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“To prevent the present heat from dissipating”: Stanley Kubrick and the Marketing of *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)

Peter Krämer

- 1 On 7 March 1963, five weeks into principal photography for *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, the film’s director, producer and co-writer Stanley Kubrick wrote to Columbia Pictures about the marketability of his latest project:

My original belief that this subject matter would be very commercial, create an almost unprecedented public and critical reaction, and be possibly the most exploitable film of recent times, has, I believe, been largely proven by the tremendous success of its plagiarised cousin *Fail-Safe* and the very unusual attention which is being given to the dispute between the two films. ... Naturally, I would like to have the film released as quickly as possible in order to prevent the present heat from dissipating.¹

- 2 The “commercial” subject matter of Kubrick’s film was the outbreak of nuclear war. This topic had already been the focus of several bestselling novels, the latest of which had been Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler’s *Fail-Safe*, published in October 1962.² Because *Fail-Safe* shared many elements with Peter George’s 1958 novel *Two Hours to Doom* (published in the US as *Red Alert*), on which *Dr. Strangelove* was based, Kubrick, George and Columbia had sued Burdick and Wheeler as well as the film production company planning to adapt the novel, for plagiarism.³ It is this on-going “dispute” which generated the “heat” that Kubrick wanted to exploit, when one might have expected him to refer instead to developments in the nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, notably the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, which, it was widely perceived, had actually brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

- 3 In his letter to Columbia, Kubrick acknowledged that the distributor, which had only taken on *Dr. Strangelove* a few months earlier in November 1962, needed time “for your sales and exploitation forces to manage a co-ordinated national release,” and therefore would have to go “five to six weeks” beyond his preferred release date (which he gave as 15 August 1963) for the as yet unfinished film:

If I understand you correctly, your plan is to break the film nationally (...I would assume in somewhere around 50 cities), so that we can take the most efficient advantage of heavy national television advertising, national magazine advertising and the big national magazine breaks [that is, substantial articles about the film, PK] which have so far been promised by a number of important editors.

- 4 It is unclear to what extent Columbia was in fact already committed to an expensive national advertising campaign for *Dr. Strangelove*, but Kubrick here certainly pushed very strongly for it. Indeed, he acknowledged how unusual this would be by claiming that the kind of marketing he envisioned for *Dr. Strangelove* “has never been done on a national scale.” At the same time, he showed himself to be reasonable and conciliatory towards Columbia by accepting the unfortunate delay of his film’s release caused by the extensive preparations necessary for “a co-ordinated national release.” Kubrick’s letter indicated that he had already embarked on the marketing of his film on his own, by contacting magazine editors with a view of securing publicity for his forthcoming release. It is also obvious that Kubrick expected to be involved very closely with Columbia’s marketing of *Dr. Strangelove*, and that his ideas and interests might not always be in line with those of the distributor; Columbia, for example, might not agree with Kubrick’s estimation of the film’s commercial potential and hence refuse to invest a lot in its marketing.
- 5 In this essay, which makes extensive use of archival sources, most notably from the Stanley Kubrick Archive at the University of the Arts London, I examine Kubrick’s involvement in the marketing of *Dr. Strangelove*. The first section provides background information on Kubrick’s early career, which helps to explain how he came to take such a central role in the film’s marketing. It also deals with the *Fail-Safe* dispute, which loomed so large in Kubrick’s thinking, reminding us that, crucially, marketing is about positioning a product in relation to its competitors; in this case, the aim was to neutralize the nearest competitor altogether. The second section explores the key selling points highlighted in advertising materials (including the press book) and in the publicity surrounding the film. Among these were the serious, topical subject, the film’s comedic nature, and, last but not least, the famous director himself. This section also examines the release strategy for the film, discussing its ever shifting release date and the national dimension of the marketing campaign around the time of the film’s US release in January 1964.

Stanley Kubrick, Hollywood and Films About the “Nuclear Nightmare”

- 6 After working as a staff photographer for *Look*, one of America’s leading mass market picture magazines, Stanley Kubrick moved into filmmaking in the early 1950s, intending from the outset to make films for the major Hollywood studios.⁴ Even though he was only in his twenties, he managed to complete two short documentaries and four

feature films for theatrical release by 1957.⁵ Kubrick had to gauge what kinds of films the majors would want to finance and/or distribute, and he settled on the following: two short documentaries about the everyday lives of interesting people (*Day of the Fight* and *The Flying Padre*, both 1951), two war films (*Fear and Desire*, 1953, and *Paths of Glory*, 1957) and two urban crime dramas (*Killer's Kiss*, 1955, and *The Killing*, 1956). Working closely with various collaborators, Kubrick initiated and developed these projects, then sought production financing (initially mostly derived from his own savings, from relatives, acquaintances and business partners; after his second feature mostly from the majors) and distribution deals. With the exception of the somewhat experimental debut feature *Fear and Desire* (which was released by the arthouse distributor Joseph Burstyn), all of these films were distributed by major studios (RKO and United Artists). None of them was particularly successful in commercial terms, but *The Killing* and *Paths of Glory* received considerable critical acclaim. In addition, from the outset of his film career Kubrick had used his press contacts to promote himself in interviews as an independent-minded, important new filmmaker who was personally involved in all aspects of film production.⁶ The reputation he built through this self-promotion, and also of course through his films, helped him gain production finance and distribution deals; it also became a cornerstone of the films' marketing and critical reception. In addition, wherever possible, Kubrick contributed ideas for the marketing of his films, as when he managed to get the well-known literary critic Mark Van Doren to write an endorsement for *Fear and Desire*, which was used in the film's advertising.⁷

