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指導教授：劉紀雯老師

Dr. Kate Liu

真善美聖

**Space Odysseys Then and Now: *2001: A Space Odyssey*  
(1968) and *Interstellar* (2014)**

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學生：江昀立 撰

Willy Yun-Li Chiang

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Research Report

Willy Chiang 403110694

Prof. Kate Liu

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## Introduction

The American director, Stanley Kubrick released his epic science-fiction film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (hereinafter referred to as *2001*) in 1968, inviting the audience to leave Earth for a visual feast of space travel before men actually set foot on the moon in 1969. Whether or not *2001* is an epic in terms of its obscure plot has always been a controversial topic; however, *2001* is undoubtedly an extremely significant film with regard to its technical prowess. Because of its stunning visuals and truly convincing portrayal of space travel, *2001* creates a benchmark for scientific realism in modern sci-fi films, becoming one of the true monoliths of all cinema (Spiegel). Forty-six years later, *Interstellar* came along, and human's knowledge of space has leaped forward greatly over these 5 decades. Filmmakers no longer need to make wild guesses at how outer space looks or what people would be like in space. In the present time, there is way more scientifically accurate information that filmmakers can refer to, and *Interstellar* is the film bringing human's current knowledge of space and groundbreaking cinematography onto big screens, just like what *2001* did at its time. Unsurprisingly, after *Interstellar*'s release, it has immediately drawn comparisons to Kubrick's classic opus, *2001: A Space Odyssey*; the director of *Interstellar*, Christopher Nolan however, doesn't intend to deny the connection between *Interstellar* and *2001*. In the interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Nolan depicted *2001* as a key touchstone of science fiction which people cannot avoid while creating the stories about getting off the planet (Jensen). Nolan's statement was not merely a compliment on Kubrick's achievement; I believe that it, implicitly, affirms *2001*'s influence on *Interstellar* and the two's connections. However, to distinguish *Interstellar* from *2001*, Nolan stated, “I think *2001*'s relationship with humanity is more philosophical, more abstract. I wanted to embrace the metaphysics but relate it to something more obviously human, like love” (Collin).

Although people can see *2001* in *Interstellar* to some degree, the two films are still very distinct from each other since, in addition to the relationship with humanity, Nolan actually makes the story of *Interstellar* more concrete with human characters and their differences. In my view, *Interstellar* (2014) can be seen as a contemporary and more optimistic version of *2001* (1968) since it develops *2001*'s theme of "human transcendence" with the similar plot pattern and using similar motifs of the scientist's (dis)connection with their family members, with their robots, and through time travel in outer space. However, *Interstellar*, though reaching farther beyond in time and space, is more human, because it provides more human plot settings and human reasons for space exploration, emphasizing human relations both in the family, among scientists, and with humans in the past and in the future. [Thesis Statement]

## Literature Review

Many critics argue that *2001* is against human or the humanity is pessimistic in its ending, its use of the robot HAL9000, its depiction of characters' performance of their own wills, and characters' reactions while they watch the videos sent from their family members, all of which, for me, can be set in a contrast to *Interstellar*. Some critics find in the ending scene in *2001*, where Bowman turns into a Star Child, a pessimistic estimate of man's potential to transcend himself since it shows "mankind's dependence on a higher order of beings for every step of progress he makes, until in the end he is reduced to what they regard as an inarticulate embryo" (Walker 193). With the use of the robot, HAL9000, *2001* shows humans' incapacity to control their own invention, falling into an image of wackiness, as critic Eberl points out, *2001* presents the audience with "the struggle of humanity against artificial intelligence—a struggle that humanity has brought on itself and must endure" (Eberl 242). Pat J. Gehrke and G. L. Ercolinihene's opinion on the anti-humanism in *2001* makes me consider the time travel in *2001*, which is not conducted by the protagonist's will, anti-human. For Pat J. Gehrke and G. L. Ercolinihene, "people might find in the rejection of reason and truth a sort of absolute humanism where the will of the human, unencumbered by any form of logic or prior truths, becomes the creator and measure of all things. Nonetheless, in Kubrick's films, the characters are driven by something quite the opposite of an absolute will" (Gehrke & Eroclini 108). Additionally, critics also indicate that *2001* is inhuman with

the presentation of the video watching scene where Dr. Poole shows his boredom while watching the birthday blessing video sent from their parents on the Earth. The American film director Tim Hunter claims that “Poole seems no longer their child while greeting a televised birthday message from his parents on Earth with complete lack of interest” (Hunter).

