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Nukes at the Movies

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In the opening scene there is a plane being refueled midair in the middle of arctic. The nozzle of the refueling plane slowly finds its way into the bomber needing the fuel. At first when watching, nothing is wrong with the scene, however after watching the entire movie one realizes the sexual aspect that is portrayed in the opening scene. There are many scenes like this in Stanley Kubrick’s satire Dr. Strangelove. There are three main themes that are prevalent throughout the movie. Sex and death, ridiculousness of war, and ideological differences. There are more than those three themes, but these are the ones that stood out and are mentioned multiple times. The entire film highlights how the public does not understand why we need nukes and America’s love of building more of them.

Sex and death is a theme that slowly becomes more and more realized throughout the movie. The first scene with the refueling plane inserting itself into the bomber seems to be innocent enough. However, this changes attitudes change throughout the movie as the scene at the end with major straddling a phallic nuclear warhead heading towards his death gives imagery of sexual dysphoria. This of course a satire of the military this time, but it also brings a deeper understanding of the nuclear narratives in the eyes of the public. At this point in time, the attitudes were clearly against nuclear warfare and there is a clear disgust of weapons of mass destruction since they can bring nothing but destruction. Kubrick shows off that clearly with one of the last scenes where Dr. Strangelove recommends hiding in the mines for 100 years to survive the destruction of world and bringing ten women for every man to repopulate the human race. The doctor also mentions that these women should be picked for their sexual characteristics. Strangelove is the one who proposed it, however most people in the room who are generals and government officials start to agree about making these preparations. As a satire this war movie shows that in case of a doomsday nuclear device going off, the end of the world, the highly elected officials and generals would only care about themselves and sexually attractive women. This sentiment is apparent throughout the plot as the president, who first argues against having war, slowly gets convinced that war is inevitable, and the only way out is to hide in the mines for 100 years with beautiful women to repopulate. Kubrick highlights the military’s love of these weapons in other scenes as one of the scenes involves a bomber pilot riding a nuclear warhead with a cowboy hat on, to his death. Even the movie title Dr. Strangelove is a quip to the military’s strange sexual attraction to these weapons. It seems that at the time this movie premiered, there was a great divide between the people who held and used these weapons, and the rest of the United States. The ones in control of these weapons, how the movie portrayed it, thought it was a necessity of life to have these weapons and have first strike capability. They loved these weapons so much because it was their safety and a reliable way of preventing war. The general public saw the military this way and thought that nuclear deterrence was some sick perversion with no end in sight. It was clear in the satire that if we destroyed each other there would be no one left around, and any survivors would inherit a dead world that would not be worth living in.

This brings us to the second theme, the ridiculousness of war and specifically the cold war. The movie is set at the height of the cold war, where any wrong decision could impact millions of lives at any moment. However, most of the movie does not have any shooting or action at all. The only shooting that occurs is the Americans fighting themselves in their own base to gain control of the safeguard codes to recall the bombers. Not a single shot is fired on a Soviet soldier at all. Not only that, but all of the important scenes that occurs is in closed rooms like the president’s war room. The most important scenes are phone calls to the prime minister of the Soviet Union who is drunk at the time. There is no savagery or gore with intense action scenes, it is just heated people talking about numbers and first strike capability in an enclosed room. The point this theme of the absurdity of the cold war is that the fate of the entire world rests on a handful of men. They are gods of death in all but their names. These generals and cabinet members could decide at any moment that the world was over. One can see that this did not sit well with the public and this satire made it very clear. Nuclear weapons give too much control to a select few, and the rest of the world is in danger because of these few. War is not decided on the battlefield anymore, it is decided behind closed doors and phone calls.

Ideology is a main theme that compliments this movie and shows sentiment at the time as well. The Soviets in the movie are referred to as the devil incarnate. Many characters such as general Turgidson paint the communists as insidious and sly, even accuses them of making up some sort of trick to start a war. Even though they are mentioned a lot, only one communist ever gets shown in the movie and that is the ambassador of the Soviet Union. We hear one side of a conversation with the prime minister of the Soviet Union, but we never do hear his voice. The ambassador himself does nothing suspicious until the very end, when he pulls out a tiny camera to take photographs of the war room which describes their insidious and slyness. However, what is more interesting is how the capitalists are painted in the movie. Nothing is said about them; however, their actions show a lot. A prime example is one scene in the telephone booth where the RAF officer must urgently place a call to the president. The phone booth is coin operated and the officer first of all does not have enough change to place probably the most important call in history. This already is ridiculous, but then when he asks another American soldier to shoot a vending machine to get change, the soldier then refuses saying it is private property belonging to the Coca Cola corporation. This whole scene is absurd and shows that capitalism also has its flaws. Kubrick paints the picture that both ideologies might be good in their own ways, but that when put into practice it still fails. This theme highlights that anti-nuclear sentiment extends to the ideology that why are we fighting for our ideology when it also has its own flaws? People have come to recognize that the American system is not perfect and has many errors, but that the people advocating for building nuclear weapons to protect our perfect democracy are lying to themselves and the public as an excuse to build these weapons.

Dr. Strangelove as a satire did a great job highlighting the sentiment against nuclear weapons and the absurdity of them. The imagery of closed rooms with a handful of old white men deciding the fate of the human race is very well depicted. The technology that makes this happen is nuclear weapons and doomsday devices. The government and military do indeed have a strange love for these weapons of mass destruction that is not explained. From this movie we can see that there is a strong sentiment against this perversion. The plot of the movie also brings into question nuclear deterrence and that having so many nukes can only bring destruction, it is ridiculous to think that amassing weapons can guarantee peace. It also brings into question why we are building more of these weapons and fighting in the first place. Capitalism and communism both have their own flaws when put into practice, most people just want to live peacefully going about their daily lives not worrying about a bomb that could obliterate their entire world.