

SUBVERSION AND SATIRE: APOCALYPTIC FUTURES IN *THE WORLD, THE FLESH AND THE DEVIL* AND *DR. STRANGELOVE*

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to investigate Ranald MacDougall's *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959) and Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) in their imaginations of disaster and apocalyptic futures. I aim to bring technical and narrative aspects of film in order to identify themes and speculative explorations of nuclear war and post-nuclear survival, emphasising political and social discussions that can be found in both films. Finding their singularities and similarities is part of my focus here, as these productions were made during the height of the nuclear scare of the Cold War in the United States and contain critical – and satirical – approaches to common themes found in apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction of the time, each with their particular shifts.

Keywords: Nuclear war; Post-apocalyptic fiction; Cold War; Disaster film

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Introduction

Pressures of nuclear conflict and mass destruction have been part of a turbulent historical development that began in the later years of the Second World War. The end of the world is a recurring *topos* in speculative fiction. More than fantasising about survival systems or weaponry extravaganzas, approaching apocalyptic themes in fictional narratives can allow for experimenting with contextual imaginations and anxieties of disaster. There has been an underlying emphasis on the crude depictions of devastation in post-apocalyptic science fiction films that can obscure potential commentary on political and social issues of their times. If, on the one hand, such portrayals play around, as Susan Sontag (1965) puts it, with a “hunger for a ‘good war,’ which poses no moral problems, admits of no moral qualifications” (46); on the other, they potentially propose alternative civil scenarios that dialogue with uncertainties of their historical moments. Some of such narratives may even challenge established notions of hegemony in the face of utter destruction and the decline of political institutions – since, as Frank Kermode (2000) suggests, “the mythology of Empire and of Apocalypse are closely related” (10). The present article looks for such indications of critical approaches to contextual issues that can be found in films of such a style and from a specific historical moment. Since nuclear war and the ensuing horrors that could be caused by it are the subject of countless science fiction films, such issues arise from different sources, places, and result in a diversity of imaginations of the future across the decades after the nightmare created by Project Manhattan and the crisis that followed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

That is especially thought-provoking when looking at the Cold War period. The late fifties and early sixties were times of growing anxiety between the United States and the Soviet Union amidst their technological race. There was an underlying and general fear engendered by the advent of the hydrogen bomb, the horrifying novelty of mutual assured destruction¹ as a geopolitical strategy, and the idea of mass destruction still lurking in the minds of the U.S. population from the horrors of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Historian Ken Alder (2007) argues that “there were two bombs dropped on Hiroshima in August 1945: the actual bomb and the *idea of the bomb*. And it was the idea of the bomb—backed, to be sure, by the mass production of more bombs—that carried weight in the emerging post-war conflict with the Soviet Union” (126, my emphasis). The reflection of that idea in cinema begot narratives that imagined a future which invoked specific apprehensions derived from the nuclear scare of the time. Two films approached that idea in particular ways: *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959, directed by Ranald MacDougall) and *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964, directed by Stanley Kubrick). They imagined not only material possibilities of geographical devastation and loss of life, but also socio-political issues of the time and how they might figure in the tensions of an incoming apocalyptic state of things. Such imaginations brought with them critical or satirical tones and went beyond the issue of the bomb: they addressed

the demands for basic civil rights, as well as the ironies of diplomacy and political paranoia. They also envisioned desolate urban spaces, and exposed a hyperbole of military personas and procedures.

Therefore, the present article aims to identify and connect particularities of film discourse and presentation in *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* and *Dr. Strangelove* in order to investigate each one's particular way of imagining an apocalyptic future and approaching apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic motifs from a similar time period. Besides addressing technical elements of film (that is, elements such as *mise-en-scène*, soundtrack, cinematography, acting etc.), I will look at one major section from each film that better expresses such portrayals and elements. Stills from the films will illustrate some of my points throughout. The article thus explores nuclear and post-nuclear imaginations from the perspective of science fiction, which speculated considerably about the impact of nuclear weaponry throughout the Cold War period. Such narratives suggest dystopian scenarios of civil and political tension, delving into discussions about the limits of nuclear power and scientific progress fuelled by geopolitical agendas, portraying the complications of a new and massive kind of war-making, but also occasionally proposing utopian possibilities in which characters somehow found a way for rebuilding in a shattered and awe-inspiring world.

1. *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*

When director and screenwriter Randal MacDougall, known for writing for films such as *The Naked Jungle* (1954) and directing *Man on Fire* (1957), released *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*² in 1959, there were mixed views from mainstream media outlets. At release date, Bosley Crowther (1959) from *The New York Times* wrote a review with a cry for realism in the film's proposal for total devastation, arguing that the filmmaking team had "stretched their imaginations a great deal further than they have stretched their intellects". On the other hand, the critic celebrated the initial film's drama as "graphic and interesting, presenting a science-fiction idea in good, vivid cinematic style." *Variety* also commended the film at the time, mentioning its "provocative three-character story dealing with some pertinent issues (racism, atomic destruction) in a frame of suspense melodrama". However, the on-location shooting of the film in New York seemed to impress both reviews, something that demonstrates one of the film's prominent features: the use of space to construct its diegetic drama and its depiction of post-apocalyptic extinction.

