

Subverting the Cold War in the 1960s:

Dr. Strangelove, *The Manchurian Candidate*, and *The Planet of the Apes*

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The election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 was, in retrospect, a crucial inflection point in the trajectory of the Cold War. Certainly the ideology of anti-communism pervaded American life in the 1950s. But after the hysteria of its first half-decade, the practical conduct of the superpower conflict became routinized during the cautious and conservative Eisenhower administration. Kennedy, however, had campaigned against American complacency, and even weakness in the shadow of the Soviet threat. Additionally, as difficult as it is to conceptualize today, the Soviet Union was at this time viewed as an economic success story, with international assertiveness to come on the heels of its material achievements.

The first two years of the Kennedy Administration were characterized by ubiquitous superpower confrontation, culminating in the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, at which time Kennedy estimated that the chance of nuclear war was better than one in three.¹ The second half of the decade witnessed the Vietnam War, an instrumental and perhaps inevitable outgrowth of the Cold War. The war not only became the principal outlet of the larger conflict, but also over time reshaped the nature of Cold War scholarship. In the 1950s, the Cold War was unquestionably attributed to the Soviet Union and its communist ideology. By the early 1970s, a thriving “revisionist” school now blamed the United States and the imperative of capitalist expansion.

In the midst of all this, three remarkable films, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *Dr. Strangelove (or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb)* (1964), and *Planet of the Apes* (1968), subverted the Cold War. They “subverted” the war in two ways. First they challenged the fundamental ideological tenets upon which U.S. policy was based. This was quite daring, especially for the first two films, made at a time when anti-communism pervaded American society, and people could still



The *Manchurian Candidate* (*The Manchurian Candidate*).

Courtesy of The Film Archive.

get in trouble by saying the wrong thing.² But more profoundly, these films subverted the very idea of the Cold War itself. Rather than switching, as much scholarship did, from an ideological position that blamed the USSR to one that accused the US, these politically charged films were ultimately a-political statements. They did not take sides, but instead ridiculed both and trivialized their conflict, asserting that the differences between them were meaningless.

Left or Right?

The Manchurian Candidate, directed by John Frankenheimer and written by George Axelrod (from the novel by Richard Condon), is the most explicit in equating the far left with the far right. The principal villain, portrayed by Angela Lansbury,

is the puppet master behind her second husband, Senator Johnny Islen, a drunken, vacuous McCarthy stand-in. In one of the film’s most chilling (and prescient) images, Islen attacks the Secretary of Defense at a press conference, while Lansbury, in the background of the room, dominates the screen as she towers over a television monitor that captures the unfolding action.³

Lansbury also dominates her son from a previous marriage, Raymond Shaw, who has just returned from Korea to a hero’s welcome. Shaw received the Congressional Medal of Honor for saving his patrol, but in fact his heroism is an illusion created by the Chinese and Russians who captured and brainwashed his entire squad. Shaw has been programmed as the perfect assassin, and after a few bloody tests of his skills back in the States, he is turned over to his American handler.

In the film’s most stunning twist, Raymond’s American handler turns out to be none other than his mother. She has arranged to secure the vice-presidential nomination for Islen, and has instructed Raymond to kill the presidential nominee as

he addresses the party convention at Madison Square Garden. Islen, the ultimate anti-Communist, will then be swept into office, leaving his wife, a Soviet agent, running the show.

These plans come undone as Raymond's commanding officer (portrayed by Frank Sinatra), haunted by nightmares from the brainwashing, is slowly able to piece together key elements of the conspiracy. He deprograms Shaw, but fails to prevent him from executing his own variation of his instructions: attending the convention as ordered and assassinating Islen and his mother.

At first glance, it can be argued that *The Manchurian Candidate* is simply a leftist critique of America and its icons and values. Indeed, one review called it a "refreshingly un-American film."⁴ The chief antagonist is in many ways a nightmarish extension of the American vision of motherhood itself. The ease with which U.S. soldiers are turned into brainwashed killers is also a challenge to a society based on the exaltation of the individual and of free will. The use of Lincoln's image, which appears throughout the film, is not only a nod to America's most famous assassination, but also mocks the mythic American values with which Lincoln is associated. This reaches its apex at a costume party when Islen appears in full Lincoln garb. Islen's McCarthy figure is such a buffoon that he settles on "57" as the number of communists he can prove are in the Defense Department solely because, thinking of ketchup, it is an easy number to remember. As both Lincoln and McCarthy, there can be no doubt that his character is a slap in the face of the far right.

