Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Teach the Film in the Classroom

Of all the Hollywood films dealing with issues related to the Cold War, Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove (1964) is, perhaps, the favorite of historians. Kubrick’s humorous, satirical film addresses some of the dangers associated with the nuclear arms race. The director employs black comedy throughout the story and develops his drama around several outlandish characters, yet his film always remains close to the people and events of the 1950s and early 1960s. Dr. Strangelove refers to many important aspects of American politics and foreign policy in the era. As such, it serves as a useful document for history instructors to consider. A classroom analysis of Dr. Strangelove can help launch lively discussions about the Cold War and the nuclear arms race.

Kubrick’s film suggests that human fallibility can wreck carefully laid plans to prevent an accidental outbreak of nuclear war. Early in the story a mentally deranged general, Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden), calls for an unauthorized nuclear assault on the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, Ripper has the code that can recall the planes, and the general commits suicide during the mayhem that develops out of this nuclear crisis. As U.S. officials consider the possibilities of nuclear war, the Soviet ambassador reveals to President Merkin Muffley (Peter Sellers) that the Russians have created a “doomsday machine.” An attack on the Soviets would trigger the device, destroying the planet with radioactive fallout. Americans and Russians then cooperate in a desperate effort to prevent a U.S. jet from dropping bombs on the Soviet Union. A damaged American plane manages to get past the Soviet defenses. Major T. J. “King” Kong (Slim Pickens) unleashes the weapon and rides the bomb down to a Soviet military site like a Texas bronco buster. Dr. Strangelove, who evidently worked with the Nazis before serving the Americans, then offers salvation. He suggests that Americans can build “mine shafts” and populate them with attractive and vigorous men and women. By employing this plan, the U.S. can win the contest of survival, despite the loss of most of its citizens. In the final minutes, the 1939 song “We’ll Meet Again” serves as a eerie sound track for images of nuclear blasts. In this extraordinary conclusion Kubrick delivers a discomfiting
Major Kong (Slim Pickens) releases the bomb manually from the plane before riding it to the surface.
message. The director warns that, despite confident statements from politicians and military figures about the value of nuclear deterrence in keeping the peace, human error or human malice could produce nuclear Armageddon.

Objectives for the Classroom Project
1. To understand the historical background of the film, especially the events in U.S. and world history that made Dr. Strangelove seem like a relevant commentary on international affairs to audiences in 1964.
2. To consider the historical significance of symbolism in Dr. Strangelove.
3. To explore connections between leading characters in the film and historical figures of the 1950s and 1960s.
4. To place Dr. Strangelove in the context of films and books of the era that dealt with the Cold War and the nuclear arms race.

The Historical Background
Students will better understand the dialogue and symbolism in Dr. Strangelove if they become familiar with the history of the Cold War. To appreciate Dr. Strangelove's appeal to audiences in 1964, it is useful for students to read about the buildup of tensions between the U.S. and the Russians and the growing fear of nuclear war in the 1950s and early 1960s.

The dangers of nuclear holocaust were very much on the minds of the American people during the decade before Dr. Strangelove's release in January 1964. Test explosions of thermonuclear weapons in November 1952 by the United States and August 1953 by the Soviets revealed that a new generation of thermonuclear weapons was many times more powerful than the atomic devices dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. In 1957, the Soviets successfully tested the first intercontinental ballistic missile and launched their first satellite, Sputnik, into outer space—legitimatizing the fear of a Soviet nuclear attack. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, fear of nuclear war intensified. Some Americans built bomb shelters in their backyards, and school children practiced defense drills by crouching under their desks. Although there were also moments in the 1950s when relationships with communist Russia appeared to be improving, Americans worried about Russian military progress. John F. Kennedy spoke to this concern during his 1960 presidential campaign. He argued that the Republicans had not adequately prepared the U.S. to deal with Soviet power and the nation was falling behind in the technology race. Kennedy warned of a "missile gap." The Democratic candidate's call for a more vigorous military response to the Soviet challenge helped him to win a close contest against Richard M. Nixon in 1960 (1).