Body

### The Theme of Human Transcendence

*2001* and *Interstellar* are the films depicting different stories of human beings leaving Earth to conduct a certain space mission; however, what distinguishes *2001* and *Interstellar* from the other space exploration sci-fi films, enabling them to link with each other is the fact that *2001* and *Interstellar* both touch on the same theme of “human transcendence” with the help from mysterious beings, who are not modern humans. According to Cambridge Dictionary, the meaning of the verb transcend is to “go further, rise above, or be more important or better than something, especially a limit (transcend).” Because of the aids from the mystical beings, the man —David Bowman in *2001* and the human beings in *Interstellar* both “transcend their limits” and survive; however, in *2001*, the mysterious beings are aliens, and in *Interstellar*, the mysterious beings happen to be evolved humans.

In *The History of Science Fiction*, Adam Roberts argues that the theme of the transcendence of humanity in *2001* is about humanity being uplifted with the help of aliens into a higher form of being (Roberts 270). In the end of *2001*, Bowman detaches himself from the human form and is turned into a higher form of being —“Star Child” by the power of the black monolith, the evidence of extraterrestrial life. In *2001*, David Bowman passes through the corridor of speckles of light, transported to a French baroque style room where he somehow turns into a dying old man. Bowman is supposed to die of old age; nevertheless, with the help of the power of the monolith, Bowman transforms his human physical and biological form into a higher form of being, fleeing from the death and reborn as an unworldly higher species— a glowing and translucent planet-size infant. However, the transcendence in *2001* is anti-human since it shows that while facing the dying situation, the man is not capable of saving himself; in order to survive, he has to depend on the power of the higher order of being.

Rather than alien species, in *Interstellar*, the mystical beings are the fifth-dimensional beings, as known as the humans who've evolved beyond the four dimensions. Due to the help from the evolved humans, humans in *Interstellar* transcend their limits on their knowledge of gravity, escaping from the fate of being adrift. Similar to the dying man — Bowman in *2001*, the human beings in *Interstellar* are also facing the dying-out crisis. In *Interstellar*, the Earth is withering and humans are in the extreme danger of extinction because of the blight. The blight ravages almost all the remaining food sources on the Earth, putting more than half of the world's human population to death. However, unlike what the black monolith does to the man in *2001*, the evolved human beings in *Interstellar* do not directly interfere humans' survival, helping humans escape from extinction by transcending their physical limit and evolving them into a higher form of being; instead, they give humans an opportunity to rescue themselves. The evolved human beings create and place a wormhole nearby the Earth, which is a getaway to another galaxy, enabling humans to leave the withering Earth for other inhabitable planets. The evolved human beings also create a three-dimensional tesseract in a fifth-dimensional space for Cooper to get and send the crucial quantum data to his daughter, who later uses the data to save the humans on the Earth.

Although *2001* and *Interstellar* share the same theme of human transcendence, *Interstellar* continues developing the theme, presenting a more human story with a human solution. Without being turned into another kind of creature, the humans in *Interstellar* transcend their knowledge with their own efforts and the aid from “they,” some evolved human beings according to Cooper, surviving the crisis and remaining “humans” at the end of the film.

### The Pattern of the Plot

In dealing with stories of human transcendence, it follows the same pattern as *2001*'s core chapter —“Jupiter Mission 18 Months Later,” which involves message from the unknown, human quest, assistance and betrayal, and time travel as the ultimate solution. However, *Interstellar* has a far more convoluted plot involving multiple time and space travels, which is also a pattern of humans betraying, or reaching out to, one another.

To start with, the space explorations of *Interstellar* and “Jupiter Mission” are both indirectly driven by the instruction of the mystical beings. In “Jupiter mission,” due to the fact that the mysterious alien monolith buried below the lunar surface sends out a strong emission aimed at Jupiter, Dr. Frank Poole, Dave Bowman and other hibernating astronauts are thus sent to Jupiter for investigating the connection between Jupiter and the monolith; in *Interstellar*, humans decide to launch the spaceship, carrying out the space exploration because they find a wormhole placed by the mystical fifth-dimensional beings, which gives them a chance to leave the dying Earth for another habitable planet. However, *2001* identifies the mystical beings as aliens, while *Interstellar* gives the mysterious fifth-dimensional beings a human-related identity — people who’ve evolved beyond the four dimensions. Unlike *2001* giving out a message that humans would be led by aliens, through Cooper, *Interstellar* unveils the identity of the mysterious beings in the end of the film, informing the audience that humans would be guided by “ourselves.”

