

INTRODUCTION

On the thirtieth anniversary of the release of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), journalist Eric Lefcowitz proposed that the film had a great impact on American culture. Lefcowitz declared, "Three decades after the film debuted, *Dr. Strangelove* has entered the pop vernacular, a metaphor for the deadly consequences of science—and government—gone awry."¹ Indeed, *Dr. Strangelove* made its mark upon popular culture, yet this statement does not explain the effects felt throughout American society after the motion picture's release. Kubrick's film prompted a debate over cold war policies that had positioned the world on the edge of destruction. When President Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush reinvigorated US nuclear research and development, critics invoked the film to warn the public about the dangers of US nuclear policies. As war with Iraq became imminent, critics of George W. Bush referenced the film when discussing the president, suggesting the film's meaning had expanded to include the desire to wage a conventional war.

In his foreword to *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image* (1979), Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. recognized the relationship between films and their audiences. He noted that an audience was an "active collaborator" with the filmmaker, "seizing from the film what it needs for its own purposes of tutelage and fantasy." This collaboration occurs when the audience recognizes similarities between its

¹Eric Lefcowitz, "Dr. Strangelove Turns 30. Can It Still Be Trusted?," *New York Times*, 30 January 1994, sect. 2, p. 13.

world and the filmmaker's celluloid world.² Kubrick's audience entered the theaters shaped by contemporary events such as the arms race, the Cuban missile crisis, and the assassination of President Kennedy.

In the decade prior to the film's release, the Soviet Union and the United States operated on the assumption that the only way to deter a nuclear attack was to accumulate a massive arsenal that guaranteed the mutual destruction of the aggressor.³ The conflict between the two superpowers placed these nations at odds and the rest of the world in jeopardy. On 22 October 1962, President Kennedy announced that the Soviets had constructed missile silos and delivered nuclear weapons to Cuba. At that moment, Americans realized that their determination to dominate the nuclear arms race and halt the spread of communism had influenced Khrushchev to position nuclear weapons ninety miles off the coast of Florida and created a crisis that could result in nuclear war. Khrushchev had to appear willing to support "wars of liberation" in order to maintain his precarious friendship with the Chinese and Cuban dictator Fidel Castro.⁴ The tense standoff convinced many Americans, including President Kennedy, that changes in policy and diplomacy were necessary to avoid future clashes between the two nations. The Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963 appeared to signal the beginning of a new era in atomic and foreign diplomacy, but the Soviet Union and the United States continued to develop and stockpile nuclear weapons. The November 1963 assassination of President

²John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson, eds., *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1979), xii.

³ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 224, 231.

⁴ Alexandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble:" Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 171, 182.

Kennedy left many Americans feeling as though the chance for peace died with him. The arms race and the Cuban missile crisis had led to calls for changes in U.S. policies, but few were witnessed. In January 1964, *Dr. Strangelove* premiered to an audience prepared to laugh after years of crises and the death of the president, but also to abandon its faith in the bomb and question the total war on communism that had been born in the closing months of World War II.

By the late 1950s, director Stanley Kubrick had begun to research the topic of nuclear warfare with the hope of making a film about a “nuclear nightmare.” He accumulated a library of about seventy books on the subject and subscribed to a variety of military magazines to better understand nuclear strategies and technology. In the course of his research, he met Alastair Buchan of the Institute of Strategic Studies in England. Buchan recommended that Kubrick read former Royal Air Force (RAF) officer Peter George’s nuclear suspense drama *Red Alert* (1958). Kubrick took Buchan’s advice and decided to use the text as the source for a film on the possibility of an accidental nuclear war. Although Kubrick decided to adapt *Red Alert* for the screen, he wrestled with George’s treatment of the possibility of nuclear war and the fitting genre for that story.⁵

When Kubrick began the screenplay, he intended to write and direct a dramatic feature similar to *Red Alert*. Peter George had criticized the military’s instinct to wage war, which he believed could lead to an unauthorized preemptive strike against the Soviet Union. In *Red Alert*, George suggested that politicians’ management of the nuclear arsenal might better ensure peace. George utilized the suspense drama genre to convey

