

## Film Studies



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### **‘Strangelove’ Vis-à-vis Repressed Fears and Impulses**

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**Abstract:** The American film director Stanley Kubrick was an avid fan of Charlie Chaplin. Therefore, when he was planning to make a film on total nuclear annihilation, he decided to make a satire to have enough opportunity to depict a dangerous and powerful military authority having total control over nuclear weapons. The result of this vision was *Dr. Strangelove*. The film revolves around a highly paranoid mind obsessed with the communist's infiltration that could go to any extreme measure to begin a nuclear war with the Russians, which would result in erasing the lives of billions on earth for centuries. In this film, Kubrick created situations where a mad man in the highest power could authorize such an attack. Kubrick associated madness with power and focused on the dangerous outcome of such a fatal combination. This essay analyses the primordial fears and obsessions in the character of Dr. Strangelove and focuses on how such abstract emotions destroy human beings' natural ability to reason. We will see that Stanley Kubrick was rigorous and systematic in excoriating the obsession with the nuclear arms race by showing the psychological and emotional devastation such dangerous preoccupation brings about as a consequence.

**Key Words:** *American Fascism, CIA Operations, Cold War, Communist Infiltration, Dr. Strangelove, Fear and desire, General Jack D. Ripper, General Lyman Lemnitzer, Madness and power, Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), Robert McNamara*

Stanley Kubrick's anti-war film was *Dr. Strangelove or How I Stopped Worrying and Started Loving Bombs* (1965) deals with the unspeakable obsession of a powerful General, coupled with his hatred for communists, resulting in nuclear attacks on Russia, endangering the existence of the population of the entire nation. The film was released when the Cold War was at its peak. The film is based on the novel *Red Alert* by Peter George. Although the novel deals only with the threat of a nuclear war, the film differs significantly from its source material. Kubrick appointed the satirist Terry Southern after deciding to make the film a

black comedy because he felt that the source material has enough insights to make a satirical critique on the theory of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), a military strategy. It was a national military policy in which each country would possess powerful nuclear weapons to destroy the enemy and thus the fear of complete nuclear annihilation would stop the attacker from attacking the defender with the same nuclear device. The conception of Doomsday device was also proposed by the Military Strategist Herman Kahn. Doomsday device is a hypothetical superpower weapon or the system of weapons with the potentiality to wipe out the earth and thus causing doomsday in the world. The threat of doomsday is used as a strong deterrent against the nuclear attacks of enemy nations as it has the capacity to go off automatically, without being monitored by manual operation. Therefore, the enemies would have enough reasons to withdraw from nuclear bombing their targeted nations as they would also face the same consequences. The doctrine of MAD came into existence as a powerful pact, which would prevent nuclear war between the United States of America and Russia in the aftermath of the Second World War. However Kubrick knew that such rational precautions opted by the governments were bound to fail as the obsession to achieve nuclear supremacy manipulated both the nations' rationale. The authors of the book *The Untold History of America*, Oliver Stone, and Peter Kuznick, narrate a real-life incident that placed America in a very embarrassing situation soon after the U.S. authorities conducted a new series of hydrogen bomb tests. Even after knowing that it is not safe to demonstrate such tests in the large islands of the Pacific, the authorities went ahead with the demonstration. “At 15 megatons, it was a thousand times more powerful than the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, The cloud of radioactive coral drifted toward the Marshall Islands of Rongelap, Rongerik, and Utrik contaminating 236 islanders and 28 Americans” (Kuznik and Stone. *The Untold History of America*. 270). From this situation, one can easily discern how obsessed president Eisenhower’s government was with the possession of highly advanced nuclear weapons while never actually worrying about the safety of the civilians.

This essay analyses the primordial fears and obsessions in *Dr. Strangelove* and focuses on how such abstract emotions destroy human beings' natural ability to reason. We will see that Stanley Kubrick was rigorous and systematic in excoriating the obsession with the nuclear arms race by showing the psychological and emotional devastation such dangerous preoccupation brings about as a consequence.

## The Age of Paranoia

In 1949, when the Soviet Union successfully demonstrated the nuclear bomb test, the fear of mass nuclear bomb holocaust became an immediate threat to humanity. Russia began to appear as the centre of fear and mass destruction as the US authorities immersed themselves in counter attacking the severe threat of nuclear annihilation. But in reality, the fear existing in the minds, the fear which was excessively focussed on the communists' attack became the actual enemy of America as the government was eager to develop its own nuclear bomb to stay ahead in the arms race. This competition for superiority between the world's two superpowers, Russia and America, created a real threat to the world after the Second World War. Both the states paid greater attention to developing mass destructive weapons in order to dominate the world. This gave rise to paradoxical situations where the governments from both the sides concentrated on inventing powerful nuclear bombs, in order to keep their territory safe and peaceful.

