Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*: A Guide to Study

ROBERT CARRINGER

1. THE FILMS OF STANLEY KUBRICK

Stanley Kubrick made his mark early even for a medium which is accustomed to early achievers. At the time of *Dr. Strangelove* he was 35. Even that is less surprising than some other facts of his career. At 24, when he made his first feature, he already had behind him four years at *Look* as a staff photographer (a job he got at 16), some national recognition for his photographic work, and two documentary films, both privately produced and financed. He had made an important feature when he was 28, an acknowledged classic before he was 30, and what may prove to be one of the important films of all time well before he was 40. The first feature, *Fear and Desire* (1953), dealt with four soldiers behind enemy lines who struggle to know themselves even as they struggle to get back to their own side. It got a few kind words from the reviewer for the *New York Times* and was noticed (but not much admired) by *Newsweek*. *Killer's Kiss* (1955) is a potboiler murder mystery Kubrick has said he would as soon forget. He broke into studio-type film production with *The Killing* (1956), a "big heist" picture in the tradition of *Asphalt Jungle* and *Rififi*, with lighting, situations, and actors which remind one of the "hardboiled" Hollywood thrillers of the 40s which the French call *film noir*. *Time* singled it out

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This is one in a series of study guides to film classics being developed by the film studies staff at the University of Illinois. Several others, including guides to films such as 8½ *and* Citizen Kane, *will appear soon in a special issue of* JAE.

as one of the ten best pictures of the year, and, if one can overlook the many and obvious signs of cost-cutting, it holds up extremely well today — largely as a result of the performances of an impeccable cast of character actors, including Sterling Hayden, Jay C. Flippen, and Elisha Cook, Jr.

Kubrick fans can point to a number of things in *The Killing* that anticipate his later films, such as expressionistic lighting of interiors, ominous-sounding voice-over narration, "chessboard" plotting, and fascination with groups of men under pressure in enclosed situations. But it is really *Paths of Glory* (1957) that establishes Kubrick's typical set of concerns. Adapted from a favorite novel of the director's by Humphrey Cobb, this film tells the story of a brigade of French soldiers in World War I ordered out of their trenches and into a futile assault on an enemy position in order to earn a promotion for their commanding general. When the assault fails, the men are disciplined according to custom by having one man selected at random from each company and taken out and shot. Again Kubrick is blessed with fine character performances, by George Macready as the ambitious General Mireau, but especially by Adolphe Menjou as General Broulard, Mireau's superior, urbane and suave but totally without humanity, a master at public relations and at the art of maintaining his own power and prestige, rather like the Prime Minister of *A Clockwork Orange*. Less satisfactory is Kirk Douglas as the good Colonel Dax, who genuinely cares for his men, recognizes that his orders will lead them into a senseless slaughter, and refuses to sacrifice principle for personal gain when it is decided that to maintain a good public image General Mireau too must be sacrificed. It is not merely that Douglas is stuck with an ungraceful part and bad lines ("Because you do not know the answer to that, I pity you"), but rather that Kubrick himself seems uncomfortable with what Dax represents: the conviction that men, who are fundamentally base, self-serving creatures, can redeem their natures only through experiencing compassion ("the noblest of human feelings," Dax calls it) for their fellow men. This theme is reenacted at the end of the film when Dax's men listen to a captured German girl sing a song about a soldier's sweetheart and feel their lust for her give way to compassion in their recognition that men on the other side, and all men, share a common plight. Whether Kubrick lost his faith in the power of compassion, or merely recognized an incapacity within himself to deal convincingly with "good men," the fact is that the moral center occupied by Colonel Dax disappears from his best films after this and they

become increasingly splenetic and misanthropic. This is not necessarily to say that they become immoral, as some reviewers have charged; rather, audiences unfamiliar with the methods of satire have found themselves more and more perplexed by films which lack trustworthy moral spokesmen.