⁵ Stanley Kubrick, “How I learned to stop worrying and love the cinema,” *Films and Filming* 9 (June 1963): 12-13; Peter Bryant, *Red Alert* (New York: Ace Books, 1958).

this criticism, but Kubrick altered the message that George offered readers in *Red Alert*. As a result, he was forced to alter the genre to effectively convey his concerns. Kubrick was struck by the many paradoxes of US nuclear policies and strategies—“from the paradoxes of unilateral disarmament to the first strike.”⁶ He intended to expose these paradoxes in *Dr. Strangelove*. Initially, he discarded scenes that depicted humorous or absurd expressions of these paradoxes. He believed that comedic exchanges between characters were inappropriate for a film about the end of the world. Eventually, he decided that the best treatment of the subject would be as a satire, or “nightmare comedy.” These absurd scenes expressed Kubrick’s concerns.⁷

Dr. Strangelove offered no characters worthy of the audience’s trust. The writing team altered and consolidated characters in George’s novel to suggest that military, political, and scientific officials could not prevent a nuclear apocalypse. Audiences were expected to draw comparisons between these characters and contemporary figures and sentiments. The deranged General Ripper (Sterling Hayden), who ordered the 843rd Bomb Wing to attack the Soviet Union, represented conservative factions of the 1950s and early 1960s that believed that an international communist conspiracy had infiltrated American society. General “Buck” Turgidson (George C. Scott) represented military commanders such as General Curtis LeMay, commander of the Strategic Air Command and an advocate of the utilization of nuclear weapons, to halt the spread of communism. President Merkin Muffley (Peter Sellers), the liberal diplomat loosely based upon Adlai Stevenson’s appearance and persona, failed to avert Ripper’s apocalypse, suggesting that

⁶ Kubrick, “How I learned,” 12.

⁷ Gene D. Phillips, ed., *Stanley Kubrick: Interviews* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001): 97; Kubrick, “How I learned,” 12-13.

US nuclear policies provided no other alternative than war. Kubrick constructed Dr. Strangelove (also Sellers) to criticize certain members of the scientific community and man's inability to control the technological progress he insatiably pursued.

Audiences' and critics' responses were mixed. While some audiences simultaneously laughed and worried about the threat of nuclear Armageddon, others scoffed at what they considered anti-American propaganda. Newspapers such as the *New York Times* and magazines such as *Commentary* provided forums for the opinions of critics, intellectuals, and the public. Letters were printed that praised and criticized Kubrick's film. In a letter to the *Times*, Lewis Mumford pointed out Kubrick's criticism of the public's "cold war trance."⁸ Film critics debated the worth of the film, although this debate often centered on Kubrick's political message rather than the motion picture's artistic qualities. Amid this heated discourse, some Americans accepted Kubrick's warning. Initially, the film became a reference to 1964 Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater, who appeared willing to wage nuclear war to halt the spread of communism. *Dr. Strangelove* became an icon for those who questioned the nation's cold war policies. By the early 1980s, *Dr. Strangelove* had become a point of reference for historians, journalists, and politicians.

A few scholarly works have examined the messages embedded in *Dr. Strangelove*. These works have been small essays and articles that only offer brief studies of the film. In 1978, Lawrence Suid argued that Kubrick made the film "to warn the

⁸ Lewis Mumford, "Strangelove Reactions," *New York Times*, 1 March 1964, sect. II, p. 8.

nation about the possible dangers of the safeguard system.”⁹ Suid is correct that Kubrick criticized the military’s cold war policies, but his narrow focus of the film neglected Kubrick’s criticism of politicians and scientists. Kubrick’s comments about the film also reveal his broader criticism of military, political, and scientific communities. Suid also argued that Kubrick’s message was lost in the audience’s laughter, yet letters and reviews indicate that some audience members recognized the realism of the film.¹⁰ Furthermore, this reaction suggests that audiences understood Kubrick’s message.

