The Essence of War

An in depth analysis of
Stanley Kubrick's

DR STRANGELOVE

By Rob Ager April 2015 ©

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Part one

DR STRANGELOVE IN CONTEXT

Chapter one
THE CONCERNED FILM MAKER

“I was interested in whether or not I was going to get blown up by an H-bomb prior to Lolita.”
SK interviewed in 1966 by Jeremy Bernstein

Paranoia is a label that has often been leveled at Stanley Kubrick, but in the 1960’s fear of thermonuclear war was epidemic. Everybody from high ranking officials to school children was affected, be it through war game simulations or “duck and cover” public information films.

Biographers have noted the affect on Kubrick. He considered emigrating to Australia so as to be out of the way should a nuclear war take place, but for a mixture of reasons eventually settled in England. He was especially prone to nuclear war fear because of his existing preoccupation with armed conflict. Three out of the six films that he’d already directed were about war – Fear and Desire, Paths of Glory and Spartacus.
Most civilians did little more than worry about the cold war, but Stanley had developed a voracious information gathering habit regarding any topic that was of interest to him. If he wanted to learn chess he’d read all the books he could on the subject, prowl the chess clubs looking for matches with the best players who couldn’t get a game elsewhere and do a little chess hustling on the streets until he felt he’d perfected his game. If he wanted to be a film maker, he’d read every book and trade publication he could get his hands on, ask a million questions of others in the industry until he’d assimilated their knowledge and engage in every facet of production until he knew each crew member’s trade better than they knew it themselves. One thing he didn’t do was assume that sufficient understanding would be found in a single author’s research. And so, when faced with fear of nuclear annihilation, Stanley did something few civilians would even contemplate. He pursued and devoured every piece of information he could about the technicalities, logistics and psychology of the nuclear arms race, while continuously cross referencing it. In short, he educated himself on the subject.

“I pretty much read the spectrum and began finding after a while I wasn’t reading anything new.”
SK interviewed in 1966 by Jeremy Bernstein

In the above interview Kubrick goes on to mention that his interest was heightened by the Berlin Crisis of 1961, which established the Berlin Wall while he was shooting Lolita. Other events contributing to cold war paranoia prior to and during the making of Dr Strangelove included the Warsaw Pact, Operation Mongoose, the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Fears of water fluoridation as communist plot were also prevalent and in 1961 the Soviet Union exploded the largest nuclear device in history, the Tsar Bomb. This bomb was so heavy that it couldn’t be delivered by missile.

During his research Stanley became astutely aware of certain “paradoxes” in the cold war. In the Stanley Kubrick Archives book can be found a transcript of a conversation he had with Joseph Heller, author of the cold war novel Catch-22. Stanley points to the fear of nuclear annihilation of large portions of the human race and the fear of world over-population as a paradox. When Heller talks about Anti-war films Kubrick responds by describing that “A lot of people enjoy war”. Heller then replies with his personal experiences verifying the fact and that the feeling of war as a bad thing often comes for military personnel after the conflict is over, but while it is going on they enjoy it. Kubrick also describes at several points his opinion that humans are drawn to the idea of mutual annihilation as an alternative to accepting individual mortality.

“There’s a fatal subconscious attraction in resolving the problem of one’s own death in the thought of the whole world blowing up together.” SK quoted in the Stanley Kubrick Archives book p365

“As fewer and fewer people find solace in religion ... I actually believe that they derive a kind of perverse solace from the idea that in the event of nuclear war; the world dies with them.”
SK interviewed in 1968 by Eric Nordern for Playboy

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The SK Archives book contains other significant quotes revealing Stanley’s opinions on nuclear conflict and related world affairs.

“The fact that it has not been used on people deliberately or accidentally since World War II is a bit like an airline with a perfect twenty-year safety record. One has to admire such a performance, but it can’t last forever.”
SK quoted in Sunday Times Magazine in 1965

“Just as man once viewed the Earth as the true centre of his Universe, he now views his nation as the moral centre of the Universe ... Who will be our Galileo?”
SK handwritten note 1962 / SK Archives book p361

“Cynicism, loss of spiritual values, two world wars, the communist disillusionment, psychoanalysis, has forced the 20th century writer to keep his hero uninvolved, detached, burdened with problems relating to life ... If the modern world could be summed up with a single word it would be ‘absurd’. The only truly creative response to this the comic version of life.”
SK handwritten note 1962 / SK Archives book p363

Kubrick would no doubt have come across many documents by or relating to controversial figures such as Herman Kahn, Curtis LeMay and Werner Von Braun. Herman Kahn wrote extensively of Megadeaths – a unit for measuring nuclear death counts by the million – and developed the Doomsday Machine concept, in which a network of hydrogen bombs would be automatically triggered by any instance of enemy nuclear attack, thus destroying all life on Earth – the ultimate deterrent. Kahn also worked with Nelson Rockefeller, Edward Teller and Chet Holfield on plans for an underground fallout shelter that could hold millions of people. This was reported on in 1961 by Fortune magazine. In his audio recorded 1966 interview with Jeremy Bernstein, Kubrick describes Kahn as “a genius”, but also describes his war game scenarios as being unrealistic. By coincidence Kubrick and Kahn both grew up in the Bronx. Curtis LeMay was one of the more aggressive of US military high command, seeking war where his contemporaries were trying to avoid it. And Werner Von Braun was a rocket scientist, Nazi and SS officer who was given a new falsified personal history by the OSS (now known as the CIA) to justify his recruitment by the US military after WW2. These figures and others like them would influence the creation of characters and plot details in Dr Strangelove.

