

Phoning home again

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

While it may be coincidental that two of the most famous English-language movies of all time--Steven Spielberg's beloved *E.T.--The Extra-Terrestrial* and Stanley Kubrick's revered *2001: A Space Odyssey*--are being rereleased in the same year, it is probably no coincidence that *E.T.* opened the weekend before Easter. It remains, two decades after its initial release, the most commercially successful "religious" movie of all time.

Of course, such a declaration begs the question of what constitutes a "religious" film. It's not religious in any conventional sense, but to those in search of a good old-fashioned Christ figure, *E.T.* is very accessible, especially since Spielberg, working closely with writer Melissa Mathison, seemed intent on making this tale of spiritual healing extremely kid-friendly. Seeing it again after 20 years (the new version has only a few minor cosmetic alterations), I found myself impressed again by the work, though also reminded of its limitations.

It's a darker tale than I remembered--the darkness accentuated by the bleak and shadowy cinematography of Allen Daviau. Elliot (Henry Thomas), the young boy who finds and hides *E.T.* from the dreaded "men with keys" (we don't see their faces at first), is depressed because of his parents' recent divorce. For him, the encounter with *E.T.* is like the conjuring up of an imaginary friend or finding a stray mutt in the neighborhood ("Can I keep him, mom? Can I?"). This desperate quality in Elliot gives the film gravity, much as the theme of obsession fuels the action in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1978), which remains the best of Spielberg's fantasy films.

On the negative side, the script seems unoriginal, tacked together from any number of fables, fairy tales and movies dealing with childhood loneliness, the power of friendship and the gradual acceptance of responsibility.

But the film is a brave attempt to bring spiritual themes to the movie masses. The little alien is able to heal with just a touch of his hand (a point that was driven home in the movie's poster, which played off Michelangelo's hand of God reaching out to

Adam). E.T. also sacrifices himself for humanity (represented by Elliot, who is dying next to his new friend) before being resurrected via a glowing "sacred heart." At the end, E.T. ascends back to the heavens, after reminding Elliot that he will always be with him.

If *E.T.* celebrates human connection to a higher power, *2001* deals with humanity's fall from grace, while holding out the idea that it is not too late to reconfigure ourselves in God's image. Unlike *E.T.*, which boasts a cornucopia of religious images, *2001* limits itself to one--the powerful and mysterious black monolith. We first see it during the famous "Dawn of Man" sequence, in which it "teaches" one of the apes how to use a weapon to defeat his enemy, and later on the moon and on Jupiter, each time bringing death and destruction.

The monolith is a high-tech tree of knowledge, which humans continually use for evil instead of good. But with the appearance of the famous "space baby," which follows soon after the painful disconnection of the computer HAL ("I'm afraid, Dave"), Kubrick seems to be suggesting that from the ashes perhaps rebirth is possible, even without a metaphoric second coming.

E.T. is no more a great movie than an ambitious buffet can be called a great meal. *2001* remains an overwhelming cinematic delicacy that can and should be savored again and again. Both films teach that a higher power looms over us and inside us, but that it is up to us to figure out the path to our ultimate destination.