

Year 2021 Nothing New: Re-evaluating the Novel 2001: A Space Odyssey

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Abstract

In this article, the themes of the novel *A Space Odyssey* (1968) and how these themes are relevant to the context of the 1960s are analysed. Secondly, the relationship among the themes of the novel, the reader's expectations and the reason for the popularity of the novel is scrutinized. As a result, it is claimed that the novel (thus, Clarke) - as a product of popular science fiction - successfully reaches popularity through reading and responding to the minds of the 1960s contemporary readers who are bewildered by the recent changes in the world. However, the calendars show the year 2021 but the media, Hollywood, the public and scientific researchers still look for extra-terrestrial life, aliens, Mars and other possible artificial and robotic intelligence. It is a truth that the projections may occur in a long period of time but unlike the popular opinion since the publication of the novel and the film, there seems no tremendous development for 60 years. It is true that some of the futuristic guesses and technologies came alive from the novel and the movie, however, thinking about space travel, artificial intelligence, nuclear warfare and the dystopian images of the world remain unchanged in basic level with a few exceptions in the internet technologies.

Key words: Sci-fi, A. C. Clarke, Popular Novel, English Literature

Yıl 2021 Yeni Bir Durum Yok: 2001 Bir Uzay Destanı Romanının Yeniden Değerlendirmesi

Öz

Bu makalede, Türkçeye *2001: Bir Uzay Destanı* olarak tercüme edilen ve romanından daha çok filmi ile tanınan *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) romanının temaları ve bu temaların 1960'ların kültürel ve teknolojik bağlamıyla nasıl ilgili olduğu analiz edilmiştir. İkincisi, romanın temaları, okuyucunun beklentileri ve romanın popülaritesinin nedeni arasındaki ilişki incelenmiştir. Popüler bilim kurgunun bir ürünü olan roman, dünyadaki son değişikliklere karşı oldukça şaşkın durumda olan 1960'ların okuyucularının zihinlerini okuyarak ve akıllarındaki soruları yanıtlayarak nasıl popüler olduğu incelenmektedir. Bununla birlikte, romandaki tahminler çok etkili görünse de takvimler 2021 yılını göstermesine rağmen medya, Hollywood, kamuoyu ve bilimsel araştırmalar hala dünya dışı yaşamı, uzaylıları, Mars'ı ve diğer olası yapay ve robotik zekayı merak etmekte ve hala uzak bir ihtimal olarak görmektedir. Günümüz teknolojik ilerleme hızında romanın tahminlerinin ve projeksiyonlarının uzun bir süre içinde gerçekleşebileceği bir gerçektir, ancak romanın ve filmin yayınlanmasından bu yana popüler görüşün aksine, 60 yıldır muazzam bir gelişme görülmemektedir. Özellikle bazı fütüristik tahminlerin ve teknolojilerin romandan ve filminden ilham alarak hayata geldiği doğrudur, ancak uzay yolculuğu, yapay zekâ, nükleer savaş ve dünyanın karamsar gelecek görüntüleri hakkında temel felsefi tartışmalar birkaç istisna dışında hala devam etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bilim-kurgu, A. C. Clarke, Popüler Roman, İngiliz Edebiyatı

A Space Odyssey is a popular science fiction novel published in 1968 by Arthur C Clarke. Contrary to tradition, the novel was based on a screenplay rather than the way around. Moreover, the previous stories of Clarke were partly the basis of the novel's story; these were *Sentinel of Eternity* (1951) and *Encounter in the Dawn* (Aldiss and Wingrove, 1986: 376). Clarke and Stanley Kubrick cooperated in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1964. After their film, Clarke wrote a novel with the same name and published it in 1968. The publication date is remarkable because one year later man stepped on the moon for the first time. The novel is more complex than the screenplay and some details are rearranged. Moreover, it is considered as an attempt to fill in the questions raised by the film. In this article, the themes of *A Space Odyssey* and how these themes are relevant to the context of the 1960s are analysed. Secondly, the relationship among the themes of the novel, the reader's expectations and the reason for the popularity of the novel is scrutinized. As a result, it is claimed that the novel (thus, Clarke) - as a product of popular science fiction - successfully reaches popularity through reading and responding to the minds of the contemporary readers who are bewildered by the recent changes in the world.