Stanley of course wasn’t the only civilian getting himself an education on the topic of nuclear war. Peter Bryant (original name Peter George) wrote Two Hours to Doom, aka Red Alert, the book upon which Dr Strangelove was based, and did a rewrite for Kubrick to coincide with the release of the film. Kubrick learned of Peter’s book from Alistair Buchan of the Institute of Strategic Studies, a think tank based in London. Such was Kubrick’s thoroughness he’d written to experts in the field asking for recommendations to add to his reading list. Bryant had previously been an RAF navigator and British Intelligence Agent. Kubrick may have learned to “Stop worrying and love the bomb”, but
the catharsis of working on Dr Strangelove didn’t work so well for Peter. Just two years after the film’s release, and part way through writing his next novel on nuclear warfare, he took his own life. The sad irony is that so many people found a sense of relief and laughter in the revelations of cold war insanity he and Kubrick delivered.

“Gradually I became aware of the wholly paradoxical nature of deterrence ... If you are weak you may invite a first strike. If you are strong you may provoke a pre-emptive strike. If you try to maintain the delicate balance, it’s almost impossible to do because secrecy prevents you from knowing what the other side is doing and vice versa, ad infinitum.”

P166 Stanley Kubrick by John Baxter

Such basic principles weren’t difficult for Kubrick to discover. As a seasoned chess player, strategic thinking against an opponent was his natural territory. But getting an understanding of nuclear warfare wasn’t enough. Stanley and co. still needed to find a way of communicating that understanding to an audience either too disinterested or too terrified to pay attention.
Chapter two
EMBRACING THE ABSTRACT

Regarding the possibility of history repeating itself in relation to the two World Wars, Kubrick, speaking to Jeremy Bernstein in 1966, stated:

“It can never happen in that way again, which may be true, but it'll happen differently. Everybody's convinced they'll never have another 1914 situation, but they'll have a 1985 situation they're not prepared for.”

Interesting that Kubrick chose 1985 as his sample scenario year, which falls uncomfortably close to Orwell's fictional nightmare future of 1984. Kubrick continues the interview with reference to mass psychological obstacles on the topic of nuclear war.

“People do not react to abstractions. They only react to direct experience. Very few people are even interested in abstractions and even fewer can become emotionally involved or emotionally react to an abstract thing. ... The only reality that nuclear weapons have are a few movie shots of mushroom clouds and a few documentaries that are occasionally shown in art houses about Hiroshima. ... The nuclear bomb is as abstract as the fact that you know some day you'll die, and you do an excellent job of denying it psychologically. ... Because of the very effective denial and lack of any evidence there's almost no interest in the problem. In the minds of most people it's less interesting than city government (laughs).”

Kubrick was already familiar to some extent with public indifference regarding war. Two films prior to Dr Strangelove he directed Paths of Glory, the true story of three innocent soldiers who were executed in France as an example to their comrades for not storming an enemy hill that they knew they couldn't take. The film was critically acclaimed, though controversial because of its raw honesty about the questionable ethics of military service, but acclaim wasn't enough. Paths of Glory wasn't a financial success, but it did solidify Kubrick's growing reputation in the film industry as a talent to look out for. Just getting the film made was a challenge in itself. Kirk Douglas' powerhouse stardom position, and his threat of abandoning a scheduled shoot of The Vikings (both films were distributed by United Artist), was what it took to get the show on the road. And it took a strong show of interest in the project from Gregory Peck to prompt Douglas to commit.

Stanley knew in advance that the downbeat ending would limit the commercial appeal of Paths of Glory. He had the script altered so that the men were saved, but Douglas demanded he stick to the original script. Stanley compensated by adding a scene of his future wife Christiane singing to a group of soldiers in the final scene, which didn't harm the film's integrity, but the sombre tone of the film remained.
And after this commercially limited response to a film in which just three innocent men are executed, Kubrick was going to destroy the world on screen. The subject matter of Dr Strangelove was far too dark. However, it was reality that came to the film maker’s aid. Kubrick cited in interviews that the writing process kept producing unintentionally funny results due to glaring ironies. He explains the paradox of films veering away from reality to appear dramatic.

“This is where the laughs are, in this thing of banality and reality and absurdity intruding into something we imagine is immune. People get a sense of the truth from it much more than they do from so called realism. Because the so-called realistic story, if you really think about it and you take each moment and each scene, has fantastic contrivances and omissions of the truth in order to keep it from being funny.”
Talking to Joseph Heller, SK Archives book p362.

This universal truth is evident in the political satire cartoons that have been a staple of national newspapers and magazines for generations. Often, they’re more revealing than reams of supposedly informative, and seriously written, column inch jargon. Kubrick continues.

