What does the hybrid American-British film *Dr. Strangelove* reveal about the shifting cultural and political attitudes of the respective nations at the height of the Cold War?

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MHIS305 America and Europe from Colonization to Coca-Colonization

*Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,* is a hybrid American-British black comedy that satirizes American and British political and cultural attitudes towards the nuclear threat of annihilation, within the context of the Cold War. The film reflects on and lampoons the shifting cultural attitudes of America and Britain from the introduction of the bomb on August 6th 1945, to the climactic events of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. It parodies the positions of the nations, poised precariously between naïve conformity, complacency and acquiescence on the one hand, and an intense and inescapable fear and anxiety on the other. In doing so the film itself becomes both representative of and indeed a catalyst for the burgeoning counterculture of dissent that came to characterise the late 1960s and 1970s on both sides of the Atlantic.

As the curtain opens and the lights dim, the audience settles into their seats, stifling the sound of their popcorn. White letters on the blackened screen begin to take shape, and the audience silently takes in a disclaimer from Columbia Pictures that is perhaps just as telling of the mood in the milieu as it is insightful into the film that will follow: ‘It is the stated position of the United States Air Force that their Safeguards would prevent the occurrence of such events as are depicted in this film. Furthermore, it should be noted that none of the characters portrayed in this film are meant to represent any persons real or dead.’ When *Dr. Strangelove* hit cinemas in 1964 it received popular attendance in Britain and broke all box office records across the US. A black satire filled with abrupt irony and comedy, with a disturbingly sincere undertone, the film was met with as much laughter as genuine contemplation, and as much criticism as acclaim.

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1 Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1964).


3 Ibid.
The film follows the dilemma of the Pentagon after a rogue military base commander, General Ripper, initiates ‘Plan R’, a plan to drop nuclear weapons on the Soviet Union. The film focuses primarily on the logic, or illogic, of the concept of Deterrence and Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), American control of nuclear weapons, and the possibility of accidental or negligent initiation of nuclear war. As the US President takes advice from his council, including an ex-Nazi scientist (‘Dr. Strangelove’) and a military commander who shows more love and lust for war and violence than the women he is exploiting, he struggles to avert disaster by pacifying a drunk Soviet Premier. The audience is asked to consider the integrity of the system and questions are simultaneously raised about desensitization to loss of human lives within the consideration of acceptable losses, the sexualisation and romanticisation of war, and the hypocrisy of America’s use of Nazi scientists. *Dr. Strangelove* is therefore an invaluable social commentary on the cultural attitudes of America and Britain as they shift with their Cold War contexts.

As audiences gazed in comfort at visions of the annihilation of the world in the final scene of *Dr. Strangelove*, their ears were filled with the sound of Vera Lynn singing ‘We’ll Meet Again,’ and it is at this point in the film that the historian is reminded that the nuclear age was experienced in different ways by different nations, and different individuals within those nations, a fact that has not always received the attention it deserves, especially in the context of the Cold War. Whilst American audiences struggled to reconcile their ease at watching the world destroyed in a montage of nuclear explosions to the sound of a particularly cheery tune, British audiences were plunged into a powerfully nostalgic, familiar and emotive space, as they remembered BBC reports of civilian bombardments not so far from home in the midst of WWII, reports which were concluded nightly by the very same tune. And of course this was a powerful juxtaposition as the British people survived WW11 but not Dr Strangelove’s scenario.

Despite the presentation of a unified front by the US and Britain against the Soviet Union, the experiences of the nations in the midst of the Cold War were markedly different from one another. In the aftermath of World War II the US arose intoxicated by a newfound

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sense of power, prestige and prosperity. In order to fulfil his goals of worldwide peace and prosperity, President Truman introduced to Americans a ‘fair deal’ and to foreign nations ‘fair dealings’. He set about pursuing a foreign and domestic policy based on justice, righteousness and an unwavering intolerance of ‘evil’; a policy that would require the full strength and security of the United States government and its people. It was in seeking to pursue such a policy that America became increasingly dependent on the bomb, particularly in light of the progressively alarming activities of the Soviet Union and its ever growing Red Army in the east of Europe. Subsequently the Bomb became a weapon of peace, and a cultural revolution took place.

