
Idea and Symbols in Stanley Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove"

Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* presents us with a fascinating satirical snapshot of the Cold War. It reflects back at us the absurdity of US (and to a similar extent Soviet) nuclear policy. Unsurprisingly, the film was controversial, accused of "pinko" communism before production even ended. The irony of this accusation in light of the film's subject matter is palpable. Kubrick uses character flaws to symbolize and scathingly criticize the institutions that those characters represent. This criticism is wide reaching, spanning from the weakness of the British military and American politicians to the warmongering of the US Military-Industrial Complex and the latent Nazism of the American scientific community. These criticisms reflect Kubrick's personal views, as well as many popular sentiments of the time.

Naturally, each unreliable character in the film represents a separate fear or anxiety the American public had about specific institutions. Generals Ripper and Turgidson each represent the wild and warmongering behavior of the US military (particularly the US Air Force) and the bloat and waste of the military-industrial complex during the Cold War. The amorality and latent Nazism of the American scientific community, especially those members involved in nuclear capable missile research, is symbolized in Dr. Strangelove. Each character has a particular flaw, even when multiple characters represent the same institution (Turgidson and Ripper representing the US Air Force/military). There is however one overarching flaw shared by all of the characters: impotence. All of the major characters in the film are impotent in one way or another, whether literally (Ripper), politically (President Muffley), or militarily/physically (Mandrake and Strangelove). Impotence is what drives all of these characters to act as they do.

The most obvious case of impotence is in General Ripper, as his impotence is literal, and his delusions about its causes are what motivate him to carry out his plan to bomb the Soviet Union and creates the central conflict of the film. But it is not delusion alone that drives him. He believes the US military has been made impotent by politicians, and that the US is not taking a hard enough stance on the Soviets. This idea very much reflects sentiments within the military community at the time (and probably somewhere within every army in every country in every century). For example, in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Air Force General Curtis LeMay (upon whom General Turgidson is based) was an outspoken advocate of direct military action against Cuba, pushing for an invasion even after the Russians withdrew nuclear armament from Cuba (Smitha, "The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962"). Although LeMay's opinion was in the minority for the general public in aftermath of the crisis, accusations of various politicians being soft on the Soviets would continue throughout the Cold War.

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In contrast to Ripper, General Turgidson is shown as being virile. He is in the midst of relations with his secretary at his character's introduction. One could interpret Ripper as representing the violence the US military could commit, as evidenced by his name. In contrast, Turgidson would represent the military-industrial complex and the bloat of the US military. In 1964, the US military had not flexed its muscles in total war since 1945 and had not been allowed to deploy its most powerful weapons since the bombing of Nagasaki, despite requests to do so during the Korean War. The violent aspect of the military is unused, leading to frustration in Ripper. In contrast, military spending was alive and well. In 1964, defense spending accounted for 9.53% of the GDP. Consider the situation 50 years later in 2014, and defense spending was only 4.59% of GDP (Chantrill, "US Government Spending 2014")(Chantrill, "US Government Spending 1964"). The US nuclear arsenal in the film is apparently adequate, with Turgidson saying a first strike could destroy 90% of Russia's nuclear capability. Turgidson is by no means satisfied with merely having the means to destroy Russia, and still prefers a release to the long military buildup. Again, Kubrick uses sexual frustration to illustrate these feelings. Turgidson is interrupted while with his secretary at the beginning of the crisis. Throughout the film, Turgidson seems eager to get the nuclear war over with.

In contrast to both Ripper and Turgidson, Mandrake does not long for war, and he adds physical failings to moral and mental ones. Mandrake is a high ranking Royal Air Force officer (Group Captain is equivalent to Colonel in the US ranking system) who apparently served during WWII as a Spitfire fighter pilot. He is timid, apologetic, and unassertive. In the war, he did not learn to use land based small arms, having "only ever pushed a button in [his] old Spitfire," leaving him militarily impotent; he was also maimed, losing one of his legs, leaving him physically impotent. Once it is assumed that Mandrake represents the British Empire in general and the British military in particular, his flaws are easily interpreted as criticisms of these institutions. His inability to assist Ripper with the machine gun is symbolic of the loss of British will to fight alongside the US. His false leg itself indicates the loss of British ability to fight, as well as the loss of parts of the British Empire in the postwar period. Huge stretches of British colonies and holdings were decolonized between 1945 and 1964, and decolonization continued until 1997 with the handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. The loss of these territories is reflected in Mandrake's loss of his own flesh.