- 7 Both *The Killing* and *Paths of Glory* were adaptations of novels. Kubrick had been able to afford the film rights for these novels because in 1955 he had formed a business partnership with the well-off producer James Harris. The Harris-Kubrick Pictures Corporation specialized in adaptations and invested increasing amounts of money in the purchase of film rights for a wide range of novels (most of them dealing with war, crime or problematic sexual relationships) in the late 1950 and early 1960s. Among these novels were two bestsellers published in the US in 1958, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Peter George's *Red Alert*. One of the key advantages of adapting bestsellers is, of course, that the success of the book has done a lot of the groundwork for the marketing of the film to be made from it; to some extent future film audiences can be assumed to be already familiar with, and interested in, the story's title and subject matter. This does not only help the distributor with advertising and publicizing the film to audiences, but it also helps independent producers in their negotiations with financiers and distributors. Kubrick and Harris nevertheless had difficulties making a deal for the production of *Lolita*, because they insisted on high levels of control over the project which the majors were not willing to grant. As a consequence of the delay of the *Lolita* project and also of the business relationship he had established with Kirk Douglas (who starred in *Paths of Glory* which Kubrick had made for his production company Bryna), Kubrick was willing to take over the direction of *Spartacus* (1960), after Douglas—who starred in the film and whose company produced it—had fired the original director Anthony Mann. Somewhat ironically, the huge commercial and critical success of this mega-budget film—which Kubrick had comparatively little control over—finally established him as an important player in Hollywood.
- 8 Even before *Spartacus* was released in October 1960, Harris-Kubrick Pictures finally managed to get financing (but not yet a distribution agreement) for *Lolita* through a deal with Seven Arts, an important telefilm distribution company which was entering

the field of movie production at that time.⁸ Seven Arts eventually released the film through MGM in June 1962, and agreed also to finance Harris-Kubrick Pictures' next project, which the company's annual report, in July 1962, described as "a satirical view of The Bomb."⁹ This project fit in well with Kubrick's preoccupation with military organizations and combat in his early work, escalating from the small scale attacks of four soldiers caught behind enemy lines in an unspecified war (*Fear and Desire*) and the stalemate of trench warfare on a section of the Franco-German front in World War I (*Paths of Glory*) to battles between rebellious slaves and the Roman army sweeping across the Roman empire (*Spartacus*)—and now the possible destruction of humankind in a nuclear war.

- 9 In an article he published in 1963—as part of the extensive pre-release publicity for *Dr. Strangelove*—Kubrick explained that he had long had a "great desire to do something about the nuclear nightmare," reading dozens of books about the subject and eventually—after a recommendation from a British nuclear strategist—choosing *Red Alert* as the main source for his film.¹⁰ However, during script development he realized that the adaptation of this "completely serious suspense story" would have to be a "nightmare comedy" with the unusually long title *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. The archival record tells a complex, indeed convoluted story about the genesis of this film.¹¹ Towards the end of 1961, Kubrick started working with Peter George on the (not yet comical) adaptation of *Red Alert*.¹² Apparently, it was widely known that Kubrick was interested in a nuclear story, because Eugene Burdick approached Harris-Kubrick Pictures in December 1961, sending them "[a] partially completed novel and outline of a novel tentatively entitled *Fail-Safe ...* for your consideration in connection with the potential purchase by you of the world-wide motion picture and allied rights."¹³ Already involved with *Red Alert*, Kubrick was not interested in this offer, but immediately recognized the similarities between *Fail-Safe* and *Red Alert* and hence the danger that someone else might pick up the film rights for *Fail-Safe* and produce a rival picture. In preparation of a possible plagiarism suit, Kubrick sent Burdick and his co-author Harvey Wheeler, via registered mail, a copy of *Red Alert*, "to which we own the exclusive world-wide motion picture and allied rights," as well as "other literary materials which we have heretofore prepared relative to our theatrical motion picture project."¹⁴ This protected Kubrick against later claims by Burdick and Wheeler that he had stolen their material, and also helped to establish the fact that the two authors had indeed been familiar with *Red Alert* and also with Kubrick's adaptation before they completed their novel, which in turn would help to prepare a plagiarism suit against them.
- 10 Kubrick's worry about competition from a film version of *Fail-Safe* probably contributed to the decision he and George took in March 1962 not to adapt *Red Alert* after all, but to develop a whole new story for their film, centering on a nuclear strategist who eventually came to be called Dr. Strangelove.¹⁵ Nevertheless, in May Kubrick strongly encouraged George to take legal action against Burdick and Wheeler, once "the actual proofs of the book are available to be read."¹⁶ Surprisingly, Kubrick reverted back to the adaptation of *Red Alert* in July and August, incorporating various aspects of the story of the nuclear strategist, not least his name and also the story's comical tone.¹⁷ At this point, it was certain that Kubrick's film would overlap significantly with *Fail-Safe*, and it is entirely possible that Kubrick was already planning to exploit this overlap and the likely law suit for publicity purposes (instead of asking his financial backers to neutralize the competition by buying the rights to the forthcoming novel). *Fail-Safe* was

first serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* and then published as a book in October 1962, and, helped perhaps by the Cuban Missile Crisis, became a bestseller.¹⁸ In the light of the novel's success, a film adaptation seemed unavoidable, and by November Kubrick and George were preparing a plagiarism suit.¹⁹ At the same time, they finally found a distributor when Columbia took over the project from Seven Arts.²⁰ Then, on 7 February 1963, *Variety* announced that the American Congress of Exhibitors (ACE) and the Entertainment Corp. of America (ECA), two recently formed production companies, had joined forces to adapt *Fail-Safe* and planned to have the film "ready for release in mid-August," thus coinciding with the release date Kubrick envisioned for *Dr. Strangelove*.²¹ A few days later, an ECA executive told the *Hollywood Reporter* that he "does not think *Fail-Safe* will conflict with Columbia's upcoming *Dr. Strangelove*, [and] pointed out that one is a serious story and the other a comedy treatment."²² However, the adjacent article in the *Hollywood Reporter* reported that Stanley Kubrick, Peter George and Columbia had just "sued to prevent [ECA] from proceeding with plans to film *Fail-Safe* ... charging copyright infringement and unfair competition." Indeed the suit aimed at preventing Burdick, Wheeler and their publishers as well as ECA from "marketing" (here meaning "publicizing") the novel and the production of a film based on it.²³ What is more, Kubrick et al were seeking damages "plus all profits from these unfair practices."²⁴