After the protagonists leave the Earth to conduct the space missions, both films involve a betrayal scene where the protagonist is betrayed by their partner and nearly killed by him. However, in *2001* the partner betraying the protagonist appears to be a machine, which is programmed by the scientists to see the mission as topmost important, while in *Interstellar*, it is a scientist who is asked to place the mission over his life; nevertheless, fails to fulfill the pledge to complete the mission due to his human instinct. In *2001*, HAL 9000, betrays humans, trying to murder Bowman, Poole, and the hibernating crew members when he finds out the truth that Poole and Bowman are considering disconnecting him to stop him from executing the mission. For the betrayer, Dr Mann in *Interstellar*; he is the most extraordinary scientist of the Lazarus mission, and just as HAL9000, Dr. Mann is also given a mission which he needs to accomplish. Nevertheless, out of Mann's unwillingness to die alone on the inhabitable planet, he betrays other scientists, forging the fake data and sending out the signal to lead the protagonist and other scientists to the inhabitable planet for saving him. In *2001*, HAL betrays the protagonist since he is a machine programmed to do anything, including killing humans, just for accomplishing the task. However, Dr. Mann in *Interstellar* betrays because he is not a machine devised only for accomplishing the given tasks, and even though he is an excellent scientist, he is still a human who cannot abandon his human instinct to survive and to stay with other people, just as Dr. Mann says to Cooper in the film, “Even

without family, I can promise you that the yearning to be with other people is massively powerful. Our instincts, our emotions, are at the foundations of what makes us human” (*Interstellar* 01:49:02). In *Interstellar*, the betrayal is conducted by a scientist, a human, and furthermore, is based on a reason which is more human.

Last but not least, *2001* and *Interstellar* both include a scene that the protagonist gets sucked in a space corridor, transported to an uncanny space where the protagonist starts his time travel. As mentioned above, for Pat J. Gehrke and G. L. Ercolinihe, the human characters in Kubrick’s film often show a sense of anti-humanism since they are usually subjected to the willpower of the others (Gehrke 108). Based on Pat J. Gehrke and G. L. Ercolinihe’s viewpoint, the time travel scene in *2001* is antihuman because Bowman finds himself subjected to the power of the monolith. In *2001*, it is not Bowman's autonomous will that carries out the time travel. Actually, Bowman doesn't intend to time travel at all, and however, in the uncanny space decorated in French baroque style, he is forced to time travel, aging fast, finally turned into a dying old man lying on the bed. It is obvious that Bowman's time travel is not driven by his own will but the willpower of the aliens. Nevertheless, while traveling through time, Cooper’s mind in *Interstellar* is not interfered by the fifth-dimensional beings. Cooper performs his own will to time travel in the tesseract, and he autonomously creates and measures the way to time travel through the tesseract himself, reaching out and sending the messages to his daughter at various points in time, which clearly shows his human will.

It is interesting to note that despite the plots of *2001* and *Interstellar* are not identical with one another, *Interstellar* runs a very similar plot pattern with the pattern of *2001*’s core plot in terms of the order of the scenes with the similar motifs. However, it is more important to note that though *Interstellar* refers to the plot pattern of *2001*’s, it also uses multiple time and space travels to develop the motifs in *2001*, making *Interstellar* a sequence of human space odysseys for the purpose of saving themselves.

#### Reason behind the Space Exploration

Unlike *Interstellar*, *2001* obliquely refers to space exploration as space race. Stanley Kubrick once satirizes the Cold War fear of a nuclear conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union in *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*,

*which* was released in 1964. When *2001* (1968) was shot, the Cold War were still in the background; nonetheless, this time, instead of the use of the nuclear weapon, the tension over the space race between the U.S and the Soviet Union becomes the point worth noting in *2001*.