Dr. Strangelove has often been characterized as a quintessentially American portrayal of the Cold War, however if we look to its inception, it is clear that the film is an intriguing fusion of American and British perspectives. Thus the examination of each stage of the film’s production is vital to an understanding of its hybrid nature. The inception of Dr. Strangelove began with British author Peter Bryant’s (a pseudonym for Peter George) 1958 thriller novel Two Hours to Doom or Red Alert as it was titled in the US. George, a Royal Air Force officer, wrote the novel based on what he thought was the most likely beginning of World War III. Despite little public success the novel was picked up by a Cold War-inspired American film director who had previously shown an aptitude for the critique of government policy through film, Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick worked alongside George and satirist Terry Southern to develop the novel into a screenplay, before producing the film with an almost all-British crew. Of this crew Peter Sellers made the most profound contribution, playing three of the major roles in the film and improvising significant proportions of the dialogue of each. Thus Dr. Strangelove is a film co-written, directed and

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8 Margot A. Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 5.
10 Ibid., p. 15.
11 Peter Bryant, Two Hours to Doom (United Kingdom: T.V. Boardman and Co. Ltd., 1958).
13 Stanley Kubrick, Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb: 40th Anniversary Special Edition (Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2004).
15 Kubrick, Dr. Strangelove, 40th Anniversary Special Edition.
produced in Britain by an American, based on a British man’s novel which was in substance almost wholly American. However this does not in itself make the film a hybrid American-British perspective, rather what makes it more than merely individual perspectives is the fact that the viewpoints of Kubrick, George and Sellers in particular, can be seen to be situated within broader American and British contexts and an increasing trans-Atlantic counterculture.

As America prospered in the aftermath of Hiroshima, its public fell into a complacent silence that was broken only by an undercurrent of dissenting fears and anxieties about the moral cost of American superiority. The exhilaration felt by Americans at their newfound power meant that questions about American abuse of nuclear weapons were swept under the rug by a culture in which any expression of guilt or remorse seemed traitorous. This cultural repression of criticism was further heightened by the political undertakings of the House of Un-American Activities Commission as it sought to root out ‘communist infiltration’ and ‘un-American’ actions, most publicly with the arrest of the Hollywood Ten. However despite this political and cultural repression, Hiroshima brought with it an uneasiness that developed into a culture of dissent, albeit one that largely fell on deaf ears. Nuclear scientists struggled to find an audience as they attempted to voice their fears about the monstrosity they had helped create, whilst others began to quietly question whether nuclear arms could ever be weapons for peace. Between 1949 and 1953 came the realisation that the atomic bomb was not just an experience of the past but of the future, and just as it had ensured American security, in the wrong hands it could also ensure American destruction.

This began to become palpable in 1949 when the Soviet Union detonated its first atom bomb, followed by Britain in 1952. By 1953 both the US and the USSR had exploded hydrogen bombs that were 500 times more powerful than their atomic predecessors, and thus the superpowers became ‘two scorpions in a bottle, each capable of killing the other, but only at the risk of his own life.’ During this period the production of films centring on nuclear war rose dramatically, signalling a growing consciousness and fear of the potential

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16 Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age, p. 5.
17 Shapiro, Atomic Bomb Cinema, pp. 70-72.
18 Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age, pp. 40-79.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 6.
of nuclear weapons. However despite this culture of growing anxiety, filmmakers and the public alike exuded a trusting optimism in the ability of humanity to overcome the temptation to employ the use of nuclear weapons and therefore to avert disaster. Thus 1949-1953 signalled an increasing awareness and fear of nuclear potential and a growth in the expression of dissent. However these cultures were largely overcome by an innocence and faith in human kind, which would see almost the rest of the 1950s characterised by an American lapse back into oblivion in the face of peril.

As the 1950s drew to a close a culture of fear again began to take hold and dissent began to flourish. In 1960 Herman Kahn exposed the reality of a nuclear conflict, contrasting the number of dead with the years for economic recuperation. This was quickly followed by Kennedy’s civil defence speech in the midst of the Berlin crisis in 1961, which aroused significant alarm. By the end of 1961 the Department of Defence was distributing millions of pamphlets including ‘The Family Fallout Shelter’ and ‘Family Food Stockpile for Disaster’, and panicked Americans were responding by rushing to build their own bomb shelters. Religious writers came to the conclusion that their ‘nation was in the throes of moral collapse of serious dimensions,’ and atomic bomb cinema began to portray an increasing scepticism about America’s nuclear motives and the morals that accompanied them.

