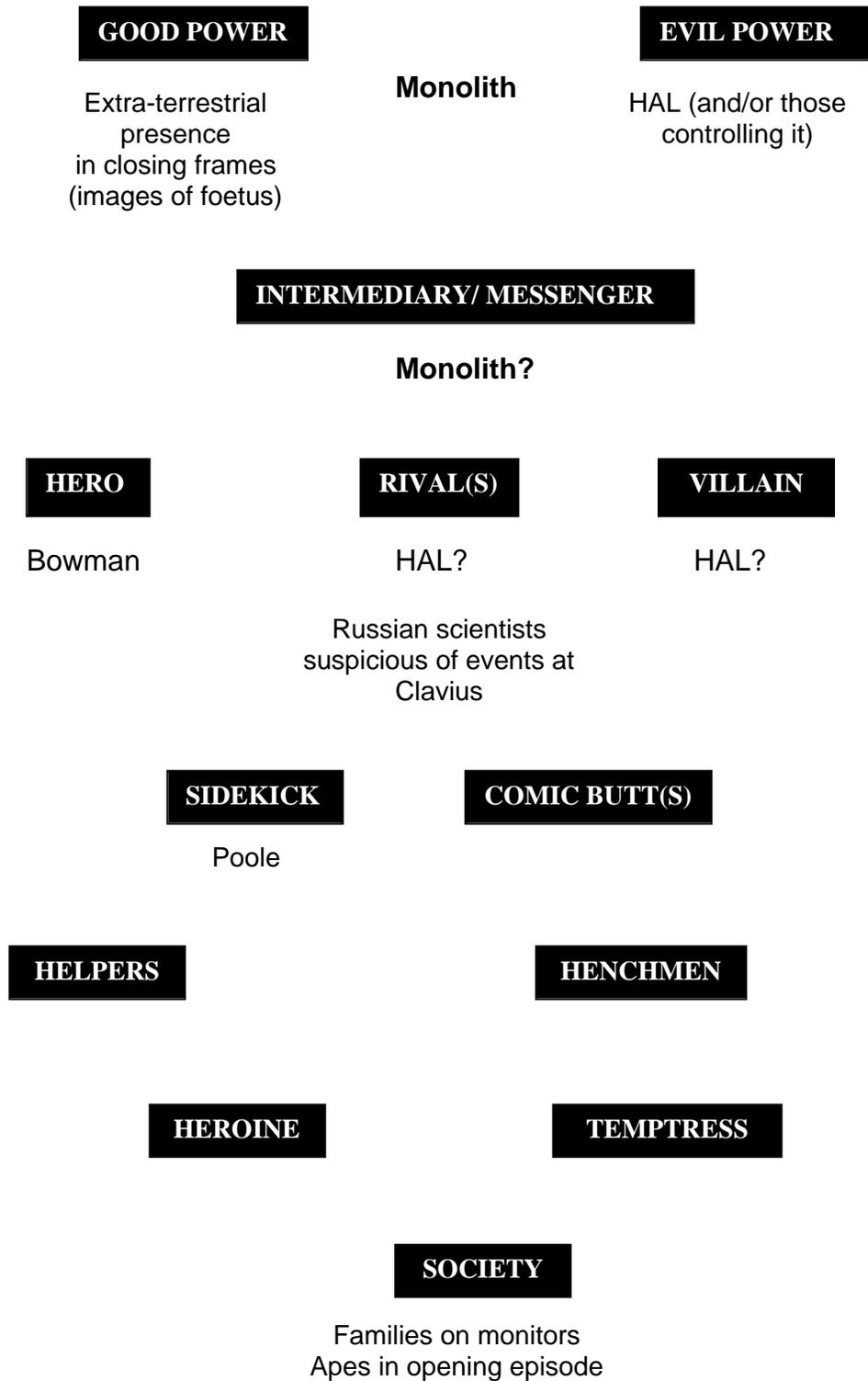
^N.B. Luke cannot he the hero since it transpires that he is the Princess' brother and Hollywood producers would get nervous of any implication of incestuous relationships amongst its main characters.

Task

Using Propp's narrative theory see how far you can allocate character roles for 2001.

