

'Dr. Strangelove' and the New Holocaust Films

By Michael Gallagher
 New York (NC) — The other night on television I saw Stanley Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove" for the first time in quite a while, and I noted several instructive differences in tone and focus in this black comedy classic of the 60s and the two recent nuclear Armageddon productions, "Testament" and "The Day After."

The basic plot of "Strangelove" concerns a deranged Air Force general in command of a Strategic Air Command wing who orders his B-52s to launch an attack on Soviet targets and then seals his base off from the rest of the world and calmly informs the Joint Chiefs of exactly what he's done.

He hopes to present them with such a fait accompli — no one can recall the bombers save by a code word that only he knows — that the president will have no choice but to hit the Russians with everything we have or else suffer devastating retaliation.

The only woman who appears in the film is the mistress of another general, a young woman who has sex and only that on her mind. So much so that George C. Scott (as the general) has to reassure her over the phone from the Pentagon War Room of his fervent devotion and his desire to return to her quickly even as world obliteration draws nigh.

If sex is a joke in "Strangelove," its treatment in "The Day After" and "Testament" reminds me of one of the best of the wartime cartoons of Bill Mauldin that featured the two classic G.I.'s, the unshaven, forever bedraggled Willie and Joe. A fuzzy cheeked recruit has obviously just told a dirty joke, and Willie and Joe and the rest of the squad are eying him sternly. Willie gives voice to the general indignation

Neediest Cases

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better life for herself. She has been unable to find a job and has been hospitalized with a heart problem.

76 A was let go from his job when he developed a serious heart problem. His wife was able to support them with her earnings, but now she is unable to work because of a serious illness. Without an income, A has not been able to take all his necessary medications.

77 O is a young divorced mother of two. Now that her children are in school, she has managed to find two part time jobs, but neither pays very well.

78 S always had a good job and has been able to provide adequately for his wife and children. Due to recent cutbacks, he is now out of work and unable to pay his bills with his unemployment checks.

79 L has had seasonal employment in a rural area. After a lengthy lay off he was recently able to find a fulltime job in a near by town. He is now catching up on the past bills for his family.

80 P is on public assistance and is attending college so she will be able to provide more adequately for herself and her three children. A fire recently struck their home, causing extensive smoke damage.

with this immortal line, "Listen, kid, sex is a sacred subject around here."

So it is in "The Day After" and in "Testament," and it's always linked with love.

In the first, just before the missiles strike, a young farm couple sneak upstairs to make love at midday, taking advantage of their young children's absorption with television. The night before Armageddon, a middle-aged couple retire to their bedroom shutting out with their love the fearful peril that is taking form in the world outside. An engaged couple, moreover, make love fervently the night before their wedding day, unaware that anything can be amiss in a world that seems to them so bright with promise.

But the most affecting example occurs in "Testament." There Jane Alexander, as a mother whose beloved husband has perished, tries to explain to her 13-year-old daughter how much she loved him and what making love means, a scene that gains in poignancy by our realization that the daughter will never know the experience for herself.

Love, marriage, family — none of which figures in "Strangelove" — are important in these films precisely because those who made them had a much more vivid realization than those who made "Strangelove"

that what they were depicting fictionally was an all too imminent possibility.

Not that satire can't be serious. In its way it can be as serious as tragedy. If "Strangelove" indeed pushed its "nothing sacred" theme to full throttle, it would be quite a different picture.

In fact in one respect you might make a case that "Dr. Strangelove" is the more serious film since, unlike "Testament" and "The Day After," both doggedly non-political, Kubrick's picture dares to make accusations.

We can't believe that "Testament's" noble mother and "The Day After's" dedicated doctor (Jason Robards) shared in any way responsibility for what happened.

"Strangelove" does point the finger, but upon closer inspection, the courage involved is more apparent than real. The focus of responsibility rests upon three quite atypical military men, caricatures pure and simple: the deranged general, his bellicose superior (Scott), who urges the president to follow through, and the blindly gung-ho pilot (Chill Wills), who descends to target astride a bomb, waving his cowboy hat and whooping it up.

The B-52s' targets moreover are military ones.

The president is a nice guy, and everybody else, save the absurd trio, is presented as working feverishly to head off disaster.

The reality was and is still worse. In 1964, just as now, population centers were targeted. In 1964, just as now, the real danger was not what some eccentrics might do, but rather the situation itself which people like the nice-guy president were willing to sit still for.

"Strangelove," with its

flippant, naughty-boy airs simply because it doesn't (the madman general is fully perceive the horror with "Jack D. Ripper"), is daring which it deals.

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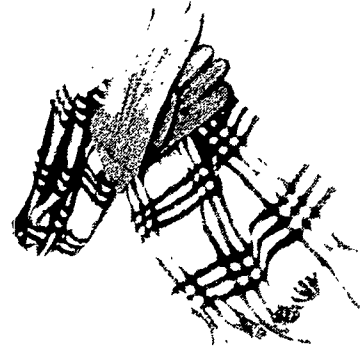
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