

# **2001: A Space Odyssey and the Anticipatory Function of the Symbolic Order in the Staging of the Beating Fantasy**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that the representation of violence in Stanley Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey* can be interpreted as a recurrent staging of the fantasy described by Freud in his 1919 article *A Child is Being Beaten*. A twofold implication of the function of anticipation is retrieved in terms of Lacan's discussion of the three phased development of the beating fantasy. In Lacan's reading, the second phase of this fantasy takes up an anticipatory function with regard to the assumption of Symbolic castration in the third phase. We argue that the retroactive construction of the three different formulas in the description of the beating fantasy in itself implies the pre-existence, and thus anticipatory function of the Symbolic Order. The anticipatory function of the Symbolic Order is retrieved in Kubrick's particular mode of staging the beating fantasy, as it both implies the signifier of the Name-of-Kubrick's-Father and the phallus as signifier of a structural lack.

**Keywords:** Symbolic Castration; Beating Fantasy; Phallus; Name-of-the-Father; Kubrick; 2001, A Space Odyssey.

## **1 Introduction**

The first chapter of Kubrick's eighth feature film *2001, A Space Odyssey* (1968)<sup>1</sup> represents a crucial step with regard to the coming into being of the human species. This chapter, which is entitled "The Dawn of Man," stages an anthropoid's discovery that the bone of a dead animal can be used as a tool/weapon. The anthropoid uses the bone to beat a rivaling anthropoid to death. Remarkably, its discovery of the bone as a tool/weapon is accompanied by the music of Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Geduld, 2008: 368), evoking an association with Nietzsche's classic philosophical work of the same name.

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<sup>1</sup> From now on we will refer to *2001, A Space Odyssey* by means of the abbreviation: *2001*.

On the one hand, we refer to the film's representation of the evolution of mankind, which is often compared with the Nietzschean progression from ape to man to superman (Ciment, 2001: 128). In a 1968 interview with Eric Nordern, Stanley Kubrick unfolds the second step of that progression in terms of mankind's evolution to non-mortal machine-entities and their subsequent transition into non-organic entities "of pure spirit" (Nordern, 1968: 49). The first of these two stages is referred to by the film's depiction of a near equality of man and machine: a computer is represented as an anthropopathic, conscious entity, while the human beings that surround it are staged as "[...] cold and increasingly impotent machines themselves" (Cocks, 2004: 120). The second stage is referred to by Kubrick in an interview with Joseph Gelmis. It concerns the rebirth of one of the film's human/machine-like characters into the so-called "Star Child" at the end of the film (Gelmis, 1969: 91-92).

On the other hand, the film's depiction of the anthropoid's discovery of the use of the tool/weapon, according to Jerold Abrams, implies that in Kubrick's view "[...] knowledge, technology, evolution and advanced forms of violence are intertwined" (Abrams, 2007: 248). This is confirmed in Kubrick's 1968 interview with the New York Times, in which the director states that "[i]t's simply an observable fact that all of man's technology grew out of his discovery of the tool/weapon" (Lobrutto, 1997: 289). This world view corresponds with a violent interpretation of the "will to power," that Nietzsche marked as the crucial motive with regard to his hierarchically structured representation of the development of earthly life (Nietzsche, 1885: 113-116).

This paper provides a new perspective on the opening sequence of Kubrick's *2001*, interpreting it as a representation of the beating fantasy described by Freud (1919). The anticipatory function of the Symbolic Order is discussed, both with regard to Lacan's interpretation of the three staged development of the fantasy and Kubrick's particular mode of staging the beating fantasy.

## **2 Kubrick with Freud**

In a 1919 article Freud describes a specific phenomenon he recurrently encountered within the clinic of hysteria and obsessional neurosis. It concerns the shamefaced disclosure of several of his patients that they derive masturbatory pleasure by fantasizing about a scene in which a child is being beaten (Freud, 1919: 179). Through psychoanalytic treatment with these patients, Freud reconstructed the development of these childhood fantasies in a sequence of three stages. These stages correspond with three related formulas of the fantasy: "Father beats the child," "I am being beaten by my father" and "A child is being beaten (by a representative of the father)" (Freud, 1919: 184-185). Over these stages, the identity of both the perpetrator and its victim vary. Moreover, Freud stated that once the third stage of the fantasy was reached, the act of beating itself could be replaced by "punishments and humiliations of another kind" (Freud, 1919: 186). In order to bring into account these modes of variation, we distil a formula that encompasses all three stages of the fantasy: "a overpowers b." The variables 'a' and 'b' respectively refer to the positions of perpetrator and victim of the

punishment. In our thesis, both the first and third chapter of *2001* on several instances reflect this formula.