The film draws inspiration from the last-man tale in M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901)³, and its initial premise focusses on a single perspective of the narrative: that of the protagonist Ralph Burton, played by Harry Belafonte. Burton, a black man, is a coal mine inspector who ends up alone in a Pennsylvanian mine; a cave-in traps him inside, and the radio silence that ensues as he tries to contact his workmates on the surface suggests a looming complication in the plotline. He eventually surfaces to find that the nearby city has been deserted

and travels to New York to find it equally desolate. After managing to make a building inhabitable by reactivating power to it and organising supplies, he meets Sarah Crandall, played by Inger Stevens; Sarah is a young white girl who had also been lost since the cataclysmic event. The two build up intimacy as time goes on. Crandall and Burton then find a third person while exploring, a white man named Benson Thacker – played by the then acclaimed Mel Ferrer. Thacker's introduction in the narrative creates a relational conflict, since Crandall develops romantic feelings for both him and Burton, which ultimately leads to a skirmish between the two men, with a subversive twist in the closing moments because the three ultimately reconcile and develop a love triangle.

MGM made sure that the cast would look familiar to the audience, and Mel Ferrer had even played a role of a seductive man involved in a love triangle before, as Andrei Bolkonsky in King Vidor's *War and Peace* (1955). Inger Stevens was a new star in the film industry, but had by then debuted in a major role along with Bing Crosby in *Man on Fire*, although the critics of the time recognised her presence in the film more for her appearance than her performance (Crowther 1957). She had also collaborated with famous names such as Yul Brynner and Charles Boyer in *The Buccaneer* (1958). As for Harry Belafonte, his position as a cast member is crucial, since his character should kick off a discussion on race that had been contextually drawing increasing attention and would culminate in the 1963's civil rights campaign, in which he prominently participated. Along with other prominent African-American artists such as writer James Baldwin and actor Sidney Poitier, Belafonte committed himself to civil rights causes, something that was intensified by his ongoing partnership with Martin Luther King Jr., as pointed out by Judith E. Smith (2016, 256).

One particular section of the film that interests this study comprises the initial sequences in which Burton is alone in the mine, leading up to the moment when he settles down in a flat in New York before meeting Sarah Crandall (*WFD* 00:33:00). The early action reveals Burton's work routine, introducing the viewer to the character's reality. Lighting is dim, shots are closer (fig. 1 and 2) – usually medium close-ups or medium shots –, establishing a sense of closeness and unease about narrow and grimy tunnels. With no music early on, the echoes of Burton's voice trying to reach his co-workers through the radio help foreshadow the disaster. The cave-in takes place and now Ralph is truly alone. For film theorist Ismail Xavier (2006), the stability of the film frame and the contingencies of setting can produce an effect of “enclausuramento” – imprisonment – of the image (21). In *WFD*, such notions of framing and space can be applied to this initial sequence. There is no obvious sign that the bombs have fallen. The audience's point of view of the action follows the cinematography, which in turn follows Ralph, so the viewer's perspective is somewhat trapped underground with him. Technical clues – mostly conveyed through diegetic sound – are given to indicate unusual occurrences: the silence of the radio, and the sudden silence of a rescue team that had been digging to save him. But only after the protagonist surfaces can the audience find out about the apocalypse, for it is now visible –

Burton is the only human figure – in wider, brighter shots of the empty mining facilities and empty streets (fig. 3).



Fig. 1–3: The transition from shots with dim lighting and medium/medium close-up shots to longer shots and brighter lighting.

Wider shots are then prevalent throughout the remainder of the sequence. Burton appropriates a car and travels to New York, only to find hundreds of cars abandoned on the avenues leading into the city. No explanation is given as to why he would travel there, but the use of such an iconic location is something the popularity of the film can benefit from. There is a heavy use of landmarks to compose the setting and make it recognisable for the audience. The scene seems to suggest that, if there is nobody alive in the Big Apple, then the rest of the world must be just as desolate; the centrality of the Empire implies a state of things abroad. Familiar spots are depicted as deserted mementos of the cityscape: the George Washington Bridge, or the Lincoln Tunnel, the Statue of Liberty. Public spaces are reimagined as a wreckage of the future; as suggested by Sontag, a nightmare that “is too close to our reality” (42). Besides, cars are now remains of human agency – hunks of technology that have been relinquished. In fact, a considerable part of *WFD*’s *mise-en-scène* consists of such depictions of technological shells of a vanished population, perpetually motionless until the only depicted agent of change comes along and makes use of what is left (*WFD* 00:15:04). Aside from cars, Ralph also gets on a boat to cross the Hudson River, reiterating the relevance of vehicular technology in the construction of the film’s *mise-en-scène* and editing, since it allows for continuous portrayals of different desolate locations (00:17:20).





Fig. 4–6: Longer shots of landmarks in NY. The jammed George Washington Bridge, the New York skyline, and a closer shot of Burton with the Statue of Liberty in deep focus.