In *2001*, it seems that the U.S government sends the astronauts to Jupiter out of their curiosity about the connection between the monolith and Jupiter; however, the reason behind *2001*'s space mission is actually political. Rice points out that at the conference, Dr. Floyd emphasizes the need to create a cover story of an epidemic is to prevent the potential for cultural shock and social disorientation; however, the standing American flag behind Dr. Floyd reveals and accentuates the actual political motive for the cover story, bringing out the fact that the cover story is a primitive drive toward group rivalry and dominance (Rice 41). Due to the fact that the discovery of the monolith is not shared with the public but kept in total secrecy, the public including the USSR, will therefore not doubt the motivation behind the U.S's space mission to Jupiter, and thus consider it merely a simple exploration. However, the real reason behind the U.S's space exploration in *2001* is plausible to win out the "special" space race between the U.S and Soviet, dominating the information of extraterrestrial life.

Nonetheless, the reason behind the space exploration in *Interstellar* is more human since it concerns not only with the rivalry between country and country; instead, it closely hinges on the survival of all human beings. *Interstellar* takes place in the near future where the survival of humanity is severely threatened. Due to the blight, more than half of the world's population has been decimated from famine, and the Earth is dying as well as humans. In *Interstellar*, the reason behind the space exploration is no longer to broaden human's understanding of outer space or to win out over a space competition but to secure humanity's survival by leaving Earth to find another habitable planet. Moreover, it is also significant to note that the reason behind *Interstellar*'s space exploration is also able to resonate with the present time and the nowadays human beings. According to the film "*The Science of Interstellar*," the model for the calamity depicted in *Interstellar* is the dust bowl hitting the Great Plain in the 1930s, which is one of the America's worst man-made ecological disasters (*The Science*). The calamity in the film is not a fair assumption or



imagination, it is actually based on a real 'man-made' catastrophe which happened before and will definitely happen in the future.

The reason behind *Interstellar's* space exploration is more human because it concerns with all human beings; meanwhile, through this reason, *Interstellar* warns the audience about the result of failing to take care of the Earth. In my view, it gives out a message that humans should start caring for our planet to prevent human beings from facing the crisis that the humans encounter in the film.

### The Use of Robot

Different from the robot HAL9000 in *2001*, however TARS is more humanized and he performs as a competent assistant that follows human orders, helping humans overcome various difficulties. With the use of TARS, the humans in *Interstellar* are able to break through their original limits, becoming a more powerful existence.

In *2001*, the human scientists on the spaceship fall into an image of wackiness with the use of HAL 9000 since they are depicted to be inferior to HAL, who is a machine but more dominant than humans. As discussed above, *2001* presents the struggle of humanity against artificial intelligence, which results from human scientists' over-dependence on HAL, and this over-dependence directly causes the circumstance that humans cannot exercise total control over HAL (Eberl 242). HAL's dominance over humans can be clearly observed in the confrontation between HAL and the humans on the spaceship. During the confrontation, Bowman and Poole cannot easily make the decision of turning off HAL when they notice HAL is malfunctioning because their fates are dominated by HAL to some degree. The humans' fates are controlled by HAL, for HAL is the brain and the central nervous system of *Discovery*, controlling every single aspect of spaceship's operations; if HAL is turned off, they will need to make massive efforts to maintain the operation of the ship. However, with the dominance of the ship, HAL is able to threaten humans' lives by manipulating the EVA pod of the spaceship to kill Poole; locking Bowman out of the ship and turning off the life supporting system of hibernating astronauts.

Conversely, the image of human scientists in *Interstellar* are superior to the robot due to the use of TARS, who is more humanized than HAL; nonetheless, is still a controlled

machine conducting tasks ranging from piloting to data collection for humans. The most obvious example showing TARS is a fully controlled robot is TARS' acceptance of humans' inputs to alter its settings. For instance, humans are able to manipulate TARS' honesty parameter from 0 to 100, and furthermore, to change his personal traits of being witty, sarcastic, or humorous for making him a better-suited companion. Aside from merely being a controllable machine, TARS in *Interstellar* takes a crucial role enabling humans to survive at the end of the film. When Cooper and TARS are stuck in the tesseract, TARS becomes a liaison between Cooper and the quantum data, taking charge of translating the data into Morse for Cooper to send the data to his daughter. In spite of the fact that Cooper figures out the way to contact Murph himself, Cooper would not be able to save the human beings on the Earth if TARS was not there since Cooper as a human, is not capable getting the quantum data in the tesseract, much less translate the data into Morse.

