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

Sebastian Dümling

When I moved from a small town in Holstein to a *Mittelstadt* (middle-sized city) in Lower Saxony in 2003 to study Cultural Anthropology, this new town, Göttingen, seemed like a metropolis to me. One of the reasons why Göttingen impressed me even more than, for instance, Hamburg, was the existence of several art-house cinemas in the town. I did not even know whether there was such a thing in Hamburg. In any case, these art-house cinemas were for me the evidence par excellence that I was now in a metropolis, even in a university town. After all, for me the logical conclusion was that towns where strange old black and white movies with subtitles are shown must be university towns.

Here in Göttingen, I also encountered an unfamiliar and strange social world. A world where I encountered social figures, such as students, lecturers, professors, who behaved very strangely. The strangest thing about them was that most of them were convinced that this city was the center of the world. My first immersion in this world triggered two feelings: I felt distinctly strange, yet I desperately wanted to be part of it. Somehow, I knew that this was a world I could *love*, precisely because it was so *strange* to me. Remarkably, one of the first movies I saw in the art-house cinema to perform a *doing studentness* was about exactly that: about strange love ... and about science.

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. What a strange title for a movie! Actually, Stanley Kubrick was no friend of cryptic titles: *Spartacus* is about Spartacus, *2001: A Space Odyssey* is about a space odyssey in 2001, *Barry*

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Lyndon is about Barry Lyndon, *Full Metal Jacket* is about full metal jacket bullets in warfare. *A Clockwork Orange* may be an exception, but it does not count because the title is taken from Antony Burgess' 1962 novel. *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) also had a template, Peter George's 1958 novel, but the novel's title was *Red Alert*. Thus, Kubrick chose his title deliberately.

Many things about the *Dr. Strangelove* title seem cryptic, starting with the doctor's strange name. In addition, one wonders: Who is the *I* who is learning here? Does the *I* mean the strange doctor? Does it mean us, the audience? Is it that something a movie character says? Does the *I* mean the West, the East, humankind in general (after all, on the plot level, the movie is about the Cold War exploding)? And finally, one asks, is it possible at all to love bombs?

But the title is not as cryptic as it seems. If one reads it more closely, it indicates programmatically what we are about to see. Moreover, the phrase already fulfills the minimal conditions of a narrative: a status changes through time, and this change is somehow connected with a conflict (of a moral, ethical, or economic nature). In other words, every narrative is about the encounter of the familiar with the strange.

The title makes it unmistakably clear that we are dealing with a love story, not a war movie. The term *love* appears twice in it. More specifically, it is a movie about a *strange love*. But what does *strange* mean? The word *strange* describes something out of place and completely alien. Merriam-Webster explains that the term's earliest documented occurrence signifies someone or something "not native to or naturally belonging in a place: of external origin, kind, or character." A fish in the desert is strange. A man on the moon is strange. Finding oneself in a city that has an art-house cinema is strange.

So, the movie is about the fact that a strange situation exists and that someone is no longer afraid of this strangeness but—on the contrary—loves it. Reading it this way, the viewers could expect a very humane narrative program: it is probably also a form of strange love when a Jewish priest on the brink of the desert embraces sick outcasts and declares his unconditional love for them—very strange.

As in every narrative, the main plot point in *Dr. Strangelove* is about boundaries being crossed (Lotman 1977). However, these boundaries are initially not ideological, political, or scientific ones. The movie's core is about crossing the *boundaries of love* or, more precisely, the *boundaries of the lovable*: Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* deals with the desire for the forbidden, a desire that is, of course, much stronger than the desire for the permitted. This, too, seems to me to be something like a model situation of narrativity—formulated somewhat stiltedly: the cultural heat that narrations release arises when originally homogeneous, autonomous sign classes—the structuralists speak of *isotopes*—heterogenize, hybridize and, like a bomb, explode.

These title announcements are already confirmed in the movie's first scene: we see a military jet in the air being supplied with fuel by a tanker plane through a hose. But how does Kubrick picture this refueling? Here, in perhaps one of the most beautiful but also strangest love scenes in movie history, we watch two planes

making love to each other. However, the two lovers have difficulties to get together 'physically.' Then, from offstage, musical advice is heard on how they—the planes—can finally unite: the score plays Otis Reading's "Try a little Tenderness."

Later, at the end of the movie, we see the outcome of this love: the womb of the B-52 bomber gives birth to the atomic bomb on which Major King Kong, the bomber pilot, races to earth and, thus, we can guess, sets the so-called doomsday machine in motion (the German subtitle translates this with the remarkable word "*Weltvernichtungsmaschine*"). Kubrick shows the end of the world as the result of an *amour fou*. The whole movie contains countless references to the fact that it is about such a fatal *amour fou*. The alarm code used to drop the atomic bomb, for example, is "R for Romeo"—an ironic reference to another couple of lovers who crossed borders, triggering fatal consequences. But it is not just the tanker and the bomber who are intertwined in strange love: the US president speaks in caring paternal love to his Soviet colleague, General Buck Turgidson, who, as his name suggests—*turgid* is colloquial for sexually aroused—, cannot control his affects, must control the military, and a revenant of Jack the Ripper commands a military base. All those very close, very intimate pairings should not be but are.