Movement plays a role in the dynamics of space and photography as the initial sequences unfold. Again, there is a contrast between the scenes inside the mine and the ones in the streets and indoors. Burton's immobility – even though he manages to get out of his post-disaster imprisonment – when trapped underground is complemented by the stasis of the shots. Once exploring outside, Burton moves about with considerable frequency and energy, and framing happens in one of two ways: (1) more use of long and medium shots with camera movement in order to focus on Burton's actions; (2) longer shots with static framing so the environment becomes the focus and Burton becomes a passing element. Such an approach to cinematography accentuates the presence of new post-apocalyptic tropes in the exposition of cinematographic space: the collapse of metropolitan societies and the idea of almost religious cleansing and renewal, something that Kermode alludes to by pointing out “the destruction of the earthly city as a chastisement of human presumption, but also of empire” (112); the focus on the portrayal of war in civilian centres rather than military contexts, which is a post-apocalyptic fiction trope suggested by David Seed (2013, 4); and the urgency to find supplies and shelter as the last survivor “attempts to decode the shattered landscape in an attempt to understand what has happened” (Seed 199). The first trope is more accurately expressed in a scene in which Burton visits a New York cathedral in a moment of despair and impotence. He climbs up the bell tower and rings the bell. As the chimes echo through the streets, the transition of static shots shows five stone lions in different positions and areas, from the first one that is lying down to the last one that is standing up (fig. 7-9). This moment resembles a much earlier film: Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), in which a three-shot montage shows a stone lion rising after the revolutionaries of the Potemkin strike back against the Tsarist forces (00:54:58). In *WFD*, that quick editing work further illustrates the desolation of the city, a once crowded zone in which virtually nothing but stone and glass now composes the landscape where a lone wanderer tries to come to terms with his new existence. There is an intensified sense of solitude as the shot transitions create an illusion of movement by inanimate objects. Such a technique can be related to Sergei Eisenstein's (1949) idea of “an artificially produced image of motion” used to convey “pictorial symbolism” (55-6). Motion and time are constructed in this scene, accompanied by the sound of the church bell coinciding with cuts in the shots. The pictorial symbolism of this scene refers to a derelict city that finally rises to the cry of a survivor.



Fig. 7-9: The stone lions “waking up,” when five successive shots respond rhythmically to the ringing of the church bell. Here, three of them are displayed to sum up the editing work.

As regards editing, Harold F. Kress – who would later work on *The Towering Inferno* (1974), for example – makes considerable use of ellipses. There is some stability in editing rhythm when Burton is inside the mine, with lengthier shots and few cuts to compress time and further convey a sense of entrapment. However, as Burton escapes the tunnels and travels, there is a shortening of shot length and an acceleration of diegetic time between the shots. Such an editing approach makes it possible for the narrative to revolve around New York before a climax and situate the spectator. Narrative time halts, since all vehicles and buildings remain unchanged, and that allows for the development of Belafonte’s character as a heroic agent, as somebody who manipulates the lifeless environment about him – which is mostly urban, therefore devoid of interference from forces of nature. As he walks down the metropolitan streets, carrying a little cart loaded with basic provisions, there is a constant transition from high-angle medium shots of his reduced silhouette (fig. 10) to succeeding Dutch-angled, point-of-view shots of the sky (fig. 11) to suggest his disorientation in such an urban labyrinth.



Fig. 10 and 11: Burton’s small figure at the centre of a high-angle long shot, and a point-of-view shot of the towering buildings from a Dutch angle.

Furthermore, communication is paramount for *WFD*’s plotline and a climax early in the film. Ralph continually tries to phone or radio survivors, both underground and outside. The film also communicates with the spectator through its *mise-en-scène*: there is an emphasis on the use of street posters and newspapers to illustrate that bombs have fallen and major cities in the world have been evacuated (fig. 12) – although there is no clue as to where all the people

have gone. Newspapers read “Millions flee from cities! End of the world!” as an extravagant verbal announcement of setting, while Civil Defense posters are scattered about the locations (fig. 13 and 14). A sign that reads “Alert today, alive tomorrow” reminds the viewer of the forthright nature of U.S. defensive policies of the era⁴. Such *mise-en-scène* elements serve to contextualise the film, capitalising on terrifying issues of the day. This sort of communication encompasses the initial sequences.



Fig. 12 (top left): The use of *mise-en-scène* components to contextualise the events; in this case, a newspaper headline. Fig. 13 and 14 (Top right and bottom): Civil Defense posters scattered inside buildings and about exterior environments; also, the presence of various construction hats with nuclear hazard symbols on them helps situate the audience.

Music is also an important element in *WFD*; both diegetic and non-diegetic music. Ralph Burton sings when he is happy, sad, or when he is simply feeling lonely. Playing the guitar and singing are some of his ways of communicating in the diegesis, possibly his way of not feeling desperate in a ravaged world. In fact, Burton’s musical inclinations reflect Harry Belafonte’s own background, being an actor *and* a singer, and showcasing that other talent of his became part of the film’s production and performance⁵. The original score exhibits some grandiose orchestral music, not uncommon in high-budget U.S. productions of the time. However, the rhythm of the musical score sometimes accompanies the images of destruction depicted throughout and slows down when deserted streets become the main landscape. In fact, the score is played during the initial credits, then silence takes over as Burton works in the mine and during his first explorations outside, then picks up again when he sets up to drive to New York, building up as the editing rhythm also speeds up and the surroundings get more urban and more imposing (*WFD* 00:13:55-00:15:17).

One of the most prominent thematic elements of the film is its approach to racism and its depicted relational structure, which is portrayed always considering an apocalyptic backdrop. The interactions between Burton and Crandall are often tense and bewildering, demonstrating that their social distance as a black man and a white woman puts them in a position of communicative obstruction. There is an underlying instability and bias in their power relations, since Crandall

often summons Burton to perform random tasks, which gradually upsets him and makes him wonder about her view of his role in that new world. All of this culminates in a scene in which Ralph and Sarah go through an argument about a grim future for humankind and their supposed state of isolation. Burton, through an incensed performance by Belafonte (fig. 15), says:

