

EPILOGUE

The study of film yields important insights about the political and social messages presented to millions of people every week. These messages may reinforce public opinion, or the director may give audiences cause to re-evaluate their opinions about the film's subject matter. In order to understand films and their impact on public discourse and opinion, scholars should attempt to construct a "biography" of a film in order to understand its meaning from conception in the filmmaker's mind to invocation by audiences after its release. Scholars should examine a film's production history and the people involved in the filmmaking process. The study of the film's production history and its crew will shed light on the filmmakers' intent and the meaning of the imagery and language presented to audiences. Scholars should examine audiences' responses to the film, expressed in box office sales, printed reviews, comment cards, and letters published in newspapers and magazines. In certain cases, a film's impact may extend beyond its initial release, as was the case with Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). This project has contributed to the growing discourse about film history by considering these points.

Dr. Strangelove provided imagery, language, and themes that related to the events of the early 1960s, such as the Berlin wall crisis and the Cuban missile crisis, and continued to resonate with audiences in the years after the film's release. Previous studies of *Dr. Strangelove* by Lawrence Suid, Charles Maland, and Margot Henriksen neglected the immediate and long-term impact of the film.¹ As this project has revealed, audiences

¹ Lawrence Suid, "The Pentagon and Conformity: *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*," in *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*, eds. John E.

considered the imagery and message of *Dr. Strangelove* when evaluating American cold war policies. As a result, *Dr. Strangelove* became one of the most influential films of the cold war era, and possibly one of the most significant politically oriented films in the history of Hollywood. The film enjoyed an after-life few political films experienced. Another point neglected in previous studies of the film was Kubrick's decision to adapt Peter George's story from a suspense drama to a satire, or a "nightmare comedy," which greatly influenced the motion picture's impact on American culture.² Through humor, the director stirred audiences to think about instead of simply feel the dangers of U.S. nuclear strategies.³

The uses of *Dr. Strangelove* have changed over the last forty years. Critics of U.S. nuclear policies have utilized the film to warn the public that nuclear strategies could lead to the nuclear Armageddon that Kubrick predicted.⁴ In 1964, viewers who agreed with Kubrick's assessment of the dangers posed by U.S. dependence upon nuclear weapons invoked the film to convey to others the possible destruction of the world. Similar references were made during the early 1980s when President Ronald Reagan increased military spending and introduced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also known as the Star Wars program. Invoking *Dr. Strangelove*, critics interpreted SDI as detrimental to peace and security. In the early 1990s and again in 2001, journalists warned that the

O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1979); Charles Maland, "Dr. Strangelove (1964): Nightmare Comedy and the Ideology of Liberal Consensus," *American Quarterly* 31 (Winter 1979): 697-717; Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

² Stanley Kubrick, "How I learned to stop worrying and love the cinema," *Films and Filming* 9 (June 1963): 12-13.

³ Robert Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *American Historical Review* 93 (December 1988): 1183.

⁴ Kubrick, "How I learned," 12-13.

U.S. had not abandoned Reagan-era nuclear strategies, thereby suggesting that the film represented an out-dated form of strategy. When President George W. Bush declared his intention to expand the war on terrorism to include the invasion of Iraq, critics referred to *Dr. Strangelove* once again, expanding the application of the film to include the criticism of aggressive and non-nuclear military action. These references illustrate the film's lasting impact on American culture and the discourse about U.S. military policies. The durability of *Dr. Strangelove* demonstrates the potential of film to articulate, or even form, political attitudes. Thus, the study of film should include the examination of public discourse in order to comprehend a motion picture's long-term impact and complete its biography.