- 11 Kubrick explained the thinking behind these harsh measures in an interview with *Variety* published on 27 February 1963: Not knowing much—or indeed anything—about *Red Alert*, "people are asking me why I am copying that story [*Fail-Safe*] and not crediting it. That is why I must take action."²⁵ The article reported that, according to Kubrick, "even if ECA did not make a film version of *Fail-Safe* the presence of the book itself would harm his own personal reputation and possibly affect the public desire to see the film." As we saw at the beginning of this essay, Kubrick was in fact very happy about the publicity his dispute with ECA generated for his forthcoming film, and he took the success of *Fail-Safe* as a good omen for the box office potential of *Dr. Strangelove*. In the end, the plagiarism suit against ECA was settled out of court when Columbia took over the production of *Fail-Safe* from ECA in April 1963. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "[a] Columbia spokesman said that [the] company is no longer worried about plot similarities of *Fail-Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove* ... since the company now can control the release date of both."²⁶
- 12 In order to get Kubrick's agreement to the settlement, the distributor guaranteed that *Fail-Safe* would not be released "prior to the expiration of six ... months after the release ... of *Strangelove* or June 1 [1964], whichever date shall be later."²⁷ In this way, *Fail-Safe*—which was eventually released in October 1964 to considerable critical acclaim but without much financial success²⁸—could not damage the box office performance of Kubrick's film. Indeed, later on Kubrick thought that, as far as re-releases were concerned, *Fail-Safe* might actually help *Dr. Strangelove*. In April 1965, he wrote to Columbia, "I do have one rather bizarre idea ... What about a double bill ... with *Fail-Safe*? ... [I]t would be one of the most talked about combinations in film history."²⁹ While I am not sure whether this double bill ever came to pass, the developments I have reconstructed here demonstrate that a key objective of Kubrick's (and Columbia's) thinking about the marketing of *Dr. Strangelove* was to neutralize the commercial threat posed by a, in many ways, quite similar film.

- 13 One might have expected (like the ECA spokesman referred to above) that, in the light of the obvious generic differences between the two films (drama versus comedy), direct competition would not have been regarded as such a big issue. However, Kubrick always regarded *Dr. Strangelove* as a comedy *and* a suspense drama, and aimed to market it as both.

Marketing *Dr. Strangelove*: Publicity, Advertising and Theatrical Release

- 14 In the run-up to the much-publicized release of *Lolita* in June 1962, Harris-Kubrick Pictures issued a press release announcing their next project.³⁰ It quotes Stanley Kubrick who described the as yet untitled film as "a satirical comedy about the Bomb. ... We chose to tell our story this way as a reaction to the stupefying reverence with which the subject has been approached in the past." At this point, the fact that the film dealt with a serious subject—arguably *the* most serious subject of all—in a comical fashion was seen as the project's most distinctive feature.³¹ This was also emphasized in the comments Kubrick made to *New York Post* columnist Archer Winsten in July; Winsten reported, "For the past three years he has read everything he could find on nuclear warfare.... [*Dr. Strangelove*] will, in his own words, be a satirical comedy of Kafka-ish, nightmarish mood."³² After Columbia had taken over the project in November 1962, the distributor's first press release mentioned the film's title, its source novel and its main star (Peter Sellers), yet placed most emphasis on the filmmaker: "[Stanley Kubrick] will direct from his own screenplay ... [He has been] hailed as one of Hollywood's most brilliant young directors."³³ Thus, three key selling points were established early on: the important subject matter ("the Bomb"), its comical treatment and the "brilliant" director.
- 15 When, on 4 January 1963—three weeks before the start of principal photography—Kubrick wrote to Columbia to discuss their ideas for the first advertisement for the film, he addressed the issue of how to weigh serious subject matter and comical treatment. He restated the basic principles that had been agreed in a previous meeting with representatives of the distributor: "The subject matter and plot of the film is the leverage by which we shall win the sympathy and support of the vast majority of the world's press."³⁴ Referring to the recent success of nuclear-themed novels (*Fail-Safe* and *Seven Days in May*), he added: "we shall win the public in the same manner." Given the primacy of the nuclear subject, he reminded Columbia that "[w]e also settled that the comedy *flavor* of the film is precisely that – a flavor, and nothing more" (emphasis in the original). More so than laughter, "[t]he most direct emotional result of the film will be suspense, excitement, and fascination". He demanded that the advertisement should "have the same balance of tone as the film." In particular, "it is terribly important to remove the film from [the] 'a Peter Sellers picture' category," because that category would identify *Dr. Strangelove* too exclusively with the comedy genre. Although Kubrick does not mention it here, this emphasis on Sellers would also divert attention from the fact that *Dr. Strangelove* was, of course, "a Stanley Kubrick picture".
- 16 When the first *Dr. Strangelove* advertisement was published soon afterwards in *Variety*, *Time* and other places, *Variety* commented that, despite some discrepancies, one might

easily mistake its plot synopsis "as applying to *Fail-Safe*"; in other words, the film was presented more as a nuclear thriller than as a comedy.³⁵ The text of the ad read:

A nightmare comedy in which a psychotic Air Force General triggers an ingenious, foolproof and irrevocable scheme, unleashing his Wing of B-52 H-bombers to attack Russia. The President of the United States, unable to recall the aircraft, is forced to cooperate with the Soviet Premier in a bizarre attempt to save the world.³⁶