If you're squeamish about words, I'm colored. And if you face facts, I'm a negro. And if you're a polite Southerner, I'm a nigra. And I'm a nigger if you're not! [...] A little while ago, you said you were free, white and 21. That didn't mean anything to you, just an expression you've heard for a thousand times. But to me, it was an arrow in my guts [...] In that world where we came from, you wouldn't know that. You wouldn't even know me. Why should the world fall down to prove that I am what I am and that there's nothing wrong with what I am? (*WFD* 00:51:44-00:52:23)

It is through that particular scene that *WFD* provides direct insight into racial issues; a discussion that MacDougall wished to present as a post-apocalyptic narrative. The film's diegesis imagines that U.S. authorities and institutions – and with them, some social conventions⁶ – had to be brought down by nuclear war so that taboos and segregation could be challenged and eventually broken, and a new future rebuilt. Stevens and Belafonte barely develop any physical contact for most of the film, whereas she and Ferrer maintain close intimacy since early in their interactions – she warmly tends him as he recovers from the fever that he had developed when first introduced. That may open ways to a fairly timid interpretation that the performance production itself sets these people apart for their racial differences. But the ending scene shows that such differences – and distance – can finally be done without through a simple shot of hand clasping between Burton and Crandall (fig. 16). Such a gesture does not go without its conflicts, however. The struggle for the “last woman” concludes as Thacker hunts down Burton around the city streets with a rifle. The violent strife is filled with threatening words, and Burton has to put his own gun down and approach his resentful rival to try and talk sense into him, at which point Sarah addresses them and calms things down. The final scene swaps the typical “The End” caption for “The Beginning,” implying that the apocalypse was not enough to eliminate hope of restoration (Fig. 17). And it is a multi-ethnic, polyamorous restoration. The hand clasping itself is the moment of resolution, an ending to racial and sexual tensions that had built up as the three move on to survive with little sense of how to start anew. Reconciling their differences and walking away in cooperation may ironically be a subtle sign of the objectification of the last woman as a shareable object in a ruined world, but it can also suggest an imagination of a future break from racial taboos.



Fig. 15 and 16 (Top left and right): Burton's argument with Crandall, and the final reconciliation between the two. Fig. 17 (bottom): the final shot of the film, showing the three survivors holding hands.

Space framing, movement, and a post-apocalyptic reflection on racial and gender power relations have been compelling points in *WFD* for this study. Shots of towering buildings from a low angle depict the crushing power of a forsaken city. The process of photography solidifies the film's particular depiction of post-apocalyptic zones – mostly urban, desolate, but not ruined – and constantly suggests what could be outside the frame – unexplored spaces. Noël Burch (1981) argues that “[t]o understand cinematic space, it may prove useful to consider it as in fact consisting of two different kinds of space: that included within the frame and that outside the frame” (17). The panning of the camera in shots that are closer to Burton and his movements reveals a landscape with little more than scraps of paper and littered objects. Suspense builds up as the audience is shown the mysteries of a dangerous world “outside of the frame” little by little, since the construction of the urban areas as giant empty spaces depends on the gradual revelation of new spaces previously not framed so new characters can be brought in. Burton continually attempts to contact the *outside* world and look for survivors, and succeeds when he finally hears responses from the other side of a radio transmission (*WFD* 00:55:17). However, he – as well as the audience – never finds out whether those responses come from people who wish to reunite and rebuild – like Crandall – or from people who wish to prioritise their own interests to the detriment of others’ – like Thacker.

The composition of the shots is also a major feature as *mise-en-scène* elements that remind the viewer of the early Cold War can be seen during many moments of the initial sequences; elements which serve to situate the audience in that fictional world where the threat of nuclear war actually turned true. As for the racial issue, it is conclusively what drives the film's alternate vision of a future, taking the narrative beyond what Sontag alleges to be simply an “Adam and Eve plot” (32), and instead complicating Ralph as the figure of an Adam – who might also be interpreted as a lonely “Robinson Crusoe” in the first moments of exploration – who questions the reasons behind Sarah's – Eve's – distance and caution towards him. Such a portrayal closes with a resolution that takes into consideration the historical changes of the time and the struggles for basic human rights in a context of segregation. Gender roles

can also be considered an aspect of the film's commentary on social issue: when Sarah and Ralph Burton find each other and get acquainted, their dynamics of relationship quickly fall into normative, pre-apocalyptic moral standards. Sarah is caught in a conflict between two aggrieved and possessive men, as an object of male desire in situation of survival and societal fragmentation. Such a situation makes it worse for her to make her own choices, as the sense of threat confuses her while she never seems to forget the age-old duty of marrying, the presumed dream of a middle-class white woman in the 1950s United States. When the final conflict does happen, she is left with no say in the matter. Her helplessness serves as indication of the secondary position in which she finds herself in after Thacker's emergence and the ensuing fight. She puts herself in the middle of a dangerous situation so that, somehow, a new perspective for that bleak world can arise. All in all, she is both objectified and empowered by the plot's finality and by the urgency of a new social order.

2. *Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*

Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* offers an inventive outlook on the nuclear scare at the peak of it, in 1964. The comical mood of the film caught the media's attention, and *Variety* received it well at the time, with columnist Dave Kaufmann (1964) writing that

it would seem no setting for comedy or satire, but the writers have accomplished this with biting, piercing dialogue and thorough characterizations. The climax is one with a grim post-script, as the Pentagon begins worrying about the mine-shaft gap in the post-nuclear era, while the Red envoy snakes some pictures of the War room.

