



MGM PRESENTS A STANLEY KUBRICK PRODUCTION

2001: a space odyssey

Some Thoughts on Kubrick's

by Dan Bates

No doubt about it: Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY is to futuristic science-fiction films what the late Carl Th. Dreyer's VAMPYR was, and still is, to film horror: The absolute ultimate, the high-water mark, the greatest ever. Arthur C. Clarke said it, and I'll repeat it: The next great science-fiction film, to be better than this one, will have to be made *on location*.

Perhaps more important, public response to Kubrick's masterpiece has been enormously in the film's favor, to such a remarkable extent that we may now simply forget all the negative reviews from the so-called *cognoscenti*:—Stanley Kauffman in *The New Republic*, John Simon in *The New Leader*, Wilfrid Sheed in *Esquire*, Judith Crist in *New York* and on NBC-TV's "Today," and, most disappointing of all because they're both normally so astute, Andrew Sarris in *The Village Voice* and, of all people, Ray Bradbury, long my favorite SF writer, in, of all places, *Psychology Today*. The public has, as the cliché p.r. phrase goes, flocked to the film in droves, and it is destined to become, I think it is safe to say by now, with Michelangelo Antonioni's BLOW-UP and BONNIE AND CLYDE, the first really popular film masterpiece since D. W. Griffith's BIRTH OF A NATION . . . which was some *fifty-three years ago!*