If mature Kubrick dates from *Paths of Glory,* it is *Dr. Strangelove* that establishes a basic pattern for the major films to follow. (Between *Paths of Glory* and *Dr. Strangelove* Kubrick was involved in *Spartacus,* which he took over late, after shooting had already begun, and he made *Lolita,* a controversial and not wholly satisfying adaptation of Nabokov's novel.) In the later films, first of all, there is a conspicuous absence of any truly sympathetic or admirable characters. Those who objected that *Dr. Strangelove* makes *everybody* look foolish could have brought the same charge against the later films. *2001,* another film about the end of man, leaves no doubt about how the director regards this outcome. Human pretensions are the chief object of the film's strong satiric undercurrent — all of human history, for instance, is passed over in the toss of a bone which becomes a space ship; into the majestic immensity of space earth men project synthetic Hilton and Howard Johnson's environments in order to reenact earthly banalities. *A Clockwork Orange,* an attack on the consequences of liberal/pragmatic "humanity," manipulates us into half-caring for a vicious thug, but only because he falls victim to a more vicious social and political thuggery. Kubrick's preoccupation in the later films is with what Jonathan Swift called "that damned animal man" and his most despicable traits. They take form in Kubrick along lines suggested by Ardrey's *Territorial Imperative* and *African Genesis* and similar books: man-ape is fundamentally sexual and aggressive; his principal activities are sublimated aggression. He embraces violence in all forms, from nuclear warfare to mugging. His weapons (as in *Strangelove*) are really symbolic projections of his own sexual parts. He is capable of manufacturing the most sophisticated electronic systems, but incapable of using them responsibly and morally. The typical turn of events is that his gadgetry or his schemes go out of control and turn against him. Kubrick operates according to time-honored principles of satire: he takes an eminently rational position (again, like Swift) and strings it out to an absurd conclusion. In *Strangelove* and *2001,* for instance, perfectly thought out plans go awry and end up being nightmares, and in *A Clockwork Orange* pragmatic schemes for the improvement of man

result in making him a kind of organic machine. Kubrick's style, however, owes less to classic literary satirists such as Swift or film satirists such as Buñuel (though there are strong suggestions of the influence of both in his films) than to the so-called new satire represented by the novels of Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*), Terry Southern (author of *Candy* and one of the writers on *Dr. Strangelove*), and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Among other things the method of "pop" or "new" satire consists in taking one's inspiration and images from forms in popular culture which have traditionally been regarded as the antithesis of "serious" art — comic books, comic strips, old Hollywood movies, thrillers, pulp fiction, and so on. All three of the later Kubrick films draw heavily on popular forms — *2001* is intellectualized sci-fi; *Dr. Strangelove* is in one sense a kind of dramatized comic book, not unlike the movie parodies that appear in *Mad;* and *A Clockwork Orange,* with its duel between a bust of Beethoven and a plastic pop-art phallus, has been described by one eminent art critic as a film which exposes the myth of "serious art." Finally, in all of the later films Kubrick uses music as an instrument of satire — especially light classics or popular tunes, which characteristically are played in ironic counterpoint to the visuals.

Kubrick is one of the foremost makers of dazzling images and the cinema's best director of special effects. But it has been charged that as a satirist he is too concerned with shock for the sake of shock, and, more seriously, that he uses sensationalism and pop forms not to champion but to exploit the youth market, which enjoys seeing its worst self-indulgences paraded as art. Some reviews of *2001* suggested as much, but Pauline Kael made it explicit in her review of *Clockwork Orange:*

> When I pass a newsstand and see the saintly, bearded, intellectual Kubrick on the cover of *Saturday Review,* I wonder: Do people notice things like the way Kubrick cuts to the rival teen-age gang before Alex and his hoods arrive to fight them, just so we can have the pleasure of watching that gang strip the struggling girl they mean to rape? . . . I can't accept that Kubrick is merely reflecting this post-assassinations, post-Manson mood; I think he's catering to it. I think he wants to dig it. This picture plays with violence in an intellectually seductive way. And though it has no depth, it's done in such a slow, heavy style that those prepared to like it can treat its puzzling aspects as oracular.