The aforementioned Bosley Crowther from *The New York Times* criticised the extent of the film's acid caricatures of authoritative figures: "I am troubled by the feeling [...] of discredit and even contempt for our whole defense establishment [...] when virtually everybody turns up stupid or insane – or, what is worse, psychopathic – I want to know what this picture proves". Crowther's interest in standing up for authority of the U.S. government in his criticism of the film disregards the parodic reach of *Dr. Strangelove* and favours a moralistic defence of national security institutions. Ironically, the "love" for the bomb is the film's central motif: that is, the obsession of imperialistic military authorities with control over intimidating devices of war.

Director Stanley Kubrick idealised the film after years of deep interest in the subject of mutual assured destruction/nuclear deterrence⁷ and the hydrogen bomb. The thermonuclear issue was a topic that kept troubling him during the second half of the 1950s, as indicated by Kubrick's former producing partner James B. Harris in the documentary *Inside Dr. Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (2000, 00:01:30). But the comical twist in the

plot and performances sets it apart from other films of the decade that addressed the nuclear issue. Sidney Lumet's thriller *Fail Safe* was released later that year, and was eclipsed by Kubrick's Cold War parody. *Fail Safe* treats the dilemma of error in launching warheads in a more serious way, building up tension to imagine how critical an attack on the Soviet Union's main city of Moscow would be for worldwide political matters. An important film for the inventory of apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic productions of the Cold War era, *Fail Safe* ventures into a realm of diplomatic speculation similar to that of *Dr. Strangelove*, but spirals down into a catastrophic suggestion by constructing a long and dramatic sequence of destruction of the city of New York – traditionally central to audiovisual portrayals of disaster.

As in *WFD*, the cast in *Dr. Strangelove* is composed of some illustrious names that play a few stereotypical roles. Sterling Hayden, famous for his leading roles in noir films and westerns, had previously collaborated with Kubrick in the director's early film *The Killing* (1956); he plays the insane general Jack D. Ripper in *Dr. Strangelove*. The actor and comedian Peter Sellers was chosen to portray three different roles – the doctor himself (a former Nazi scientist who is ironically assigned the role of director of weapons research and development in the US), President Murkin Muffley, and Ripper's executive officer, Lionel Mandrake from the Royal Air Force. Finally, there is George C. Scott, who plays general Buck Turgidson, an excessively restless man whose suspicion of the Soviet Union is almost as critical as general Ripper's.

Before delving into the analysis of major technical aspects and ultimately investigating one section of the film (namely, the final sequence of the War Room and the ending sequence [*Dr Strangelove* 01:27:38-01:34:44]), it is worth bringing up the first demonstration of its satirical approach expressed through some audiovisual elements. The film opens with a disclaimer that reads:

It is the stated position of the U.S. 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 real persons living or dead. (*Dr Strangelove* 00:00:00-00:00:23)

Such a statement already takes into consideration the tense and delicate nature of national reception of works that attempted to depict a nuclear deterrence scenario, especially one that had such a critically satirical view of the Cold War at its peak.

The opening sequence then begins with an aerial shot of clouds hovering over mountain summits (fig. 18) as a voiceover narrator introduces the audience to the issue at hand: the diplomatic predicaments between the US and the Soviet Union and the rumours of the existence of a Doomsday device in the remote Russian Arctic islands. Such a statement which would come full circle at the end of the film as the powerful individuals in the War Room confirm the existence and the imminent detonation of such a machine. A lengthy shot of

the clouds and mountains then transitions to two American planes in the sky during an air-to-air refuelling. The image would seem trivial were it not for the initial framing of the scene. The central shape in the first shot is the refuelling boom itself, protruding from the tanker as a phallic representation of the technological advancements of the U.S. Air Force (Fig. 19). The B-52 bomber itself, whose interior is a predominant diegetic space throughout the narrative, can be recognised as a phallic instrument of war, and its bombing destination an objective of a symbolic coitus (Seed 193). The scene resumes with slow motions of the boom lodging into the B-59 (Fig. 20), accompanied by Laurie Johnson's gentle violin rendition of Harry Woods, Reg Connelly and Jimmy Campbell's "Try a Little Tenderness" so as to create an air of romantic sex. This sequence is relevant because the development from the Air Force disclaimer to a depiction of two aircrafts engaging in implied intercourse disrupts the seriousness of the subject matter, and sets the foundation for the rest of the film's humour.



Fig. 18-20: The sequence of shots from the initial moments of the film, showing the phallic images of the tanker during air-to-air refuelling.

The plotline is made up of some micronarratives that interweave in the development of the film's central conflict. There is the first narrative layer of Jack D. Ripper at the Burpelson Air Force Base who sends irreversible engagement codes to the B-59 bombers that are flying over Russian territory ordering them to drop hydrogen bombs in several locations; one of such aircrafts is another narrative setting in which much of the film's action occurs, and it is commanded by Slim Pickens' character, the rowdy Major T. J. "King" Kong. The narrative core, however, is that of the War Room, which is introduced to the audience after the authorities at the Pentagon find out that Ripper has issued an attack command to the bombers. The War Room becomes increasingly more present in the plotline as diplomatic tensions between U.S. and Soviet authorities heat up.