A Space Odyssey owes much of its popularity to the socio-political context of 1960s United States and the film with the same name (James and Mendlesohn, 2003). The novel successfully included the themes which the people were curious about at that time. Clive Bloom claims that Clarke is one of the writers who capture the general public's imagination in print (2008: 234). The people were looking for answers to the questions such as: Is there extra-terrestrial life? Is it possible to live on the moon or any other planet? How did humanity and 'human' begin? Is it possible to colonize the moon and space? Moreover, the 1960s was a post-war period in which the the US and USSR were in a cold war which included the races of technology, weaponry and espionage. The technological race was considerably influential in the fields of space discoveries, nuclear weapons and spying. Therefore, people also wondered: What if the USA and USSR go into war with nuclear weapons? Who would go to space first? These questions are fine examples of how a bestseller exploits the curiosity and emotions of its readers and reach popularity. However, the years passed by and we are now in 2021. It is obvious that there's nothing new and the search for aliens and life on mars still go on.

Another important factor that makes *A Space Odyssey* a trademark in literature is the talent of its writer. Clarke was a pioneer in this genre along with Asimov, Heinlein, Roy Bradbury, Philip K. Dick and Kurt Vonnegut in the 1950s and 60s (Aldiss and Wingrove: 1986: 306-8). Arthur Clarke was a prominent writer who practised the genre beforehand with various short stories that include vivid imaginary insights into the future and technology. In fact, Clarke was named by the press as the "prophet of the space age" and a member of the Golden Age of postmodern science fiction (Seed: 2005: 5, 243). For his introduction of unique technologies in the novel Clarke says that: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (Aldiss and Wingrove, 1986: 281). The narration of Clarke and his ideas in the novel provide *A Space Odyssey* with endurance which is the most important criteria for a work of art to become popular. Popular fiction is generally read for escapist purposes; however, the novel offers the reader more than spending time and entertainment. The reader may find serious subject matters in the novel such as the roots of life on earth, space technologies and travel and extra-terrestrial life. *A Space Odyssey* keeps its reader with the times and the conversation in daily life and popular debates. Each time you read it you may find the basics of today's recurrent themes in films, novels and conversations. Of course, this was a fantastic idea for the 1960s reader, now it won't be that

interesting because the insights into the feature of the novel stay unexplored and unanswered up today.

McCracken (1998) claims that popular fiction deals with the reader's sense of self who is disoriented by the pressures of modernity. *A Space Odyssey* is a perfect example of this situation; that it offers its readers with explanations on how humanity began and that there is extra-terrestrial intelligence which are more advanced and better evolved than the human. In an age when humankind is distressed by world wars, nuclear weapons, unique and hazardous technological advancements, intense political disputes and the possibility of space travel, the novel comes up with possible solutions and warnings for the contemporary reader. Each of these disruptions has a theme or symbol attached to them in the novel serving as explanations for the reader. In addition to these, McCracken also claims that a bestseller provides the readers' lives with the plots and heroes they lack and deals with widespread hopes and fears (1998: 2). Firstly, the readers are provided with three plots in which there is a hero and adventurous events. Moon-watcher is evolved into a human, Floyd is a scientist and an astronaut going to the moon on which settles a human colony and Bowman is a charismatic hero who is transformed into a star child after struggles with artificial intelligence. Their stories are exciting and progressive at the same time; responding to the curiosities about evolution, space technology and aliens. Secondly, *A Space Odyssey* deals with the hopes and fears of the contemporary readers as an ideal work of popular fiction should do. The hope for the correct answers of the origins of life, space travel and alien intelligence, 'nuclear peace' and technological advancements are present in the novel. Besides, the fears of the readers are targeted as well. The fear of nuclear war, isolation and death in space and robots taking control are the themes of the novel which are primary proofs of its exploitation of the contemporary reader. In parallel to these functions Clarke says that his aim in his writings is a "sense of wonder" (Seed, 2005: 5). More than an escape into fantasy, *A Space Odyssey* provides some philosophical answers to the basic questions of humankind (Sanders, 2008: 129-33).