GOOD POWER   **EVIL POWER**

INTERMEDIARY/ MESSENGER

HERO   **RIVAL(S)**   **VILLAIN**

SIDEKICK   **COMIC BUTT(S)**

HELPERS   **HENCHMEN**

HEROINE   **TEMPTRESS**

SOCIETY

Here is one possible interpretation of 2001 using the Propp model of character roles:

GOOD POWER

Extra-terrestrial
presence
in closing frames
(images of foetus)

Monolith

EVIL POWER

HAL (and/or those
controlling it)

INTERMEDIARY/ MESSENGER

Monolith?

HERO

Bowman

RIVAL(S)

HAL?

Russian scientists
suspicious of events at
Clavius

VILLAIN

HAL?

SIDEKICK

Poole

COMIC BUTT(S)

HELPERS

HENCHMEN

HEROINE

TEMPTRESS

SOCIETY

Families on monitors
Apes in opening episode

Another way to analyse a film narrative was suggested by a theorist called Todorov. He identified a model based on a series of conflicts:

hero

heroine → **point of conflict** ► **event** ► **event** ► **resolution of conflict**
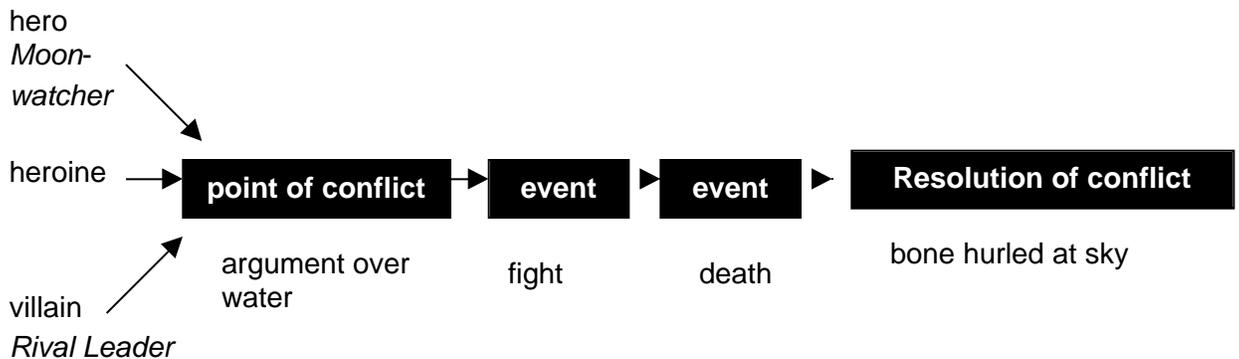
villain
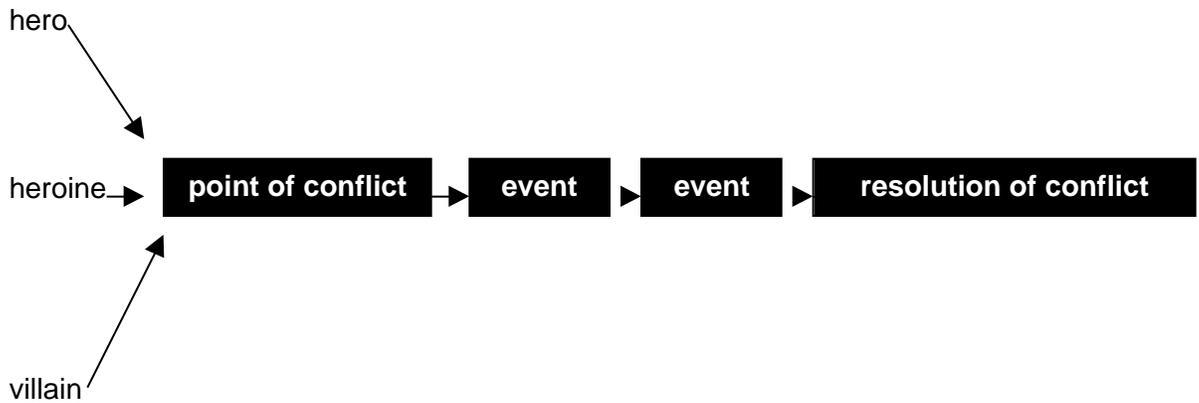
Using Propp and Todorov you will see how unconventional 2001 is considering that it was targeted at a mainstream audience. This disruption of expectations goes some way to explain why the initial reaction to the film was so mixed.
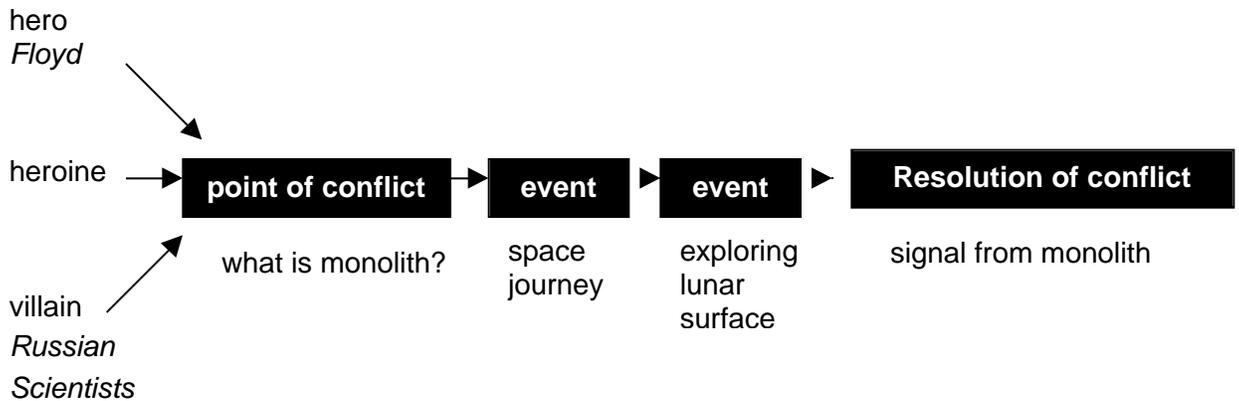
Task