- 17 The generic term "comedy" is here qualified ("nightmare") in a way that suggests tension and fear rather than the levity and release of tension usually associated with laughter, while the adjective "bizarre" indicates that a suspenseful attempt "to save the world" can give rise to moments of comical detachment.
- 18 Two internal memos about possible magazine articles to be generated in conjunction with the film's release indicate that Kubrick and the marketing team (at his own company and at Columbia) were unsure about how to deal with the film's political implications. There was some anxiety that the film might be perceived as "un-American" due to its "audacity to joke about such official things as the Pentagon"; one marketing expert suggested in January 1963 that this could be countered by an "an article on how the old American custom of taking comic pokes at ourselves got lost as far as the screen is concerned during the McCarthy era," also by a piece celebrating the tradition of "social satire" in American cinema.³⁷ There was agreement that Kubrick himself should very much be at the heart of the publicity for the film, for example by getting someone to write an article about his distinctive approach to filmmaking; the above marketing expert wrote: "I would like with this picture to have what amounts to THE KUBRICK TOUCH emerge as a valid screen commodity" (along the lines, as he pointed out, of Lubitsch, DeMille and Hitchcock). Yet, the filmmaker's personal views on political measures to be taken about the nuclear stalemate should not be made explicit, "Stanley's theme is inspection for the sake of control of arms, not really for disarmament," and the best way "to air his views" was to have them expressed by a sympathetic magazine writer, rather than by Kubrick himself.³⁸ An earlier memo (from December 1962) also put a lot of emphasis both on comedy (with proposed article titles such as "Comedy As a Weapon of Social Criticism" and "Anatomy of a Comedy") and on the political implications of *Dr. Strangelove*: "I would suggest that [peace campaigner] Bertrand Russell is approached for possible articles."³⁹ This suggestion was crossed out, most probably by Kubrick himself, presumably because he feared that the impact of the film would be weakened if it was tied too closely to a particular political stance.⁴⁰
- 19 Before principal photography on the film started towards the end of January, there had thus already been an extensive discussion about the key selling points to be highlighted in advertisements and publicity, notably the nuclear theme, comedy and Kubrick. It is perhaps somewhat surprising that the memos quoted above also introduced sex into the marketing equation. Since the film's screenplay included appearances by a scantily clad female character (in the form of pictures in a *Playboy* like magazine and in person), both memos suggested that the actress playing that character should actually be featured in *Playboy* and other men's magazines. Sex would indeed become an important component of the film's presentation to the public.
- 20 From February 1963 onwards, Columbia and Kubrick's company courted the press. They issued more press releases, which contained extensive quotations from Kubrick as well as background information about the film.⁴¹ In February and March, Kubrick gave interviews for articles in *Variety* and *Queen* magazine, and he then published a piece

under his own name in *Films and Filming* in June.⁴² In April, journalists were invited to the set (at Shepperton Studios in London), so as to entice them to write articles about the film's production.⁴³ Some journalists were even provided with copies of the script.⁴⁴ In the press releases and articles published up to June 1963, Kubrick clearly is the focus of attention, with many comments on his total control of the production process; the fact that other people work on the film as well is acknowledged but they are presented (and present themselves in interview statements) as working *for*, rather than *with*, Kubrick. In these texts, the filmmaker is given considerable space to outline his motivations for making the film (which was to deal with the most important issue of the day), to comment on the extensive research he had done on the subject of nuclear war, to express his personal belief—shared by many experts—that there was a good chance that nuclear war would actually happen (most likely by accident) in the not too distant future, and to explain the comical approach he took to the subject (it was the only way fully to confront the absurdity and terrible danger of the present situation). Both Kubrick's own statements and the surrounding text (which often included references to *Red Alert*) tended to focus on the serious subject matter, with comedy being seen as an innovative, insightful and, it was hoped, impactful way to relate this subject matter to the audience.

- 21 There was, then, a considerable publicity campaign for *Dr. Strangelove* in the first half of 1963. As we saw at the beginning of this essay, Kubrick had initially been hoping for a mid-August release, but in March he had accepted that it would take Columbia until the end of September to get ready. Production delays then made an even later release date necessary. The original shooting schedule from January 1963 expected principal photography (excluding special effects shots) to be completed on 26 April, yet the shoot took a whole month longer, and effects shots were done as late as June.⁴⁵ During that month, the suggested release date was moved twice, first to October and then even later.⁴⁶ By October 1963, two endings were being discussed, the first included a huge pie fight in the war room, the other was the shorter scene that was eventually used in the film.⁴⁷ On 1 November, a telegram announced that, after consultation with various people,⁴⁸ Kubrick had finally arrived at a decision: "Pie sequence out."⁴⁹ In mid-November, there was a plan to premiere the film in a London cinema on 12 December, yet it took extra negotiation time to get an "A" (rather than the highly restrictive "X") certificate from the British Board of Film Censors; the certificate was only issued on 9 January 1964.⁵⁰ The American Production Code Administration also issued its Seal of Approval as late as 2 January 1964.⁵¹ A memo from 18 December 1963 had advised Columbia "publicity managers" in various countries that "[i]n the United States the film is opening in 300 key situations between January 22-29, and the local efforts are being backed up by a huge national television campaign of approximately \$ 300,000."⁵² Yet even this information did not turn out to be correct, because the actual release date in the US and the UK was 30 January 1964.⁵³ Final changes to *Dr. Strangelove* were only implemented during the first week of its release; under pressure from the US Air Force, Columbia decided to ship a "silent Roll-up 'Disclaimer' Prologue" (a printed text starting "It is the stated position of the US Air Force") which was to be added to all prints of the film.⁵⁴
- 22 When it became clear that the film's release would be delayed considerably, Columbia and Kubrick prepared for a second round of publicity from November 1963 onwards. Once again, printed materials (including a voluminous press book) were made available, and Kubrick gave a series of interviews.⁵⁵ While the articles based on

interviews with Kubrick covered the same ground as the ones from spring 1963 (the main addition being more detailed information about the film itself), Columbia's press book, which was addressed both to the press and to exhibitors, included a wealth of new material. Among this material were numerous quotations from positive reviews of the film in the American press.⁵⁶ The most important addition, however, were articles about the film's stars (both Peter Sellers and George C. Scott were credited above the title) and supporting actors. This took into account the fact that, in general, press coverage of Hollywood has always been more focused on stars than on directors.