“I very deliberately tried to avoid the irresistible temptation of a lot of satire to level with the audience at some point and tell them what you really think. You’re always afraid that if you keep saying the opposite of truth they may not get the point. ... If you really want to communicate something, even if it’s just an emotion or an attitude, let alone thinking about it and you take each moment and each scene, has fantastic contrivances and omissions of the truth in order to keep it from being funny.”
Talking to Joseph Heller, SK Archives book p363/364.

Heller undoubtedly subscribed to these views. His renowned book Catch-22 (published in 1961) also uses satirical comedy in a war context, and may have helped prod Stanley to go the satirical route. In the aforementioned discussion with Kubrick, Heller states, “That’s the difference between an academic lesson and an aesthetic experience.”

Another experience that likely contributed to Kubrick opting for a comedy format was his prior film Lolita. It was the first comedy (though a tragic one) he’d made. All his previous films were deadly serious and were box office failures (with the exception of Spartacus, on which Stanley was merely a director for hire), where as Lolita was a huge success. This lesson was never lost on him, as most of his films after Lolita featured dark humour, particularly in A Clockwork Orange, The Shining and Full Metal Jacket.

Note: Jules Pfeifer and then Terry Southern were hired to add their brands of satirical humour to the Dr Strangelove script, resulting in public statements of dispute from Southern that the script “wasn’t funny” prior to his input. That
dispute isn’t a matter to be resolved in this article, though I will add that taking either side would be to ignore the spontaneous contributions from Peter Sellers on set. In this author’s opinion the humour of Dr Strangelove appears to be a collaborative effort.

Communicating an emotionally challenging subject to a potentially indifferent audience wasn’t the only motive for recasting Peter George’s Red Alert story as a comedy. Censorship and political controversy were equally to play their part. Again, Kubrick’s experience of directing Lolita came to his aid. With Lolita, an adaptation of a novel in which a writer has a sexual relationship with a twelve year old girl, Kubrick had learned how to make compensatory adjustments to win censor approval prior to shooting, but without destroying the essence of the story. He also learned to communicate a story indirectly through cryptic innuendos and non-verbal metaphors. Remember his comment to Joseph Heller: “If you really want to communicate something, even if it’s just an emotion or an attitude, let alone an idea, the least effective and least enjoyable way is directly.”

The aesthetic challenge of indirectly communicating controversial themes brought a new sophistication to his direction of Lolita, but it wasn’t easy. Many innuendos in early script versions were quickly spotted by censors upon submission and Stanley was prompted to remove them. According to biographer Vincent Lobrutto, the president of the MPAA objected to the Dr Strangelove script on the grounds that it appeared to reference the, then, current Whitehouse administration. Kubrick got around this by claiming that the film was set in an unspecified future. This, of course, was a smoke screen because, as is already known to many fans and film scholars, several real world figures in the arms race are mocked in the film (more on that in a later chapter). And the comedy element is of itself a smoke screen to engage audience interest.

Another subtle approach cited by Kubrick is the use of dream logic. Responding to Joseph Heller’s description of Dr Strangelove as being both funny and realistic, Kubrick reveals …

“With one exception – Peter Seller’s performance of Dr Strangelove, the German scientist. He has the ability to go into the area where it’s like a dream. He can go into surrealism and keep his other leg in reality. He can do things which are not real – for instance, it’s almost inconceivable that anybody could behave as Dr Strangelove does in the last scene, with the hand. I suppose even a psychotic personality wouldn’t behave in that way. But it’s something somebody might do in a dream. Crossing the line between dreams and reality is something Pinter does all the time.” Talking to Joseph Heller, SK Archives book p364.

This statement reveals a simple facet of Kubrick’s work. Some things cannot be taken at face value and must be considered in terms of symbolism. Such “dream-like” symbols can generally be identified, as Kubrick explains, by their incongruence with reality. With poorly conceived productions we’re generally accustomed to passing off such details as continuity errors and plot holes, but when watching a carefully crafted film such as Dr…
Strangelove, in which great efforts were made to get flight control panels and cockpit jargon realistic, blatant mismatches with reality are the key to hidden themes and meanings. Speaking of a deleted ending, in which the arguing politicians and military personnel of the war room begin throwing pies at each other, co-writer Terry Southern describes symbolic elements of Dr Strangelove’s behaviour.

“He takes a giant step forward and pitches flat on his face. He immediately tries to regain the wheelchair, *snaking* his way across the floor, which is so highly polished and slippery the wheelchair scoots out of reach as soon as Strangelove touches it. We intercut between the pie fight and Strangelove’s *snakelike* movements ... Strangelove, exhausted and dejected, pulls himself up so that he is sitting on the floor ... Then, unobserved by him, his right hand slowly rises, moves to the inner pocket of his jacket and, with considerable stealth, withdraws a German Luger pistol and moves the barrel towards his right temple. The hand holding the pistol is seized at the last minute by the free hand, and both grapple for its control ...” Stanley Kubrick by John Baxter p190

Note Southern’s double description of Strangelove moving like a snake. Considering Strangelove’s underhanded manipulation and opportunism in the film, a trait sometimes symbolized by people being referred to as snakes, the metaphor was likely preconceived.

