

## A “Fluid” Truism: *Dr. Strangelove*’s Confrontation of the Malleability of Knowledge and Truth

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Power serves, at its most basic, as a fundamental force that shapes the world we live in. Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) aptly captures the play between power and resistance under the lens of the Cold War. Unlike previous examinations of *Dr. Strangelove*, this essay is founded on Foucault’s power/truth regime in which reality is bent through the dispersal or confinement of knowledge and choice. The ability of power to mold subjective truths is explored in an attempt to distinguish between true truths and ideological manipulation not only during the Cold War era, but in modern life.

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The outbreak of war has consistently galvanized Hollywood retellings of truth, gore, and resolution in warfare. Since its advent, film has functioned as a means of mass storytelling based on the intimacies of human experience. In the aftermath of World War I and World War II, war became an integral theme of cinema in its portraiture of life. The ease with which filmmakers have dramatized pre-existing militant conflicts draws from the universality of war in society. The increased willingness to leave violent warfare uncensored in film as well as a transition from more group-oriented stories to an individualistic focus is a transition that parallels society’s budding awareness of the lasting detriments of war on both combatants and noncombatants. As is evidenced by the increasingly personal narratives of war films, war and its effects are a deft shaping force in human lives. The movies that best capture this connection emerged during the Cold War era and are consistently the most in-touch with the simultaneous human disgust and draw towards war.

The Cold War is unique among wars as it was only partially tangible and heavily psychological. Thus, an influx of rhetorical tools was used to depict war in film from roughly 1945–1990 in a unique portraiture of the deeper human psyche. Movies like *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), which focused on fear of threat and mental vulnerability, parallel the main themes that defined both the cinematic period and social climate during the Cold War. However, Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), is unique even among Cold War films for its use of black humor and heavy-handed irony as a lens to present Armageddon. Under the umbrella of macabre comedy, *Dr. Strangelove* utilizes unconventional modes of film rhetoric to show the malleable boundaries of knowledge, truth, and choice.

Previous examinations of *Dr. Strangelove* have focused on similar themes, all under the parasol of power. However, the focus on power has been on its oppressive potential in terms of politics (Dhanapala; Lindley; Maland), war (Bizony; Boyer; Henriksen; Stillman), and societal institutions (Foertsch; Goodman and Saltman; Sinaikin; Weinstein and Wild; Wolfe), rather than on the nature of power itself. Many of the interpretations base their definitions of power on Steven Lukes’ “three-dimensional power” model. Lukes’ contribution to the study of power lies in his recognition that power is culturally multi-dimensional, that the relationship between power and democracy is a paradox, and that power is coercive. In following Lukes’ model, many previous examinations of *Dr. Strangelove* have failed to understand power as anything other than domineering and out of the realm of institutional politics. This is a flaw, as power need not be coercive and is not necessarily

constrained to politics. When power is viewed strictly through disciplinary lenses, the majority being political science and film studies, the exploration of truth and its relation to power in the film is lost.