While *WFD*'s exploration of cities is more centred on the street level and the pedestrian perspective, *Dr. Strangelove* avoids the depiction of large cities entirely, and focusses on the aerial perspective of space. Aerial shots come aplenty throughout the film, and restate the military efforts that form the film's thematic core, as opposed to the civilian standpoint seen in MacDougall's

production. Military areas complement – or are accompanied by – martial music in some sequences. Verbal language is also used to convey meaning through the depiction of signs that bear resemblance to those seen in *WFD*, but with a wittier and more humorous aspect. The phrase “Peace is our profession” shows up in a framed picture in Ripper’s office and in an outdoor hoarding at the Burpelson Air Force Base as part of the comedic composition of space in the film, used in order to convey the ironic idea that peace is the last thing on the authorities’ mind – a point which is particularly indicated in a shot during the conflict between Ripper and the soldiers who are trying to stop him (Fig. 21). There is also a multitude of military books and leaflets in Ripper’s office and in the War Room (Fig. 22) that compose the film’s space and build up the sarcastic resonance of its narrative, especially in the War Room. The film’s editing maintains transitions between narrative layers and character groups, and those transitions are the driving force behind the development of diegetic time and rhythm, such as in sequences structured in cross-editing. Such a development resembles Christian Metz’s (2011) concept of *autonomous segments* presented in his article “A Grande Sintagmática do Filme Narrativo”⁸. Metz details six kinds of syntagmatic units that organise meaning in a film, and the *alternating syntagma*, or simultaneous editing: a common narrative structure in which autonomous shots from different events alternate and form a cohesive temporal relation, and such a structure dictates the rhythm of *Dr. Strangelove* (Metz 212). The transition from one narrative nucleus to the other intensifies as the danger of the Doomsday device draws nigh, which is reinforced by the concurrent events of the B-59 and the War Room, aligning the separate situations – which were previously temporally independent – and setting up an aura of impending doom, critical to the construction of the final sequence.



Fig. 21–22: *Mise-en-scène* items: a “Peace is our profession” sign at the Burpelson Air Force Base, where a loud gunfight is taking place; and a book called *World Targets in Megadeaths* sitting on the War Room table in a medium shot of George C. Scott as general Buck Turgidson (right).

Moreover, the satirical facet of *Dr. Strangelove* manifests itself in some particular ways, almost always going back to political dilemmas of its time. For one thing, the film scorns the complicated procedures of engagement on a military aircraft through the repeatedly dramatic zooming shots of the myriad buttons and switches used to drop nuclear bombs, which delays time in the diegesis, like a sort of operational bureaucracy (*Dr. Strangelove* 01:22:00). Another way – and possibly, the ubiquitous way – through which the narrative communicates

its satire is the grotesque representation of zealous national measures about the prevention of nuclear apocalypse and the suggestion of an apocalyptic aftermath by high-ranking U.S. authorities – conveyed through the configuration of the film’s satirical characters. Historian Spencer Weart (1988) writes that

A nuclear scare built up, worse than any before, frightening the public in the United States, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union. It came to a climax in a tense speech the President gave over national radio and television in July 1961, implying that the world was on the brink of war [...] This sounded too scary, however, and in the final version Kennedy only said that people should be ready to protect their families, and that he would ask Congress for funds to stock shelters with food, water, and first-aid kits. (255)

The notion of nuclear scare presented here does not refer to Cuban fears or Soviet fears of the time, but specifically to fears resulted from imperialistic values of national defence in the United States. Kubrick works on such an idea by unravelling a narrative that mostly depicts figures of authority as obsessive and vulnerable, so Strangelove’s plan to build a fallout shelter serves the purpose of protecting only such authorities, not the people under their control in the hierarchies of political power. Like in war, the highest authorities are not on the front lines, and thus subordinates with no choice on the matter operate the bomber that travels above Russian lands in that imagined present in which Cold War disaster is closer than ever for the United States. The pilots’ position is a disadvantaged one in the hierarchy of power – the crew are fulfilling their duties, while the authorities are promoting world destruction. The film satirises militarism and war by showing the irony of a dreadful, all-encompassing devastation that will leave nothing or nobody unscathed, not even those who planned it.

Another idea mocked by *Dr. Strangelove*’s sardonic format is that of Cold War deterrence, a concept which is increasingly demonstrated throughout the film, with general Turgidson (George C. Scott) being the first to comment on it at the War Room. His stance on the matter is that of incredulity, and his extremist approach to the weapons race is justified by a belief that “war is too important to be left to politics,” and that serious action must be taken, so that “communist subversion and conspiracy” can be avoided (*Dr. Strangelove* 00:23:40). General Ripper is the main agent in the plotline as regards suspicion of conspiracy. Sterling Hayden’s character is mostly portrayed as an isolated man, locked in his office in a military facility, constantly suspecting that the communists will take action against the U.S. at any moment and in subtle ways. He develops the theory that the Soviets are trying to poison American people’s bodily fluids through fluoridation, an idea that references the common paranoias of then contemporary McCarthyism.

Satire is also present in simple elements of presentation, such as the names of the characters themselves, as well as in subtle bits of performance. Jack D. Ripper resembles the name of British serial killer Jack the Ripper, and Strangelove can indicate the odd penchant that the character seems to have for mass destruction,

whereas the word *merkin* in Merkin Muffley – the bald president of the U.S., also played by Sellers – originally means a wig that can be worn as artificial pubic hair. When it comes to performance, it was Kubrick's desire that there should be a constant exaggeration of military uneasiness and ruthlessness (*Inside: Dr. Strangelove* 00:27:31), expressed through Ripper's reckless engagement commands or through his belligerent position against his compatriot forces that try to breach into the base to stop his plan, or yet through Turgidson's excessive suspicion about the presence of a Soviet ambassador in the War Room and Scott's own over-the-top performance.