At the beginning of the opening chapter the anthropoids are presented as herbivores, living side by side with the tapirs that surround them. Yet they are a vulnerable prey to predators, as the film depicts the killing of one of them by a leopard. We thereby witness the first illustration of the formula of the beating fantasy: the 'character' of the leopard takes up the position of the perpetrator 'a,' while the anthropoid is in the position of 'b,' its victim. In a second illustration of the staging of the beating fantasy, the tribe is chased away from a pool of water by a rivaling tribe of anthropoids, which implies that they now are at risk of death by dehydration. Yet a counterpoint is marked when one of the anthropoids discovers that the bone of a dead animal can be used as a tool/weapon (Duncan, 2008: 59). At that point a passive-active reversal takes place, as the tribe members now take up the position of the perpetrators in the staging of the beating fantasy. This is illustrated by the depiction of their evolution from herbivores to carnivores, as the anthropoids have discovered that animals can be slaughtered for food. Moreover, they prove to be able to regain the pool, as one of them uses the bone to kill a member of the rivaling tribe.

In the film's third chapter, entitled "Jupiter Mission," a conflict arises between two crew members of a spaceship and their anthropopathic board computer. Here we witness one of the crew members being annihilated by the computer, which also attempts to murder the second astronaut. Subsequently, and similar to the first chapter, a passive-active reversal takes place when the second crew member takes revenge by disconnecting, and thus demolishing the computer.

### **3 Lacan with Freud**

In his fourth (1956-57) and fifth (1957-58) seminar, Lacan provides a close reading of Freud's essay on the beating fantasy, which on two instances implies anticipation. The three staged development of the fantasy corresponds with the subject's working through of the Oedipus complex (Freud, 1919: 185, 192; Lacan: 1957-58: 235). Adding to Freud's theory, Lacan interprets the sequence of these three stages as a repositioning of the subject towards the Symbolic Order (Miller, 1982-83). As Lacan points out, the first phase of the fantasy stages an intersubjective Oedipal situation (Lacan, 1956-57: 115-116). Although the mother is not represented in the fantasy, she is replaced in the Oedipal triangle by a sibling, with whom the child that produces the fantasy rivals for the father's love. In this stage the beating of the rivaling child is interpreted as its radical annihilation as a desiring subject (Lacan, 1957-58: 238). In Freudian terms, it concerns the proof that the father only loves the child that produces the fantasy, not the child that is being beaten. In the second stage, the act of beating has acquired a contrary signification; it is now the child that receives the beating, thereby acquiring proof of the father's love (Freud, 1919: 189). Although the second stage concerns a regression towards a dual mode of functioning (Lacan, 1956-57: 117), as it is either the child or the rivaling child that receives the beating, it concerns a crucial Oedipal step, as it anticipates the child's transition to the third and final stage of the fantasy (Lacan, 1957-

58: 238). In that third, or post-Oedipal stage, the subject of the fantasy has assumed Symbolic castration, submitted itself to “the law of the beating” (Lacan: 1957-58: 243). As Lacan points out, the fantasy has become desubjectivized (Lacan, 1956-57: 118), which accords with Freud’s observation that in the third stage, the punishment is laid upon a numerous quantity of anonymous children (Freud, 1919: 185-186). Moreover, the concrete person of the father has transcended into its abstract beyond: “The Name of the Father” (Lacan, 1957-58: 243).

At this point we remark that these three stages in the development of the fantasy were only retrieved by Freud with female patients. With male patients, he retrieved two stages (Freud, 1919: 198). In Freud’s interpretation, his male patients’ second and last phase, described by the formula “I am being beaten by my mother,” is equivalent to the third phase of the cases in which his patients were female. Yet, the formula of the male patients’ last phase does not display the desubjectivized character of the formula “A child is being beaten,” which accords with his female patients’ last stage. We are thereby disposed to equate the male patients’ second phase with the second phase of Freud’s female patients. This implies that Freud’s male patients did not reach the post-Oedipal level or, as reflected in the corresponding formula, that their functioning did not exceed identification with the imaginary phallus of the (m)Other. This hypothesis is supported by Freud’s observation that his male patients displayed a more severe level of disturbance in their sexual life, as he described them as “true masochists in the sense of being sexual perverts” (Freud, 1919: 196). Although in all cases the Symbolic Order anticipated their coming into being, Freud’s text illustrates that only his female patients fully assumed Symbolic castration. With regard to his clinical sample, the second or Oedipal stage of the beating fantasy thus only anticipated the third or post-Oedipal stage in his female patients.

Freud remarked that the second stage of the beating fantasy was at no point remembered by his patients, that it was essentially constructed during the analytic cure (Freud, 1919: 185). Thus the entire description of the development of the beating fantasy by means of the sequence of three stages and the denotation of each of the according formulas implies a retroactive Symbolic operation. The mere “existence” of the fantasy is essentially Symbolic, a product of language (Fink, 1997: 25). The fantasy does not exist as such, as long as it is not spoken or written about. Moreover, as the specific words used to describe the fantasy are essentially derived from the Other, the Symbolic Order essentially anticipates the construction and thus existence of the beating fantasy.