These previous methods of analyzing the film have been confined to power as an oppressive force utilized by institutions, which has led to a singular disciplinary approach and a biased idea of power (Biesecker 351–52). In order to understand power outside the guise of institutions, academic disciplines ought to be abandoned, as the subjects themselves are “an integral part of the discursive ordering and physical management wielded by power” (Foucault, “Discipline and Punish” 1473). In other words, disciplines are tainted in their knowledge because what each discipline embraces as truth is a truth created by a preexistent power. Thus to remove this existent bias in disciplinary approaches, a definition of power that stretches in applicability to every facet of society must be used. Michel Foucault, a French postmodernist thinker, specializes in the exploration of power as it is tied to knowledge and subjectivity. He defines power as “supervising,” “norm enforcing,” and “disciplinary” (“Discipline and Punish” 1472). Power is action. It is not an institution or a person: all such institutions and persons are shaped by the influence of power (“Discipline and Punish” 1474). Power then is not what is good or bad, but what is normal. As power is removed from morality through the creation of its own status quo, it is allowed to enact retribution without question. Punishment is accepted by the ruled society as a byproduct of power’s existence (“Discipline and Punish” 1498). Power’s parallel is resistance, which is defined by power to be what is abnormal and is consequently punished for its abnormality (“Discipline and Punish” 1495). This creates a necessary action of judgment in which right/wrong, truth/lies are established under the determinations of power. Foucault calls this relationship a power/truth regime, where power creates subjective truths from the normality on which power is based. This produces a power-yielding power system in which a population is “subjected as pupils to the discipline that, later, as instructors, they would themselves impose” from the learned norms and truths of the power/truth regime (“Discipline and Punish” 1492). *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) embodies Foucault’s power/truth regime throughout the film in its venture for truth based on incomplete knowledge as a byproduct of the power, rather than a simple institutional skirmish. The alterations truth undergoes throughout the film marks moments of power fluctuations in a cyclical struggle between power and resistance, which shifts the definition of truth dependent on the temporary reigning power. This consistent imbalance marks power’s evolution in the power/truth regime from which the film’s truth changes from peace, to drastic defensive action in the face of a nonexistent threat, to a truth of violence and death.

The knowledge, truth, and choices of the characters can be used to track the transformation of the power/truth regime. These three themes occur cyclically throughout the film in the three main settings: the Pentagon “War Room,” the Air Force base, and the deployed B–90 Stingray bomber. Each setting reflects different levels of knowledge, off of which the characters must decide the truth and then make a choice. Although titled a comedy and riddled with irony, *Dr. Strangelove* presents a blunter version of reality that is anything but comic. With characters based on real military personnel and the fictional Russian doomsday device which paralleled a Cold War Russian defense project, the film version of reality was not as far from the truth as it initially appeared (Bizony 67–8). Through the use of a sexualized version of the halo effect, enthymeme, destructiveness of cycles, and appeals to ethos, *Dr. Strangelove* is a highly charged rhetorical film whose rhetoric does not convince its viewers, but instead concerns them.

The film opens with a disclaimer of the vulnerabilities of the Air Force and a male narrator who claims the necessary precaution of 24/7 airborne surveillance over Russia. The camera then moves from a wide shot of a B–90 bomber to its interior where the pilot, Major Kong, absently munches on a sandwich and stares into an edition of *Playboy*, which depicts a woman lying on a

rug, barely covered by a January 1963 issue of *Foreign Affairs* (Stillman 492). This shot both successfully degrades woman to an object before a single female character is introduced and also serves to frame the extraordinary under the guise of monotony. Similarly, the radio officer's disinterest when flipping through the "Top Secret" code notebook makes the reading of a code, which calls for nuclear war on Russia, all the more surprising and unbelievable. Despite their initial disbelief, the bomber occupants trust blindly, and in the decision to trust their orders, they are back-set with heavy trumpet and drum music and a baritone male accompaniment whose only line consists of a single repeated "ha." This music is replayed in every subsequent scene with the B-90 bomber crew, who after decoding the transmission and turning off their radio in accordance with protocol, become knowledge isolated. The repetition of militant and mocking music only reinforces this stagnation, as nothing for the crew changes after General Jack Ripper's order alters their perception of reality. The subsequent knowledge isolation in the face of a new reality changes the crew's collective perception of the truth. In believing a truth exclusive to the occupants of the bomber, their identities are altered by their curious exclusion from the truth of the power/truth discourse that occurs in the War Room and Air Base throughout the remainder of the film.

The bomber crew immediately and unknowingly becomes the main source of conflict in the film, as the general who sent the order they follow does not have backing from the United States government. The power/truth discourse that had existed up to this point is altered by General Ripper's meshing of provocative violent action in order to gain peace as a truth. This marks the beginning of a movement of resistance, which is portrayed as simultaneously gallant and tragic. The heroic music which heralds every B-90 bomber scene evidences attempts for dramatic protagonist action, yet there is a conspicuous absence of character development in the B-90 crew. This lack allows for the audience to both project themselves onto the crew, and ironically, also to identify these characters as pawns in General Ripper's resistance. The crew's ignorance of following false orders and dedication to what they know becomes the sole source of good protagonist action, despite the fact that their success is tantamount to Armageddon. In essence, the bomber crew is absolved from wrong because they had no way of knowing to the contrary. While on the surface, this reduces the crew to a troop of renegade cowboys, they are portrayed not as traitors but as heroes in their oblivion. Kubrick's infusion of ethos into an undeveloped crew influences the audience to bend their perception of truth in order to compensate for the crew's lack of knowledge.