[The latter went ahead making money—though not for D.W.C.—after initial distribution and, according to *Variety*, holds an unofficial b. o. record.—CTB.]

The comparison with Griffith extends beyond mere popularity: 2001 is (as I stated in a letter to *The Village Voice* berating Sarris for his astounding lack of perception) in size, scope, intellectual pretension, and general naivete, the most remarkable film work of art since Griffith's financially unsuccessful, but more artistically important, INTOLERANCE, released in 1916.

What's more, to go outside the science-fiction genre once again (and the greatness of any film can only be measured by how it stands up alongside films outside its own

genre), I haven't seen anything so difficult, demanding, or just plain stimulating and cinematically exciting since Bergman's PERSONA in 1967.

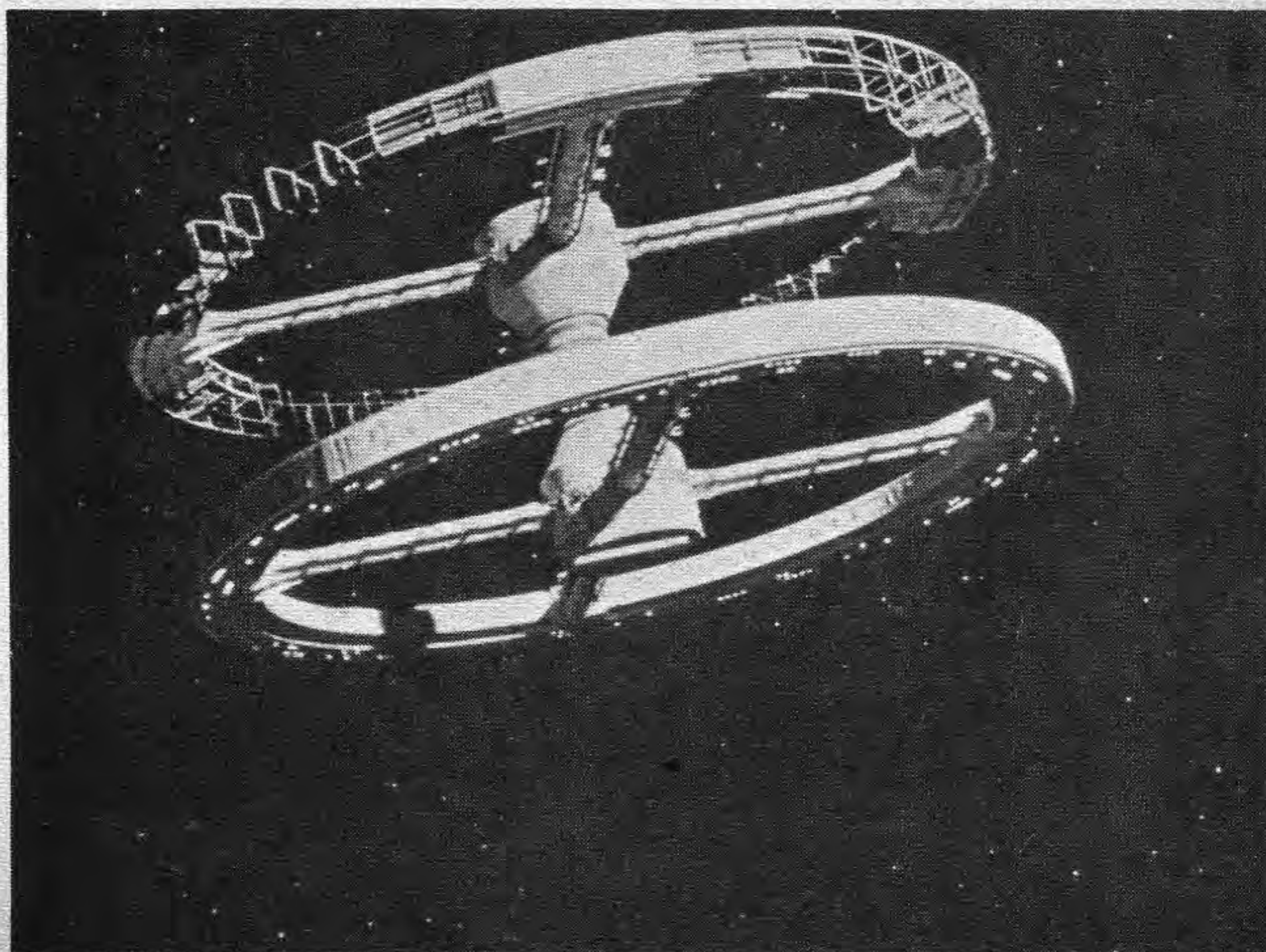
In short, 2001 has turned out, despite the reviews, to be everything one expected it would be, and should have been, knowing Kubrick's genius. That's right, I said "genius." There's something strikingly original about 2001.