Using the Todorov model, try to plot the narrative of 2001. Dividing it into sections, it might be represented like this:
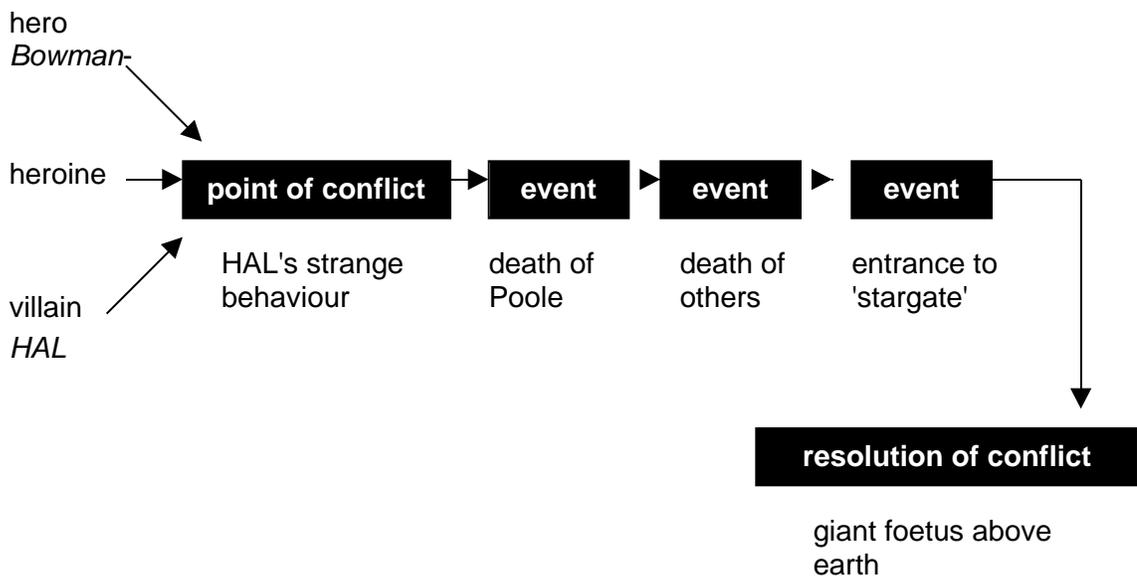
Section 1