Certainly any film that can end, logically, with its central character murdering his mother while dressed as a priest wearing the Congressional Medal, can be fairly labeled "un-American." But there is a fundamental difference between an "un-American" film, and an anti-American film in the context of the Cold War. *The Manchurian Candidate* could just as easily be called "un-Communist," as the far left does not fare any better than the far right. In fact, the Communists are portrayed as so evil and ruthless, that some have interpreted the film as an anti-Communist wake-up call.⁵ Aside from the horrors visited upon Raymond (at one point he is forced to kill his true love) no iron curtain figure is endowed with a single positive attribute. The main Russian antagonist would "gladly" have Raymond kill one of his underlings as a test, but since he is understaffed, some random innocent victim must be chosen. The key Chinese figure is not just murderous, but cynical and materialist, and takes advantage of his trip to New York to take care of a long shopping list at Macy's.

Clearly, this was not a piece of leftist propaganda. Condemned by both the American Legion and the Communist Party, the film was one which "if the rightists hated [it] . . . the liberals hated it even more."⁶ The target was not one side in the conflict, but the conflict itself. Ultimately, when Raymond's mother promises revenge against her comrades for choosing her son as the assassin, any modest distinctions between the Communists and the anti-Communists in the film disappear. In the words of one observer, the film "revels in anti-ideology." Frankenheimer himself stated quite plainly, "I wanted to do a picture about how

ludicrous McCarthy-style far-right politics are and how dangerous the far-left is also, how they were really exactly the same thing, and the idiocy of it all."⁷

A bold argument to make in 1962, *The Manchurian Candidate* was a box office success, but its sustained influence was almost certainly limited by the fact that it was withdrawn from circulation shortly after the Kennedy assassination. That event had a more modest effect on the profoundly influential *Dr. Strangelove*, causing its first screening for critics to be postponed from its originally scheduled date, November 22, 1963.⁸

Nuclear War and its Discontents

While *The Manchurian Candidate* played in theatres during the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was *Dr. Strangelove* that took head on the most pressing issue of the day, the danger of nuclear war, and total human annihilation. Presented as a comedy, it was also a Stanley Kubrick film, and thus bore the stamp of his obsessive realism. Kubrick studied nuclear strategy for years, reading scores of books and countless journals, absorbing the work of leading scholars such as Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn.⁹ Source lighting, enclosed spaces, and the judicious use of hand held cameras (during the raid on Burpelson Air Force Base) visually complement the film's technical accuracy. Now close to forty years old, it is still routinely shown to students to illustrate elements of deterrence theory.

Like *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Dr. Strangelove* is critical of American society – where else would one find a machine gun in a golf bag – but its principal target is the Cold War itself, and the moral equivalence, and folly, of both sides. The action of the film is limited almost entirely to three restricted settings. There is the office of General Ripper, who has ordered his squadron of B-52s to attack the Soviet Union. Here, his British assistant Mandrake (played by Peter Sellers, who has three roles in the film) engages Ripper in a desperate attempt to figure out the recall code that will bring the planes back. The second setting is the war room, where the President (also Sellers), his advisors, and the Russian Ambassador attempt to diffuse the situation. Here



General Jack D. Ripper has a plan—Captain Mandrake has a problem (*Dr. Strangelove*).

Courtesy of The Film Archive.

we learn that the Russians have constructed a doomsday device, by which any nuclear explosion on their territory will lead automatically to global destruction. The third setting is the cramped quarters of the last B-52 bomber, whose broken radio prevents it from receiving the recall code. Against all odds, its crew is successful in delivering its payload, inadvertently triggering the doomsday device. Under the guidance of Dr. Strangelove (Sellers) the survivors in the war room plan to revive human society in America's deepest mine shafts.

The far right is an obvious target in this film. General Ripper is obsessed with fluoridation, and in fact there were elements of American society which held that fluoridation was a Communist plot. Turgidson, who advocates for a first strike while acknowledging that the U.S. would "get its hair mussed" (10-20 million deaths), is a caricature that hits uncomfortably close to home for some elements in the Air Force at the time. And Colonel Bat Guano is so obsessed with protecting private property (a Coca-Cola machine) and guarding against potential "preversion," that he is reluctant to allow Mandrake to call the White House with the recall code.