Another plot device was conceived to engage audience members who would otherwise be emotionally repelled by a film about the end of humanity. The story begins with an Alien species secretly watching humanity’s nuclear oblivion plight from space. The primary purpose of framing the story in this way would be to put the audience in a neutral observer position, separating them from both emotional involvement and feelings of political loyalty – in a word, disassociation. Though this wasn’t included in the final cut, it is retained in Peter Brant’s rewrite of the book to tie in with the film, the Aliens baffled and amused at the absurdity of their subjects. Also cut from the ending of the film was a series of on screen lyrics and a karaoke bouncing ball, prompting the audience to sing-along with the lyrics of Vera Lynn’s *We’ll meet again*.

A final point for this chapter confirms that Kubrick and co employed non-verbal communication in the form of metaphors and dream logic to suffuse their film with hidden themes. On page 359 of the Stanley Kubrick Archive book are photocopies of two letters that previously sat for decades among Stanley’s collection of catalogued
correspondence with fans and critics. The first is dated March 20th 1964 (two months after the film’s release). It is a letter from Mr Legrace G. Benson of the Dept of History of Art at Cornell University in New York. In it he identifies and praises the film’s subtly encoded sexual themes. The second letter is a response from Kubrick on April 6th of the same year. Kubrick wrote:

“Dear Mr. Benson:

Thank you very much for writing such a flattering letter. I am sorry such a well thought out analysis of the picture has to be confined to personal correspondence. Seriously, you are the first one who seems to have noticed the sexual framework from intermission to the last spasm.

I will be in New York for the next few months and if you happen to come down from Ithaca, I hope you will give me a ring and perhaps we can have a drink together.

Yours very truly

Stanley Kubrick”
Chapter three
PRODUCTION

Rather than present a meticulous breakdown of the production process for Dr Strangelove, I’ll limit this chapter to a selection of interesting production factors, many of which will become significant later in this analysis. If you wish to read a thorough chronological account then I suggest the biographies of Kubrick by John Baxter and Vincent Lobrutto. Both books were released in the same year so it’s very unlikely that either were regurgitating each other’s ideas. I’ve heard several claims that the Lobrutto biography is biased against Stanley to make him appear in a negative light. I disagree with this as I’ve read it several times and, as far as I can tell, Lobrutto was simply being factual about the on-set tactics used by Kubrick to get the results he wanted and to thwart conflicting agendas presented by studios and collaborators. Come to think of it, Baxter’s book is equally frank in this respect. Here is what Kubrick’s assistant, Anthony Frewin, had to say on the topic of Lobrutto’s book.

He admired Vincent Lobrutto’s biography for the industry that went into it and said “this tells me things about me and my family I never knew.”

SK Archives book p518

An early account of Kubrick’s concept for the film, well before production went ahead, occurred a month before Lolita’s release. According to Vincent Lobrutto, Kubrick told New York Times editor and critic A. H. Weiler that he was producing “Dr Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb”, the story of “... an American college professor who rises to power in sex and politics by becoming a nuclear wise man.” However, Terry Southern told biographer John Baxter that one of his first contributions as a hired writer, well into pre-production, was to coin the new title of the film. This difference of reporting is probably not due to the quality of either biographer’s research, but more to do with Terry Southern’s post-release claims of being played down in terms of his contributions to the script. Southern claimed the script wasn’t funny prior to his involvement, but Kubrick’s former partner in film making crime, James Harris, told Lobrutto that he and Kubrick were already developing comedy aspects of the script much earlier (such as having a waiter take deli orders from the hungry war room generals). There was no significant reason for Harris and/or Weiler to fabricate their accounts. Weiler’s report actually matches an alternative title scribbled on a piece of paper, which is reprinted on page 348 of the Stanley Kubrick Archives book - “Strangelove: Nuclear Wiseman”. More likely, Southern was trying to bolster his status in relation to the film’s success after the fact. In fact Weiler’s report of the film idea being about “an American college professor who rises to power in sex and politics by becoming a nuclear wise man” tallies with certain interpretations that will be presented later in this article.

Dr Strangelove was shot in London at Shepperton Studios. This decision appears to have been influenced by multiple factors. Vincent Lobrutto attributes this to technical difficulties of shooting in New York, such as the lack of a large enough studio space for the War Room set. But, equally plausible, John Baxter has cited that Peter Sellers was
unable to leave the UK due to divorce proceedings. Columbia pictures had already stipulated as part of their contract with Kubrick that Sellers would play multiple roles, just as he had done in Kubrick’s previous film Lolita (studios tend to attribute the success of a given film to simplistic and incidental factors rather than appreciating the complexity of a film’s psychological appeal).

On behalf of Columbia, Seven Arts provided funding with Kubrick doubling up as producer and director. Seven Arts were a British based production company that had also worked with Kubrick and James B. Harris, his former producer and business partner, on Lolita.

Possibly contributing to the UK shooting location choice was Kubrick’s increasing weariness of America and the creative control afforded by being out of reach of studio executives. By the time Stanley produced 2001: A Space Odyssey he and his family had permanently relocated to England.