The film *Dr. Strangelove* was released on 29<sup>th</sup> of July 1964 when the effects of the Cold War between America and Soviet Union were beginning to show its effects on society. The threats of communist invasion had created paranoia in the U.S., which came to be known as the Red Scare. Federal employees were analyzed in order to investigate whether they were really loyal towards the government of the United States. US Senator Joseph McCarthy ordered the investigation in order to expose the alleged communist infiltration of the government and the Hollywood film industry. Although there was no evidence or proper proof to prove guilty screenwriters like Alvah Bessie and Dalton Trumbo, producers and directors like Adrian Scott, Herbert Biberman, and Edward Dmytryk were targeted as communists sympathizers and were forced to appear for the hearings in the courts. After being intimidated by the McCarthyian investigation, the frightened studio executives blacklisted the accused from the film industry and barred them from working in the studios. This endangered concepts such as freedom of speech and freedom of expression. "FBI director J. Edgar Hoover was quick to equate any kind of protest with communist subversion, including the civil rights demonstrations led by Martin King Jr. Hoover labelled King a communist and covertly worked to intimidate and discredit the civil rights leader" ("Red Scare." *HISTORY*, A&E Television Networks, 1 Jun. 2009, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/red-scare>). This was a period when intense fear over an attack by the Soviets and the anti-communist propaganda was at its peak in America. The

fear of communist sympathizers residing in America and actively working as spies had created a new threat to the security of the United States.

The phobia of the communist invasion did not create this paranoia. However, the government authorities had instrumentalized the threat of communist invasion to achieve total domination over the citizens of America. During the Second World War, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had successfully carried out espionage activities while using U.S. citizens, who had a soft corner for communism. However, even after the war, President Harry Truman's executive order made it mandatory for all federal employees to be analyzed to prove their loyalty towards the state and government. McCarthy's undemocratic probe into the personal convictions and artistic choices of individuals who were part of the arts and films, exposed the double standards of the authorities. "Truman's loyalty program was a startling development for a country that prized the concepts of personal liberty and freedom of political organisations" ("Red Scare." *HISTORY*, A&E Television Networks, 1 Jun. 2009, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/red-scare>). Stanley Kubrick found this policy implemented during the Cold War not only absurd but condemnable as it threatened the democratic virtues that the U.S. stood for. His first film, *Fear and Desire* (1954), passionately advocated the idea of the sheer absurdity behind the concept of war and how such wars were fought out of human fears and insecurity, victimizing innocent soldiers by using the mantra of nationalism and patriotism.

### **The Synopsis of the Film**

The film *Dr. Strangelove* depicts the war caused by internalized fears originating in the minds of men with power. The film examines how this fear becomes a displaced expression of repressed anxieties and frailties rooted deep within human beings who enjoy total control over the operation of mass destructive weapons. Here, the American Generals reflect the collective minds severely affected by the fear of communist invasion. This delusional neurosis of infiltration had affected the American society during the peak of the Cold War. In the film *Dr. Strangelove*, General Jack D. Ripper becomes the embodiment of the collective fears of that age. The very name Jack Ripper is a direct symbol to implicate the psychotic mind-set of the American General as the origin of the name roots back to the days of a serial killer named Jack the Ripper, who had terrorized London with his bizarre killings of women. The film begins with General Jack Ripper as his one decision causes a series of unfortunate events. He takes the decision to execute Plan R, a command in which B-52