And it takes a real genius to be truly original, as Kubrick has been here.

Before we go any further, perhaps we need to re-define that word "original."

First off, it's a kind of a false word. There is absolutely nothing "original" under the sun, as any good philosophy major will tell you. This is particularly true in movies, where the nearest you can come to "originality" is in an "original" employment of techniques and gimmicks used previously by others. Take, for instance, Orson Welles' CITIZEN KANE, which was considered vastly original, and still is. "Welles shows ceilings," people shouted. So what? So did Fritz Lang in KRIEMHELD'S REVENGE in Germany in the Twenties. There's nothing original about showing ceilings.

Like KANE, the originality in 2001



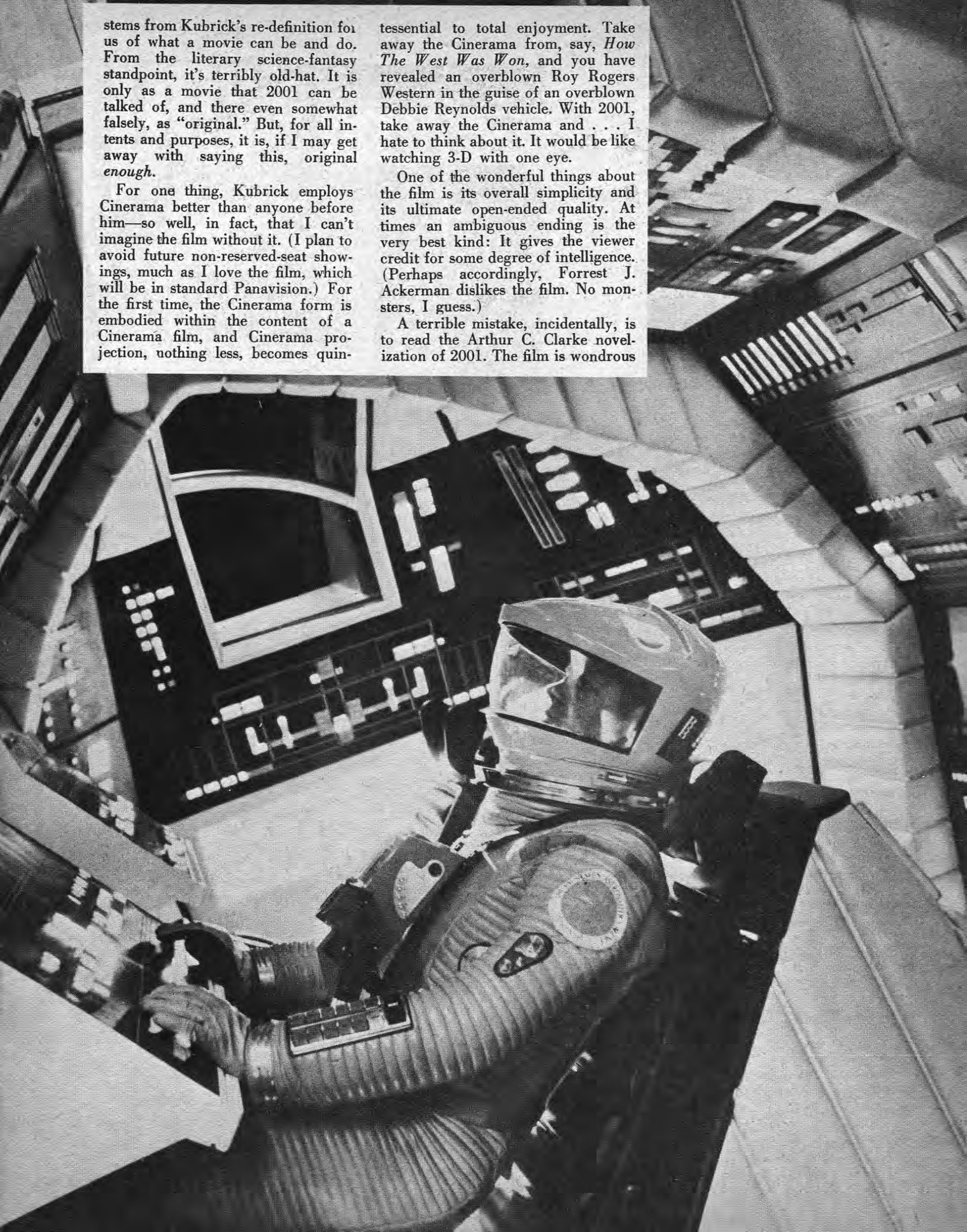
stems from Kubrick's re-definition for us of what a movie can be and do. From the literary science-fantasy standpoint, it's terribly old-hat. It is only as a movie that 2001 can be talked of, and there even somewhat falsely, as "original." But, for all intents and purposes, it is, if I may get away with saying this, original enough.

