

### **DR. STRANGELOVE: *A critical film review***

This essay will analyse this film from different perspectives. First, by looking at its realism and whether its depiction of a real life situation is realistic. Secondly, by observing its elements of satiric comedy. Thirdly, by discussing its rampant examples of sex allegories. Finally in terms of its general context at the time of its release in the sixties. 6 pages long.

## **DR. STRANGELOVE**

Dr. Strangelove discusses nuclear politics, which tells the story about a madman who uses a system's breakdown to launch a nuclear war on the Soviet Union by his own authority. The film develops from this perspective where by the totality of actions was focused on finding a solution to reverse the technological and communications breakdown, which occurred when bombers were sent to attack their targets and could not be re-called. In view of this Dr. Strangelove can be analyzed by discussing four different perspectives. First, it can be analyzed by looking at its realism and whether its depiction of a real life situation is realistic. Secondly, it can be analyzed by observing its elements of satiric comedy. Thirdly, it can be analyzed by discussing its rampant examples of sex allegories. Finally the film can be analyzed in terms of its general context at the time of its release in the sixties.

Dr. Strangelove, according to author Andrew Sarris, was one year too late as all of the turning events in the cold war such as the test ban treaty, the Kennedy assassination, and the Cuban missile crisis had passed. However, as these marking events had passed the mood of pessimism, and passivism, which occupied discourse in the era of Dr. Strangelove, reflected how society felt either not knowing when civilization could come to an end or how to deal with the issue of nuclear weapons. Few films were produced about nuclear weapons because many people went to theatres to escape the problems of everyday life and therefore most studios did not invest into scripts that dealt with these issues. Furthermore, the film industry's declining attendance in the sixties prompted studios to produce films that were guaranteed to attract large crowds at the box office. In light of this, Kubrick's decision to add an element of satiric comedy helped him to receive approval to make the film. Television, being the most popular entertainment in the sixties, offered a wide variety of comedy shows which attracted large audiences and consequently led film studios to adopt the same comedic formula. Furthermore the successful appearance of British comedy in the sixties added to the trend on comedic themes in American films.

Comedy, therefore being the natural solution to attract audiences back to the theatres, was used in satirical form. Satire provided a great irony in the film in that as society watched the film, which ridiculed decision-makers in general, they were simultaneously laughing at the possibilities of their annihilation. In fact Peter Malone states, "Dr. Strangelove offers nothing very constructive, but it is a black satirical analysis of much of what is wrong with us". Although Peter Malone's statement implies a lot more than simply laughing at us, he points out the black satirical content, which could mean that through the anxieties of the nuclear age, society has acquired a morbid sense of humor. Or Peter Malone's statement could also transcribe a meaning that suggests society has acquired a sense of humor capable of laughing at any situation in any context.

The comedic aspect is another important element because it supplied a device to present the film in a manner that could be entertaining to the mass audience. Andrew Sarris is quoted as saying, "...a sane (no pun intended) film on the bomb would have been a deadly bore". This being said Peter Sellers and George C. Scott, who are involved in most of the dramatically funny scenes, play roles that ridicule their character's political positions in similar fashion to Charlie Chaplin's role in *The Great Dictator*.

A good example of this comedic element is George C. Scott's portrayal of General Turgison in the war room scene where he cynically implies to carry out a large scale attack with several hundred bombers because they cannot recall the four bombers that are irreversibly destined to their targets. The comedy in this scene arises from the audience's inability to comprehend imagining an officer at that level in the army, making such a cynical suggestion. In essence, the comedic aspects evolve from comedy to satire when the character is put into a realistic context including sets and costumes, while Kubrick manipulates the filming through his stylistic and formal styles, which makes the "event" and "look" of the film realistic. Therefore satire in this film is a blend of realism and exaggerated acting.