The futuristic title of *A Space Odyssey* is promising: '2001' and 'space' conveys that the novel is set in future and in space, while 'Odyssey' promises an epic-heroic action-packed story. Bowman, who survives the attack of artificial intelligence (HAL), is transformed into a 'star child' and becomes an eternal being and saves the world from nuclear destruction. These should be the attributes of a hero and reasons why Clarke resembled his work to a classical epic story. Like, *Odyssey* his novel also became a popular trademark not only in science-fiction but also in the film industry and space researches. Films and novels on artificial intelligence, robotics, space and biotechnologies followed the tradition into the 21st century. However, rather than an optimistic outlook, the predictions and themes in the movies, books and series changed into dystopias where the future of the human race is threatened by the artificial intelligence which the human itself created for advancements and ease of life and bragged about.

A Space Odyssey includes and carries out the standard functions of popular fiction listed by McCracken. He states that the function of a popular narrative is to show the reader that a better, more fulfilled life is possible, to meet modernity's need to colonize the future and project new worlds for ourselves (1998: 14). Considering the functions mentioned, with the story of Bowman, *A Space Odyssey* shows us that a better life is possible with the last stage of evolution. Bowman evolves into the final stage of the man-ape: 'Star Child'. He has no matter and body but is an eternal intelligent being with supernatural powers and without the stress of being human, and less sophisticated than the aliens. From Moon Watcher to

eternal being, the reader is promised an ultimate evolution where no ageing, war, disputes and conflicts occur. Secondly, *A Space Odyssey* literally colonized the moon for humankind. Half of the moon is run by the US and the other half by USSR which is today's Russia. In the novel, the moon is colonized by earthlings and they travel back and forth and live on the moon. Thirdly, the novel projects its own version of worlds: the man-ape world, the world on the moon and the world behind the stargate.

A Space Odyssey fits into the genre of popular fiction with the most precise and to-the-point limits. According to McCracken, a popular science-fiction novel should include these themes: the fantasy of alien encounter, the increasing relationship between humanity and technology, borderlines between humanity and nature and limits of time and space (1998: 102). *A Space Odyssey's* plot is a complete pursuit of an alien encounter. The black slabs in the period of man-apes, on the moon and on Japetus are considered as proofs for extra-terrestrial intelligence. The star child is also a fantastic vision of an alternate alien. Technology is the second important theme in *A Space Odyssey*; the developments in technology represented by HAL, space travel and various details of life in space and shuttles. The borders between humanity and nature are respectively developed by the plot of the novel. First, man-apes and the nature they live in are philosophically analysed by the novel. Man-apes are slaves to nature. For example, a leopard feeds on man-apes (Clarke and Kubrick, 1968: 8). Secondly, the nature of space travel is mentioned by giving examples of the details of space travel and how the human body survived during space travel and on the moon. Thirdly, the transformation of Bowman inside the star-gate and his turning into a bodiless eternal light is a perfect example of how the novel analyses the borders between humanity and nature. This last phenomenon is a visionary opinion on the limits of time and space as well. During the transformation, Bowman realizes that time stopped (Clarke and Kubrick, 1968: 233) and both the star-gate and Bowman's eternal being is a violation of conventional time and space theorised by physical laws.

The context of 1960s and readers' expectations from the novel are important for analysing the popularity of the novel (Broderick, 1995: 16-19). During 1960s, arguments on space travel increased and also the race between the US and USSR were apparent both in politics and space researches. The readers were curious about the possibilities of space travel and colonization of the moon. The details on the space travel of Floyd and his landing on the colony on the moon are great visionary explanations possible for the reader. They are pretty convincing technological advancements and concepts. The journey to Saturn is another perfect example of how the novel responded to the readers' expectations raised by the recent developments and especially by the film. The astronaut suits, their lives in the shuttle, their missions and the nature of space travel are well documented in the book. Details on how they feed, sleep, interact, repair and spend time are conveyed by Clarke's visionary and fantastic insights. The media and the race between the US and USSR are also present in the novel. Floyd joins a press meeting and avoids the questions on the possibility of extra-terrestrial intelligence. Moreover, the mission centre for Discovery demands from Bowman that he should write a plausible report for the press explaining the status of the research. Dr Floyd's Russian friend Moisevitch is a clear representation of the race and relationship between The US and USSR. Floyd does not give details to Moisevitch about the epidemic in the US side of the moon (Clarke and Kubrick, 1968: 52). Moisevitch mentions TMA-1; implying that he knows that something is wrong. Moreover, the Chinese are also mentioned in the story as a possible suspect for the magnetic disturbance in TMA-1 and the nuclear race (1968: 40). Today in 2021, the moon projects and travels, space colonization and race among the nations are still

