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Film Analysis: *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*

by Andy Dameron

(Honors English 1135)

The Assignment: Students selected a film and viewed it repeatedly and then isolated specific scenes for careful study. Research involved the reviews, creative process, and social context of the film. Their assessment of the film's effectiveness concluded the paper.

Many films attempt to tackle social issues, especially those dealing with the military, yet fail to discuss them in the approachable, thought provoking way that Stanley Kubrick's movie, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, does. Kubrick addresses his issues with any country's development and possession of the atomic bomb through incredible caricatures of US and national government and military officials and policies; yet he does not do it in a directly aggressive way. Kubrick's sly story and character driven points are incredibly effective in expressing a sense of disdain towards the world's policies on nuclear weapon possession and deployment, which had an intense effect on audience in 1964 and continues to be a relevant argument today.

The extremely comedic nature of the film allows the audience to relax and take in the story and have fun, or as Elaine Dundy states in her 1963 interview with Kubrick, "You do laugh – at moments you laugh out loud reading it, but all time it never lets you stop thinking, 'Yes, this could happen'" (Phillips, 9). This concept of being able to laugh and have a good time while still thinking that the events portrayed in the film could actually occur makes for an entertaining and thought provoking movie, and that is just what this film did; it made people think, and continues to make people think, about the repercussions of nuclear warfare. In the February 16, 1964 issue of the *New York Times*, Dana B. Hopkins writes a letter to the editor stating, "Thanks to [Kubrick's] integrity and talent we have been given not only entertainment but truth as well" (Hopkins, X7), expressing a feeling that Kubrick's film is more than just entertainment, and that it does have something to say and succeeds in doing so. People not only saw Kubrick's notions of poor planning on humanity's part for developing an atomic device, but they agreed as well. In another letter to the editor in the same 1964 issue of the *New York Times*, Ruth Cain sums up Kubrick's achievement by stating, "[Kubrick] is ridiculing the human race – all of us, no exceptions – for getting itself into the ludicrous situation where we busily maintain the Doomsday Machine that will probably destroy us" (Cain, X7). Viewers connected with Kubrick's film, and believed it, which yielded a \$9.164 million box office total gross, according to leesmovieinfo.net. The film also went "on to break all attendance records across the US and, by the end of the year, had earned a place in *Variety's* list of All- Time Top Grossers" (Goodchild, xix).

Although the viewers received the film very well, critics were not as receptive and, at times, were quite hostile in their responses to the film. In one review, Bosley Crowther asserts that "the trouble with it as a thesis for mordant satire in a film is that it is based more on wild imagination than on basically rational truths" (Crowther, X1). Crowther does not believe, like the viewers do, that anything in the film is the slightest bit possible. However, Kubrick does not intend on making the viewer believe in what he is expressing. He, instead, is intend on conveying the "impact the original idea makes on [him] in the first place" (Phillips, 14). Kubrick seems to only be interested in expressing his own views as opposed to convincing others to feel the same way, which is what Crowther seems to miss in his criticism of the film. Whether viewers buy into it or not is not

Kubrick's intend for the film, but rather, it is to provide his viewpoint on a given situation; in this case, on the arms race and the conflict with Russia at the time.

The fact that many of the film's audience members thoroughly enjoyed the film and did agree with the assertions made against the maintenance of an atomic bomb and nuclear weapons program is a testament to what the world was going through at the time. The film was released on January 29th, 1964; this was a time when the United States and Russia were in a scramble to develop a strong nuclear proliferation program before the other country. The United States was in a vicious war against communism at the time and had boycotts on Cuba for supplying weapons to Venezuela and other countries for the purpose of aiding communist initiatives. Also, President John F. Kennedy had just been assassinated and Lyndon B. Johnson took his place. Not only was the United States in a Cold War with Russia, but a conflict in Vietnam was also escalating and the United States would soon send in troops to intervene. Basically, the United States was in a very war torn, paranoid state at the time of *Dr. Strangelove's* release.