Beyond witnessing his physical impotence, we see Mandrake try unsuccessfully to convince Ripper to call off his attack. It is easy to interpret this as a sign of British diplomacy failing to convince the US to hold off in Vietnam or other conflicts. Even before the end of WWII, Britain was already losing influence. By the time of the film, Britain was no longer a power on roughly equal footing with the US, but a dependent with relatively little say in what America wanted to do. We again see a symbol of failing diplomacy when Mandrake is attempting to contact President Muffley, but is obstructed by Colonel Bat Guano, with diplomacy and collaboration hindered by the US military. In the same scene, British cultural irrelevance is also emphasized.

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When Colonel Guano shoots the vending machine for its change, he warns Mandrake that he will “answer to the Coca-Cola company” if his intentions turn out to be unjustified. This exchange shows the British as culturally dependent on American companies. Yet the same scene could also be a criticism of the influence of corporate America on the world, rather than a comment on British cultural dependency, a nod towards who *really* runs the world.

Like Mandrake's, Strangelove's impotence is primarily physical. Until the final moments of the film, he is unable to use his legs, and one of his hands acts on its own throughout. Dr. Strangelove is an amalgam of various German scientists recruited during Operation Paperclip, the US initiative to recruit German scientists and engineers after the end of WWII (Trueman, "Operation Paperclip"). His alien hand could be symbolic of latent Nazism in Operation Paperclip scientists. Although former Nazis were never officially recruited, the reality was that many scientists and engineers were Nazi party members and had their backgrounds whitewashed before being recruited (Trueman, "Operation Paperclip"). We see a similar whitewashing with Strangelove, who changed his name from Merkwürdigliebe. In the end, we see much of Strangelove's latent Nazism come out.

Once it is inevitable that the doomsday device will be activated he progressively loses control of his alien hand, culminating with a Nazi salute to the president. Strangelove begins describing how humanity could persist underground. As he describes the arguably eugenic factors that would be used to determine who lived on in a shelter and who died aboveground, Strangelove appears more or less unconcerned by the potential for catastrophe throughout the film and happily provides scientific advice to the President and military representatives. If it is assumed that Strangelove represents Germany as a whole rather than just the Operation Paperclip scientists, then his crippling and wheelchair are easily interpreted much the same as are Mandrake's false leg and crippling. Strangelove is crippled because Germany was crippled, and far more severely than Britain. While Mandrake can put on a show of being able bodied, there is no pretending for Strangelove, just as West Germany could no longer pretend to be a dominant power.

Throughout the film, although he is the leader of the dominant power, President Merkin Muffley is ineffectual and unable to control his subordinates. Again, the very name of his character is representative of his personality. Both his first and last name refer to the female genitalia, and his character is timid and weak. He appears, and is seen by his advisers as, weak towards the Soviets, even inviting them into the war room against the advice of Turgidson. Additionally, he does not seem to be up to date on nuclear strategy or technology. When informed of the existence of Wing Attack Plan R, which Ripper issued to his bombers, the President acts indignant and surprised. Turgidson reminds him that he approved the plan after being accused of being weak towards the Soviets.

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When this happens, the President appears to be embarrassed; it is clear that he has lost face. This setup shows the inability of the President, and thus the civilian American public, to control the military, even when they are the ones approving plans. He is similarly surprised that the US is pursuing its own doomsday device program, even though the source is the *New York Times*. If it is assumed that, as the President, Muffley also symbolizes the American public, then this ignorance of nuclear strategy and technology becomes representative of the tendency of the public towards ignorance, even in important matters. Indirectly, the public did approve of Wing Attack Plan R and an American doomsday device program by electing Muffley and other politicians. The problem faced in the film is ultimately born from institutional failures allowed to fester by an ignorant and disinterested public.

Kubrick, through symbolism and satire, showcases the failures of all the major institutions that control the use of nuclear weapons. The military is depicted as hotheaded, rash, and paranoid, while politicians are painted weak and ineffectual. The scientific community is shown as willing lab dogs for the military-industrial complex. Both the British and the Russians act as fading powers, vulnerable to the whims of the US. Much of this is hidden in plain sight, with names accurately describing character traits. Additionally, Kubrick uses sexual metaphor to drive home the symbolism, with nuclear explosions constituting the film's climax. *Dr. Strangelove* came at a time when the threat of nuclear holocaust was still very real, and very fresh in the public's mind from the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kubrick's scathing criticism of the establishment naturally gave rise to debate and led to accusations of anti-American or communist agendas in the film. At the time, the film offered a hard look at what the public had let grow in America, and today offers audiences a terrifying glimpse of just how close we came to oblivion.

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