- 23 The film's sexual dimension also featured prominently in its advertisements. The press book displayed the designs for a wide range of ads to be placed in newspapers and magazines. The two main designs revolved around a series of six questions. In one case, these were superimposed on the drawing of a bomber fleet; the nuclear-themed first question ("Why did US H-Bombers attack Russia?") was here followed by the highly sexualized question "Why did Dr. Strangelove want ten women for each men?"⁵⁷ The other design used six panels, each containing a publicity still of the film's character that is referred to in the accompanying question, starting with a picture of Sterling Hayden playing General Ripper and the question "Why did General Jack D. Ripper unleash his H-Bombers to attack Russia?" The second and fourth panel featured Tracy Reed. In one only her naked legs are seen, next to George C. Scott, "Where was General 'Buck' Turgidson when the Hot-Line rang?" The fifth panel shows her on the phone in revealing clothes, "Why did Miss 'Foreign Affairs' phone the Pentagon War Room?" A "press book insert" featured "an alternate campaign ... [which] now has been tested around the country and has proven tremendously successful." The main design for this campaign featured a scantily clad Tracy Reed surrounded by smaller pictures of General Ripper, Dr. Strangelove and others, accompanied by the question about Dr. Strangelove's demand of ten women for each man, or the exclamation: "Ten women for each man!" The tagline used in these ads—"the hot-line suspense comedy" or "the *wild* hot-line suspense comedy" (*my emphasis*)—also had vaguely sexual undertones ("wild," "hot"), yet, of course, as with the ads in general, the emphasis was on the fact that the film dealt with a serious subject in a both suspenseful and comical fashion. Kubrick's name is not very prominent in the ads; it is inserted, in comparatively small print, between the name of the two stars and the film's title, and also appears, again in small print, twice at the bottom of the ad.
- 24 The press book also listed the various trailers available for *Dr. Strangelove* ranging from a 10 second "teaser trailer" for television to a theatrical trailer over three minutes long, and describes them as "[p]robably the wildest ever devised for a motion picture, utilizing a system of quick cuts in all three creative areas—film, sound and dialogue—with a number of different voices". Indeed, most of the shots last for only a fraction of a second, flashing a word (or part of a word) or providing a glimpse of a scene from the film.⁵⁸ The words shown in rapid succession on screen add up to the long title of the film and to questions similar to those used in the ads. Serious moments from the film are used as well as comical ones, but the frantically rhythmic editing in combination with childish sounding music clearly emphasize comedy rather than suspense. It is also worth noting that a bikini-clad Tracy Reed makes several appearances while the last three words of the film's title ("love the bomb") are spoken by a (comically exaggerated) sexy female voice. An effort is made to highlight Kubrick's name at the very beginning of the trailer both through printed words ("A Stanley Kubrick Production") and pictures of the director being flashed on the screen, but overall the

actors are of course much more prominent. Thus, the ads and trailers did not maintain the strong focus of the earlier publicity on Kubrick and the serious subject matter he was dealing with, and instead fore-grounded stars, comedy and indeed sex.

Conclusion

- 25 In January 1963, after several years of research on the subject of nuclear war and over a year of script development, Stanley Kubrick finally started principal photography on *Dr. Strangelove*. From the beginnings of his film career in the early 1950s, Kubrick - usually working closely with various collaborators, notably James Harris - had been involved in all aspects of film production, from finding source material and finance to making deals with distributors (with one exception all of these deals were with major Hollywood studios). In the process he had learnt to promote himself, the projects he had in development and the films he completed to financiers, distributors, the press and cinema audiences. *Dr. Strangelove* was the second of his films financed by Seven Arts, a major new force in film production, but it was sold to Columbia in November 1962. Following on from an initial press release about his new film project earlier in 1962, after November 1962 Kubrick and the marketing team he employed, in collaboration with Columbia, embarked on the preparation and execution of a complex marketing campaign. While the film was shot from January to May 1963 (with special effects work lasting until June), print advertisements were prepared and released, press releases were issued, journalists and editors were courted (with a view of getting them to write and publish articles about the film), and Kubrick gave interviews to the press. The main focus of this campaign was Kubrick himself, the extraordinary filmmaker who had taken on the biggest issue of the day and had decided that only a comical treatment could do it justice. Because of this focus, Kubrick and his team were particularly worried about a rival project entitled *Fail-Safe*, which also dealt with the subject of nuclear war (albeit in a non-comical fashion). From the moment he had learnt about this project (in December 1961) Kubrick appears to have made preparations for a possible plagiarism suit which would eliminate this competition. After several twists and turns, this objective was achieved when Columbia took over *Fail-Safe* in April 1963 and assured Kubrick that it would be released long after *Dr. Strangelove*.
- 26 Columbia also accommodated Kubrick's wish, expressed as early as March 1963, for a wide release of *Dr. Strangelove* supported by a national TV advertising campaign. However, the “heat” that Kubrick felt had been generated by the very public “dispute” about *Fail-Safe* early in 1963, had long dissipated when—after substantial production delays and several last-minute changes—*Dr. Strangelove* was finally released in the US and the UK at the end of January 1964. In the run-up to this delayed release, there had been a second round, starting in November 1963, of courting the press, giving interviews, handing out material for the press and exhibitors, and paying for advertisements. All of this was accompanied by a wide range of trailers being shown on television and in cinemas. In contrast to the first flourishing of the marketing campaign in the early months of 1963, the emphasis—especially of the ads and trailers—was now more on comedy and sex than on suspense and serious subject matter, on stars rather than on the filmmaker.