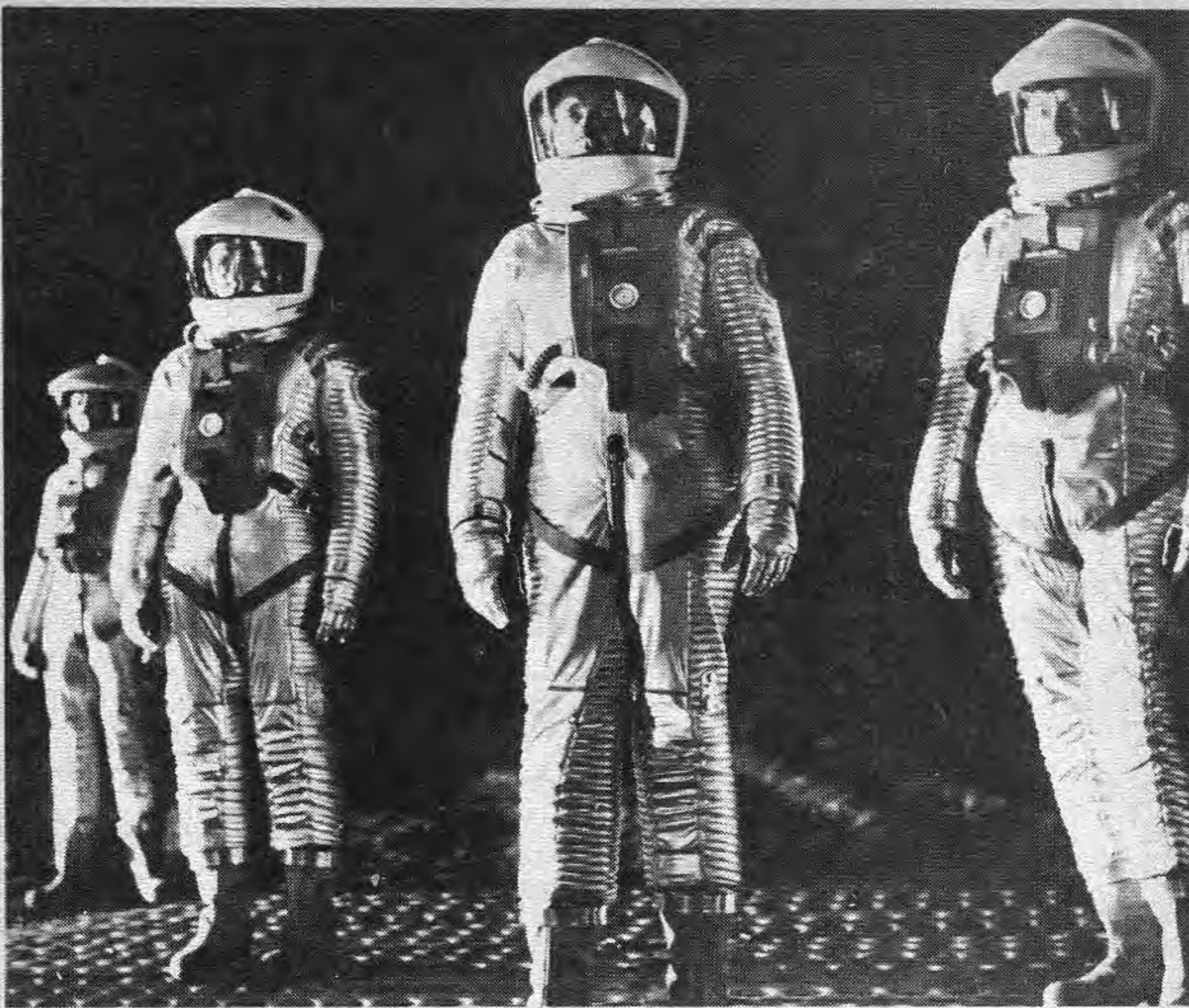
For one thing, Kubrick employs Cinerama better than anyone before him—so well, in fact, that I can't imagine the film without it. (I plan to avoid future non-reserved-seat showings, much as I love the film, which will be in standard Panavision.) For the first time, the Cinerama form is embodied within the content of a Cinerama film, and Cinerama projection, nothing less, becomes quin-

tesential to total enjoyment. Take away the Cinerama from, say, *How The West Was Won*, and you have revealed an overblown Roy Rogers Western in the guise of an overblown Debbie Reynolds vehicle. With 2001, take away the Cinerama and . . . I hate to think about it. It would be like watching 3-D with one eye.

One of the wonderful things about the film is its overall simplicity and its ultimate open-ended quality. At times an ambiguous ending is the very best kind: It gives the viewer credit for some degree of intelligence. (Perhaps accordingly, Forrest J. Ackerman dislikes the film. No monsters, I guess.)

A terrible mistake, incidentally, is to read the Arthur C. Clarke novelization of 2001. The film is wondrous





and open to all sorts of interpretations; in perhaps the most predictable, (and one which I share to some vague degree) the Catholics have proclaimed the film "a major religious experience," probably taking the reappearing slab to be some metaphysical stand-in for God, and even John Simon, ending his negative review in *The New Leader*, labels the film "a shaggy God story." Clarke's "interpretation" (which I choose to take the novelization to be) is earthbound and *cloddish*. That is to say, it explodes my soap bubble.

On another matter, not since, perhaps, the days when *The Lone Ranger* was American's favorite radio program has an entertainment so engendered such a widespread interest in classical music, albeit the music this time is that of decidedly lesser composers. (For that matter, what's so hot about Rossini or Liszt?) There are now two stereo long-playing recordings of the music from the film. The more interesting one, for me, is the Columbia disk with Ormandy and Bernstein, which features music played in the film (Richard and Johann Strauss, Khatchaturian, Gyorgy Ligeti) and, most significant, introduces to the serious listener on Side 2 an orchestral-electronic suite of highlights from Karl Birger Blomdahl's archtypal "operative excursion into . . . outer space," *Aniara*, which has a plot somewhat similar to that memorable Czechoslovakian film, *IKARIA XBI*, known in this country only in a mangled form titled *VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE*.