debated on the news, media and publications. It cannot be said that there are novel and primary advancements.

The threat of nuclear war and destruction is another subject matter of *A Space Odyssey*. As mentioned before in the paper, after the US dropped atomic bombs on Japan, the nuclear weapon race started among the powerful nations of the world. The US and USSR were involved in The Cuban Missile Crisis in which the US threatened to bomb Cuba a Soviet comrade, while USSR threatened Turkey a US ally. Moreover, people at the time were curious about where this conflict was leading to. In the middle of all these events, *A Space Odyssey* provided insights into the possibilities and dangers of a nuclear weaponry race. In the first parts of the book man-apes begin their advancements with the tools and, at the end of the book Bowman – who is now a Star Child – stops the nuclear warheads in the air. The evolutionary relationship between man and tools has now become very dangerous. Man-apes used tools to kill other animals and apes, now he invented nuclear weapons which are far more destructive. In addition to these events, Clarke states in the book that as long as man invented new tools and technologies “he was living on borrowed time” (1968: 36). Nowadays, after the confrontations of Russia and USA, and of course North Korea’s threats of nuclear missiles, the debate stays the same and status quo.

Another theme in the novel which is much debated at the time of its publication is the advancements in technology especially in the field of robotics and artificial intelligence. Clarke is especially talented in reflecting these advancements. Bloom says that Clarke’s style is “typified by a fidelity and precision regarding the various scientific topics with which his stories deal” (2008: 234). The readers’ emotions and horrors are exploited by HAL - a computer that developed emotions and intelligence - and the slabs on earth, the moon and Japetus. HAL is a symbol of how far technology can develop. He is a computer responding to conversations and is responsible for programming a journey to Saturn. He feels responsible for keeping information from the astronauts in the shuttle and tries to warn them of fake errors in the communication system. When threatened by Bowman, HAL murders Poole and other hibernating astronauts (Clarke and Kubrick, 1968: 168). HAL is an important symbol in the novel. He can be considered as the Frankenstein of the 20th century. He was ‘built’ in the laboratories by scientists who did not expect that the computer would start feeling emotions and act independently. He develops features similar to man. What kind of technologies does *A Space Odyssey* imagine? Clavius Base on the moon is an outer space settlement that makes it possible for humankind to live in space. It provides air and necessary protection. Newspad is another technology (1968: 59). Floyd reads news on the machine which is today’s tablets. The black slabs make horrific sounds and they add suspense to the story as well as HAL’s murders in the space.

In conclusion, *A Space Odyssey* successfully reaches popularity through reading and responding to the minds of contemporary readers who are bewildered by the recent changes in the world. *A Space Odyssey* owes much of its popularity to the socio-political context of 1960s and a member of the Golden Age of postmodern science fiction. In an age when humankind is distressed by world wars, nuclear weapons, unique and hazardous technological advancements, intense political disputes and the possibility of space travel, the novel comes up with possible solutions and warnings for the contemporary reader. Each of these disruptions has a theme or symbol attached to them in the novel serving as explanations for the reader. *A Space Odyssey* fits into the genre of popular fiction with the most precise and to-the-point limits. It is true that some of the futuristic guesses and technologies came alive from the novel and the movie, however, thinking about the

space travel, artificial intelligence, nuclear warfare and the dystopian images of the world remain unchanged in basic level with a few exceptions in the internet technologies. The year 2021 proved a few of the prophecies to come alive, though the philosophical permutations and possibilities on the human-robot-artificial intelligence, time travel and space colonization have not changed at all.

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