- 27 How successful was this marketing strategy? While there is no space here to offer a detailed discussion of the press discourse about *Dr. Strangelove*, we can note that in line with the overall objective of Kubrick and his marketing team (which was to generate interest in the film), there were a lot of articles about the film in the American press from spring 1963 onwards.⁵⁹ The main focus of these articles, and also of the many reviews published in January and February 1964, was on Kubrick, on the film's serious and topical subject matter, and on its unusual, comedic approach to this subject matter—once again, this is perfectly in line with the themes highlighted in the film's marketing from spring 1963 onwards.⁶⁰ At the same time, a considerable amount of the writing about *Dr. Strangelove* at the beginning of 1964 focused on Sellers (who played three different parts in the film) and also on Tracy Reed, who plays a bikini-clad secretary (a publicity still showing her in this outfit found wide usage), which reflected the particular emphasis on stars, comedy and sex in the marketing materials from autumn 1963 onwards.⁶¹
- 28 The film received praise from the majority of critics, several declaring it to be one of the best American movies of recent years and an important contribution to the public debate about nuclear weapons; however, it also was the target of political attacks from some film critics and other commentators, which in turn provoked a vigorous defense of the film by its supporters.⁶² In addition, the film was a success at the box office; by the end of 1964 it had earned \$ 4.15 million in rentals in the US, and was listed by *Variety* as the fourteenth highest grossing film of the year.⁶³
- 29 Judging by the film's critical and commercial success, the marketing campaign can be said to have worked well. However, it is, of course, by no means the only, or even the main, reason for the film's success. After all, although they are primed by publicity and advertising, film reviewers and audiences ultimately respond to the qualities of the film itself, not to the qualities of posters, trailers etc. Marketing can attract attention to the film, but it cannot make viewers like it. This is an important caveat, which is easily forgotten in marketing studies. No matter how much effort distributors and filmmakers like Stanley Kubrick put into the marketing of their films, their main financial and creative investments are focused on film *production*. Thus, marketing research needs to be modest in the claims it makes about the contribution of marketing to a film's success or failure.
- 30 A final point concerns the national dimension of the marketing campaign for *Dr. Strangelove*. One has to be cautious about the importance of Columbia's willingness to invest money in television advertising and advertisements reaching a nation-wide audience (through the TV networks or national magazines). After all, the massive press book for the film was full of advice about what exhibitors could and should do *locally*, including the placing of ads and trailers in local media. In addition, Kubrick and Columbia organized a large number of preview screenings, which an internal memo identified as one of the main reasons for the film's box office performance: "The fantastic success of *Dr. Strangelove* in England and America is largely due to the intensive screening program the picture received many weeks in advance of opening."⁶⁴ This program had initially been scheduled for November 1963, but, judging by the letters Kubrick received in response to these previews, the vast majority of the screenings took place from January onwards.⁶⁵ The screenings were invitation-only events, involving the press, opinion leaders, prominent members of the various communities in which they were organized and indeed anyone who might spread the

word, the idea being that the people seeing the film this way would talk to others about it and thus prepare the way for its commercial release: "we want to penetrate to the greatest possible depth and get word-of-mouth going. Hold one for leading doctors, one for leading lawyers, one for cab drivers, barbers and beauticians."⁶⁶ This raises the possibility that "heat" was generated at the local rather than the national level, by members of local communities rather than by mass media. Without further research, however, it is difficult to know to what extent this was indeed the case.

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NOTES

1. Stanley Kubrick to Rube Jackter, March 7, 1963, SK/11/9/27 1/2, Stanley Kubrick Archive (SKA), University of the Arts London. For an example of the "heat" generated by the *Fail-Safe* suit, see David E. Scherman, "Everybody Blows Up!", *Life*, March 8, 1963, unpaginated clipping in *Dr. Strangelove* clippings file, Performing Arts Research Center, New York Public Library (NYPL) at Lincoln Center, New York. Kubrick had advance notice of this publication, which appeared the day after he wrote the above letter. Also see "Coming: The End of the World," *Newsweek*, March 4, 1963, unpaginated clipping, SK/11/6/71, SKA.

2. In total, the novel sold in excess of 2 million copies, as did Nevil Shute's post-apocalyptic novel *On the Beach* (1957) and Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey's *Seven Days in May* (1962), which deals with an attempted coup in the US caused by the military's dissatisfaction with a nuclear disarmament treaty; Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, *80 Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1975* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1977), 15-19.

3. For details on this law suit, see below.

4. This paragraph and the next one are based on: Peter Krämer, "The Limits of Autonomy: Stanley Kubrick, Hollywood and Independent Filmmaking, 1950-53," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, ed. Yannis Tzioumaki, Claire Molloy and Geoff King (London: Routledge, 2013), 153-64; Peter Krämer, "The Making of an Independent Filmmaker: Stanley Kubrick and Post-War Hollywood," unpublished paper presented at "American Independent Cinema: Past, Present and Future," Liverpool, May 2009; Vincent LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), Chs. 7-11.

5. Kubrick was also involved in three other film projects (for television and for non-theatrical exhibition).

6. See, for example, Phil M. Daly, "Along the Rialto," *Film Daily*, December 14, 1950, 4; Thomas M. Pryor, "Kubrick Plans 3rd Film," *Motion Picture Daily*, December 19, 1950, 2; "A 22-Year-Old Producer Makes Real Films for Fun and Profit," *New York Journal-American*, December 27, 1950, 16; "Young Man with Ideas and a Camera," *New York Times*, January 14, 1951, X5; "Producer," *New York Times*, June 29, 1952, X3; Irene Thirer, "Kubrick Another Boy Film Producer," *New York Post*, March 27, 1953, 58; "Prodigies," *People Today*, April 8, 1953, 58-60; Laura Lee, "More Action, Less Talking in Movies," *Sunday Bulletin* (Philadelphia), July 26, 1953, 8, 10.

7. See Krämer, "The Limits of Autonomy," 160.

8. "Seven Arts Plans to Back 15 Films," *New York Times*, September 13, 1960, unpaginated clipping in "Seven Arts Productions" clippings file, NYPL; cp. Seven Arts Productions Limited, "Annual Report Year Ended January 31, 1962," published in July 1962, John Huston Papers, file 1693, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), Beverly Hills. Cp. LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick*, 192, 202, 218.