This is the first instance where truth becomes arbitrary based on knowledge. It also places the crew of the bomber in the lowest position of power as they have no information, and thus have a limited potentiality for choices. Phallic and sexual imagery is repeatedly used to frame the vulnerability of the crew in their information isolation. A lingering camera shot of the heroes' plane being refueled by a larger plane and zoomed-in views of the fuel tube connecting to the B-90 bomber is explicitly sexualized, despite the occurrence being between two machines. The three minutes spent on this shot are unnecessary to the plot of the film, and thus must be examined as a rhetorical means to dehumanize the worth of the crew and minimize their eventual end. The sexualizing of military equipment in the physical absence of women creates a parallel between commodities and the female sex, and by patriarchal association, with femininity. Thus, women and femininity forcibly assume the basest status in the male-directed power/truth regime. The lack of women in the film except those portrayed as objects leads to complete knowledge isolation and simultaneously eliminates any opportunity for female choice. The all-male bomber crew mirrors this feminine vulnerability in their isolation, marked strategically through sexual imagery. The classification of sex and its associated gender becomes an underlying power dynamic, which helps to regulate the current power regime, a regime which strategically favors masculine men to the detriment of the rest. This underlying structure remains constant even throughout the flux of the power/truth regime in the

film and becomes a means by which strong, informed men are disassociated from the ignorant and the weak.

The information desert in which Major Kong and his fellows find themselves has tragic results as Major Kong continues to make loyal decisions to the Air Force based off of the same false information. Kong's inability to rectify the information lapse culminates in his eventual death, as he bull rides a nuclear missile into a Russian target, whooping and waving his cowboy hat. Kong's death itself, riding a phallic shaped bomb whose tip is labeled "Hi THERE" in white chalk, is a blatant use of sexual rhetoric to frame an unfortunate hero, and thus minimizes his death. This can even be taken further, for after the bomb's explosion, the camera cuts back to the War Room of the Pentagon and, other than marking that the doomsday device has been triggered, does not mention Kong or the other soldiers in the B-90 bomber for the remainder of the film. The absence of recognition insinuates that the act of the explosion itself is the only significant occurrence, and the causalities of the act are irrelevant. Under the guise of sexual rhetoric, the minimization of Kong's death is less due to a desire to spare the audience gore, than the more probable explanation that Kong's death did not matter, but like women and sex in this war patriarchy, his death was a means to an end.

The irony of ignorance in a branch that was earlier in the film acclaimed as invulnerable continues at the Air Force Base, headed by General Ripper. General Ripper, the issuer of B-90's orders, was based off of the amalgamation of two real Cold War generals, Curtis LeMay and Tommy Powers (Bizony 67). LeMay was the leader of the bombing campaign that defeated Japan at the end of World War II, and he commanded B-52 nuclear-armed bombers until 1963. Aggressive to the point of reckless, LeMay organized provocative spy plane flights over Russia in the hopes of provoking a response, saying "if we can get the Russian Bear in a trap, let's take his leg right off . . . let's take his testicles too" (Bizony 67). The mixture of hypersexual awareness is reflected in Ripper, whose main fear of the communists throughout the film is their poisoning of his "essence" via his "precious bodily fluids" (specifically mentioned in minutes 23:14, 29:37, 46:42, 59:19, 57:14, and 57:24). LeMay's second in command, Tommy Powers, was infamous for his cold disregard of causalities, which is embodied in Ripper's willing sacrifice of thousands of lives due to a gut feeling of impure communist influence. Powers' spirit is similarly echoed in General Buck Turgidson, Ripper's immediate superior, who urges action despite potential casualties: "Mr. President, I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed. But I do say no more than 10, 20 million killed, tops . . . Ah, depending on the breaks" (Bizony 67-8).