Dr. Strangelove's ending monologue, where we observe the caricature of a mad scientist whose every word or action portrays that of a Nazi doctor's ideology is the best satirical scene in the film. The scene's irony occurs when we come to realize that a Nazi, which America fought so hard to defeat, was dictating his love of destructive weapons for their own sake, within the confines of the American war room. The combination of realistic issues played by comic strip like characters set in a realistic setting created Kubrick's satire enabling him to talk about any issue, even the nuclear bomb in the context of the sixties.

Adding to this satirical comedic flavor was the use of sex as an allegory through out the film. In fact the opening and ending of the film present these allegories very clearly as the refueling of the two plains simulated intercourse while the orgiastic qualities of the explosions at the end represented an orgy. Anthony F. Macklin presented an article where he analyzed the names of the various characters, which attached various sex aspects. Some of his examples were: general Ripper's name which uses Jack the Ripper's connotation as a sex fiend whose obsessed with bodily fluids, his cigar and gun; General Buck Turgidson middle name "Buck" which meant male in various connotations; Dr. Strangelove's name is used to imply his impotency. These are but a few examples, which used sex to provide an interpretation describing what gender issues, were like in the sixties.

Realism is another important aspect of the film because the nuclear weapon's issue was close to everybody's minds in 1963 and still is in the present day. Dr. Strangelove provided a dramatic look at both nuclear powers on the brink of a nuclear war of destruction without necessarily wanting to be in such a war. Its absurd comedic elements such as the use of the music "When Johnny Comes Home" in the bomber's dramatic approach to its target transformed the entire scene into a wild-west showdown. Another scene, which helped diminish the realism in the film, was Ripper's subtle use of his phallic cigar and the battle scene where he pulls his machine gun from his gulf bag. This comedy helped accentuate the surrealism in the film however, it's realistic story line, in an era when people knew a lot less than we know today, transformed the film into an absurdly morbid comedy. This is especially obvious when we as historians look back and see the general context in panoramic

view knowing what came before and after.

Realism mixed in with comedy is further exploited in three different real life scenes: Kong's bomber, the battle between American troops, and the war room scene. In essence these scenes poked fun at serious decision-makers, in the context of almost vaudeville like comedy, which distorted what reality looks like.

The airplane scenes, for example, provided a cramped realistic look at the cockpit while Kubrick duplicated intimate details of its control panel. However, the plane's cockpit scene's realism soon dissolved when we notice pilots playing cards and watching pornographic magazines. Furthermore when the go code, to launch the bombs, was received the final scenes transformed themselves into an old Wild West showdown as Kong puts his "Wild Billy" cowboy hat. The whole representation of the pilots as being calm while they were carrying a load of nuclear bombs was perhaps used by Kubrick to illustrate how normal the discussion of nuclear bombs had become in the sixties. Or perhaps its just Kubrick's way of demonstrating how humorous and morbid society had become in the nuclear age.

The battle scene was incredibly realistic in its authentic reproduction of World War II battle footage. However all seriousness turns to comedy when Peace is Our Profession is ridiculously shown some twelve times. It is then further ridiculed by the irony of the soldier's statement where he let's the viewer know how realistic the Russian's duplicate of American equipment, looks. This scene demonstrates how a technological device such as a backup system to reverse the doomsday machine could backfire and cause us to fight ourselves.

Finally realism dissipates in the war room scene when general Turgison suggests that an all out attack should be launched while he smiles cynically. Immediately following Turgison's speech, realism further slips into almost farse like comedy when the American president talks to a drunken Russian president, not to mention Dr. Strangelove's ending display of satire at its best. These scenes depicted a group of people in situations that surpass everybody's imagination as to how people in high office could react or should react in the context of chaos such as in Dr. Strangelove.

In summary Dr. Strangelove presents the impression of being a serious movie but always included a scene, action or line, which made every scene, transforms itself into comedy. Furthermore it's comedic and satiric elements which occur on and off throughout the film add to the lack of realism by diverting seriousness to laughter. The context of this film and the perceptions of nuclear weapons at the time helped this film achieve the stature of a classic as it succeeded in making an entire generation laugh about an issue that could end life on any given day.

by Pierre Hobson