It would be possible to make charges running roughly along the same lines against *Dr. Strangelove.* According to one definition, a good piece of criticism is one which provokes its reader into producing a better piece of criticism, and one does not have to like Kael to see that

anyone who cares about Kubrick sooner or later will have to face the objections she raises. The films themselves can provide the only satisfactory answer, of course, but for an understanding of the intentions and methods of Kubrick's satire it might be useful to recall his own explanation of how he came to make *Dr. Strangelove:*

> ... it seemed to me that ... it was very important to deal with this problem dramatically because it's the only social problem where there's absolutely no chance for people to learn anything from experience. If it ever happens, there may be very little of the world left to profit by the experience.
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> ... "Red Alert" is a completely serious suspense story. My idea of doing it as a nightmare comedy came when I was trying to work on it. I found that in trying to put meat on the bones and to imagine the scenes fully one had to keep leaving things out of it which were either absurd or paradoxical, in order to keep it from being funny, and these things seemed to be very real. Then I decided that the perfect tone to adopt for the film would be what I now call nightmare comedy, because it most truthfully presents the picture.
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> It is often difficult not to have a cynical view of human relationships. But I think that in a subject like this the cynicism should at least try to serve some constructive purpose. It seemed to me that, since this is a tragedy (which has not yet occurred, any insight which could be provided, any sense of reality which could be given to it so that it didn't seem just an abstraction which the nuclear problem is in most people's minds) was really quite useful. The paradoxes of deterrent have become so abstract, and so many euphemistic expressions have been thrown into it that I seriously doubt that the problem is at all real to anyone.
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> ... Kennedy made a speech where he said that "the world is living under a nuclear Sword of Damocles which can be cut by accident, miscalculation, or madness," and in this case it's cut by madness.
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> — *Films and Filming* [June 1963], 12-13.

2. CREDITS

DR. STRANGELOVE: OR, HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE BOMB

Released USA 1964. A Hawk Film for Columbia Pictures. Produced and Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Screenplay by Stanley Kubrick, Terry Southern, and Peter George. Based on the novel *Red Alert* by Peter George. Photography: Gilbert Taylor. Traveling Matte: Vic Margutti. Music: Laurie Johnson. Art Direction: Peter Murton. Production Designer: Ken Adam. Editor: Anthony Harvey. Special Effects: Wally Veevers. Sound: John Cox and Richard Bird. Main Titles: Pablo Ferro. Wardrobe: Bridget Sellers. Makeup: Stewart Freeborn. Hairstyles: Barbara Ritchie. Associate Producer: Victor

Lyndon. Production Manager: Clifton Brandon. Assistant Director: Eric Rattray. Running time: 93 minutes. Black and white.

Captain Lionel Mandrake President Merkin Muffley Dr. Strangelove	*Peter Sellers*
General "Buck" Turgidson	*George C. Scott*
General Jack D. Ripper	*Sterling Hayden*
Colonel "Bat" Guano	*Keenan Wynn*
Major T. J. "King" Kong	*Slim Pickens*
Ambassador de Sadesky	*Peter Bull*
Miss Scott	*Tracy Reed*
Bombardier Zogg	*James Earl Jones*
Mr. Staines	*Jack Creley*
D.S.O. Dietrich	*Frank Berry*
Navigator Kivel	*Glen Beck*
Co-Pilot Owens	*Shane Rimmer*
Radio Operator Goldberg	*Paul Tamarin*
General Faceman	*Gordon Tanner*
Admiral Randolph	*Robert O'Neil*
Frank	*Roy Stephens*
Burpelson Defense Team Members	*Hal Galili, Laurence Herder, John McCarthy*

16MM DISTRIBUTOR: Columbia Cinemathèque, 711 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10022, (212) 751-7529.

3. SEQUENCE OUTLINE

Foreword

Moving titles note the Air Force's position that under current safeguards the events in the film could not happen and disclaim that the characters in the film are based on real persons.

