

Dr. Strangelove

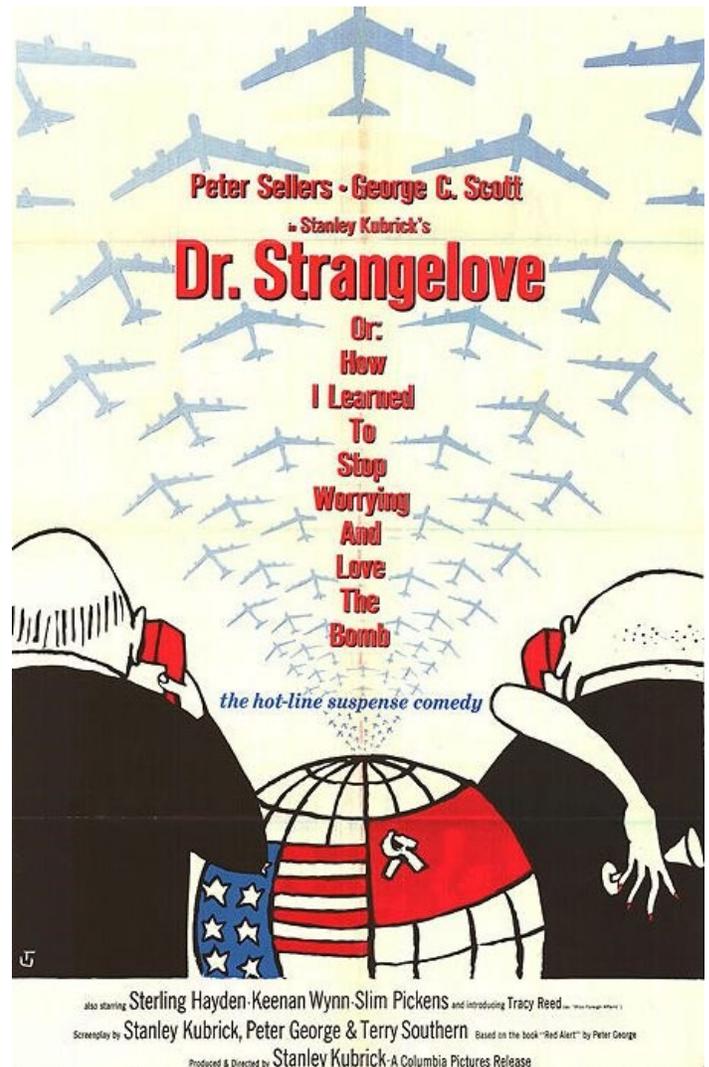
By Wheeler Winston Dixon

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Stanley Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb" (1964) is perhaps the darkest comedy of all time. Based on Peter George's novel "Red Alert," the film is a brutal political satire that culminates in the obliteration of the entire planet in a hail of thermonuclear bombs. At the time of the film's production, with the Soviet Union and the US locked in an arms race stalemate, such a prospect was hardly the stuff of comedy, but Kubrick, working with writers Terry Southern and Peter George, with a hefty uncredited assist from Peter Sellers, fashioned a screenplay, and then a film, that fulfilled all the promise of the project's apocalyptic concept.

At 94 minutes, the film moves swiftly, with no waste motion or excessive narrative material. After a brief, spoken introductory sequence outlining the basics of the entire Cold War nuclear strategy, the film begins with General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden), commander of Burpelson Air Force Base and a paranoid, clearly unhinged anti-Communist, ordering an attack by his nuclear missile armed B-52s on Russia, convinced that the Communists are planning to take over the United States by fluoridating the nation's water supply. Captain Lionel Mandrake (Peter Sellers, in one of three roles) tries to stop him, but to no avail. Meanwhile, in the War Room at the Pentagon, General Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott) apprises US President Merkin Muffley (Sellers again) of Ripper's unprovoked attack.

After consulting with the Soviet Ambassador, Alexi de Sadesky (Peter Bull), Muffley calls the drunken Soviet Premier Dimitri Kisov on the "hotline" to assure him that Ripper's action is that of a rogue warrior, and isn't part of an all out attack. However, Kisov informs Muffley that if any nuclear attack on the Soviet Union succeeds, even a minimal one, it will trigger a "Doomsday Machine" that will destroy the entire planet in a barrage of thermonuclear destruction. Muffley's scientific advisor, Dr. Strangelove (Sellers yet again), confirms the existence of the "Doomsday Machine," and begins calculating how long it will take to repopulate the Earth after such an annihilatory strike.