Contrary to Paul Boyer’s claim of almost complete acquiescence until the 1980s, the culture of fear that had lain sedentary for almost a decade came to a climax with the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The extreme intensity of the conflict that lasted just 13 days saw the American myth of security and invincibility shattered. The world had come as close as it had ever done to nuclear war and the proximity of America to Armageddon had finally sunk in, and yet inexplicably by 1963 the Gallup Poll showed that American anxiety had fallen back to below the levels of 1957. This time however the culture of dissent did

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21 Shapiro, Atomic Bomb Cinema, pp. 95-143.
22 Ibid.
24 Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age, pp. 194-239.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 223.
27 Ibid., pp. 194-239.
29 Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age, pp. 304-343.
not hold back, rebellion broke forth and 1964 marked its loudest explosion of critique yet.\textsuperscript{31} There was something intrinsically wrong with American’s indifference to the threat posed by nuclear weapons, and \textit{Dr. Strangelove} would subvert this in the most hilarious way possible.

Whilst America’s response to the Cold War was the simultaneous experience of fear, acquiescence and dissent, the experience of Britain was markedly different. Whilst Britain was also guilty of acquiescence in the Cold War years, the fear felt by British people was far more real than it was for Americans. The end of the war signalled the rise of the US; however for Britain it signalled the end of a powerful era,\textsuperscript{32} the demise of an Empire,\textsuperscript{33} and with the loss of international power came domestic tension.\textsuperscript{34} War had come at a great cost for Britain, and whilst it had emerged relatively unscathed compared to the majority of Europe, it did not enjoy the affluence and prosperity of the US. Britain had lost most of its gold and foreign currency reserves, its merchant Navy stood at just three quarters of its former size, living standards had dropped considerably and the US had mortgaged the British Empire by loaning it some 3,700 million dollars.\textsuperscript{35} The late 1940s saw food and coal shortages, which were only mitigated somewhat by the Marshall Aid, and the pound was devalued by over a quarter. From the outset of the Cold War, Britain ranked a convincing third among the superpowers, a fact that was only partially masked by its technological advances, notably the detonation of its first nuclear bomb in 1952.\textsuperscript{36}

Britain emerged as a significantly weakened nation fundamentally compromised by its decision to acquire nuclear weapons, not as an imperative of national survival, but merely in order to retain a seat at the top of the table; a seat that would only be offered upon invitation by the US, contingent on a preparedness to support US motives.\textsuperscript{37} It was this very political relationship that was personified in the film by the British officer who, whilst able to perceive the lunacy of his rogue commander, found himself none-the-less co-opted into the suicidal policy because to refuse would be impolite.\textsuperscript{38} The prospect of nuclear

\textsuperscript{31} Henriksen, \textit{Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age}, pp. 240-243.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{36} Parkin, \textit{Middle Class Radicalism}, p. 106.
\textsuperscript{37} Morrison, ‘Are the Russians Involved, Sir? The British Dimension of Dr. Strangelove,’ pp. 375-390.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ibid.}
annihilation was something that dawned on the British much earlier than the Americans. As a second rate superpower Britain nervously looked both East and West. Geographically small and densely populated, the notion that Britain’s anxieties were intensified not solely because of its lack of political influence is not far fetched.\(^{39}\) Whilst the Americans seriously considered what they could handle as acceptable losses, be it the deaths of 10-20 million civilians which General Turgidson memorably described in *Dr. Strangelove* as ‘getting our hair mussed,’ Britain was struck with the fact that an equivalent attack on their own soil would mean the destruction of the entire British population.\(^{40}\)