Ripper's base is the exact opposite of Ripper himself. The first camera shot of the base focuses on a sign which reads, "Peace is Our Profession." This sign reappears multiple times, each in scenes where peace and freedom are being eradicated. In the first base scene, General Ripper commands Captain Mandrake to issue code "R" and impound all private radios in case of alternate enemy relay, with the rhetorically significant halo of the Air Force base's motto. The halo, a symbolic method-tying image to an audience's understanding of identity, is positioned behind Mandrake as he takes Ripper's call (Heinrichs 243). It is noteworthy that Jack's first order when attempting a false attack is to constrict the knowledge flow to those under his command. As the sole filter through which the base receives information, Ripper places himself in a position of absolute power within the base. The General then shuts down the base, ordering his soldiers to 1) Trust no one, 2) Kill anything within 200 yards of the perimeter, and 3) Shoot first, ask questions later. In redefining the militant code of his base, Ripper is changing the primary identities of both his soldiers and himself, creating a new truth of aggression, backed by Ripper's paranoid knowledge. In attempting to replace what had been accepted as truth under the "Peace is Our Profession" halo, the General becomes a force of resistance in the truth/power discourse. The dichotomy of Ripper's new truths barked out of an intercom and a second view of a "Peace is Our Profession"

sign while soldiers march past carrying heavy artillery, emphasizes the irony of Ripper's plan to enact violent action against Russia despite tentative peace.

The power Ripper amassed by restricting information to his own men is now cemented when he cuts off information to his federal superiors by shutting down the base. He is in control of not only the base but also maintains control over his military superiors by keeping them in the dark. Ripper's information monarchy is interrupted by his own second in command, Captain Mandrake, whose discovery of a private radio leads him to the realization that Russia could not have attacked or the news would be broadcasting on all stations. When Mandrake confronts Ripper, the General physically locks him into his office to prevent the Captain from acting on this knowledge. Literally locked in, at gunpoint, and unable to choose otherwise, Mandrake listens to Ripper explain that in the absence of choice, there is only one option (22:50). This creates a cycle of knowledge and choice, from which comes truth, a warp of Foucault's truth/power regime. In comparison to the B-90 crew, Mandrake and Ripper have only a slight knowledge advantage in knowing Russia has not attacked. Yet the "truth" the General understands is based on an imaginary knowledge and incorrect choices. Thus, truth and knowledge become inextricably linked but increasingly arbitrary. Ripper's false truth, accurately called madness, ensures mutually assured destruction (MAD), an ironic twist within itself of the horrific consequences of action based on false truth.

After denying Mandrake his freedom of choice, the General is surprisingly forthcoming and attempts to justify himself, modifying history and knowledge to support his own actions. Recalling former French politician George Clemenceau's statement that war is too important to be left to generals, Ripper dates it and says: "When he said that, 50 years ago, he might have been right. But today, war is too important to be left to politicians. They have neither the time, the training, nor the inclination for strategic thought" (23:14). Ripper's logic is a clear example of enthymeme, where he jumps from seemingly only vaguely related commonplace ideas to form complex arguments to support his crippling fear of "Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion and the international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids" (Heinrichs 132; 23:20). Mandrake's initial shock and attempt to reason with Ripper is unsuccessful, as the General's madness renders him incapable of listening to more-ordered logic. Mandrake himself seems to go mad in his few communications with Jack: When Jack asks about Mandrake's own war experience, Mandrake admits to being tortured by the Japanese. However, he confesses "I don't think they wanted me to talk, really, they were just having a bit of fun. The strange thing is, they make such bloody good cameras..." (59:41). This train of thought is almost unintelligible in its randomness, yet it seems to be one of the few things Mandrake says which Ripper understands. When we are assured later that Mandrake has not indeed gone mad, his cyclical speech is understood to be a method of tailored communication with Ripper. As Ripper's train of thought became increasingly monomaniacal, Mandrake engages in logic jumping as well, mimicking Ripper's rhetoric in one last attempt to break through the madness.