The following year, Charles Maland argued that *Dr. Strangelove* challenged what Geoffrey Hodgson called the Ideology of Liberal Consensus, the dominant cultural paradigm in America at the time of the film’s release.¹¹ Hodgson suggested that this ideology contained two basic assumptions: first, that the structure of American society was sound; and second, that communism posed a threat to the survival of the United States. Maland argued that Kubrick satirized the cold war consensus in four ways: “anti-Communist paranoia; the culture’s inability to realize the enormity of nuclear war; various nuclear strategies; and the blind faith modern man places in technological progress.”¹² However, Maland did not examine the subjects of Kubrick’s satire in great detail. Another shortcoming of Maland’s research was his failure to uncover the heated debate over the film expressed in reviews and editorials. Maland incorrectly suggested

⁹ 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. O’Connor and Martin A. Jackson (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1979), 226.

¹⁰ Suid, 232.

¹¹ Charles Maland, “*Dr. Strangelove* (1964): Nightmare Comedy and the Ideology of Liberal Consensus,” *American Quarterly* 31 (Winter 1979): 697.

¹² Maland, 705.

that audiences were not “swept away by the film.” The debate that followed the film’s release suggests that audiences were affected by the film.¹³

Most recently, Margot Henriksen wrote *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (1997). Henriksen’s title is misleading, in that only a small portion of the book actually addresses Kubrick’s film. Henriksen devoted the majority of her text to the study of less obvious criticisms of the bomb. She characterized *Dr. Strangelove* as the culmination of dissent in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Henriksen argued that Kubrick warned audiences that, if they failed to challenge the cold war consensus, their fate would be the same as President Merkin Muffley’s America. However, she failed to examine specific aspects of the cold war that the film satirized and Kubrick’s comments and essays about the film that explain the filmmaker’s intent.¹⁴

John E. O’Connor contributed an essay to the December 1988 forum on film and history in the *American Historical Review* that provided the methodology for this study. O’Connor examined the use of films as historical “artifacts” or documents. Although much of O’Connor’s essay proposed a methodology for the study of historical films, his ideas can be applied to this project. He proposed that the historian should attempt to “understand how a film represents or interprets history,” to confirm theories about “then-current social and cultural values,” to uncover “factual data not otherwise available,” and to trace the history of film and television.¹⁵ O’Connor suggested that in order to

¹³ Maland, 715.

¹⁴ Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xxvi, 190, 339.

¹⁵ John E. O’Connor, “History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past,” *American Historical Review* 93 (December 1988): 1207.

understand a film's contemporary relevance or impact, a historian must understand the audience's experience. This experience can be understood through the study of "other films current at the time, the novels, the news and magazine stories, and other social or cultural influences that may have oriented the viewer at some specific place and time in the past to respond to the film in one way or another."¹⁶ This project will examine how *Dr. Strangelove* represented and interpreted contemporary events and the ways in which Kubrick reflected and challenged contemporary values and beliefs.

This thesis contributes to the literature on *Dr. Strangelove* by arguing that the film impacted the public discourse on the cold war and American culture. This project will argue that audiences understood Kubrick's message, although they reacted to it different ways. Critics and audiences debated the film's treatment of nuclear weapons. More importantly, *Dr. Strangelove* encouraged greater discussion of the soundness of current cold war policies. This thesis will also analyze Kubrick's adaptation of *Red Alert* to understand how and why the genre and criticism changed. Finally, this project will examine the ways in which journalists and historians began to incorporate the film into their studies of the cold war and analyses of contemporary events, borrowing scenes, dialogue, and metaphors in order to draw parallels to the seemingly absurd and often dangerous events of the cold war. This thesis will also analyze how the film has been invoked in the discussion of post-cold war military and nuclear policies.

¹⁶ O'Connor, "History in Images/Images in History," 1206.