The aforementioned James B. Harris worked with Stanley for several years. As a team they produced The Killing, Paths of Glory and Lolita, but now they were both setting out on their own again. Accounts from both men claim an amicable split, but the reasoning remains vague. One possibility, from Kubrick’s standpoint, was his increasing secrecy as a film maker. He and Harris had been close friends and openly trusting collaborators, but Kubrick’s growing reputation, and the controversy his films generated, required increasing stealth on his part. Having a business partner who knew the majority of his methods and motives was no longer practical. And so Dr Strangelove would be his transitional piece between open collaboration with a trusted business partner (The Killing, Paths of Glory, Lolita) and his deliberate compartmentalization of collaborators (all of his films from, and including, 2001: A Space Odyssey).

This emerging secrecy is one of the most interesting features of Dr Strangelove’s production process. A well known example is Stanley’s chess tactics, both literal and symbolic, with the actor George C. Scott, who played General Turgidson. Stanley would bring a chess board on set and play various crew members, invariably winning to establish intellectual dominance and discourage their hopes of playing mind games with the director on set. Scott wanted to play the Turgidson role straight; to deliver a powerful and convincing performance. He was also a good chess player, but Kubrick earned his respect through multiple wins on the chess board. Meanwhile, on the symbolic chess board of the film set, he pacified Scott’s serious performance motive by shooting the takes Scott wanted and then requesting a handful of extravagant takes afterward. As Scott later explained in interviews, Kubrick used the extravagant takes in the cutting room. According to editor Gordon Stainforth, he also did this with portions of Jack Nicholson’s performance in The Shining.

Other examples of Kubrick’s emerging tactics with collaborators include his apparent approaching of Sellers with the Dr Strangelove contract while the actor was drunk, his use of debt-ridden writers who would have less collateral in contract negotiation (Terry Southern for Dr Strangelove, Arthur C. Clarke for the novelization of 2001: A Space

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Odyssey, and Anthony Burgess for the rights to his A Clockwork Orange novel), and the set design requests he presented to Ken Adam. Biographer John Baxter, on p176 of his book, explains that Kubrick hired Adam based upon the triangular set designs used for the evil scientist’s laboratory in the James Bond film Dr No. He then allowed Adam to develop designs based upon NORAD (North American Aerospace Defence Command), but later abruptly requested a redesign to a triangular shape that ended up being much like the Dr No sets, which he wanted all along. This would become a staple tactic of Kubrick’s for the rest of his career. He would hire an artist or technician, knowing full well in advance what result he wanted. He would have the collaborator develop a variety of designs of their own volition then he would gradually rule out the designs that least matched his desired outcome, thus prodding the hired hand into creating what was originally desired without ever having to verbally state it. The extensive conceptual art and typed feedback to artists housed at the Stanley Kubrick Archives in London reveals the director’s frequent use of this technique. This was all part of Stanley’s method for maintaining secrecy of his films’ intending meanings.

By the time Kubrick made The Shining his mastery of creating thematic sets without ever verbalizing their meaning had reached phenomenal heights of skill. My video on the subject, which I produced in August 2011, offers a detailed study of the Escherstyled spatial anomalies in The Shining’s sets.

A specific example of how important secrecy was becoming to Kubrick’s work is outlined by John Baxter (p182). A particular instance of satire in the film regarding a prominent war official in the United States was somehow leaked to the US government, who then contacted Mo Rothman of Columbia. Rothman told one of Kubrick’s writing collaborators, Terry Southern “Tell Stanley that New York does not see anything funny about the end of the world as we know it.” Experiences such as this encouraged Kubrick to refine his secretive modus operandi.

Research methods in Kubrick productions were also reaching new heights. Wanting to accurately reproduce B52 cockpits, Kubrick and co. had already been refused access to USAF tech manuals, but Ken Adam was able to reproduce the cockpits from flight magazines already collected by Stanley.

To faithfully shoot adlibbed performances by Sellers, Kubrick used multiple camera set ups, allowing fluid continuity in the cutting room later. Though Sellers delivered superbly in the three roles of President Muffley, Group Captain Mandrake and the mad scientist Strangelove, he avoided playing the Texan pilot Major Kong. A back and forth series of mind games took place between he and Kubrick. For once, Kubrick lost. Sellers claimed through a letter from his agent to Stanley that he couldn’t do a Texan accent and, by interesting timing, showed up on set with an ankle in cast, providing a doctor’s note claiming he’d fractured it. Whether the fracture was genuine is a mystery, as is Sellers’ true reason for not wanting to play Major Kong.

John Wayne was then asked to play Kong, but refused. Wayne had avoided military service in WW2, despite many other Hollywood stars enlisting, and despite his own on
screen tough guy status and pro-Vietnam war political position later. He was also a member of The John Birch Society, which promoted communist water fluoridation paranoia, also parodied in Dr Strangelove. Later in Kubrick's filmography John Wayne would be parodied in Full Metal Jacket, another war film, this one featuring raw recruits.