Bombers are ordered to initiate a full-scale nuclear combat on Russia. As soon as Plan R is executed and the bomber plane goes out of range, the General not only cut off every device of communication, but he also makes sure that even the President cannot reach him. His obsession with the nuclear attack is so intense that not only does he lock himself with Captain Lionel Mandrake, but also makes sure that the secret code to terminate the air attack on Russia is not known to anyone other than him. The President of the United States, sitting in the War Room, makes several attempts to call back the B-52 bombers. He somehow manages to call off almost all of the bomber planes back with the help of Captain Lionel Mandrake, who makes great efforts to decode the secret combination to recall the B-52 bombers. But the politicians and the generals fail to recall one of the bomber planes. The rest of the film depicts the absurd efforts of American government to call back the warplane that has gone beyond their reach. However all their efforts go in vain as they completely fail to stop B-52 plane from bombarding the Russian territory. At the end of the film when the U.S. President Merkin Muffley fails to resolve this conflict concerning national security, he turns to Dr. Strangelove, a former Nazi scientist who had once worked for Adolf Hitler and is now serving the United States of America. He is a wheelchair bound mad scientist, for whom even the idea of annihilation gives greater excitement. His recommendation was to select a group of more than 200,000 people and relocate them inside a deep mine shaft in order to escape the nuclear fallout. This is Dr Strangelove's plan to repopulate America after the nuclear annihilation. He advises that with a general ratio of ten females to each male in which the women should be carefully chosen according to their sexual characteristics and the men on the parameters of physical power and intellectual faculties with good organizing, governing, and business skills. This idea of the mechanical process of reproduction that would involve sexual orgies excites the mind of Dr. Strangelove so much that he miraculously rises from his chair and he utters, "Mein Fuhrer I can walk!"

### **Power Dominance: A Displaced Means to Communicate Repressed Fears**

When the mission to destroy Russian territory becomes irreversible, the General Ripper strongly feels that now the Americans are forced to accept the only possible rational option in which they must be committed to the plan of ultimate annihilation. "I can no longer sit back and allow Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion and the international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids" (00:23:51 – 00:24: 11).

In other words, the reason for General Ripper's strong hatred towards the communist's is his unshakable belief that since 1946 the communists are affecting the precious bodily fluids of Americans with fluoridated water. The fear created of delusion has urged him to execute Plan R.

Stanley Kubrick was much aware of how powerful men during post-World War were excessively preoccupied with total power. Kubrick wanted to juxtapose this obsession of men with power with their deeply rooted psychological fears, which was the fundamental reason for such violent outbreaks. In the chapter titled *The Bomb: The tragedy of a Small Man*, appearing in the book *The Untold History of United States*, the writer duo Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick reveal how Harry Truman who became the President of the United States in 1945, had a difficult childhood in which he had to struggle to win his father's approval. "And he was forced to wear Coke-bottle-thick glasses, so he could not play sports or roughhouse who picked on and bullied him. 'to tell the truth, I was a kind of sissy,' Truman remembered" (Stone and Kuznick. *The Untold History of United*.140). This trauma and psychological pressure influenced Truman to make very bold and unnecessarily cruel decisions to prove that he was not a sissy or a coward, but a very strong man. The chapter makes it clear that the dropping of the two nuclear bombs was unnecessary as the Japanese were all set to surrender. After dropping the bombs, the news broke lose that bombs had ended the war. Almost eighty-five per cent of the American public were happy that the bombs had brought the war to an end and approved the usage of mass destructive weapons. But as the writers point out that even many military leaders considered such a nuclear holocaust as totally unnecessary and morally reprehensible. But Henry Truman celebrated as he heard the news:

Truman was dining on board the USS Augusta on his way back from Potsdam when he learned of Hiroshima. He jumped up and exclaimed, 'this is the greatest thing in the history' he shortly thereafter said that announcing the news of Hiroshima was the "happiest" announcement he had ever made (Stone and Kuznick. *The Untold History of United* pg. 171).

The attitude of Truman is much similar to that of General Jack Ripper, who chooses to attack the Soviet Union as though to prove his power when the thought of being impotent becomes almost endurable to him. The repressed fears of the psychopathic General whose displaced actions create insanely delusional situations where in the name of patriotic sacrifices, the mission to annihilate the human race is launched. General Jack Ripper commits this crime against humanity assuming that his insanely terrible action would protect his

fellow Americans from communist infiltration. But the film makes it clear that in order to hide his sexual weakness; he is psychotically relying upon the great nuclear devices which reflect the greater power. Here Kubrick tries to bring out sexual insecurities and human frustrations which force him to attack on enemy nations so that he can repress his own fears with his powers. Nevertheless such thoughtless impulsive crimes committed by the powerful men will always lead to disastrous consequences to the larger population.