But again, the attacks on the right do not provide support for the left. The superpowers, in their conduct of the nuclear confrontation, are portrayed with stunning symmetry in their ends and means. Turgidson may attempt to clumsily plant a camera on the Russian Ambassador, but it doesn't matter, because the Russian has one of his own, which he uses to take snap-shots of the war room as the bombs begin to explode. Premier Kissoff is a philandering drunk who has temporarily kept the doomsday machine a secret (rendering it less than useless) because he likes surprises. This is not the fault of the doomsday machine, of course. The Americans "wish they had one."

In the words of one critic, Kubrick "has managed to explode the right-wing position without making a single left-wing affirmation."¹⁰ Rather than taking sides, *Dr. Strangelove's* focus is more on mankind than it is about political disputes between two countries. More specifically, it has been argued, most notably by F. Anthony Macklin, that the film is "a sex allegory: from foreplay to explosion in the mechanized world."¹¹

Certainly, it would be hard to argue that a film whose action is set in motion by Jack D. Ripper ordering an attack against Laputa (Spanish for prostitute) is not about sex. And that of course is the tip of the sexual iceberg. From Ripper's cigar to the descent of the final bomb, sexual symbols abound, whether attached to the names of the players (Buck Turgidson means "swollen male") or the plan of the attack (R for Romeo). No wonder Kubrick wrote to Macklin: "I think that you have found a rather engaging way of viewing the film. I would not

think of quarreling with your interpretation nor offering any other, as I have found it always the best policy to let the film speak for itself."¹²

But while sex must be seen as a central component to any reading of the film, it is much more than a simple allegory. It is not just sex, but the suppression of sexual and other human impulses that is closer to the heart of *Strangelove*. This complementary interpretation is closer to George Linden's, who places stress on the film's subtitle: How I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb. Linden embraces a sexual interpretation, but one that sees the violence of the film resulting from erotic displacement and its attendant neuroses. Not love, but strange-love.¹³

Such an interpretation evokes the themes raised by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In this essay Freud argued that civilization, however necessary, prevents men from acting on their most basic impulses, and this is an important source of psychological distress.¹⁴ While the parallels to Freud's argument are not airtight, this approach to the film is more satisfying than the simple sex allegory reading for three reasons. First, several key aspects of the story make sense only in the context of displacement. Most explicitly, Ripper explains to Mandrake that he has recently embarked upon a policy of strict abstinence from sex. (He does not avoid women, but he denies them his "essence.") It is Ripper's suppression of his own sexuality that has found its outlet in nuclear war. And that war will solve the problem. With civilization destroyed (and in need of restoration) there will be ten women for every man in the mineshafts that the survivors will occupy. The women will be chosen for their ability to stimulate the men, and "regrettably" the traditional (civilized) norm of monogamy will have to be abandoned. Goodbye civilization, hello, free love.

Second, only the quasi-Freudian reading with its emphasis on displacement can account for the predominance of food and eating that is present in almost every scene.¹⁵ The most obvious example of this is the enormous buffet in the war room (and the un-released pie-fight, see note 8), but the displacement motif is explicit on the B-52, where each crewman's survival kit includes "nine packs of chewing gum/one issue prophylactics." Finally, this interpretation, with its emphasis

on the advance of civilization and control, fits neatly with another great theme of the film, the abdication of human decision making to machines, and the general erosion of the "human" element in humanity.¹⁶ We are first introduced to mechanization when we realize that while Major Kong bides his time reading *Playboy*, his B-52 is able to fly itself. But the encroachment of machines becomes increasingly consequential throughout the film. The plane's



The men in the War Room (*Dr. Strangelove*).

Courtesy of Columbia Pictures Corporation.

CRM-114 discriminator decides which transmissions will reach the crew, and when it is damaged, they are unable to receive the recall code. This allows the first bomb to land. The doomsday device that is triggered in response, ending the world as we know it, is admired because it “rules out human meddling.” And when President Muffley balks at choosing who shall be chosen for survival and allowed to enter the mineshafts, Dr. Strangelove explains that this decision as well could be made by computers.