Prologue

1. Forward-advancing shot over empty sea of clouds as voice-over narration tells of Russian work on Doomsday device
2. Sexual images of a bomb, and of a bomber refueling in midair as "Try a Little Tenderness" plays on the soundtrack
3. Titles in cartoon script superimposed over plane refueling

Red Alert

4. Burpelson Air Base: General Ripper informs exchange British officer Captain Mandrake of Red alert; voice-over explains Strategic Air Command flying B-52 bomber network
5. Inside a B-52: pilot reading *Playboy* when instructions come to initiate Wing attack Plan R; Major Kong obeys and orders bomber on attack into Russian territory
6. Secretary, under sun lamp in bikini, takes 3 A.M. phone call informing her boss General Turgidson
7. Burpelson: Ripper exhorts his men to fight bravely, telling them to trust no one; Mandrake discovers contraband transistor radio
8. Bomber: plans proceed, communications system locked to all messages but those bearing secret prefix, target announced
9. Burpelson: Ripper refuses to recall planes, telling Mandrake of international Communist conspiracy to sap vital body fluids
10. The War Room: Turgidson explains the predicament to President Muffley, suggests that we go in force before Russians have time to retaliate, but President refuses and calls in Russian ambassador

The Doomsday Machine

11. Bomber: supplies issued
12. War Room: Russian ambassador arrives, Turgidson grabs him and takes away his tiny secret camera
13. Burpelson: other troops advance on the base; battle ensues
14. War Room: President speaks with Russian Premier Kissov, who is drunk; Russian ambassador tells of existence of Doomsday Machine
15. Burpelson: Ripper tells Mandrake of suspected fluoridation plot; his headquarters are fired upon
16. War Room: Russian ambassador elaborates on workings of Doomsday mechanism; Dr. Strangelove's advice called for
17. Burpelson: battle scenes inside base; Ripper confesses to Mandrake he first discovered plot when unable to perform sexually; base surrenders and Ripper commits suicide because he figures they'll torture him to get the secret prefix
18. Bomber: hit by missile over Russian territory
19. Burpelson: Mandrake discovers probable secret communications prefix but Colonel Guano temporarily detains him
20. Bomber: damaged plane flies low out of radar range and proceeds toward target

21. Burpelson: after various delays Guano reluctantly shoots Coke machine to get change for phone call to President
22. War Room: Turgidson leads prayer when all planes believed accounted for

Final Bomb Run

23. Bomber: low on fuel
24. War Room: word comes that one plane got through and that it will be sufficient to set off Doomsday device
25. Bomber: heads toward alternate target because of fuel shortage
26. War Room: Turgidson concludes bomber will make it
27. Bomber: doors won't open as bomber approaches target; Kong opens them manually and rides bomb down to explosion

Epilogue

28. War Room: Strangelove proposes mine shaft survival plan, including ten women for every man; Turgidson advises taking precautions against possible Russian survival plan; Strangelove rises from his chair
29. Series of nuclear explosions to sound of "We'll Meet Again Some Sunny Day"

4. STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *Dr. Strangelove* opens with two planes in the act of refueling in midair. The editing makes the symbolism of these shots too obvious to miss. What are some other sexual images, symbols, names, and allusions in the film? Kubrick and his writers were having tremendous fun, of course, but is there a serious purpose underlying their sex jokes? Sexual themes are prominent in Kubrick's films after *Dr. Strangelove;* would one be doing an injustice to the comedy of *Dr. Strangelove* by speaking of a "sexual theme" in it?

2. What are the components which go into the film's portrait of the military hawk? Of the liberal politician? Of the foreign scientist?

3. What kinds of lighting techniques are used in the sequences in General Ripper's office? In the War Room? For each case comment on the appropriateness of the lighting. What kind of overall mood or impression is Kubrick trying to establish with this lighting?

4. General Ripper to Captain Mandrake, at the beginning: "I shouldn't tell you this, but you're a good officer and you've a right to know." Major Kong: "I ain't much of a hand at makin' speeches,

but. . . ." General Turgidson: "I don't like the looks of this, Fred." What are some of the possible reasons why the screenwriters have most of the characters speaking a language which is filled with familiar clichés?

5. One critic objected to the outdoor battle scenes at Burpelson, which seem to have been shot with a hand-held 16mm camera and which sometimes look like authentic newsreel footage, as being out of place in the film. Could one make a good defense of Kubrick's decision to present them in this fashion? On what grounds?

6. Directors and writers often allude to a key theme in a work through an image or line which appears to be unrelated or unimportant. Could one such example be Captain Mandrake's remark about the Japanese, "[Torture] was just their way of having a bit of fun, the swines! The strange thing is they make such bloody good cameras."