While still on the topic of performance, there are some specificities of direction that characterise the film's tone and help one understand the final sequences of the production, which are important for this article. Film critic Alexander Walker points out that Kubrick wanted the character of President Merkin Muffley to “be the one man that understands the consequences of his actions – the one serious point in the film,” so he had to play him seriously (*Inside: Dr. Strangelove* 00:17:11). Additionally, Sellers' improvisations are frequent in the film, most glaringly in his roles as Mandrake and Strangelove (*Inside: Dr. Strangelove* 00:17:00-00:19:40). One moment in the final sequence is a testament to that: Strangelove's rapid mannerisms as he tries to resist his autonomous right hand (Fig. 23), as if he were resisting his own Nazi past (*Dr. Strangelove* 01:31:00). Strangelove eventually explains the logic of a fallout shelter, just as he did the notion of deterrence (*Dr. Strangelove* 01:28:00). At this moment, his hand gets particularly out of control in Sellers' performance as he becomes overly excited with the idea that nuclear annihilation would push people into fallout shelters so his breeding techniques and plans can prepare the population for a new future. In *Inside Dr. Strangelove*, Alexander Walker mentions that his mysterious figure

comes out of the old high German cinema of Fritz Lang and Murnau; the sinister man, the man of tremendous power who is himself, in some way, impotent. That is to say, in the film, he is sitting in a wheelchair. Stanley loved that sense of the criminal genius, who, for one reason or another, is handicapped, has got a disability. Which doesn't prevent him from destroying the world. (*IDS* 00:19:43)

Despite the fact that the wheelchair was actually the result of Sellers' involvement in an accident during production (*IDS* 00:21:41), the use of such a prop accentuated Strangelove's increasing lunacy, his ecstasy with the Doomsday device leading up to the point when he gets up of the chair and yells “Mein Führer, I can walk!” right before the editing abruptly shifts to real-world footage of various mushroom clouds (Fig. 24), accompanied by Vera Lynn's voice, singing “We'll meet again” (*Dr. Strangelove* 01:33:00). The use of musical soundtrack in the very last scenes contrasts with the almost prevailing absence of non-diegetic sounds throughout the film, with the exception of “Try a Little Tenderness” in the beginning and the repetitive and scornfully silly use of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” during all the B-59 scenes; a traditional martial song from the

Civil War that sounds fitting for an overly militaristic scenario in which U.S. air force recruits and officials could not be farther from home.

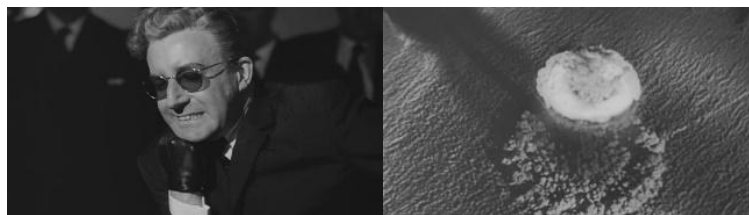


Fig. 23–24: Strangelove fights against his own hand; one of the mushroom clouds shown in the final scenes of the film.

Overall, the construction of meaning in the last scene has a touch of sinister sarcasm that Kubrick had prepared to oppose the otherwise light-hearted and goofy mood of the rest of the film. The sarcasm grows stronger as “We’ll meet again,” a love song, accompanies the aforementioned sequence of real-life warhead detonations. Unlike the mysterious destruction of the fictional world of *WFD*, nuclear annihilation does materialise shot after shot, and there is an underlying irony in the fact that the entirety of the film focusses on the political forces of defence and control that can no longer stop the disaster brought about as a by-product of that very expression of excessive control and paranoia. The slapstick and droll mode of performance seen throughout the film – especially in Scott’s acting and Sellers’ Strangelove – give way to an equally exaggerated, but more sombre, side of the doctor: the uncontained Nazi salutes, the pleasure expressed through the monologue that highlights the macabre details of eugenics planned for the future of humankind, as well as the framing and editing work that gradually closes in on Sellers’ face repeatedly until the whole personnel in the War Room is convinced of his plans (Fig. 25-27). Yet there is still room for wacky scenes as the film intermittently cuts from Strangelove’s speech to the parallel action aboard the B-59 – again relating to Christian Metz’ description of the alternating syntagma in cinema –, where the crew is trying to open the jammed bay doors so that the bombs can be dropped, as per superior orders. In an act of brave lunacy, Major Kong opens the bay doors manually and mounts one of the warheads, comically falling from the sky in a cowboy-like manner (Fig. 28). All of those techniques build up to an explosive climax, a sudden ending of the diegetic action with a tragicomic effect, which is suddenly wrapped up by the aforementioned depiction of nuclear mushrooms, accompanied by an supposedly unfitting love song.





Fig. 25–27 (from left to right, top to bottom): The editing and framing work that closes in on Strangelove as he explains his plans for the nuclear shelters and gradually convinces the statesmen and military officers present. Fig. 28: Shot of Major Kong “riding” the bomb as he descends into oblivion.