#### **4 Kubrick with Lacan**

In our thesis, the opening chapter of *2001* concerns Stanley Kubrick’s particular mode of representing the beating fantasy. The anticipatory function of the Symbolic Order is thereby retrieved with regard to the anthropoid’s discovery that a bone can be used as a tool/weapon.

On the one hand, this discovery is directly preceded by the tribe’s encounter with an uncanny object, shaped as a black rectangular cuboid. This object reappears at several

other transitional moments in the film (Stackhouse, 2008: 392) and is referred to by Kubrick as “the monolith” (Gelmis, 2001: 93). A closer look at the film’s preproduction reveals that the choice for the specific design of the object was not directly adopted from Arthur C. Clarke’s *The Sentinel*, the short story on which the film’s screenplay was based. In Clarke’s original version, the object is described as a “glittering, roughly pyramidal structure” (Clarke, 1951: 305). Yet during the writing of *2001*’s screenplay, Stanley Kubrick explored a variety of geometric shapes for the object’s design. He subsequently considered the form of a transparent cube, a pyramid and a tetrahedron, but ultimately decided to use the shape of the rectangular cuboid (Lobrutto, 1997: 284). In our reading, the staging of this specific geometrical form marks the signature of the director through the staging of the signifier “Cube-Brick,” an acoustic equivalent of Stanley Kubrick’s surname, or: the Name-of-his-Father.

Moreover, as the monolith is staged as an erected rectangular cuboid, it clearly takes a phallic shape. In the subsequent staging of the beating fantasy, the anthropoid overpowers his rival through the use of a phallic shaped bone. We add that the signifier ‘bone’ on an acoustical level is associated with the signifier ‘boner,’ the linguistic reference par excellence to the erect form of the phallus. This calls to mind the remarkable alteration Lacan made to Freud’s essay on the beating fantasy, when he added the element of the ‘whip,’ or the instrument by which means the punishment is executed (Lacan, 1957-58: 234). As Lacan points out, that instrument above all concerns the staging of the phallic signifier (Lacan, 1957-58: 234, 242). Later on, in his tenth seminar, Lacan (1962-63: 311) remarks that whenever the phallus is called upon, it is staged as an instrument of power, ultimately referring to the desire for omnipotence. Accordingly, *2001*’s initial staging of the phallic symbol enforces a violent interpretation of the Nietzschean “will to power” as the central driving force of (human) evolution. This is underlined by Kubrick’s use of the cinematographic technique of the jump cut, whereby the anthropoid’s use of the phallic bone/weapon is visually associated with another phallically shaped object, a technological device that floats through space three million years later in the evolution of mankind. The December 1965 version of the script mentions that this technological device was originally meant to represent an atomic bomb (Kubrick & Clarke, 1965), the instrument of power that was central in Kubrick’s previous film, *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).

In his tenth seminar, Lacan (1962-63: 311) states that the phallus and its reference to omnipotence is typically called upon at the moment where it essentially falls short. Its function in essence is to cover up the lack in the Symbolic Order, the core of powerlessness that marks the human being. Accordingly, *2001* ultimately stages the phallus as a veil for a structural lack. Indeed, the opening chapter’s staging of the monolith is essentially accompanied by Ligeti’s *Requiem* (Geduld, 2008: 368), which marks the futility of the human subject. This theme is commented upon by Kubrick in his 1968 interview with Nordern: “Man is the only creature aware of his own mortality and is at the same time generally incapable of coming to grips with this awareness and all its implications” (Nordern 1968: 69). As Miller (1982-83) points out, the human subject’s entrance into the Symbolic Order stages the subject as nothingness, as disappearing under the metonymic progression of the chain of signifiers.

Thus the Symbolic Order anticipates Kubrick's representation of the beating fantasy on two instances; by means of the accorded staging of the signifier of The-Name-of-his-Father and of the phallus as signifier of a structural lack.

## 5 Conclusion

Both Lacan's interpretation and *2001's* staging of the beating fantasy on several instances imply the concept of anticipation. Firstly, in Lacan's reading, the regression made during the second phase of the beating fantasy anticipates the assumption of Symbolic castration, which is staged in the fantasy's third phase. We added that as each formula of the beating fantasy is essentially structured by language, the Symbolic Order anticipates its construction and thereby its existence as such. Secondly, as *2001's* staging of the beating fantasy implies both the signifiers of the Name-of-Kubrick's-Father and the signifier of the phallus, the director's particular representation of the fantasy implies the pre-existence and thus anticipatory function of the Symbolic Order.

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