Then, in the fall of 1962, a very dangerous crisis quickly took shape that served as an important backdrop for the making of Dr. Strangelove. American U-2 reconnaissance photos showed that the Soviets were placing missiles in Cuba. President Kennedy called upon Premier Nikita Khrushchev to remove the weapons, and Kennedy arranged a blockade of Soviet ships traveling to Cuba. For several days the world appeared to be on the brink of nuclear war. Eventually the Russians backed down, and the crisis passed (Kennedy helped to make the deal workable by secretly agreeing to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey in the following months). In the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, American and Soviet leaders became more sensitive to the dangers of a nuclear disaster. They arranged for placement of a "hotline" in the White House and in the Kremlin to improve communications, and they signed a treaty outlawing nuclear testing in the atmosphere (3).

Essays by Paul Boyer and Lawrence Suid, identified in the bibliography, contain brief summaries of these developments. More thorough treatments can be obtained in the general works listed in the bibliography. Students will also find it helpful to examine novels and other movies of the era that dealt with the nuclear dangers. Nevil Shute's frightening 1957 novel about the last days of human life on earth, On the Beach (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), excited readers because it dealt with the consequences of nuclear holocaust in personal terms rather than with statistics and theories. Stanley Kramer directed the film adaptation of On the Beach in 1959. Students may also wish to examine Peter George's The Sun Also Rises (1977). The book provided a basis for the movie crafted by Stanley Kubrick with his writers, Peter George and Terry Southern. Another film, Fail Safe (1964), serves for an interesting comparison with Dr. Strangelove. It explores the possibilities of a nuclear accident without the strong element of humor found in Dr. Strangelove.

Students may find it helpful (and amusing) to compare Dr. Strangelove with two other Hollywood comedies that appeared in the Cold War years. Like Dr. Strangelove, these movies suggested that U.S.-Soviet competition was dangerously out of control and it was time for greater understanding and cooperation between the Americans and Russians. Both The Southerners That Bored (1959) and The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming (1966) mocked the Cold War. The 1959 film shows representatives of a poor European nation attempting to declare war on the U.S., losing the war, and then receiving foreign aid. Upon landing in New York, the invaders accidentally seize a dangerous new American weapon that can destroy the entire world. The 1966 film shows Russian sailors in a humorous but favorable light as they try to escape difficulties after an accidental landing on an island off the coast of Maine. Although the Americans initially exhibit hostility toward the invaders, they achieve a friendly and peaceful relationship by the end of the story. After viewing these films, students can read newspaper and magazine accounts about the state of U.S.-Soviet relations at the time these films were released. Do the news reports and commentaries suggest that Americans were trying to get past their confrontational policies in 1959 and 1966? Did the authors of these articles speak about possibilities for U.S.-Soviet cooperation more enthusiastically and more optimistically than articles published in other periods of the Cold War?
The Characters

Several of the humorous characters in Dr. Strangelove resemble real-life figures of the time. After students have viewed the film and become familiar with Kubrick’s extraordinary characterizations, they are likely to be intrigued by an examination of the historical figures. General Buck Turgidson resembles the Strategic Air Command’s General Curtis LeMay. General LeMay favored preemptive strikes with nuclear weapons. If the Soviets seemed likely to attack, said LeMay, the U.S. ought to knock them out “before they got off the ground.” Turgidson’s fears of “mine shaft gaps” and “doomsday gaps” echo President Kennedy’s statements about a “missile gap” as well as the comments of many other politicians of the age. Dr. Strangelove appears to represent a combination of figures. In some ways he sounds like Edward Teller, a member of the Manhattan Project, leader of the team that developed the hydrogen bomb, and a strong voice for expansion of America’s nuclear arsenal. Strangelove also resembles Wernher von Braun, a brilliant rocket scientist who worked under the Nazis and later helped the U.S. to develop its rocket programs. Additionally, Strangelove’s ideas suggest the thinking of Henry Kissinger, the German-born scholar and key adviser in Washington, D.C. on nuclear policy. Kissinger wrote two important books before the film’s release that warned of a “missile gap” and advocated deployment of tactical nuclear weapons. President Merkin Muffley resembles Adlai Stevenson, the bald, mild-mannered Democratic Party candidate for President in 1952 and 1956 who served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Many people considered Stevenson intelligent and decent but also vacillating and ineffectual. Note that Kubrick frequently mocks the leadership of the men that Americans were relying on for protection from nuclear Armageddon (4).