Original poster from the film. Courtesy Sony Pictures.

In the meantime, using advice from the American military, Soviet fighters have managed to shoot down all of General Ripper's B-52 bombers except for one, piloted by the ignorant, racist Major T. J. "King" Kong (Slim Pickens). At the same time, American soldiers attack Burpelson Air Force Base and retake it, but not before General Ripper commits suicide, without revealing the "recall code" for the planes. On its way to Moscow, Kong's plane is severely damaged by the Soviets. But, ever the patriot, Kong manages to make his way to the bomb bay, open the doors, and literally ride a huge hydrogen bomb out of the plane and into the sky, screaming madly like a cowboy at a rodeo. The bomb, with "King" Kong on it, plunges to the earth, detonating with devastating impact.

Back in the War Room, Dr. Strangelove is busy calculating that it would take "ten females for each male" to repopulate the Earth in a "reasonable"

amount of time, much to delight of the military men assembled, when the Domsday Machine activates without warning. The entire world is enveloped in a massive wave of nuclear explosions. "Dr. Strangelove" ends with a seemingly endless montage of nuclear bombs detonating across the globe, while Vera Lynn's British World War II hit "We'll Meet Again" plays on the film's soundtrack. The film then fades silently to black, with the briefest of end titles.

The impact of "Dr. Strangelove" as both a cautionary tale and a "nightmare comedy" (in Kubrick's words) has not lessened with the passing of years; indeed, it has become more pronounced. Much of Sellers' work as Strangelove was improvised, and Kubrick, recognizing the actor's genius at creating such a horrifically comedic character, gave him free reign. Uncharacteristically for such a meticulous filmmaker, Kubrick even included a take near the end of the film in which Peter Bull, playing the Russian ambassador, is clearly starting to laugh -- or as the British put it, "corpse" -- in the middle of a scene, reacting to the extreme energy and absurdity of Seller's performance as the wheelchair-bound, partially paralyzed Dr. Strangelove.

Sellers was originally supposed to play Major "King" Kong as well as the other three roles, but never felt comfortable with the Kong part, and after "spraining an ankle" (accounts vary to this day as to whether or not Sellers faked the accident to get out of the role), Kubrick offered the role to John Wayne, who instantly turned it down cold. Slim Pickens was then offered the part, and played the role as a straight dramatic part, offering a neat contrast to the utterly over-the-top portrayal of Buck Turgidson by George C. Scott. Pickens reportedly arrived on the set in much the same clothing he wears in the film; Kubrick was delighted with his performance.

Interestingly, however, George C. Scott later claimed that Kubrick had tricked him into delivering such a manic performance by encouraging the actor to mug through a series of outrageously exaggerated rehearsal takes, and then incorporating them -- after shooting a series of supposedly "official" takes -- into the finished film. *Dr. Strangelove* was also scripted to conclude with a huge, Three Stooges style pie fight in the War Room, which was actually filmed, but cut before the film's release because Kubrick thought such obvious slapstick would move the film into the realm of pure farce, and blunt its satiric edge -- a wise decision.

Kubrick had a penchant for filming scenes over and over again, until he got precisely what he wanted, no matter what. This drove some actors to distraction, while others simply went along with the director's demands. The scene in which Slim Pickens, as "King" Kong, rides a nuclear bomb falling to Earth like a rodeo cowboy, for example, was filmed numerous times, with Pickens doing one take as stoically as Buster Keaton, and others with a degree of surprise, bemusement, or even shock, until Kubrick hit on the final "rodeo cowboy" idea incorporated in the final cut. Throughout the film, then, Kubrick was ceaselessly experimenting with every aspect of the production, and since the film was entirely a personal project, he had to answer to no one but himself -- something we could use more of in the film industry today.

"Dr. Strangelove," which is also one of the last major studio black and white films, remains the talisman of a generation, as popular today as when it was first released. Even though the threat of Mutual Assured Destruction seems to have lessened since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the prospect of nuclear warfare on a worldwide basis continues unabated. "Dr. Strangelove" also reminds us that when such devices proliferate, the chances that something -- or someone -- will "go wrong" are exponentially greater with each passing year. Kubrick intended "Dr. Strangelove" as satire; but as the years pass, and weapons become all the more sophisticated and compact, it seems that the film is more prophetic than even he might have expected.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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