



## The Domsday Body, or Dr. Strangelove as Disabled Cyborg<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes *Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Kubrick 1964) as a 20<sup>th</sup> Century apocalypse in which human-machine mixture provides the central dualism. Unlike ancient apocalypses, however, the film does not attribute good or evil to either pole of its central dualism. Instead, the conflicting desires for purity, General Ripper's for organic and the Soviet's for mechanical, drive the action to global thermonuclear war. Using cyborg, disability, and monster theory, the paper situates the character Dr. Strangelove as the film's central monster, for he embodies human-machine hybridity and other elements abjected from the liberal-democratic ideal.

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[1] Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* has been analyzed as a secular nuclear apocalypse, and indeed it is.<sup>2</sup> Secular apocalypses tend to focus on global destruction, but their appropriation of other apocalyptic elements varies. In his discussion of secular apocalypticism in mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century American pop culture, Stephen O'Leary proposes four categories of apocalyptic film: the monster film, the alien invasion film, the post-nuclear survival film, and the realistic film. He places *Dr. Strangelove* in the fourth category, as a satirical variation:

By reinflecting the stock images of nuclear apocalypse with ironic associations of sex and romance, Kubrick demystified the machineries of nuclear war and exposed the paradoxical absurdity of the balance of terror. (O'Leary 414)

Recently, *New York Times* reporter Fred Kaplan noted that *Dr. Strangelove* was far more realistic than audiences thought at the time. No matter where the film falls on some realistic to absurd continuum, the mundane means and results of its nuclear *eschaton* nevertheless contain two significant features of religious apocalypses: a cosmic dualism articulated by purity concerns, and a subtle representation of an apocalyptic monster. On a superficial level, the cosmic dualism of the Cold War's two competing superpowers, both with universalizing ambitions, transposes the dualism of ancient apocalypticism's elect and damned. However, the American-Soviet opposition does not bring the thermonuclear curtain down; Kubrick shows little interest in the dualisms of East-West, Totalitarian-Liberal, or Communist-Capitalist, preferring to depict both his American and Russian characters as limited bunglers, whether venal, or well-intentioned but ineffectual. The real locus of cosmic dualism can be found in the opposition of human and machine, or rather in their destructive union.<sup>3</sup> At the human-machine boundary, the film's central dualism and its monster meet: as the rage to purify the human-machine mixture drives the action to thermonuclear holocaust, the monstrous instantiation of this mixture appears in the image of Dr. Strangelove himself.

### **Purity and Plot**

[2] Unlike ancient apocalypses, which depict a definitive sorting of categories at the ideal *eschaton*, *Dr. Strangelove's* dystopic *eschaton* arises from two conflicting quests for purity.

Here, the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas can be helpful. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas argues that pollution is such because it falls outside of and threatens a system of order:

There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. . . .

Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment. (2)

That is, objects, actions, and persons are pure or polluted only in terms of a symbolic structure that defines order.

. . . ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (5)

*Dr. Strangelove* contains both overt and subtle purity schemes. On the surface level, both Americans and Soviets attempt to defend and propagate political economies that mutually define the other as the danger to purity. Yet Kubrick undercuts this operating assumption of Cold War film audiences, and instead suggests discursively and visually that the human-machine boundary is the locus of order and disorder.

[3] For his part, General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) conceives of Communism as an international machine that threatens organic purity. After he orders his B-52 wing to attack Soviet targets, his obsession with purity becomes explicit. In a series of conversations with British exchange officer Captain Mandrake (Peter Sellers), Ripper discloses his understanding of the Communist threat:

I can no longer sit back and allow Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion, and the International Communist Conspiracy to sap and impurify all our precious bodily fluids. (*Dr. Strangelove*)

In General Ripper, there is no American Manifest Destiny, no capitalist or democratic apologetics, not even a love of war for war's sake. He launches the strike to preserve organic purity. (I will deal with the role of sexual impotence below.) Water, to Ripper, is the source of life, essential to earthly and human identity; it "replenish[es] our precious bodily fluids." In contrast to purely organic human beings, Communists do not drink water. Instead, they drink vodka and contaminate water with fluoride: "A foreign substance is introduced into our precious bodily fluids without the knowledge of the individual." His concern for purity centers on the organic integrity of the individual body; the impure threat introduces an inorganic element that bypasses individual autonomy.