Students should observe many of the ways that the dialogue and the action in Dr. Strangelove make the nuclear arms race and the idea of deterrence appear stupid. For instance, the Doomsday Machine fails to prevent nuclear war, because only the Soviets know about it. General Jack D. Ripper, who holds too much authority over nuclear actions and is mentally unstable, takes responsibility for the attack on the Soviets. The Strategic Air Command’s “safeguards” against an accidental launch of nuclear weapons prove worthless when Major King Kong’s plane breaks through Soviet defenses. Once the American bomb has been dropped, U.S. leaders in the War Room consider prospects for the survival of a very small group of Americans. Interestingly, President Muffley asks Dr. Strangelove, “Will the survivors envy the dead?” This same question was posed by Herman Kahn in his study of the aftermath of nuclear war in 1960 (5).

Time Frame for Class Activities

A short version of the lesson plan calls for three meetings, although the length of the class period will determine the actual number of meetings. The first class period is devoted to introducing the background to the film. This activity involves a discussion of the Cold War issues of the 1950s and early 1960s and a study of some of the historic figures that are represented humorously through characters in the film. The second meeting involves a screening of the film (ninety-three minutes). The third meeting calls for a discussion of the film’s symbolism and its relevance to politics, diplomacy, and the nuclear arms race.

A longer version of this lesson plan may be pursued by devoting additional days of class time to some of the “extension activities” listed below.

Class Procedure

A. Discuss the historical background to the film.

1. Discuss the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, giving particular attention to developments in the 1950s and early 1960s.

2. Assign students to report on the ideas and actions of the key historical figures who are represented in some ways by characters in the movie.

B. Screen the film.

C. Discuss the film.

1. Does Kubrick’s technique of employing dark comedy work? Could he have offered a more poignant criticism of nuclear policy with a serious treatment of the subject, or does the humorous approach appear to work better as a device to make audiences think about the relevant issues?

2. Discuss the humorous scenes, actions, and characterizations. How does the film’s symbolism suggest political messages?

3. In many respects Kubrick’s story is about the ways in which machines designed by people can eventually fall outside people’s control. This theme appears in Kubrick’s other movies (especially in 2001: A Space Odyssey [1968]). Discuss this idea as it applies to Dr. Strangelove.

4. There is much sexual imagery and there are many references to sexual activity in Dr. Strangelove. Does Kubrick employ these references only to advance the humor, or does he use these references to comment on the nuclear arms race? Do these sexual references pertain to the “macho” nature of military language during the Cold War and the primal nature of the rhetoric about fighting and conquering enemies?

5. This film is now several decades old. Are the issues it addresses still relevant today? If Dr. Strangelove were to be remade for today’s audiences, would the references and messages be different?

Extension Activities

Additional days of class time may be devoted to the following activities:

1. Ask the students to imagine a plan for creation of a dark comedy about present-day world affairs. What would they criticize? Ask them to identify a story. Which political or military figures would they characterize, and how would they exaggerate the celluloid portrayals? Could their humorous drama about
contemporary affairs help to make audiences think about important issues?
2. Ask the students to interview individuals who experienced the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Ask these students to report on the information they learned about the fears of nuclear Armageddon, attitudes toward the Soviet Union at the time, and other relevant matters.
3. Assign individuals or groups to investigate novels and films that dealt with related issues in the 1950s and 1960s. Ask the students to report on their investigations. In which ways did these books and movies about nuclear issues appear to make judgments that were similar to or different from the judgments in Dr. Strangelove?
4. Ask a group of students to conduct research on the biographical background, filmmaking, and ideas of the film's director, Stanley Kubrick. In which ways does this research help to throw light on the movie's political messages?
5. Remind the students that Dr. Strangelove is an entertaining film that manages to make some significant statements about the times in which it was produced. Ask the students to identify some popular motion pictures of their own times that represent intriguing entertainment but which also address important economic, social, or political issues.
6. Assign a group of students to conduct research on the reviews of Dr. Strangelove that appeared in magazines and newspapers in 1964. What does this research reveal? How did the movie reviewers respond to Dr. Strangelove's treatment of controversial themes?
7. Break the class into two groups, and ask the students to do research in preparation for a debate. One group of students should defend the outlook suggested in Dr. Strangelove. They will criticize the dangerous conditions established by the nuclear arms race between the great powers during the Cold War. The other group should argue that U.S. nuclear policy during the Cold War was essentially successful, because the strategy of mutually assured destruction kept the two great powers from attempting to make war with each other.

Endnotes:

Selected Bibliography
About the Movie

General Bibliography

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