Slim Pickens was hired to replace Sellers as the Texan pilot, but Kubrick refused to let Pickens see any of the footage that had been shot. This was another emerging tactic, soon to be used regularly by the director. Minor collaborators would usually be shielded from almost all information about the production, aside from that necessary for them to carry out their role. Kubrick would give almost nothing away, while simultaneously bombarding collaborators with questions to elicit everything they knew. Adrienne Corri, who played the writer's wife / rape victim in A Clockwork Orange, told John Baxter, “Stanley is like a vampire of people’s brains. He draws out whatever he thinks anybody knows. He just goes on and on in that rather flat voice to get out what people know. He doesn't necessarily listen. He just wants to see what they know.”

Another emerging facet in the Kubrick method was the act of rewriting scenes at short notice. As has already been famously cited, Sellers was given a great deal of free reign in his performance of the Strangelove scientist and as President Muffley. However, he played Mandrake as scripted. But such spontaneous film making wasn't limited to Sellers performance. Vincent Lobrutto quotes George C Scott (p238) “Every morning we would all meet and practically rewrite the day’s work. He’s a perfectionist, and he’s always unhappy with anything that’s set”. That’s actually a contradiction. Perfectionist film makers like to have everything prepared in advance rather than shoot adlibbed or hastily rewritten scenes. On the one hand, short notice rewriting allows a film maker to make necessary adjustments based upon observations of the work in progress, but on the other hand it allows the secretive film maker to introduce conceptual alterations without giving the crew a chance to understand the thematic implications of the changes. It is very clear from Kubrick’s post Dr Strangelove film career that both of these motives were at play.

High numbers of takes also served other purposes under particular conditions. Sterling Hayden was very nervous when shooting his first scene as General Ripper, but Kubrick patiently worked with him on forty-eight takes until the actor settled in. Yet Kubrick was no fool when it came to insincere forms of incompetency or simple skiving. Associate producer Victor Lyndon told novelist Elaine Dundy 'It's no good saying to Kubrick such and such will or won't work. You've got to prove it to him to his satisfaction and that means you've got to have all your arguments lined up very logically and precisely. Not that he doesn't leave you alone to get on with it - he delegates power but only on the non-creative side of the film and even then he checks and double checks. The creative side is entirely in his hands. He even designs his own posters.” Designing his own film posters became regular practice with international design variations often hinting at subtle thematic ideas encoded in Kubrick's films. In particular, the range of unreleased posters for A Clockwork Orange and The Shining (currently available for public viewing at the Stanley Kubrick Archives) are both a visual treat and strikingly thematic in ways not verbally expressed by the director in interviews.
Stanley’s opposition of excessive tea breaks, and thus additional overtime, taken by British crews was expressed to Variety’s Jack Piler. And amusing behind-the-scenes footage of Full Metal Jacket reveals that nearly 25 years on Kubrick was still frustrated with the tea break problem. Video embedding for the clip has been disabled, but it can be watched at this link.

Source lighting is another feature of Dr Strangelove that would become standard Stanley practice. Characters in the War Room were lit by lights that were also on-screen props. The usual open ceiling plan of a film set (allowing for shifts in lighting) was ruled out by the triangular set design already insisted upon.

An external problem that came up during the shoot was the film Fail Safe, and its source novel, a nuclear war story very similar to that of Dr Strangelove. The novel of Fail Safe was released in 1962, becoming a US best seller and was so similar to Red Alert, which was released four years earlier in 1958, that Peter Bryant filed a lawsuit. It was settled out of court. Also, by bizarre coincidence, Max Youngstein was producing Fail Safe. He worked for United Artists, who produced The Killing with Harris / Kubrick. After being shown the final cut of the film he’d been fairly dismissive of the entire project and was infuriated with them for advertising The Killing on their own initiative. Now he was producing a film that had a similar plotline to Dr Strangelove and he was trying to get the film finished and released in advance. Personal rivalry with the upstart Kubrick may well have been on Youngstein’s mind considering the success Kubrick had attained since their conflict at UA.

Kubrick filed a lawsuit against all the key companies and players associated with the Fail Safe production, but it was unnecessary. Columbia, producing Dr Strangelove, also came to his aid by acquiring distribution rights to Fail Safe and making sure Stanley’s film was released first. It worked. Dr Strangelove was a smash hit, but Fail Safe failed at the box office despite positive reviews, the excellent Sydney Lumet in the director’s chair and a solid cast including Henry Fonda and Walther Matthau. Its serious tone was probably unpalatable to a public who’d already howled at Kubrick’s parody of the same subject matter.

Another two aspects of production worth noting here, which both will be highly relevant later in this article, are 1) scenes that were shot but deleted from the edit, and 2) details in the book adaptation (not the original Red Alert book, but the rewrite for Kubrick) that were either omitted from the film or altered all together. As already noted in chapter two of this analysis, the book is framed with opening and ending chapters describing an alien race’s observations of the nuclear war proceedings. This is missing from the film. The book gives a variety of additional details about particular characters that are sometimes revealing of who and what they represent, which we will explore later. President Muffley is introduced in the book while making his way to the war room. After some amusing arguments with guards about I.D. he is elevated into the war room in a chair that emerges from the floor. This was filmed, but not included in the final cut.

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Kubrick also insisted on a green baize covering of the table in the war room, despite the film being shot in black and white.