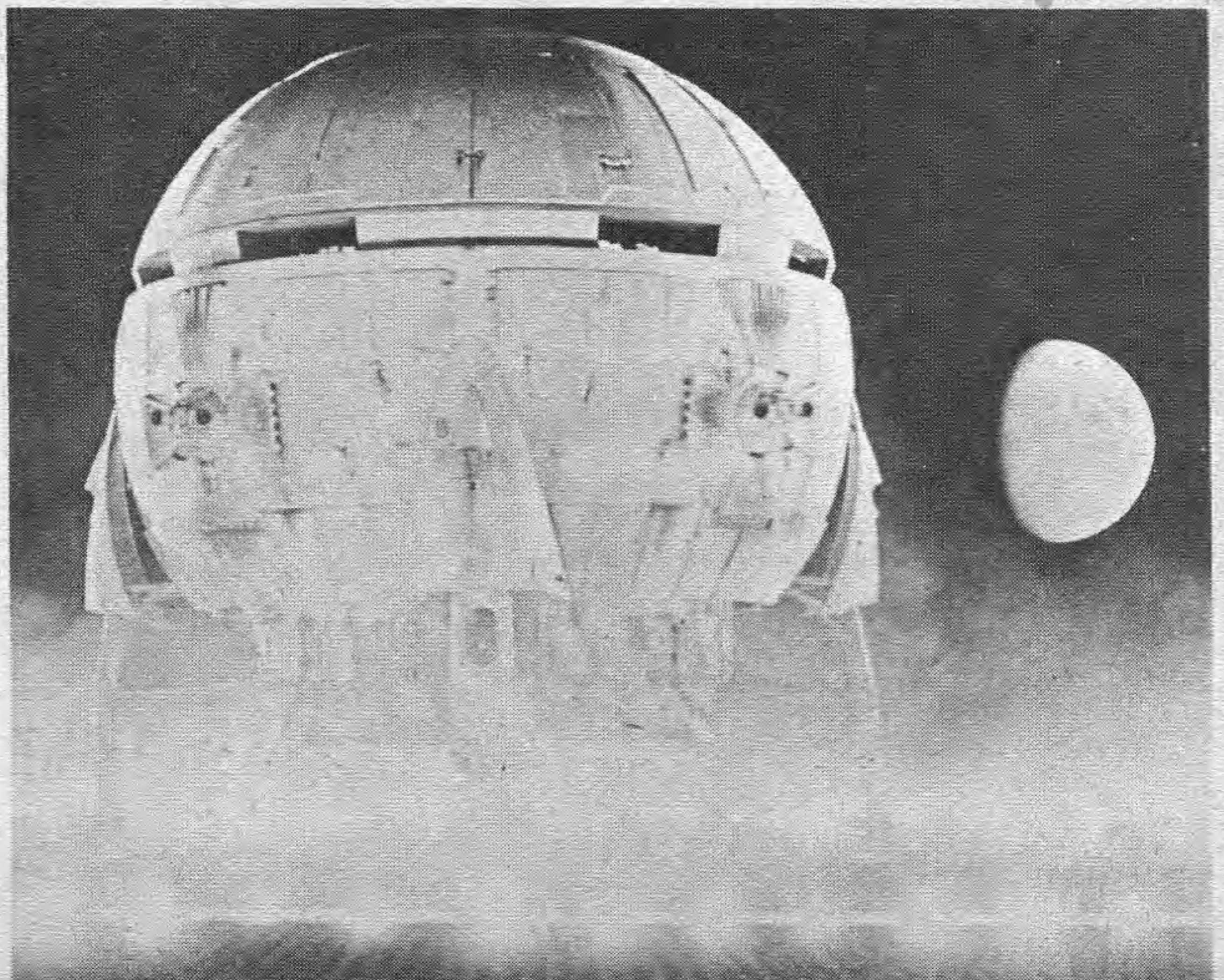
Anyway, thanks to 2001, Ligeti is now a musical name to conjure with, equal, in my mind, to that of Edgar Varese. Both minor names, to be sure (and, for that matter, Richard Strauss has composed much better more important works than *Also Sprach Zarathustra*; nonetheless, it's amazing the way this piece, formally used mostly by hi-fi record-player dealers to demonstrate their in-store models to potential customers, has suddenly, thanks to the movie, become a pop favorite; the best recording of the

entire tone poem, for the record, is the late Fritz Reiner's on RCA Victorola), but there's no denying the service the film does if it sparks the interest of only one viewer in classical music. Like I said, not since *The Lone Ranger* . . .