The fictional General D Ripper has a lot of resemblance to the real-life General Curtis Lemay who was obsessed with destruction of the communists with the nuclear bomb. During the height of the Cold War when Russia had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba and awaited for a trigger factor from America to launch the attack, Robert McNamara the Secretary of Defence and the then President John F. Kennedy were trying to resolve the situation through peace talks with the then Russian President Khrushchev. But General Curtis Lemay was not in favour of such negotiations. “Kennedy was trying to keep us out of war, and General Curtis LeMay who I served under said, ‘Let us go in. Let us totally destroy Cuba’” (*12 lessons from Robert McNamara*. 00:09:22-00:09:37). If such an action had been taken then, it would have resulted in the death of maximum numbers of people residing both in Cuba and in America. Naturally as a consequence, the entire territory of Cuba would have been annihilated by the powerful nuclear missiles. In the words of McNamara, “I want to say, and this is very important: At the end, we lucked out. It was luck that prevented nuclear war. Rational Individuals came that close to total destruction of their societies” (*12 lessons from Robert McNamara*.00:14:49- 00:15:01). Even though at the end of the day the American President Kennedy and his Russian counterpart Khrushchev were happy that the issues of nuclear annihilation were resolved peacefully, Curtis Lemay was disappointed. McNamara recalls his reactions to this victory of peace. “And LeMay said, ‘Won? Hell lost! We should go in and wipe them out today!’” Lemay believed ultimately we’d confront these people with nuclear weapons, and by God, we better do it when we have greater superiority we’d confront these people with nuclear weapons.” (*12 lessons from Robert McNamara*.00:18:14-00:18:27).

This yearning for mass destruction through violent attacks of nuclear bombs was reflected in the character of General Ripper. In order to stroke his sense of power, he would not hesitate to push the button of mass destruction. When Lieutenant Mandrake tries to dissuade him from such an act of lunacy, soon after the General has given command for nuclear air attacks, he retorts very strongly. As stated before, the General, under the spell of

delusional disorder completely negates the truth and strongly believes that the Russians are the sole reason for his sexual impotency. This dangerous psychological state where a person firmly refuses to accept the truth of his own weakness and fragile condition causes a state of anarchy wherein human beings with such state of mind indulge in terrible acts of violence. It leads to death of countless innocents. Kubrick argues that the primordial fears of one man with supreme power can cause a nuclear holocaust when that fear transforms into madness. Here the madness and fear are dangerously intertwined in the mind of a General who enjoys the rare privilege of ordering a nuclear attack. With the character of General D Ripper, Kubrick implicates that when the psychotic madness wears the highest degree of military uniform reflecting order and protocol, even the most insanely delusional plan of mass murder can fall under general norms. Sigmund Freud believed that dreams are a secret safety-valve for human beings from which the unconscious mind attempts to explore repressed fears and desires into the conscious mind. Even though these fears and desires are heavily censored and are forced to appear in a disguised form, still they manage to slip into the conscious mind as symbols subtly representing repressed whims and unfulfilled caprice. The mind of General D Ripper works in a similar fashion. He has this great desire to earn total power over the Soviets so that he can forget the fact that he is sexually impotent. The idea of sexual impotence here is yet again implicated by Kubrick as a symbol which represents the American generals' obsession to indulge in violent outburst against their enemies during the Second World War, in the name of patriotism and national interest. But in reality, they are just engaging themselves in acts of violence and destruction just like the Nazi reign which they proposed to stop. In the book *The Untold History of America*. Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick observe:

In 1948, Lieutenant General Curtis Lemay, the mastermind of the United States' terror bombing of Japan, took charge of SAC and set out to turn it into a first-rate fighting force- one that would be ready to do battle against the Soviets at a moment's notice. 'We are at war now!' he declared. When fighting began, he intended to simply overwhelm Soviet defences, dropping 133 atomic bombs on seventy cities, knocking out 40 percent of Soviet industry, and killing 2.7 million people. The SAC emergency War Plan he designed called for delivery of the entire stockpile 'in a single massive attack' (Kuznik and Stone. *The Untold History of America*, 228).

From this quote, one can discern the violent mental state of General Lemay during the post-World War. Kubrick wanted to emphasize on the deluded state of man when given extraordinary power. Similarly, Dr. Strangelove, the German Scientist, who happens to be a cripple bound to a wheelchair reflects the buried mind-set of the Nazi's in the US



