

History 152
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2001: A Space Odyssey. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. 1968.

2001: A Space Odyssey takes the viewer from early hominid society to human planetary exploration and therefore spans from the early Stone Age to Planetary Society. How does a movie accomplish in less than three hours such a broad span of history? That is the magic of movies! 2001 makes a leap from *Australopithecus africanus* to Homo sapiens through special effects—which in 1968 were considered state of the art. But the leap in history is also made possible by a mysterious monolith which appears throughout the movie. The existence of the monolith is the guiding event of the movie.

The monolith first appears on the australopithecine barren landscape. Its existence creates an unknown experience for our early hominid ancestors and the experience changes their consciousness. *Australopithecus* will begin interacting with its environment in a creative way that brings forth tools. After flinging the viewer into space on a PanAm shuttle to the Moon, the viewer listens in on a conversation about an unknown object that has been discovered on the Moon.

That conversation will lead the viewer to an excavation site on the Moon and introduce the viewer to a mission to Jupiter. Both the Moon mission and the Jupiter mission reflect forms of governance and trans-regional organizations. While in orbit around Jupiter, the monolith again appears, this time on a much larger scale, and the viewer encounters the ultimate interaction of humans in the environment: the human effort to understand the unknown cycle of birth and death.

The scene I have chosen is when *Australopithecus*, as the result of an encounter with the unknown, conceptualizes a tool while looking at a pile of tapir bones. While grasping the femur with its hand, hinging its wrist, and flopping the bone into the dirt, *Australopithecus* seems to inadvertently strike a rib bone whose curve causes it to fling itself from the dirt into the air. Almost with experimental motion, *Australopithecus* elevates its arm and gains more force, causing another bone to fly higher. Then, with arm fully extended, *Australopithecus* drives the femur bone onto the skull in the pile of bones. The force of the femur smashes the skull, and voila, a tool for hunting!

This scene sets up the action of the movie because it hypothesizes human creativity and the drive to survive. The femur bone will also become a weapon—a new form of technology--and its use to defend a water hole symbolizes cultural

dominance. The tool itself, transforms the consciousness of its user, and special effects of Hollywood helps us imagine the leap in being from early hominid to space faring humans.

Historical Commentary: Although 2001 is a science fiction movie, its portrayal of *Australopithecus* can be called science fictional history. Hollywood has taken knowledge of the past and animated that knowledge by using actors and body language. The body language, as well as physical appearance, is based on fossil remains and how *Australopithecus* should have moved according to bone size and shape. Another scientific feature of 2001 is portrayal of space as conducting no sound. However, the movie strayed from the laws of physics when it showed a partially illuminated spaceship, instead of a pitch black image. In addition to 2001's scientific characteristics, the movie is also unique because science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke collaborated with Stanley Kubrick and wrote a novel based on the screen play. Scientific anomalies aside, 2001's presentation of the monolith is a reminder of the human experience of reality: the source of the monolith and the source of reality remain unknown.