7. Kubrick has been criticized for not knowing the difference between the controlled wit of satire and the uncontrolled burlesque of low farce. In *Dr. Strangelove* this may be a problem of not knowing when to stop: General Turgidson's explanation of the predicament to the President, a masterpiece of satiric characterization, is immediately followed by a downright embarrassing hot-line conversation between the President and Soviet Premier Kissov. What factors (acting, script, tone, technique, etc.) would seem to account for the success of one and the failure of the other?

8. With which character or characters in the film do our sympathies lie? Do we remain consistently sympathetic with any one character? In some cases is the director manipulating our sympathies in order to create satiric effects? Which ones?

9. Film directors have always borrowed freely from serious drama and fiction, but many recent directors have been as much influenced by popular culture forms. What features of *Dr. Strangelove* (language, situations, characterizations, etc.) seem to have been derived from old Hollywood movies? From comic strips or comic books? From other popular forms?

10. Comment on the pacing of the last third of the film. What devices are used to build up tension and suspense?

11. What emotions are aroused by the image of Major Kong riding the bomb down to its explosion? Analyze the sources of this effect, noting the mixture of comic and serious. What kind of humor is this?

12. After the grisly climax of Major Kong riding the bomb — which many people later remember as being the end of the film — there are

two more sequences. What is the purpose of the final sequence in the War Room? Of the closing sequence of nuclear explosions? Do they improve the film, or might it have been better if it had stopped with the first explosion plus another series of explosions?

13. Why does Kubrick have Dr. Strangelove rise out of his chair and come forward just before the Doomsday Machine goes off?

14. At the end the Doomsday device has been set off, and we see a series of nuclear explosions as we hear Vera Lynn sing a popular World War II song, "We'll Meet Again Some Sunny Day." Different viewers react in different ways to this sequence. Some have said that the music and the soft, gentle, billowing shapes of the mushroom clouds stylize and mute the effect for us, while others maintain the opposite — that in fact irony and understatement *increase* the shock value and create a more profound sense of horror than explicit images would. Kubrick is fond of such devices; in both *2001* and *A Clockwork Orange* there are scenes of slow-motion violence accompanied by classical music or popular tunes. What do you think Kubrick intended to accomplish with this type of ending in *Dr. Strangelove*? How successfully do you think he accomplished it?

15. One well-known reviewer was troubled by *Dr. Strangelove* because of its implication that "virtually everybody" in the American defense establishment, the Commander in Chief included, is "stupid or insane — or, what is worse, psychopathic." What are the assumptions, apparently, upon which this criticism is based? To what extent is this criticism valid?

16. What is the overall point of the film?

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL READING

Bernstein, Jeremy. "Profiles: How About a Little Game?" *The New Yorker* 42 (Nov. 12, 1966), 70-72+. The director's background (especially his fondness for chess), his working habits, and glimpses into his private life at the time of the making of *2001*.

Burgess, Jackson. "The 'Anti-Militarism' of Stanley Kubrick." *Film Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Fall 1964), 4-11. On the director's three anti-military films, *Fear and Desire, Paths of Glory,* and *Dr. Strangelove.* The author regards *Paths of Glory* as Kubrick's best film through *Dr. Strangelove.*

Geduld, Carolyn. *Filmguide to '2001: A Space Odyssey.'* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973. "The Director," pp. 3-20, develops

an interesting and useful point of view on *Dr. Strangelove* and other Kubrick films before *2001*.

George, Peter. *Red Alert*. New York: Ace Books, 1958. The source novel for *Dr. Strangelove,* originally published under the name "Peter Bryant."

Kubrick, Stanley. "Interview." *Playboy* 15, no. 9 (September 1968), 85-86+. Principally concerned with the ideas in *2001,* but also generally relevant to a study of the director's career. Some remarks on *Dr. Strangelove*.

Walker, Alexander. *Stanley Kubrick Directs*. Rev. ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972. Critical commentaries on all the Kubrick films through *A Clockwork Orange*. The many, many frame enlargements in the volume are arranged to illustrate recurring situations and visual patterns.