The release of a political film at this point in time was a very gutsy move on the part of Stanley Kubrick. The mood of the public was so sensitive at the time the film's release was actually delayed, according to Peter Goodchild in his novel *The Real Dr. Strangelove*, for several months after the assassination of President Kennedy. Once the film was finally released, Columbia Films included a disclaimer at the beginning of the film reading:

It is the stated position of the United States Air Force that their Safeguards would prevent the occurrence of such events as are depicted in this film. Furthermore, it should be noted that none of the characters portrayed in this film are meant to represent any real persons living or dead. (Goodchild, xxi)

The fact that Columbia had to issue the disclaimer at the beginning of the film is a testament to the state of the nation at the time of the film's release. And why shouldn't the public be scared? Kubrick provides the whole reason for the Cold War, and the basis for public tension, in his film when Dr. Strangelove states, "Deterrence is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy the fear to attack" (Goodchild, xx). The whole point of the Cold War was to scare the opposing country into submission by building up a stronger nuclear arms program and threatening to use it. This fear is the basis of Kubrick's film, and is encompassed when the President is willing to let one of the Air Force's bombers be destroyed, killing its crew, in order to prevent Russia's "Doomsday Machine" from going off and sending the world into a nuclear holocaust. This is the same fear that the United States was experiencing, which is why the nuclear weapons program had to be continually built up so as to put the fear back into the Russians.

Kubrick felt that this conflict was silly and extremely dangerous, and he felt that it was possible, in the tension and the rhetoric of the conflict, that there could be a slip up that would end the way people live on Earth. The satiric nature of the film gives the audience a sense of absurdity towards the issues covered in the film, which is what Kubrick wanted to do; he wanted to provide his take on the Cold War and the arms race. Because the events that the film deals with were so current and even present at the time, Kubrick's film resonated with its audience, which yielded tremendous success.

Kubrick's film offered a strong viewpoint on the Cold War and the arms race and was very well received by audience members. Why, though, was it so successful when other social protest films do not fair as well. Presently there have been a number of social protest films dealing with the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism, yet none of them seem to have garnered the public acclaim that Kubrick's film has enjoyed. Even the supposed king of social protest documentary, Michael Moore, has not been as well received by the public as Kubrick was. Although this may be due to the public's vast division on the nation's current issues as opposed to the general unity in fear of communism and

nuclear strike that was being experienced by the United States in the 1960's, a key factor in the film's success is the genre and style in which the story is told and in which the movie is filmed.

Kubrick had already been established as an anti-war director in Hollywood with his movies *Paths of Glory* and *Spartacus*. Once a label like that has been established, the audience for any future movies knows what to expect and will make their decision to attend the film based on their own beliefs on the issue. Michael Moore has been labeled the same way, yet his films turn off an enormous amount of viewers before they are even viewed because of this reputation. The reason Kubrick was able to keep everyone at least coming to his movies was through his style. Moore makes documentaries that are extremely, and admittedly, one-sided. The nature of the documentary, specifically Moore's documentaries, tends to give the audience a sense of force feeding "information" to them as opposed to letting them make their own conclusions based on the viewpoints expressed. Kubrick remedies this problem for *Dr. Strangelove* by making the movie a comedy that is entertaining as well as thought provoking. Even those audience members who do not agree with the film's social standpoint still find it humorous, such as film critic Bosley Crowther, who calls the film a "shattering sick joke" (Crowther, 24), states, "Some of the stuff is awfully funny. That much has to be said. And some of the jabs at blow hard generals and stuffy diplomats strike sharply home" (Crowther, X1).

A lot of the disarmingly humorous affect of the movie on its viewers can be attributed to the script. This movie could have been made to be a serious undertaking of serious issues; however, Kubrick decided to go the satire route. Kubrick's original intention for the film was for it to be a direct translation of former RAF navigator, Peter George's novel *Red Alert*. This novel tells a similar tale as *Dr. Strangelove* in that they both deal with an accidental deployment of a nuclear device. Kubrick's film, however, takes a more story telling approach to the situation so as to possibly soften the material. Kubrick noted that "following this approach I found that it never interfered with presenting well-reasoned arguments" (Goodchild, xx). This decision allows for the viewer to watch the film in a relaxed state as opposed to being preached to. Kubrick was able to make his arguments without totally turning off his audience.