9. Seven Arts Productions Limited, "Annual Report Year Ended January 31, 1962," 10. Cp. LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick*, 228-9. According to LoBrutto, it was around this time that Harris and Kubrick decided to dissolve their partnership and go their separate ways. Rather than merely releasing *Dr. Strangelove* through a major studio, Seven Arts sold the project to Columbia in November 1962; see W. L. G. LeBrun (Columbia) to Ron Phipps, 5 November 1962, SK/11/9/19 1/4, SKA. Seven Arts is not listed in the film's credits, nor is James Harris.
10. Stanley Kubrick, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Cinema," *Films and Filming*, June 1963: 12.
11. Cp. Peter Krämer, "'The Greatest Mass Murderer Since Adolf Hitler': Nuclear War and the Nazi Past in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)," in *Dramatising Disaster: Character, Event, Representation*, ed. Christine Cornea and Rhys Owain Thomas (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013), 120-35.
12. See material contained in folder SK/11/1/13, SKA.
13. Eugene Burdick to Louis Blau, Harris-Kubrick Pictures Corporation, 26 December 1961, SK/11/9/14, SKA.
14. Kubrick to Burdick and Wheeler, January 19, 1962, SK/11/1/13, SKA.
15. Cp. Krämer, "'The Greatest Mass Murderer Since Adolf Hitler'".
16. Kubrick to George, May 4, 1962, SK/11/9/12, SKA.
17. Cp. Krämer, "'The Greatest Mass Murderer Since Adolf Hitler'".
18. "Claim *Fail-Safe* Plagiarized Brit *2 Hours to Doom*," *Variety*, February 12, 1963, 1, 4.
19. Tom Boardman to Kubrick, 22 November 1962, SK/11/9/12, SKA; and "Statement by Peter George regarding legal action for plagiarism against authors and publishers of the novel *Fail-Safe*," 3 January 1963, SK/11/9/84, SKA.
20. W. L. G. LeBrun (Columbia) to Ron Phipps, 5 November 1962, SK/11/9/19 1/4, SKA.
21. "ACE Opens Purse, Helps First ECA Film, *Fail-Safe*," *Variety*, 7 February 1963, 1, 4. Cp. an earlier announcement: William Werneth, "*Fail-Safe* To Be ECA 'Image-Making' Project," *Motion Picture Daily*, January 14, 1963, 1, 4.
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25. Jack Piler, "Stanley Kubrick's Point of View," *Variety*, February 27, 1963, unpaginated clipping, Stanley Kubrick fiche, AMPAS.
26. "Television Industries Halts Production Plans," *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 1963, 3.
27. Columbia to Louis Blau, undated, SK/11/8/1, SKA.
28. Cp. the reviews for *Fail-Safe* in the Collection of Newspaper Clippings of Moving Picture Criticism, MFL+ Collection, NYPL; according to Lawrence Cohn, "All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety*, May 10, 1993, C76-C108, the film did not even return \$3 million in rentals in the US.
29. Stanley Kubrick to Leo Jaffe, 13 April 1965, SK/11/9/35, SKA.
30. "*Lolita* Producer-Director Team Announces New Project," draft of press release, undated (yet content indicates it is from before the release of *Lolita*), SK/11/6/71, SKA.
31. As mentioned earlier, Kubrick nevertheless temporarily reverted back to the idea of doing a straightforward adaptation of *Red Alert*, which indicates that, in his thinking, the subject matter was the main point of the film.
32. Archer Winsten, "Rages and Outrages," *New York Post*, July 2, 1962, 59.
33. "Stanley Kubrick signed multiple picture deal with Columbia. Initial Production will star Peter Sellers," Columbia press release, no date (but most probably from November 1962), SK/11/6/71, SKA.
34. Kubrick to Jonas Rosenfield Jr., Columbia Pictures, January 4, 1963, SK/11/9/19, SKA.
35. "Stanley Kubrick's Point of View".
36. Quoted in *ibid*. For a selection of actual ads from a range of newspapers and magazines, see SK/11/6/61-2, SKA; also see a sheet listing ads and articles from early 1963 in SK/11/6/71, SKA.