Finally, there is the top military advisor and inventor of the Doomsday Machine, Dr. Strangelove. He is a German *Kraut* in the war room, the control center of American military power. The audience even learns that the name "Dr. Strangelove" is the translation of the much stranger German name "Dr. Merkwürdig-Liebe." This refers to another strange love affair: the Americans, who defeated German fascism militarily, are now ensnaring the Germans militarily. The same year Kubrick made his movie, Bob Dylan sang something very similar in his song "With God on our side": "The Second World War / Came to an end / We forgave the Germans / And then we were friends."

The historical dimension expressed in the figure of the German scientist Dr. Merkwürdig-Liebe is obvious. Many German scientists involved in National Socialism were welcomed with open arms in the US, most prominently Werner von Braun, who collaborated on the V2 and then planned the launch vehicles for the US moon mission. Speaking of von Braun, V2, and strange love: a few years after Kubrick's movie was released, Thomas Pynchon published his giant of a novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, on the relationship between the military, German fascism, and the strange sexual desires that produced both. Among other stranger incidents, the novel tells of a GI in World War II who has an erection each time just before the V2 hits London.

However, Kubrick is not concerned here with the politics of memory. Instead, the figure of Dr. Strangelove joins the ranks of other Kubrick figures whose boundless desire always implies destruction. While *Lolita*, *A Clockwork Orange*, or *The Shining* are about the libidinous transgression of morality, decency, and reason, *Dr. Strangelove* takes up a motif that has been part of the core of popular storytelling since early in the nineteenth century: Dr. Strangelove is a *mad scientist* whose boundless desire for knowledge brings destruction (Frizzoni 2004). The character

of the mad scientist has permeated popular culture at least since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). When the institutionalization of modern universities is complete, and the dream of an omnipotent science is being dreamed of in many places in Europe, Frankenstein is an ideal figure that popular culture uses to work off the growing unease with instrumental reason. Just as a side note, Göttingen also plays a role in this imagination. In Thomas Pynchon's novel *Against the Day* (2006), a conspiratorial community of anarchist mathematicians meets in Göttingen's Prinzenstraße to develop a formula that will unhinge the world order. Pynchon's hero, who learns of this Göttingen conspiracy, incidentally, leaves his US home with a song on his lips, the "Göttingen Rag"—which is too beautiful not to quote:

> Get in-to, your trav'ling coat,
> Leave Girl-y, a good-bye note,
> Then hop-on, the very-next boat,
> To Ger-manee–
> Those craz-y, pro-fessors there,
> They don't ev-er cut their hair,
> But do they, have brains to spare–
> You wait and see!

But back to *Dr. Strangelove*. Essentially, the mad scientist topos is about a form of reason that creates knowledge for the sole purpose of creating this knowledge, as an end in itself. In the process, ethical questions are subordinated to rational totality—if they are relevant at all. The absolute control of nature, Horkheimer and Adorno later argued, had in this way itself become a fetish, an irrational myth, which was then elevated to the status of official ideology in National Socialism.

In this respect, it is understandable that after World War II, the mad scientist experienced a new accentuation. Now, the *mad Nazi scientist* appeared in movies such as *The Yesterday Machine*, *They Saved Hitler's Brain*, *The Flesh Eaters*, or *Dr. Strangelove*. The mad Nazi scientist differs from the classical mad scientist in two respects: First, the Biblical dictum "For they know not what they do," which applies to Frankenstein, does not apply to the Nazi scientist. On the one hand, the cinematic Nazi scientists know that they are creating destruction, that they are building "*Weltvernichtungsmaschinen*." On the other hand, the consequences of their mad research are absolute: Frankenstein, after all, merely created a monster that spread fear in a limited locality. The mad Nazi scientists, on the other hand, produce works threatening to destroy the whole world. Therefore, unlike the classical mad scientists, they are ultimately evil.

To return to the beginning of my reading, *Dr. Strangelove* is about a love that is not allowed to be, about loving what is unlovable. This aporia of love can be grasped more precisely. In my understanding, the movie is about the love of humanity that destroys humanity, or, more precisely, about the love of humanity that produces evil. After all, this is the irony of the Doomsday Machine: to save humanity from its destruction, one invents the machine that destroys humanity. This was anything

but Kubrick's invention. In actual history, this paradox was called *brinkmanship*, politics on the brink of the abyss. According to Soviet and US game theorists, the nuclear first strike was to become impossible because neither party would have survived this scenario.

Kubrick identified the crucial flaw in this indeed captivating logic: the flaw is human. The cynical and at the same time humanistic lesson of most of Kubrick movies, from *Lolita* to *Eyes Wide Shut*, is that it is human defectiveness, its lack of controllability, its love of things that destroy it that makes a human into a human in the first place. *Dr. Strangelove*, then, like most Kubrick movies, can be understood as a tragic love story since Kubrick always made movies about fish that love nothing more than to swim in the desert. To put it in his own words: he doesn't believe in heaven or hell, Kubrick once said. But he does believe in people tearing up hell when they try to enter heaven.

One does not have to share this view—and neither did I when I first saw the movie in the art-house cinema in Göttingen. However, what the movie shows is the foundation on which I stand as a researcher of narrativity: namely, that narrations attack beliefs of purity and authenticity, imaginarily excluding strangeness from their worlds, beliefs, which, in the best case, produce boredom, and in the worst case, politics of annihilation. This seems to me to be precisely where the "essential power and beauty of narrative" (Bendix 1992: 103) lies: narratives transport us to worlds where fishes lie in deserts or where you can love bombs—without having to enter a desert, without having to love a bomb.

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