Government during the cold war period. In order to emphasize on this idea, Kubrick creates the character of Dr. Strangelove who does not appear in the source material of the novel *Red Alert*. As mentioned above, Dr. Strangelove is a former Nazi German scientist, now working for the President of the United States of America. It appears that Kubrick has drawn inspiration from Project Paper Clip, in which full immunity and asylum is given to German scientists in exchange for their intelligence and service. Dr. Strangelove is in a wheelchair, his crippled state reflects that of Germany soon after the Second World War. Even though Dr. Strangelove is working for the President of the US, his mind cannot forget his working experience with Adolf Hitler. He refers to the President as “Mein Führer” and desperately tries to hold on to his arm, which is trying to lapse into Nazi salute. In short, Kubrick wants to implicate that the Nazi ideology had not left Dr. Strangelove even though he is working for the Americans, a seemingly democratic nation. This idea becomes much clearer in the last scene, when the American President and his team inside the war room fail to recall one warplane destined to drop an atomic bomb on the territories of Russia. When the President of America is afraid that the doomsday device of Russia would go off and annihilate everything, Dr. Strangelove comes out with a plan, which is again yet another reflection of the Nazi’s obsession with pure blood. He suggests that only few American Strongmen accompanied with beautiful women would take shelter in the underground, a safe place to hide after the nuclear fallout. The Nazis were interested only in the termination of the Jews, but when Dr. Strangelove is confronted with the chance of annihilating the total population of the world, the mere thought increases his sexual impulses. His sexual fascination with the concept of strong men making love to healthy women, and thus creating a new world of pure populace makes him so excited that in a state of frenzy he manages to get up from his wheelchair. The scene suggests that for Dr. Strangelove, the idea of the termination of the entire human race gives an orgasmic experience. To insist on this idea in the very next scene, the film cuts to gigantic mushrooms created soon after the nuclear explosion, a clear suggestive of the height of orgasm at the end of copulation. Therefore, in this film, Kubrick juxtaposes sexual obsession and insecurities with the Cold War conflicts and tries to show how the war has become a plaything for the delusional preoccupation of few powerful individuals. In 1965, when the fear of hydrogen bomb was still fresh in the audience’s mind, Kubrick dares to show the viewers what could happen if the wrong person pushes the wrong button.

## **The Failure of the Democratic Institution to Stop the War**

*Dr. Strangelove* is a very important film in Kubrick's career as it was released in the middle of the 60s when the Cold War was all set to collide with the Vietnam conflicts. The Presidents were becoming less and less capable of taking the right decision as they had become the puppets of the CIA directors and powerful military generals. When John F. Kennedy rejected the CIA proposal to send air support to destroy the Cuban army during the Bay of Pigs conflict, he incurred the wrath of the CIA officials such as Richard Bissell, Navy Chief Admiral Arleigh Burke, and General Lyman Lemnitzer. This was yet another covert CIA operation to overthrow Fidel Castro, the President of Cuba. Lemnitzer angrily commented "pulling out the rug was unbelievable... absolutely reprehensible, almost criminal". (Stone and Kuznick. *The Untold History of America*. 292). But Kennedy stood his ground firmly, as he explained to his close friend, "We're not going to plunge into an irresponsible action just because a fanatical fringe in this country puts so called national pride above national reason"( Stone and Kuznick. *The Untold History of America* 292). *Dr. Strangelove* addresses this extreme fanaticism which strives to throw all reason into thin air in the name of national pride and honour. It also depicts the powerlessness of the President of the United States of America, who is not free to take any reasonable decisions to maintain a harmonious relationship with countries with communist ideologies.

The film *Dr. Strangelove* is also about collective failure of the so called rational system. All the powerful generals and the President of the United States fail to stop the war. President Merkin Muffley is cornered by two mad generals. When General Jack Ripper has already given order for complete nuclear annihilation of the Soviets, another General 'Buck' Turgidson, sitting with the President in the war room in order to resolve this terrible conflict, keeps on insisting on the inevitability of nuclear war with Russia. He is in fact in sympathy with his fellow Gen. D Ripper's terrible deed. He feels disappointed when the President attempts to ward off his recommendations in favour of continuing the nuclear war. Thus, the film tries to throw light upon the democratic state where anarchy is set loose and even the President is helpless in his efforts to bring back the order in a chaotic power system of the nation which is constantly foiled by superior military heads whose minds are fixed upon destruction and hatred against communist states. Nevertheless Kubrick's intention lies in exploring the subliminal fears of the influential people of the ruling state. Such fears eventually formulate the dangerous decision taken in the name of national security. At the same time, through the film, *Dr. Strangelove* Stanley Kubrick constantly emphasizes that

modern civilization could destroy itself if human beings fail to recognize their psychologically repressed impulses. When one does not take restorative measures to curb such unconscious impulsions, they find their way out through the displaced actions, resulting in costly destructions.

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