With *Dr Strangelove*, Stanley Kubrick and his crew approached the issue of nuclear apocalypse in a way that caricatures the political anxieties of the time. Its *mise-en-scène* emphasised the military paraphernalia and the luxury of the political high echelon. The grandiose space designed by Ken Adam for the War Room demonstrates an exuberance of lighting contrast that is stylistically comparable to Alexander Walker’s descriptions of Strangelove’s figure as coming out of German Expressionism. Kubrick played with the fears of those decades, either through the transition from a jocular depiction of political manias to the suggestion of a sinister imagination of a future based on mass destruction and eugenics. Ultimately, the film’s characters,

especially, but not uniquely, Kong, Turgidson, and Strangelove himself, are determined by clear obsessions and compulsions. The comedy of the narrative reveals these compulsions as a form of diplomatic ignorance and in every case presents psychic automatism as a mechanization of the self. (Seed 197)

So, how do *WFD* and *Dr Strangelove* adapt imaginations of disaster and post-disaster to cinematographic discourse? Both films resist the usual way of approaching post-apocalyptic narratives. They do not follow the formulaic mode of other films such as *The Day After* (1983, directed by Nicholas Meyer), which veered more towards the action-orientated aspects of survival and less towards social issues, thus resembling the model of earlier films such as the sensationalistic⁹ *Panic in Year Zero!* (1962, directed by Ray Milland). Susan Sontag argues that “compared with the science fiction novels, their film counterparts have unique strengths, one of which is the immediate representation of the extraordinary: physical deformity and mutation, missile and rocket combat, toppling skyscrapers” (44). In *WFD*, soaring skyscrapers become direct indicators of something other than imposing structures: they become indicators of an absence of the other, of the sense of loss and lack of communication – they become part of the space composition, but also part of a process of rediscovery of familiar spaces, now devoid of social meaning. In *Dr. Strangelove*, nuclear combat is presented as more than a source of fictional action: it is presented as a compelling subject matter that an unusual narrative format for its time decided to demystify in order to shed new light on the issues of weapons race and militaristic supremacy. *WFD* and *Dr*

Strangelove approach these tropes differently. The former deals with disaster in a palpable way – especially in the initial sequences, in which Burton walks around deserted and car-filled streets of a gigantic and once crowded city. Its set does not feature ruined buildings, because the desertion of its space is what defines its *mise-en-scène*, not its destruction. And the slow revelation of spaces, the gradual opening of the frame’s imprisonment as Ralph Burton explores the streets of an abandoned New York, is just as much a moment of discovery for the spectator as it is for the protagonist. And such a structure of editing and cinematography creates meaning in a way that is important for the present analysis: the film links the discovery of spaces with the sense of survival necessary for Burton to start anew, ultimately bringing the “starting anew” trope together with a portrayal of racial differences, sexuality, and gender roles.

As for *Dr. Strangelove*, disaster is presented as iconic images of mushroom clouds, and only as a final portrayal of the film’s discourse, when the parody of intense diplomacy and nuclear deterrence reaches its ludicrous, if dramatic, climax. *Dr. Strangelove*’s depiction of mushroom clouds relates to suggestion by Spencer Weart that some images, ideas, and anxieties can “become strongly associated with one another in a cluster that includes a particular subject, such as nuclear energy” (xii). Showing real-life footage of nuclear detonations while omitting disaster and ruins in the fiction itself serves to bring a sense of foreboding to what the narrative is about: the risk of devastation through articulations of the military. The film builds up the anxiety of destruction, never explicitly showing how it would affect the characters and the spaces of the diegesis, although *Strangelove* himself hints at it verbally by describing how the post-nuclear survival would be, and who would enjoy the privilege of a life underground after the event. But it happens in the end, and it is such an absolutely destruction that it is not shown, thus making use of a pictorial apophasis to present its disaster. It can be terrifying for what it does *not* show.

Therefore, while *WFD* portrays a post-disaster future in its geography and in the social interactions of characters that have to stick together to survive and overlook their prejudices, *Dr Strangelove* offers the imagination of a post-apocalyptic future after building it up through the portrayal of articulations of power – in dialogue-heavy scenes –, as well as the very danger of nuclear weapons. The problem of disaster films that mostly rely on the drama and thrill of the action is inexistent in these two productions, for their screenplays, their performances and their scene construction more clearly probe possible futures of political and social complexities, of actual changes caused by nuclear anxieties and by a profoundly affected urban life. In both films, there are suggestions of terrifying futures with nuance and commentary through their human interactions, their political conflicts, and their depictions of distorted new worlds.

Notes

1. Derived from the concept of rational deterrence, mutual assured destruction is a term for a diplomatic and military strategy, prevalent during the Cold War, through which nations with substantial nuclear arsenals would refrain from using mass destruction weapons in the belief that their adversaries would do the same.
2. To be referred to as WFD henceforth.
3. The initial credits display the message “Suggested by a story by Matthew Phipps Shiel”.
4. In May 1979, the United States Congress published a report with comprehensive details on nuclear war and the possible aftermath of a nuclear blast called *The Effects of Nuclear War*. The book encapsulates the cautionary discourse of alertness that many different post-bomb measures used to describe – including the earlier short film *Duck and Cover* (1952, directed by Anthony Rizzo), commissioned by the US Civil Defense Administration.
5. It could be argued that Belafonte became part of the Hollywood star system because of such talents as well.
6. Not only social conventions of race and gender are challenged in the narrative, but also those of romantic relationships. The image at the ending – the three characters holding hands and walking towards a new beginning (fig. 17) – suggests that the moral imposition of monogamy is threatened. The love triangle and the subsequent conflict between Burton and Thacker does not end in murder, as it habitually would, but in a resolution that benefits everyone. And since the avoidance of human extinction is a recurring matter, such a suggestion may ring true.
7. Related to mutual assured destruction, previously covered.
8. “The Great Syntagma of the Narrative Film” (my translation).
9. The poster for *Panic at Year Zero!* brings a message that reads: “Where science fiction ends and fact begins!!”

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Recebido em: 21/01/2023

Aceito em: 04/07/2023