37. Nat Weiss to Lee Minoff, January 30, 1963, SK/11/9/27 2/2, SKA.
38. It is not clear which writer Nat Weiss had in mind, but it is certainly the case that in the run-up to the film's release and during the first few months of its release, *Dr. Strangelove* was widely discussed as an important contribution to the public debate about nuclear strategy. I have explored this in Krämer, "The Greatest Mass Murderer Since Adolf Hitler".
39. Bob Ferguson and Hortense Schorr, "Proposed Magazine Program for *Dr. Strangelove*," December 7, 1962, SK/11/9/27 2/2, SKA.
40. Indeed, throughout the pre-release publicity and the film's release, Kubrick stayed clear of pronouncements on what ought to be done about the nuclear stalemate, and maintained his distance from peace campaigners. In response to a letter from SANE (the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy), for example, Kubrick wrote in July 1964: "Though I obviously share most of their views and objectives (the film speaks for that) I have avoided any identification with Peace Groups because I believe this film and my future films will have more impact coming from an uncommitted source, not easily labeled as a Peace Group effort." Kubrick's handwritten note on letter from Donald Keys (SANE) to Kubrick, July 9, 1964, SK/11/9/97 2/3, SKA.
41. See, for example *Dr. Strangelove* "Fact Sheet," no date (the content suggests that it is from spring 1963), SK/11/1/18, SKA; undated press release (probably from February or March 1963), SK/11/6/61-2, SKA.
42. "Stanley Kubrick's Point of View"; Elaine Dundy, "Dr. Strangelove and Mr. Kubrick," *Queen*, March 13, 1963, unpaginated reprint in press material contained in SK/11/5/10, SKA; Kubrick, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Cinema". Also see David Lewin, "The Fingers of Oblivion," *Daily Express* (London), March 14, 1963, unpaginated clipping, SK/11/6/61-2, SKA.
43. Max Lerner, "Folly on Film," *New York Post*, April 16, 1963, 33; Leon Minoff, "'Nerve Center' for a Nuclear Nightmare," *New York Times*, April 21, 1963; "Not With a Bang but a Simper," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 28, 1963; these last two are unpaginated clippings in *Dr. Strangelove* clippings file, NYPL.
44. Lee Minoff to Robert Musel (UPI London), 4 March 1963, SK/11/9/29 1/2, SKA; Elaine Dundy, "Dr. Strangelove and Mr. Kubrick".
45. "Shooting Schedule No. 1," January 15, 1963, and Victor Lyndon, "Schedule Status," May 27, 1963, both SK/11/2/2, SKA.
46. Victor Lyndon to Al Schwartz (Columbia), 13 June 1963, and W. L. G. LeBrun (Columbia) to Schwartz, 26 June 1963, both SK/11/3/7, SKA.
47. Lee Hodgson to Kubrick, October 29, 1963, SK/11/9/68 1/2, SKA.
48. Cp. documents in SK/11/9/68 1/2, SKA.
49. Lee Minoff to Robin Bean, *Films and Filming*, November 1, 1963, SK/11/9/18 3/4, SKA.
50. LeBrun to Lyndon, November 15, 1963, SK/11/9/19 1/4, SKA; Kubrick to Lyndon, December 12, 1963, SK/11/9/79, SKA; LeBrun to Lyndon, January 10, 1964, SK/11/9/19 1/4, SKA. Cp. LoBrutto, 245
51. Production Code Administration, "Analysis of Film Content Form," January 2, 1964, PCA Collection, AMPAS.
52. Memo, no author, December 18, 1963, SK/11/9/83, SKA.
53. The first reviews in the general press (rather than the trade press) came out in the US and the UK on January 29-30, 1964. See SK/11/6/16 for British reviews, and the *Dr. Strangelove* clippings file, NYPL, for American reviews.
54. Al Schwartz, Columbia, to "branch managers," January 29, 1964, SK/11/4/3, SKA. Another change had taken place in December, when, in the wake of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November, it had been decided to delete a dialogue reference to Dallas by overdubbing it "Vegas"; Ray Lovejoy to Lyndon, December 6, 1963, SK/11/9/79, SKA.
55. Material for the press: envelope filled with various materials, probably from January 1964, SK/11/5/10, SKA; "Columbia Press Book," probably from February 1964, *ZAN-*T8 microfiche,

Reel 238, No. 1069, NYPL. Kubrick interviews quoted in: Lyn Tornabene, "The Bomb and Stanley Kubrick," *Cosmopolitan*, November 1963, 14-16; Lyn Tornabene, "Contradicting the Hollywood Image," *Saturday Review*, December 28, 1963, 19-21; Eugene Archer, "How to Learn to Love World Destruction," *New York Times*, January 26, 1964, X13; Stanley Price, "Hot Line on Dr. Strangelove," *Town*, January 1964, unpaginated reprint contained in the above press envelope; "Direct Hit," *Newsweek*, February 3, 1964, 79-80.

56. The presence of these quotations indicates that the press book was put together *after* the film's release in late January 1964.

57. I have discussed the importance of Dr. Strangelove's climactic speech, which this question refers to, in "'The Greatest Mass Murderer Since Adolf Hitler'".

58. The full theatrical trailer can be found, for example, on the 40th anniversary DVD edition of *Dr. Strangelove*. There is a significant stylistic shift after the first 90 seconds (towards a much slower cutting rate), which, together with the appearance of the Columbia logo at this point, suggests that the first half of this long trailer was also shown separately.

59. For early articles about the film's production and content, see, for example, Dundy, "Dr. Strangelove and Mr. Kubrick," and Max Lerner, "Folly on Film," *New York Post*, April 16, 1963, 33. Other prerelease articles include Tornabene, "The Bomb and Stanley Kubrick," and Tornabene, "Contradicting the Hollywood Image".

60. For a more detailed discussion of the film's reception, see Krämer, "'The Greatest Mass Murderer Since Adolf Hitler'".

61. See, for example, Bob Thomas, "New Sellers Picture Finds Fun in H-Bomb," *Newark Evening News*, January 29, 1964, unpaginated clipping, *Dr. Strangelove* clippings file, NYPL. The emphasis on the two British actors was, as could be expected, particularly pronounced in the UK press (Sellers was a huge star in this country, and Tracy Reed was the daughter of well-known film director Carol Reed). See the many press clippings contained in SK/11/6/16, SKA.

62. For details, see Krämer, "'The Greatest Mass Murderer Since Adolf Hitler'".

63. "Big Rental Pictures of 1964," *Variety*, January 13, 1965, 3. With re-releases, the film would eventually earn \$5 million in rentals; Cohn, "All-Time Film Rental Champs," C84.

64. Memo, no author, no date (it has to be from after January 1964), SK/11/9/83, SKA.

65. "November Screening Schedule," no date, SK/11/9/33, SKA; for letters to Kubrick, see the three folders of SK/11/7/17, SKA. The only letter from November 1963 in this collection is from Joseph Losey; Losey to Kubrick, November 14, 1963, SK/11/7/17 3/3, SKA.

66. Roger Caras to Bill Lewis, January 2, 1964, SK/11/9/19, SKA.

ABSTRACTS

Making extensive use of archival sources, most notably from the Stanley Kubrick Archive at the University of the Arts London, this article examines the production history and marketing of *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and the Love the Bomb* (1964), a film based on Peter George's 1958 novel *Red Alert*. The focus is on the complex relationship between Kubrick and the people behind a rival project, Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler's nuclear thriller *Fail-Safe* which was published in 1962 and eventually released as a film a few months after *Dr. Strangelove* in 1964. The article also outlines two major efforts to promote Kubrick's forthcoming film through press releases and a press book, interviews, contacts with editors and journalists, paid

advertisements as well as theatrical and television trailers. The initial promotional campaign took place in the first half of 1963 and foregrounded the film's director, its serious, topical theme and the unusual, comical treatment of that theme. The second campaign, which started in November 1963 and was necessitated by delays in the film's production and release, placed more emphasis than the first one on comedy; it also foregrounded sex and the film's stars, especially Peter Sellers.

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