Although *2001* and *Interstellar* both feature intelligent robots, with the different use of the robot, the two films give out distinct pictures of humans. With HAL, a dominant robot character, the human scientists in *2001* are degraded, turned into a relatively inferior existence; however, the scientists in *Interstellar* show human dominance over the machine, presenting a positive potential for humans' competence to control their own creation, and with the help from the robotic assistant, humans are able to achieve more things that they wouldn't have been able to, and humans in *Interstellar* are thus placed in a more powerful image.

### The Human Relation

The last but not the least important factor of being "human" is how one maintains one's family relations. *2001* and *Interstellar* both deal with the human relation in the family and among scientists; additionally, *Interstellar* also emphasizes on the human relation with humans in the past and in the future. Nevertheless, the two films show extremely different tones of human relation. The human relation in *2001* is cold and aloof or even inhuman, while in *Interstellar*, the human relation is strong and tight, which makes *Interstellar* a space odyssey more human than *2001* from the outset.

In *2001*, the human relation in the family and among scientists are both alienated. *2001* presents two scenes relevant to the interactions between the characters and their family

members; the first one is Dr. Heywood Floyd's video-calling scene, which shows a cold family relation between Dr. Floyd and his daughter. During the conversation, instead of seizing the chance to talk with her lovely one distant far away from him, Dr. Heywood seems to pay no attention to the chatting with his daughter, Squirt. Actually, Dr. Heywood's call is not for Squirt from the starting point, Squirt just accidentally picks up the phone call, and Floyd is thus forced to talk with Squirt about her birthday, which he probably would not know of if Squirt did not remind him. While having the chatting, it seems that he just wants to over the conversation as soon as possible, asking Squirt to tell his wife that he has telephoned already. In the essay "2001: A Cold Descent," the author Mark Crispin Miller argues that Dr. Heywood's perfunctory conversation with his daughter is the evidence that he betrays the managerial approach to family relation because the content of the conversation shows that he can't understand the loss in his family which results from his absence (Miller 13). The second scene related to the human relation in family involves Dr. Frank Poole watching a transmission sent by his parents on the Earth. Upon seeing his parents on the screen telling him the events they've experienced in the recent days, Poole doesn't hold any interest in them; he just emotionlessly and inhumanly stares at the screen, seeing his parents telling their stories and wishing him a happy birthday without a hint of a smile on his face. In most human cultures, birthday is worth celebrating and supposed to be a day brimming with love; nevertheless, the two "happy birthday scenes" in *2001* show no love but a withering relationship of humanity.

*Interstellar* on the other hand depicts the solid and intimate human relation in the family through the similar message-watching scenes. After awaking from the fourteen-month hibernation, Cooper views about a year's worth of messages, gladly seeing his son talking about his learning situation; nevertheless, feeling depressed that his daughter refuses to talk to him at the end of the video. In the next message-watching scene, more than two decades have passed after Cooper undergoes the failure on Miller's planet. Cooper sits in front of the video screen, receiving the joy, love, and heartbreak spanning 23 years. Cooper's face is wreathing with smiles while his 17-year-old son Tom shows him a picture of the girl he believes is the right girl for him; Cooper's eyes are filling with tears as Tom in his middle age tells him that Cooper's father-in-law died a week ago and was buried next to his grandson. When Murth shows up on the screen, telling him she is the same age he was when he left the

Earth and it is the right time for him to go back, Cooper breaks down because he understands he has failed to fulfill his promise to return. Rather than viewing the transmission indifferently as Poole does in *2001*, Cooper goes through the emotions of happiness, sadness, and regret upon watching the messages from the Earth. Furthermore, very different from Dr. Floyd in *2001*, Cooper fully understands the cost of his disappearance in his family, feeling sorry for what his son and daughter have missed out over these years. On the other side of the galaxy, when Cooper is not able to send out messages, his son and daughter still talk to the camera, sending messages to Cooper without knowing whether Cooper is dead or not. Cooper's children efforts of sending out the messages and Cooper's outpourings of his emotions to the messages are the performances of close human relation strongly bonded by love, and this close humans' attachment just becomes the gold key to the humanity's survival in *Interstellar* due to the fact that it is Cooper's strong relation with his daughter lets him take a leap of faith, sending the quantum data to the seconds hand of the watch, which Murth eventually picks up out of her longing for her father.