Dr. Strangelove was an important and daring film. Writing to the *New York Times*, the philosopher Lewis Mumford wrote “This film is the first break in the catatonic Cold War trance that has so long held our country in its rigid grip.” Like *The Manchurian Candidate*, however, it was not a political film, with a practical philosophy or point of view. Rather, it was a-political. Kubrick took aim at mankind, which was willing to flirt with annihilation over “political differences that will seem as meaningless to people a hundred years from now as the theological conflicts of the middle ages seem to us today.”¹⁷

“Beware the Beast Man”

Planet of the Apes takes that philosophy as its starting point. As the famous closing shot reveals, mankind had destroyed itself in an ancient nuclear conflict. Centuries later, three American astronauts who participated in an experiment on time and space travel, crash land on a barren and unknown (to them) planet. The astronauts, led by Taylor (Charlton Heston), find themselves on an “upside down” world where talking apes rule and humans are treated like animals. Taylor, ultimately the lone survivor of his crew, is imprisoned and mistreated by the simian society, whose leaders recognize him to be a grave threat. He eventually escapes his captors, only to confront his destiny.

The film, directed by Franklin J. Schaffner (who would also direct *Pappillon* and win an Oscar for *Patton*), does not have the reputation of the other films and was not taken as seriously at the time.¹⁸ This is unfortunate, because the film, which is beautifully shot, is sharply written and worthy of close attention. Of the three films discussed here, it is the most obviously subversive of American values, but still poses more of a challenge to the legitimacy of the Cold War itself than it does to either side in particular.

The film, often but not exclusively through the voice of Taylor (Heston), systematically kicks out the ideological pillars that formed the basis of the American Cold War psyche: patriotism, heroism, and religion. At the very start of the film, Taylor



Planting the Flag (*Planet of the Apes*).

Courtesy of The Film Archive.

laughs at the planting of the American flag, and mocks his colleague’s willingness (eagerness?) to die a hero’s death for his country (and this in 1968).¹⁹ But the film’s most sustained assault is on religion, no small matter for a deeply religious country fighting a cold (and hot) war against godless Communism.

It would be a mistake to underestimate the role of religion in the Cold War. From a philosophical perspective it undermined the prospects for compromise and “normal poli-

tics,” and, more practically, it was an important common bond that helped hold together a diverse Cold War coalition in the United States. *Planet of the Apes’* sustained assault on religion thus takes on even greater meaning. This attack features three interrelated themes. First, the apes themselves are devoted to a religion akin to some form of Christianity, and the theologians in society have great power. Mocking Taylor, the powerful Dr. Zais asks him why only apes have souls, and why they have been created by god in his image. Since most members of the audience are unlikely to think that apes have souls, the film challenges their own claim, based on faith, to have an eternal soul. (It is no accident that Taylor also happens past a solemn ape funeral.) Second, religion is portrayed as dishonest. When scientists suggest that Taylor is a sentient being, they are tried for blasphemy, in a court where religious doctrine rules over plain fact, and where the presiding officer knows, and disregards, the scientific truth. Finally, and most ironically, near the end of the film, readings from the ape’s scriptures summarize the lawgiver’s view of mankind. But these words are so similar to those uttered by Heston on his spaceship they could have easily been derived from them. Thus the bible itself was not written by an ape god, but a mortal man.

Written by liberal leaning Rod Serling and blacklist survivor Michael Wilson, it is perhaps not surprising that the film would challenge conservative American values.²⁰ But by no stretch of the imagination does the film attribute mankind’s destruction to The West or its way of life. Additionally, the film presents a chilling portrayal of ape society that seems to have much in common with the communist bloc of the time. As one critic noted, “the wholly authoritarian ape society paranoically represses the slightest manifestation of dissent.”²¹ It is also a society devoid of materialist concerns, yet which has managed to create a class system anyway, with orangutans on top, chimpanzees in the middle, and gorillas at the bottom. Delete god from the totalitarian theologians in control, and you are left with a politburo.

In the 1960s, revisionist scholars began to argue that the United States rather than the Soviet Union was to blame for the

Cold War, and the fight spilled into the streets. But regardless of where one stood, as much as anything else it was an era captured by the phrase “everybody’s shouting – Which Side Are You On?”²² Remarkably then, as with *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Dr. Strangelove*, for all its political swipes, *Planet of the Apes* has no practical politics, but rather is a critique of mankind. The posters for the film led with the line uttered by Taylor: “Somewhere in the universe there must be something better than man.”²³ That is why the misanthrope agreed to take a one-way mission away from earth in the first place. Like Taylor, the lawgiver knows who is to blame: “beware the beast man, for he will make a desert of his home and yours. He is the harbinger of death.” As the film closes, Taylor, his worst nightmares confirmed, calls for the damnation of man – mankind – for its collective sins.