Ripper is also the only character whom is shown writing, a rhetorical technique vital to convincing. Although Ripper's speech-based rhetoric becomes increasingly difficult to understand, a sample of his writing is much more concise. A maze of connected phrases repeats over and over: "peace on earth" and "purity of essence." While this writing helps us to better understand Ripper's mindset, it also enables Mandrake to discover the code that will call off the B-90 Bombers, which is successful in stopping every bomber but Kong and his crew.

Ripper's speeches are impossible to analyze thoroughly without the lens of sexual rhetoric. His frequent use of the word "penetration," the conspicuous cigar hanging from his lips, and his repeated portrayal of women as lustful creatures who deprive men of their "essence" throughout the film can be viewed as a means to enhance his masculinity through phallic references. Ripper's realization of the Communist plot to poison his "essence" during the "physical act of love" provides sup-

port that Ripper's sexuality is inherently tied to his false knowledge and thus, his madness (57:24). Ripper describes his realization as accompanied by a "profound sense of fatigue, a feeling of emptiness . . . a loss of essence" from which he deduced that "a foreign substance is introduced to our precious bodily fluids without the *knowledge* of the individual, certainly without any *choice* [emphasis added]" (56:19). The cyclical transition from knowledge, to choice, and then to truth, reoccurs constantly in Ripper's self-validation of his own instability as he tries to alter the paradigm of the existent power/truth regime.

This same cycle reoccurs both literally and rhetorically in the Pentagon War Room. Seated in a large circle, various members of the government and military gather to discuss the unauthorized enacting of "Plan R." The main dialogue occurs between President Merkin Muffley, General Buck Turgidson, and Dr. Strangelove himself. As they learn about Russia's doomsday device and the inevitability of its triggering if Kong's bomber succeeds in dropping a missile, the room becomes polarized as each character becomes more blunt about his true opinion in the shadow of daunting calamity. As the lines between political correctness and truth become increasingly blurred, its malleability parallels the increasing ductility of the power/truth regime in the film, and with it, an increased need for punishment. For power in a power/truth regime to remain a potent force over a population, its truths must remain accepted by a majority. As punishment is amoral when used by power, the propensity for violence grows as resistance grows. This is illustrated in the War Room as the American leaders' discussion diverges from what is moral to what is in their best interests. While none of these characters are embodiments of power, they are all under its influence and so their behavior is indicative of a larger cultural force. In each of these characters, there is a progression of knowledge, and with the increased knowledge, an increased capacity for violence and malleable truth.

President Muffley is perhaps as feminine as his crude allegorical name "muffle" suggests. In a film dominated by men and the glorification of the male "essence," Muffley is an ignorant fool, with a weak stomach for big decisions, regardless of holding a respected position in the American government. The president's speeches consist only of political correctness and uncertainty; he neither persuades anyone nor decides anything in the War Room. Thus, in spite of his historically powerful position, Muffley does not actually hold any power because of his constant resistance to do anything. This excludes the president from playing any effectual part in the power/truth discourse and reduces him to the equivalent of a woman in the underlying power structure. Whether this can be treated as an absence of rhetoric or simply extreme ineffectuality, Muffley is undeniably compliant, the ideal womanly characterization in this patriarchy. His passivism verges on ridiculous in his communication with the Russian Prime Minister, Dimitri Kissoff. In his phone call to Kissoff to tell him nuclear warheads are headed for Russia, Muffley avoids news with small talk culminating in a nervous laugh:

Fine, I can hear you now, Dmitri...Clear and plain and coming through fine...I'm coming through fine, too, eh?...Good, then...well, then, as you say, we're both coming through fine...Good...Well, it's good that you're fine and...and I'm fine...I agree with you, it's great to be fine...a-ha-ha-ha-ha. (42:17)

This behavior is identical to the negative stereotype of women as reacting in the same way by avoiding a subject they dislike to confront. Muffley's discomfort continues, as he is forced to confront a violent situation for which he is both woefully unknowledgeable about and seemingly unwilling to learn the more unpleasant details.

