Kubrick’s Use of Composition in 2001: A Space Odyssey

By

Gabriel Nell / 13906461

UC Berkeley
The sequence of shots in *2001: A Space Odyssey* beginning with Dave sketching his hibernating colleagues and ending with HAL mistakenly detecting a fault in one of the ship’s components well illustrates how Kubrick composes his shots to show HAL’s relationship to Dave. The first three shots in the sequence leading up to the conversation are of Dave by himself, sketching his colleagues. The opening shot is a close-up of Dave working on his sketch of his hibernating colleagues to introduce us to the situation. The next shot shows Dave standing while sketching, the background dominated with a clinical white, interrupted by the sarcophagi, also white, of the hibernating crew and one sleeping crewmember. The odd angle of the shot, in which Dave is standing on the “floor” which is on the right edge of the screen, almost forces us to tilt our heads. The shot makes Dave appear small and very much out of place because he is neither sleeping like his colleagues nor is he even on Earth as the floor being sideways reminds us. The subsequent shot tracks in front of Dave walking around the inside of the circular craft. While Dave remains fixed in the center of the shot, the ship rotates in the direction he is walking, re-emphasizing Dave’s remoteness (by emphasizing he is in space). These shots set up an important conversation between Dave and HAL.

The sequence of shots during the conversation is a kind of complex shot reverse shot involving four rather than two shots: a wide-angle shot from HAL’s point of view, a
view of HAL and Dave together with HAL filling most of the shot, a close shot of HAL’s eye, and a close up of Dave’s face. Which shot is used depends more on what is being said rather than who is speaking.

The wide-angle shot from HAL’s perspective is unique because its geometry and depth is completely different from the rest of the film. HAL’s view is not even rectangular; it is circular, in stark contrast to the wide rectangular scope format of the rest of the film. HAL’s field of view is also much broader than anything we’re used to; his view is so wide that it captures most of the spacecraft’s interior. The narrow circular geometry and extremely wide field of view offers a peculiar combination that emphasizes the difference between the way that HAL and the human crew perceive the world. Though HAL has a small, video-resolution view of the world, it is an unnaturally broad view lending the impression that HAL is all-knowing. It is also significant that HAL’s view is fixed; HAL is incapable of seeing anything more than his video cameras allow. His static and complete view of the world around him contrasts sharply to the dynamic and limited way that humans see.

Kubrick uses HAL’s perspective to emphasize HAL’s intellectual and emotional superiority over the human crew. HAL greets Dave and expresses interest in Dave’s
sketches, but as the conversation progresses it becomes clear that HAL is probably only feigning interest in order to start a conversation with Dave so HAL can do his psych report. HAL’s position as a parent-figure is illustrated by the way the shot looks down to Dave, with the wide-angle lens making Dave appear unnaturally small. HAL’s view becomes that of a parent looking down at a child, the child proudly displaying his drawings to his parent.

A different shot that emphasizes HAL’s superiority is a view of Dave sitting in front of HAL’s console. Kubrick takes full advantage of the scope aspect ratio, filling the frame almost entirely with HAL’s view screens and eye. Dave is peripheral in the shot; he is on the right side, mostly obscured by the chair he’s sitting in and clearly small in comparison to HAL’s vast console. The shot is also from slightly lower angle, and because Dave is more in the foreground, this puts HAL higher in comparison to Dave. These effects combine to push Dave into the lower corner of the screen, allowing HAL to fill the frame.

During the course of the conversation, we see two variations of this shot. The first variation contains Dave in the lower middle of the shot rather than in the corner. HAL still dominates most of the frame, and Dave is still small, but he is less peripheral, and perhaps
on slightly more even ground. More significant is the third variation, in which Dave and HAL fill the frame almost equally. The view shows a profile of Dave looking directly at HAL, who takes up significantly less screen area than earlier shots. Dave and HAL are on equal footing in this shot, which comes at a time when HAL mentions how the preparations for the mission were kept in such secrecy, and the melodrama of separate training and hibernation. At this point, along with the subsequent close-up of Dave, we understand that Dave begins to realize HAL’s motivation in the conversation, and thus we are shown a view depicting HAL and Dave as equals.

The third type of shot, a close-up of HAL’s eye, is used only briefly during the conversation. The shot is framed so that the screen area is almost totally filled by HAL’s eye. While other shots of HAL from further away reveal a white glow around HAL’s eye, this glow is conspicuously absent in the close-up. Instead, the area around the central yellow dot and surrounding red flow is blackness. The framing draws us to the absolute center of the screen, but what we see is difficult to understand, providing a sense of mystery about who or what HAL actually is.
Kubrick chooses this view of HAL at two points in the conversation: when HAL says, “perhaps I am just projecting my own concerns...” and when he mistakenly detects a fault in the ship’s equipment. The former is an important part of the conversation because something is happening in HAL’s mind that we don’t understand; either HAL is deceiving Dave because he needs to do his psych report, or he truly is concerned about the mission. HAL’s mistaken detection of a fault is even more important because it sets up a critical flaw in his character that drives the rest of the movie. The sense of mystery the composition provides is important at this point; it underscores the importance of the events to have an ominous close up of HAL’s eye.

The analogous close-up shot of Dave is framed so that Dave’s face is in the center of the screen with a shallow focus. The colors in the background and on Dave’s uniform are unsaturated, and his face is lit primarily from below. The combined effect gives Dave a serious, contemplating expression that shows that he is carefully listening to HAL, reading between the lines. Towards the end of the conversation, the sequence switches between the close-up of HAL’s eye and the close-up of Dave’s face. The contrast between the two is illustrated by the unsaturated shot of a familiar human face following the mysterious red and yellow of HAL.