2001 and Dreyer's *VAMPYR* are uniquely similar in that both, though made in the sound era, are primarily silent films where dialogue is concerned. Perhaps I should say that they are primarily *visual* films, and how refreshingly cinematic that a big-budget major-company Cinerama production should be so at this time.

I have seen *VAMPYR* exactly once, in a special screening in the fall of 1967 at New York's New School for Social Research. The print shown was bereft of English subtitles, and the student viewers and myself, confronted by apparently Danish subtitles, were left to make what sense we could out of the print visually. That it ultimately made no sense whatever is the secret, indeed the key, to the film's success as the greatest horror film of all time: Like Murnau's great silent, *Nosferatu*, it is as illogical as a nightmare. And what is there more bone-chillingly unforgettable than a nightmare?

The best review of 2001 I have encountered to date is Philip French's in the monthly *London Magazine*. Maybe your local library has it. French not only reviews the film itself; he also attempts to place it both within the chronology of Kubrick's remarkable career, and within the spectrum of other noteworthy SF films made to date. Among the latter,



he cites the important early silent experimental works of Georges Méliès, Fritz Lang's 1926 METROPOLIS and William Cameron Menzies' 1936 THINGS TO COME (both of which he notes must have inspired Kubrick to some extent), the already cited Czech film, the Russian FIRST COSMONAUTS ON VENUS, and the remarkable French trio of recent vintage: Godard's ALPHAVILLE, Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, and François Truffaut's British-made FAHRENHEIT 451. French, I think rightly, skips the American, or, that is, Hollywood period of science-fiction films of the Fifties, the majority of which were inspired by McCarthy-H.U.A.C. paranoia—was the Id monster a card-carrying Commie?—and all of which, compared to 2001, now look most definitely mediocre. (I include, under this mediocrity label, FORBIDDEN PLANET, already hinted at, THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL, and IT CAME FROM OUTER SPACE, which, compared to Kubrick's film, are all mere kid stuff, despite their pretensions otherwise.)

Some other positive reactions have come from Penelope Gilliatt in *The New Yorker*, who unstintingly termed

the film "great," and the Hippy media, most notably *The East Village Other* and *The Los Angeles Free Press*. Writers in both publications tagged 2001 one of the greatest films of all time. It is that, though it is not, as some friends of mine have declared, foaming at their mouths, *the greatest film ever made*, though I can see how it might appear to be so to persons whose realms of interest are strictly limited to the science-fantasy sphere. It's understandable, from another standpoint, that others not so limited should react so, for 2001 most decidedly overwhelms you on first viewing. It's designed to do exactly that. A couple of friends, trying desperately to relate to me their first impressions (thank God, not simultaneously), were totally inarticulate. They could speak only in monosyllables, or half-phrases. 2001 inspires that kind of reaction. Like CITIZEN KANE, it really grabs you, and there's no comparing the initial experience of seeing it for the first time. Kubrick's use of ZARATHUSTRA is exactly right, and the way those three planets rise, one up behind the other, to the music . . . man, I tell you, this is definitely a once-in-

a decade film to get excited about!

But, in the cool, calm light of day afterward—and I have now seen the film three times, (and plan to catch it a couple more before its local Cinerama engagement closes, for, as I told you, I can't imagine it without Cinerama), we must come to acknowledge the work rationally for what it is: an unarguably important work, one that in many ways bursts the bounds of what a popular commercial movie can be and do, as well as to repeat myself, the high-water mark of film science-fantasy to date.

But, the greatest motion picture ever made? Hardly. At least, not as long as we have LA REGLE DU JEU, CITIZEN KANE, GERTRUD, BELLE DE JOUR, PERSONA, and the works of Jean-Luc Godard, among some others, to measure alongside it.

The Hippy attraction, obviously, is the psychedelic "trip" beyond the infinite at the end. Kubrick's "light show" grabs even the squares in the audience. Which makes at least one thing about the film incontestable:

No matter who you are, 2001 turns you on.