In addition to showing the different tones of family relationship, *2001* and *Interstellar* also display two extremes of human relation when depicting the interactions between protagonists and their crew members. Mark Crispin Miller argues that in *2001*, though Bowman and Poole are partners and a pair identical; nonetheless, they dissociated themselves from one another, showing the interactions which can barely be seen (Miller 134). With little human interaction, the only two "active" astronauts on the spaceship, who are supposed to show intimate partnership, establish an indifferent relationship. People might argue the warm comradeship can be observed when Bowman tries to rescue Poole dying in space; however, Bowman shows no emotion during the rescuing process, which results in the situation that he is more like picking up a garbage waiting to be recycled rather than saving his partner important to him.

In contrast, it is obvious that the characters in *Interstellar* present near comradeship between each other in the film. For instance, Cooper shows care to Romilly and gives him a headphone playing sounds of the Earth for soothing Romilly's anxiousness of staying in the spaceship; Cooper and Amelia grieve because they lose Doyle, who was trying to save Amelia but lost his own life while conducting the mission on the water planet; Amelia rushes to Cooper to rescue him with worry when Cooper's helmet visor was broken by Mann, which

would cause him to suffocate and die, and it is also this firm comradeship that results in the ending of *Interstellar* when Cooper determines to leave the space station, hopping on the spaceship in search of Brand, who has landed on a desolate but habitable planet to start colonization all by herself.

Apart from the human relation in the family and among scientists, *Interstellar* also draws audience's attention to the human relation with humans in the past and in the future. In the end of *Interstellar*, it has been almost 90 years since the protagonist left the Earth, and humans remaining on the Earth have already solved the gravity equation, successfully leaving the Earth and living on the space station. Cooper, the representation of humans in the past is saved by the future space rangers when he is drifting in space; he later wakes up in a space station beyond Earth, receiving greeting and help from the people living in the future. The scene shows a connection between the humans in the past and in the future, displaying a sense that the human relation will not be washed out as time goes by; also, Cooper's belief in the future humans offering help just suggests hope for days to come. Furthermore, in the future, humans no longer live on the Earth but the space stations orbiting in space; however they do not leave their past behind; instead, with the monuments for the Lazarus Team and Endurance; with Cooper's household restored as a museum and the TV screens filled with elders recounting their stories of the disaster and their survival, future humans connect themselves to the past, remembering what the humans in the past did for them and why humans were forced to leave the mother Earth.

Compared *Interstellar* with *2001*, though *Interstellar* reaches farther beyond in time and space, human relations— no matter in family, among scientists, and between the humans in the past and in the future are not thus broken up; on the contrary, with the close attachment to one another, the human relation in *Interstellar* is still near and tight. Because of such a strong human relation, humans in *Interstellar* are able to lead each other out of the dark, marching toward the bright future with hope.

## Conclusion

*Interstellar* (2014) can be regarded as a contemporary and more optimistic version of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) since it adopts *2001*'s theme with *2001*'s plot pattern, sharing

the similar motifs of the use of robot, human connection in the family, among scientists through a space exploration. However, *Interstellar* is a human version of *2001* due to the fact that a far cry from *2001*, in *Interstellar*, the space exploration is not only conducted for the rivalry between countries but for the survival of all human beings; with the help from their controllable robots, human scientists in *Interstellar* are powerful but not a group of people waiting to be surpassed, and most importantly, the relation between humans in *Interstellar* is not scattered and withering but strong, deep and close-connected.

Both *2001* and *Interstellar* not only portray the story of a space exploration but meanwhile, raise the similar question about who or what leads to humans' desperate situation, and what the possible solutions could be? *2001* illustrates a future where human will survive by evolving into a higher form of being, while *Interstellar* offers a rather human answer. In *Interstellar*, humans are exposed to desperate circumstances because of the man-made catastrophe —blight and the selfish human instinct as performed by Dr. Mann; nevertheless, without monolith, alien and evolution, humans still make and correct mistakes, survive, conquer and thrive. In *Interstellar*, who will save us out of the desperate situations? It is us, humans with strong attachment to and connections with one another.

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