Notes

1. Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1969) 110.
2. These films enjoyed some cover, the former from Frank Sinatra’s star power (and connections with President Kennedy), and the latter by distance; it was produced entirely in England.
3. One of the many sub-texts of this film is a critique of the political manipulation of the media and of images in general, most evident in the discussion of the staging of the assassination.
4. Peter John Dyer, “*The Manchurian Candidate*,” *Sight and Sound* 32:1 (1962-3): 36.
5. On this debate, see Susan Carruthers, “*The Manchurian Candidate* and the Cold War Brainwashing Scare,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18:1 (1998): 73, 81-2.
6. J. Hoberman, “When Dr. No Met Dr. Strangelove,” *Sight and Sound* 3:12 (1993): 19; John Thomas, “John Frankenheimer: The Smile on the Face of the Tiger,” *Film Quarterly* 19:2 (1962-3): 8.
7. Carruthers 84. Gerald Pratley, *The Films of John Frankenheimer* (Cranbury, NJ: Lehigh U P, 1998) 40. Frankenheimer also stated “we asked ourselves who would Mao Tse-Tung like to see as president of the United States more than anyone else. And the answer was Richard Nixon” (95).
8. *The Manchurian Candidate* was re-released with some fanfare in 1988. See Thomas Doherty, “A Second Look,” *Cineaste* 16:4 (1988); note also page 31 on the a-political aspects of the film. The assassination had two other modest effects on *Dr. Strangelove*. 1) A reference to “Dallas” was replaced with “Vegas” in post-production. 2) At one point, the film contained an elaborate pie-fight, in which the president was struck in the face. General Turgidson then states that “our beloved president has been struck down in his prime.” This scene, rejected before the assassination, would have been unthinkable in its aftermath. Vincent LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* (New York: Penguin, 1997) 245, 247.
9. LoBrutto 231, 240. Thomas Schelling’s work had a profound influence on U.S. strategy in the 1960s and remains important to this day. See esp. his books *The Strategy of Conflict* (Harvard U P, 1960), and *Arms and Influence* (Yale U P, 1966).
10. Robert Brustein, “Out of This World,” *New York Review of Books* 1:12 (1964): 4.
11. F. Anthony Macklin, “Sex and Dr. Strangelove,” *Film Comment* 3:3 (1965): 55.
12. Macklin 55, 56; See also Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Continuum, 1989 [expanded edition])136-7.
13. George W. Linden, “*Dr. Strangelove*,” *Nuclear War Films*, ed. Jack G. Shaheen (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U P, 1978) 60, 65-7.
14. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (1930; New York: Norton, 1961), esp. 47, 66-70, 102; also 37, 45, 79, 93.
15. For a summary and discussion, see Thomas Allen Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist’s Maze* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1982) 92.
16. Kubrick would explore this more fully in his next film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.
17. LoBrutto 248 (Mumford quote); Kagan 111 (Kubrick quote).
18. *Sight and Sound* did run a joint review of *Apes* with *2001*, another film about humanity and its relationship to apes, but the film was received principally as a fantasy entertainment product. Judith Shatnoff, “A Gorilla to Remember,” *Sight and Sound* 22:1 (1968). The film was a commercial success, spawning four sequels and a devoted fan base. On the entire cycle of films, see Michael Atkinson, “Son of Apes,” *Film Comment* 31:5 (1995).
19. Prominent conservative Heston does not address the politics of this film, or others that he appears in, such as Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil* (1958), that would appear to be sharply at odds with his own political philosophy. See Charlton Heston, *In the Arena: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), esp. 394-8.
20. On Wilson, see Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960* (New York: Doubleday, 1980); On Serling, see Gordon F. Sander, *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television’s Last Angry Man* (New York: Penguin, 1994).
21. Henry Hart, “*Planet of the Apes*,” *Films in Review* 19:3 (1968): 172.
22. Bob Dylan, “Desolation Row,” from the album *Highway 61 Revisited* (Columbia, 1965).
23. Tony Nourmand and Graham Marsh, *Film Posters of the 1960s* (Woodstock NY: Overlook, 1998) 94.



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