hero
Moon-watcher

heroine → **point of conflict** ► **event** ► **event** ► **Resolution of conflict**

villain
Rival Leader

    argument over   fight   death   bone hurled at sky
    water

Section 2

hero
Floyd

heroine →

| point of conflict | → | event | ▶ | event | ▶ | Resolution of conflict |

villain
*Russian
Scientists*

what is monolith?   space
                      journey

exploring
lunar
surface

signal from monolith

Section 3

hero
Bowman

heroine →

| point of conflict | → | event | ▶ | event | ▶ | event |

villain
HAL

HAL's strange
behaviour

death of
Poole

death of
others

entrance to
'stargate'

| resolution of conflict |

giant foetus above
earth

Most science fiction films can be divided into two broad categories - those which present a positive view of the future, where endeavours are rewarded despite challenges along the way or those which present a bleak view, where trials and obstacles only lead to failure and often death. These two views of the future could be termed utopian and dystopian.

Consider the events of 2001 and place evidence on the following diagram that the film puts forward a view of one possible future for mankind that is either utopian or dystopian or has elements of both.

UTOPIAN   **DYSTOPIAN**
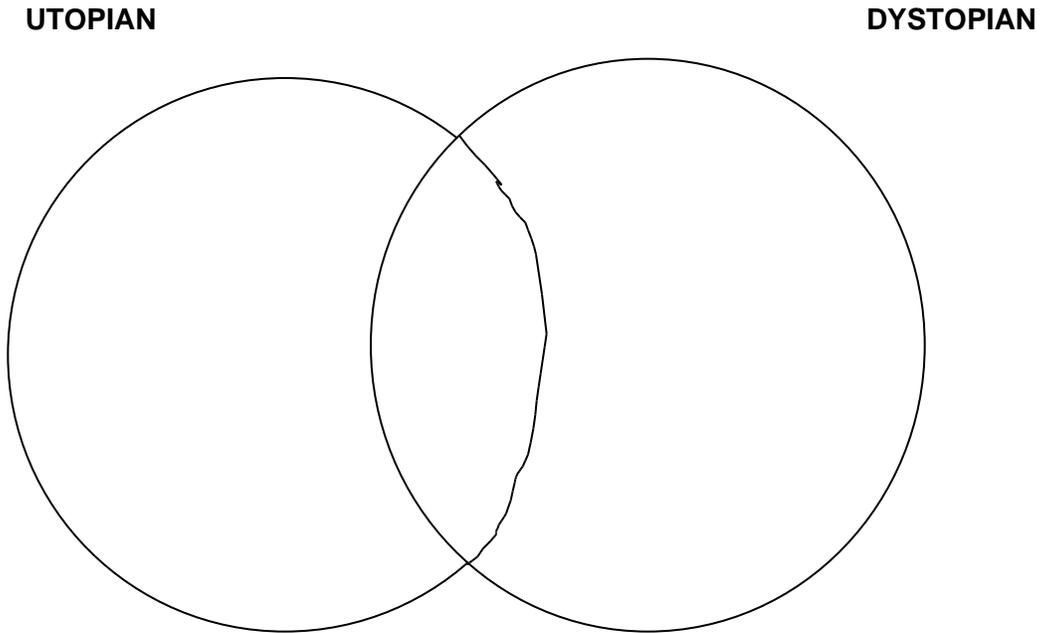
As a highly unconventional film, 2001 often seems to resist conventional methods of analysis. This does not make it a pointless exercise, however, as it leads you to appreciate the depth of the film's aesthetic achievement.

Perhaps we should leave the final word to Kubrick himself:

> *"If 2001 has stirred your emotions, your subconscious,*
>
> *your mythological leanings, then it has succeeded."*

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Back issues of special interest magazines such as Fangoria and Cinefantastique and the novels of Philip K. Dick, Iain Banks and William Gibson are also worth consideration for a wider perspective on the science fiction genre.