But the most important missing scene, filmed but not included in final cut or the rewrite of the book, is the pie fight scene. Once the nuclear war has been kick started near the end of the film, Muffley, Turgidson, DeSadesky and the rest of the war room crowd start throwing cream pies at each other. President Muffley is hit, which causes the fight to stop with Turgidson then calling for retaliation. Strangelove then declares Muffley and Desadesky insane, orders them to be institutionalized and is hailed by Turgidson and the other generals as their new leader.
Post production was long-winded. Kubrick preferred a minimal editing crew. Even for later films, in which excessively large numbers of takes needed to be catalogued, editing would generally consist of one editor and Stanley himself. He was very unhappy with the first cut of Dr Strangelove and thus embarked on an extensive rearrangement of scenes – extending the editing period to eight months. This is likely the reason that the novel rewrite is chronologically different to the film.

Kubrick’s habit of archiving his production materials also began to surface in his production of Dr Strangelove. Several minutes of unused aerial footage, shot for the B52 bomber scenes, ended up as psychedelically coloured landscapes in the ending of 2001: A Space Odyssey.
Kubrick spent six weeks at Columbia's offices, insisting upon a generous marketing campaign. Advertising and publicity was another of his ongoing self-education projects that would lead to him personally designing the marketing campaigns of later films. According to Vincent Lobrutto's biography, Columbia executives were "far from enthusiastic" after seeing the yet to be released Dr Strangelove, which at that time still included the pie fight scene, despite Kubrick apparently placing friends in the audience for the purpose of "manipulating reaction to the film in his favour". John Baxter has cited that Columbia decided against preview screenings of the film, opting instead for a very short release in New York so that it could be submitted to the Oscars for that year. The film was then withdrawn from release, while alterations were made over sensitivities regarding the assassination of John F. Kennedy – the pie fight scene depicted US President Merkin Muffley being struck down in battle with a pie. A preview screening invitation card, featured in the Stanley Kubrick Archives book (p359), is dated November 22nd 1963 at 8:30pm. At 12:30pm on the same day, just eight hours earlier, Kennedy was shot and killed in Dallas. Kubrick had written on the card in red felt tip, "Never held. The day Kennedy was shot."

Potential controversy over the Kennedy assassination may have been narrowly avoided, but the comedic treatment of nuclear war was always destined to cause a stir. Bosley Crowther of the New York Times called Dr Strangelove "beyond any question the most shattering sick joke that I've ever come across". He applauded many of the film's funnier moments and its encapsulation of the technically warped military mindset, but expressed revulsion at its ending, in which the insanity of both General Ripper (the
apparently lone instigator of the war) and Strangelove himself (the opportunist former Nazi waiting for a new war) spreads to engulf the behaviour of everyone in the war room.

“I am troubled by the feeling, which runs all through the film, of discredit or even contempt for our whole defense establishment. ... It is alright to show the General who starts this wild foray as a Communist-hating madman, ... But when virtually everybody turns up stupid or insane – or, what is worse, psychopathic – I want to know what this picture proves. ... The only character who seems to have much sense is a British flying officer ... The ultimate touch of ghoulish humour is when we see the bomb actually going off, dropped on some point in Russia, and a jazzy soundtrack comes in with a cheerful rendition of ‘We’ll meet again some sunny day’. Somehow, to me, it isn’t funny. It is malefic and sick.”

Crowther, whose beliefs were clearly challenged by the picture, expresses awareness of his own mixed feelings, “My reaction to it is quite divided, because there is so much about it that is grand, so much that is brilliant and amusing, and much that is grave and dangerous”. This wasn’t the only time Crowther reacted with hostility to films that became considered classics. He slated Psycho, Bonnie and Clyde, The Great Escape and Lawrence of Arabia. In September of the same year as his Strangelove review, Crowther gave a comparatively positive review of Fail Safe. Though he still asserted the possibility of accidental nuclear was not possible, he cites the reasoning for his preference of Sydney Lumet’s film simply “… it does not make its characters out to be maniacs and monsters and morons. It makes them out to be intelligent men trying to use their wits and their techniques to correct an error that has occurred through overreliance on the efficiency of machines”. In a nutshell, it was the anti- military establishment message of Kubrick’s film to which Crowther objected. Historian and Philosopher Lewis Mumford responded in writing to Crowther’s negative comments of Dr Strangelove, “This film is the first break in the catatonic Cold War trance that has so long held our country in its rigid grip”.

Much more scathing was a piece in the Washington Post (not surprising) by Chalmers M. Roberts. Chalmers’ 2005 obituary in the same newspaper describes that the reporter was;

"... a retired chief diplomatic correspondent of The Washington Post and the author of books on such topics as nuclear arms control ... Mr. Roberts began
covering the Cold War as The Post's chief diplomatic correspondent in 1953. ... During World War II, while working for the Office of War Information, he was one of two government officials assigned to escort Eleanor Roosevelt during her tour of the United Kingdom. Later in the war, he was an Army Air Forces intelligence officer and visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki to inspect the devastation caused by the atomic bombs.”