With Kubrick's decision to take this film the way of the satire, he set on to write the script. Some of the most amusing moments of the film come through the dialogue the characters have with each other. Again, even the hardened critic Bosley Crowther cannot discount the humor of the writing, stating, "there's one simply delicious passage in which the president, played by Peter Sellers, gets the Soviet premier on the telephone in the midst of the terrible crisis and has a nutty conversation with him" (Crowther, X1). The passage to which Crowther is referring to is the conversation in which the President describes the unfortunate situation to Dimitri, the Soviet premier. This passage is a perfect sample of the script that expresses the very style that the film is made in. In the passage, the President, speaking as a "progressive nursery school teacher" (Kubrick, 52), casually brings up the fact that "apparently, one of our base commanders suffered some sort of a mental breakdown and ordered his planes to attack your country" (Kubrick, 52). Now, there is no way that this statement, or even the whole conversation would take place in such a way. The Soviet ambassador even says that the premier may be drunk, which adds more lunacy and idiocy to the whole situation. This expression of casually taking on an extremely dire issue carries throughout the film.

It was not only the screenplay, however, that made for the success of this movie. The casting of characters was also a key component to the film's success. The most obvious casting choice was that of Peter Sellers in three roles. Each of his roles are extremely different and are only similar in the fact that they are all going through the same situation of the panic that the attack has caused. Sellers attacks these roles beautifully, and upon first viewing, without knowing any better it is difficult to tell that these characters are, in fact, played by the same actor. In the role of the crazed General Ripper is Sterling Hayden, who portrays the General with a sort of manic innocence. His

intentions are noble, yet the scare that the whole situation has created caused him to take pre-emptive action. These men are extremely funny and dedicated to their performances and they are believable in a movie that has an extremely far fetched screenplay.

While examining the screenplay, one cannot help but notice, after viewing the film, that some parts have been changed or omitted. Most of these alterations are minor and are only small bits that do not really affect the whole film. However, one part of the screenplay changes significantly upon viewing the film. The ending of the film, especially the part of dropping the bomb, is extremely different from how it played out in the screenplay. In the screenplay, the Pilot, T.J. "King" Kong, orders all of his crew to "prepare to eject" (Kubrick, 70g) so that he can take the armed nuclear missiles into the target by flying the plane into them. So all but Lt. Jimmy Zogg eject and the two complete the, now Kamikaze, mission and blow up their target. What follows is similar to the ending in the film, with all of the officials in the War Room deciding the fate of the human race. After this, however, the President and the other officials actually catch the Soviet Ambassador taking pictures in the War Room and a pie fight ensues, which does not happen in the film, the audience just sees him taking the pictures while the rest are too occupied by thinking about who will be placed in the fallout shelter. The final bit in the screenplay has a zooming out shot of the earth and roll up titles indicating that the film has been a documentary of sorts on the "dead planet Earth" (Kubrick, 75) in a series entitled "The Dead Worlds of Antiquity" (Kubrick, 75).

The only similarity between the screenplay's ending up and the ending of the final product of the film is that the members in the War Room discuss what to do now that the end of the world is imminent and they decide to have a select group of people placed in a fallout shelter so that they can re-populate the planet. Before this, however, the crew of the bomber does not eject and it does not turn into a Kamikaze mission. The bomb bay doors still do not open, however, Major Kong takes it upon himself to go into the hull and try to open the doors manually by messing with some of the wiring above the missiles. The rest of the crew follows through with the launching procedures and ends up dropping the bomb, with Major Kong still sitting on it, on the target. The sequence carries out in a series of shots going between the different crew members shouting out commands and confirmations to each other and of Major Kong frantically trying to hard wire the doors open. The audience finally sees the doors open and Kong begins to celebrate at his triumph, then the final order is given, there is a hesitation and Lt. Lothar Zogg (not Jimmy) asks "What about the Major" and then proceeds to launch the missile anyway, sending Major Kong to his death.

Another difference in the endings from the film version to the scripted version is that the film ends with a montage of nuclear explosions as opposed to a mock-documentary ending. This image is extremely effective in communicating exactly what would be happening if the supposed "Doomsday Machine" were to go off and destroy the world. Also, in the film, when the men in the War Room are trying to decide what to do about the preservation of the human race, it is Dr. Strangelove who comes up with the idea of the fallout shelter under a mine shaft and the ratio of men to women and so on and so forth. In the screenplay, however, a character called Von Klutz, who has not appeared in the script until now, gives the suggestion. Von Klutz was most likely omitted to keep from introducing a character so late in the film and to give Peter Sellers more to do since Kubrick felt that Sellers was "one of the great film actors working today" (Phillips, 13). It also could be to give Dr. Strangelove more of a part, since he is the title character of the film.