This information gap and dislike of gore is made up for in General Turgidson, who oscillates between positions of violent action and political correctness. Other than General Ripper, Turgidson is the most highly sexualized male character of the film, and like Ripper is frequently shown with the phallic symbolism of a cigar. He is also the only man to appear in a scene with a real woman.

His emphasized sexuality simultaneously coincides with his draw towards violent action. Turgidson repeatedly insists on holding “off judgment on” Ripper’s insanity “until all the facts are in,” which hints at a reluctance to condemn Ripper’s actions, potentially because Turgidson partially supports them. Turgidson’s fluctuations between what is considered right and what is considered violent become blurred as the resistance to the existent power/truth regime, embodied in Ripper and Dr. Strangelove, creates a new truth in which violence and justice are synonymous. The dichotomy of his political correctness and violent inclinations are made most evident when he is asked whether Major Kong and his crew can survive plane damage and unknowingly trigger nuclear Armageddon by dropping a bomb. Turgidson ponders, “If the pilot’s good, see, I mean if he’s reeally sharp, he can barrel that baby in so low...oh you oughta see it sometime. It’s a sight. A big plane like a ‘52...varrrroom! Its jet exhaust...frying chickens in the barnyard!” (120:30). After exclaiming this, Turgidson claps his hand over his mouth, remembering too late that success of the pilots is exactly what the room is working against. Turgidson’s only restraint from encouraging increased warfare is political acceptance; otherwise, his rhetoric verges on the violent and uncontrolled.

Turgidson’s hunger for success through war appears mild indeed however, in comparison to Dr. Strangelove himself. A former Nazi and apparent paraplegic with a mysteriously gloved right hand, Dr. Strangelove acts as a rhetorical omniscient in the film whose insatiable hunger for violence and purity of essence gives him a mobility of mind that defies the physical mobility of his War Room companions. Unlike the disjointed enthymeme employed by the majority of the cast, Strangelove uses cogent arguments, which follow nothing but logical paths, and yet leads to horrific conclusions he convinces his companions to accept as truths (Heinrichs 132). Strangelove, despite the threat of death, seems to glorify in the idea of a doomsday device, which can be triggered without human intervention. Muffley balks at the idea of a machine being triggered automatically and impossible to untrigger, yet his suddenly humanitarian stance only displays his ignorance of undoable decisions being an inherent part of death and war. Admittedly, while he and Turgidson are disturbed by the idea of worldwide death, Strangelove supports the mass finality of the doomsday machine:

Mr. President, it is not only possible, it is essential. That is the whole idea of this machine, you know. Deterrence is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy...the FEAR to attack. And so, because of the automated and irrevocable decision-making process which rules out human meddling, the Doomsday machine is terrifying and simple to understand...and completely credible and convincing. (52:30)

As Strangelove revels in the undoable, his rhetoric similarly revels in death. The doctor’s relatively few lines are haunting as they reveal a new truth of violence to which even the President of the United States bows. Yet as the members of the room give in, one by one, to Strangelove’s plans, the world begins to cave. As Strangelove yells “Sir! I have a plan!” he stands up from his wheelchair, crying “Mein Führer! I can walk!” and the world explodes. Kubrick’s decision to end his black comedy with a Nazi standing, leading a group of American leaders down an undoable road of death is dark in a non-comedic way. Through rhetoric alone, Strangelove was able to persuade powerful Americans of the necessity for violence by manipulating their knowledge, altering logical truths, and acting as an opportunist in the desperation of the Cold War.

*Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) presents a compelling, albeit confusing scenario in which rhetoric is used to manipulate knowledge, truth, and choice in a cyclical pattern of Foucauldian power/truth regime that spirals into mass destruction. While we no longer fear a Soviet invasion or worry about being poisoned by Nazi ideology, we are

still subject to tendentious communications of knowledge that conflict more frequently than not. How is it that we, as people who value life and choice, can find true truths, and how will we know when we have found them?

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