In 1951 British science fiction author John Wyndham noted that since the 6\(^{th}\) of August 1945, ‘the margin of survival narrowed appallingly . . . the path of safety started to shrink to a tightrope along which we had to walk with our eyes deliberately closed.’\(^{41}\) Instead of keeping their eyes deliberately closed and being co-opted into the lunacy of American foreign policy as their government was, the British people of the 1950s created of culture of protest and dissent. Rising affluence in the late 1950s was met with the rise of the New Left, social outrage and an increasing cynicism about the way wealth was shared.\(^{42}\) The establishment came under fire and dissent extended to nuclear arms. Whilst the ‘Angry Young Men’ of the ‘Kitchen Sink School’ wrote about their fears and anxieties in the nuclear world, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND),\(^{43}\) supported by a plethora of novelists, artists, poets, intellectuals, television and film stars, called for Britain to re-claim her leadership in the world by denouncing the use of nuclear weapons and thereby offering something the world had almost forgotten – morality.\(^{44}\) Therefore the culture that was engendered in Britain at the height of the Cold War was one of rational fear and dissent toward a government that was displaying its own acquiescence by being co-opted into Cold War thinking. It is unsurprising then that Jeff Nuttal argued that anti-nuclear protest was something that crossed the Atlantic East to West,\(^{45}\) and this may signal to us why *Dr. Strangelove* was so controversial in the US: because it incorporated a far more cynical British form of dissent that America had not yet seen.

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\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.


\(^{43}\) Parkin, *Middle Class Radicalism*, p. 108.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

When Kubrick released *Dr. Strangelove* in 1964 he was just one of many American film directors in the period seeking to critique the establishment and American foreign policy in the Cold War. Films such as *Fail Safe*,[^46] *Catch-22*[^47] and *The Manchurian Candidate*[^48] flooded cinemas signalling that his individual perspectives were part of a much broader context of dissent that engulfed America when the prospect of nuclear annihilation was realised after the Cuban Missile Crisis. A comparison of Peter George’s novel and Kubrick’s film gives extensive insight into the perspective of director who’s initial intention was to simply adapt the dramatic thriller into a screenplay, however increasingly saw the inherent humour in the idea of MAD. Likewise he realised the best way to accurately portray the madness that was the Cold War was to take an oblique approach to the issue. This was much more than a transition from drama to comedy, this was reflective of the political and cultural shift undergone by both British and Americans, albeit in different ways, in the lead up to and in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The film all too accurately depicted the fact that Americans had spent the better part of two decades almost completely indifferent to the danger of nuclear war, and British foreign policy had similarly been coerced into the race for nuclear arms without a coherent reason why. The film’s manipulation of its audience’s response—encouraging calm and resigned humour— to this very scenario eventuating, only heightened the sense of irony. Thus Kubrick’s perspectives, which are clear throughout the film, are evidence of a broader wave of American dissent.

What makes *Dr. Strangelove* stand apart from the other films of its time however is that it was equally representative of a British perspective, introduced primarily through George’s novel, and the improvisations of Sellers.

Whilst nuclear fiction and satire were not new to America, no other film had attacked the American establishment and its Cold War view in the way that *Dr. Strangelove* did, and this is evidence of the much more subversive dissent of British contributors to the film and their broader contexts. When George wrote the novel in 1958 he did so based on an unwavering belief that the most likely cause of World War III would be its initiation by a crazed, rogue, American general. Whilst such a perspective did not stand alone in the British culture of dissent during this time, it would have stood starkly against the acquiescence and

patriotism that enveloped America during the same period. Furthermore although other American films argued that rational and humane men had not controlled the American order, *Dr. Strangelove* openly painted the establishment as maniacs, monsters and morons.\(^{49}\) The notion that an American military General could go ‘a little funny in the head’ and thereby initiate nuclear war, as Sellers memorably described it when he embarked on a completely impromptu piece of dialogue, would have been borderline traitorous in the world of nationalistic America. Sellers’ perspectives however were certainly characteristic of a much more alert and critical British public. Thus it is this hybrid of perspective that has enabled the film to portray two very different national experiences within one coherent picture, whilst also provoking distinctly different responses from each target audience, contingent on which side of the Atlantic they originated from.\(^{49}\)

*Dr. Strangelove* is a unique piece of historical fiction. It provides rich and accurate depictions of American and British Cold War anxieties and strategic responses, whilst also triggering the very same resigned response from its audience that it is seeking to critique. In doing so the film is itself evidence of a bourgeoning Atlantic counterculture, but also serves as a reminder that the Cold War acted as a very different historical backdrop for America and Britain, and it was against these backdrops that radically different cultural attitudes and responses were formed.

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