The title, *Dr. Strangelove*, is a curious one because the title character only appears in two scenes. Granted, the movie does have the subtitle *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, but the main title is *Dr. Strangelove*. Why would the film be titled after a character that only appears in two scenes? This is simple to answer when looking at the content of the scenes in which he appears. The first scene in which Dr. Strangelove is involved is one in which the threat of the Russians' Doomsday Machine is revealed. Dr. Strangelove goes into describing what will happen when the U.S. attacks are carried out, that the Doomsday Machine will automatically send out a

retaliatory response, wiping out the planet with nuclear missiles. He also mentions that “the whole point of the Doomsday Machine is lost if you keep it a secret” (Kubrick, 55), which is expressed in the fact that the attacks were being carried out. Had the crazed General Ripper known about the retaliatory Doomsday Machine, he may have been a bit slower on trigger, which, in effect, was the whole point of the Cold War; it was a war of deterrent and scare tactics. This issue was a huge one for the time, and thus, vastly important to the meaning of the film and may have contributed to the titling of the movie.

The second scene in which Dr. Strangelove is involved is the final scene. In this scene he offers the suggestion of the fallout shelter beneath the mine shafts in order to preserve the human race. He details everything that must be done in choosing who is preserved so that the human race may thrive again. This scene may be a bit less influential in the naming of the film, since it was not originally Dr. Strangelove making the suggestion, yet the movie was already titled *Dr. Strangelove*. However, making a connection to the previous scene in which Dr. Strangelove is seen, it can be noted that Strangelove is involved in the scenes that detail what could happen and what we must do if it happens. This is the entire basis of the film and what Kubrick really wanted to get across. Kubrick wished to express his opinion on what could happen should there be a problem in the failsafe procedures involving nuclear weapons and one should be accidentally deployed.

This idea of accidental deployment and what might happen should the Russians launch an attack on the U.S. before the United States had an opportunity to strike first or to defend itself was very much in the minds of the U.S. public. Perhaps a lot of the success of the film can be attributed to the fear that people had and the willingness they had to attack the nuclear proliferation program in the U.S. However, this film is still popular and still taught and viewed by current students, as it was back in 1964. Over the past forty years, this film has not lost its impact, nor its relevance to world issues. The nuclear attack is back; this time the threat is from North Korea. Granted, the threat is not as dire; the threat is still there, along with the threat of a terrorist attack.

This film has the ability to change minds about war and weapons development now, just as it did when it was first released. People should view this film, one, because it is a funny and enjoyable film, and two, because it offers a viewpoint of someone who is against war in a non-threatening way. The message of the film is extremely clear, but is not forced down the viewers' throats and the viewer feels as if he or she can take the message with a grain of salt. The mentality of many viewers of the film, upon its initial release, was one of “The film is a comedy... so why take it so seriously” (Feron, 29). This is precisely why the film is so effective. The viewer who agrees with Kubrick can take the film for all its agenda pushing, politic bashing worth; while the viewer who doesn't quite agree with some of the viewpoints expressed in the film can sit back and enjoy an entertaining black comedy.

Stanley Kubrick's film, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, caused an immense stir in society when it was released. Critics both hailed and hated it, and audiences adored it, leading to record breaking box office profits and attendance records. The film covered the scenario of an accidental, irreversible deployment of a nuclear device and the repercussions that would follow. Kubrick is able to tackle an immensely controversial and scary topic with a sort of neutrality and innocence through his ingenious use of farce and comedy that is almost disarming to the skeptical viewer. Even harsh critics of the film cannot denounce the comedic value of the film. Kubrick's script and casting are spot on and greatly helped the success of the film. Not only were the issues covered relevant to the time the film was released, but similar issues and some of the same concerns are being faced today, which adds to the timeless quality of this film. *Dr. Strangelove* is a pivotal film in terms of filmmaking and spreading an opinion, and is extremely successful at what it intends to do; make the audience think.

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