Roberts’ history of working in military intelligence, and probably his ongoing pride and loyalty to such institutions, would undoubtedly affect his experience of Kubrick’s cold war satire film. It’s also possible that he had some ongoing affiliation with the defense industry, though the obituary cites his contribution to the release of The Pentagon Papers in 1971. His article about Dr Strangelove, published Feb 21st 1964, was titled “Film With A-War Theme Creates New World Problems For U.S”. He claimed Kubrick’s film “can cause the United States as much harm as many a coup or revolution” and “Moscow gold could not have purchased a better piece of propaganda”. He concluded with a long quote from Leonard Beaton of the Institute of Strategic Studies in London, claiming the scenario envisaged in the film is impossible. Ironically, it was Alistair Buchan, also of the Institute of Strategic Studies, who had recommended the book Red Alert to Kubrick to begin with. Chalmer’s M. Roberts’ article isn’t currently available on the Washington Post’s website archives, but is featured in the 2001 documentary Stanley Kubrick: A Life in Pictures. One interviewee in the same documentary also recalls that a Beverley Hills newspaper had stated Kubrick “should be physically harmed” for having made the film. But the Communist Propaganda labels that were predictably cast weren’t entirely without merit. Vincent Lobrutto has cited that Communist newspapers in Europe loved the film.

Despite the mixture of extremely positive and negative reviews, Dr Strangelove was nominated for many awards, and won several. It received 4 academy award nominations, including Best Picture and Best Director. It received 7 BAFTA nominations and won four of them including Best Film, Best British Film and even the UN Award (Vincent Lobrutto has cited that the United Nations attempted to recruit Kubrick and a handful of other popular directors to produce films on their behalf. Fail safe was also nominated for the UN Award in 1966). Kubrick was voted Best Director by the New York Film Critics. The Society of Film and Television Arts awarded it Best Film. It won the Hugo Award for Best Sci-fi Film and the Writer’s Guild Award for Best Screenplay.

As the years have gone by since release Dr Strangelove hasn’t lost its appeal. A directors’ poll of all-time favourite films for Sight & Sound in 2002 brought the film in at No 5, just below Citizen Kane, Godfather Part 2, 8½ and Lawrence of Arabia. In 2007 it was voted 39th in the American Film Institute’s top 100 movies list. On Metacritic it has a 96/100 score among critics and a 9/10 score among audiences. On the Internet Movie Database it has an 8.6/10 score. And on the popular film website Rotten Tomatoes it is the highest rated of all comedies with a 100% score among critics and a 94% score among audiences.
Upon first viewing the film myself in approx 2006 I couldn’t stop laughing, but was also shocked at how relevant the film was to modern day politics. I showed it to a film buff friend – both of us had been disgusted at the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Stanley was staunchly against the first Iraq War according to an interview with Christiane Kubrick in The Guardian). At the sight of General Ripper firing his machine gun with the British officer Mandrake holding the ammo belt, my friend howled with laughter “It’s Bush and Blair!”

Kubrick’s avoidance in interviews of giving away too much information about his key motives was beginning to show itself.

Bernstein: “Where you surprised at the reaction to Strangelove, the fact that it was so widely discussed and widely reviewed. Did you have any feeling of what the response would be to it?”
SK: “Well I mean all films are reviewed. The discussion went beyond reviews, but it was quite obviously something that might become a controversial issue.”
Bernstein: “Well, when you got finished with it did you have some sense that it was a winner?”
SK: “Well I was very pleased with it. I was very pleased with the film. It also happened to be a very successful film commercially.”
SK speaking to Jeremy Bernstein 1966

After the success of Dr Strangelove the Kubrick family relocated to Abbot’s Mead in England and later to Chidwickbury. Stanley would only make a handful more flights to America during the production of 2001: A Space Odyssey. Beyond this he never returned to his country of birth. The high walls, remoteness and security of his homes in the UK probably reflect the extent to which Kubrick had made political enemies with Dr Strangelove, which is a certain contender for the most openly anti-establishment film of all time.

In the 1990’s the time had come for a DVD release, but to Kubrick’s dismay, Columbia had lost the original film negative. The easy option would have been to restore the film
from an inferior copy that had been made, but such was Kubrick’s desire to maintain his, still highly relevant, film for future generations he photographed every frame of a master real he’d personally archived.

Forty-six years after the film’s original release, on 11th Feb 2010, this article in The Guardian spoke of a counter-propaganda documentary produced by the US military in response to Dr Strangelove, but which was never released. The twenty minute video is called SAC Command Post and can be viewed at the National Security Archive website. Its aim, in line with that of the Washington Post article attacking Stanley, was to reassure the viewer that the film’s accidental war scenario isn’t technically possible. It may be that the film was produced for private screenings to reassure government and military personnel rather than the public. The production of SAC Command Post reveals the deep concern in political and military institutions regarding Dr Strangelove’s power, a film made by mere civilians, to influence public opinion. However, a statement from nuclear strategist Herman Kahn supports Kubrick’s position:

“There is no acceptable way to protect ourselves from a psychotic Soviet decisionmaker who launches a surprise attack without making rational calculations.

Herman Kahn, On the Nature and Feasibility of War and Deterrence, page 40 (1960)

The fear works both ways.