[4] Ripper's strategic thinking is consistent with this obsession. He exploits plan provisions that amount to purity assurances: Burpelson Air Force Base is sealed off not just from physical attack, but from external radio transmissions, and the B-52s in the attack wing set their radio receiver with a code prefix that will reject all transmissions not preceded by the code.

Mechanical messages are thus categorized as pure or impure, depending on their source, and secret codes regulate their transmission across boundaries. These details show the deep blending of realism and symbolism in *Dr. Strangelove*. Coded communication may seem to be simply strategic, but the significance of code itself taps an ancient motif in religious apocalypses, which often include veiled messages decipherable only to insiders. Through code, Ripper sets up purity distinctions that cut across the binary opposition of Cold War powers, isolating a true elect from

mere Americans. This elect will show their worthiness by the decisions they make in the wake of Ripper's command. He believes that when the American authorities discover that they cannot recall the planes, they will then enhance his attack with a massive first strike. That is, the fulfillment of Ripper's plan depends not on unstoppable machinery, but on an elect of individual human decision-makers who discern his intentions and command their machinery accordingly. Nor is Ripper wrong. In the War Room, General Turgidson (George C. Scott) proposes precisely this response. Under pressure from President Muffley (Peter Sellers), Turgidson abandons the first strike proposal and, with the following diagnosis, defends the existence of the plan: "I admit the human element seems to have failed us here." The proximate cause of the fatal turn of events, then, is the human half of the human-machine hybrid.

[5] Within the film's premises about military strategy, the orders of a fluid-obsessed, impotent, and renegade base commander would be insufficient, by themselves, to lead to global thermonuclear holocaust. However, the Soviets have been secretly pursuing purity by other means.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, President Muffley and Soviet Ambassador De Sadesky (Peter Bull) act on the assumption that the attack can be stopped--until they discover the existence of the Doomsday Machine. In a phone call from the War Room, Muffley explains to Soviet Premier Kissoff that he cannot recall the planes and suggests that the Soviets shoot them down. They agree to this plan, and then De Sadesky speaks with his leader. The American officials, and the audience, hear in Russian De Sadesky's side of the conversation: a non-Russian speaker sees only the horror on De Sadesky's face, a nonlinguistic evocation of dread. He hangs up and announces the existence of the Doomsday Machine, a weapon with the retaliatory capacity to encircle the earth in a "doomsday shroud" of radioactivity that will last for ninety-three years. First, President

Muffley takes the ambassador's statement as a threat, and protests that it would be madness to use such a weapon. De Sadesky corrects him: "The Doomsday Machine is designed to trigger itself automatically." Later, Dr. Strangelove (Peter Sellers) admires the machine with the gloss that it eliminates "human meddling." In direct contrast to General Ripper's obsession with organic purity and reliance on human decision-makers, the Soviets have been pursuing mechanical purity and automated decision processes. If either state of purity were possible, that is, if everything could be categorized as either human or machine in a stable order, then the film's interlocking mishaps could not occur.

[6] Thus the initial components of the disaster. The details unfold in a delicate balance of human and machine decision-making, failure, and success. When one B-52 takes a missile hit, its radio receiver is disabled and cannot receive any incoming messages. The crew then operates under a hermetic seal, as it were, a state of complete purity. The plane's mechanical inability to receive the recall code might have been cancelled out by the mechanical malfunction of its missile bay doors, but for the decisions of Major Kong (Slim Pickens). Biskind notes that actions aboard the plane manipulate generic conventions that enlist the audience's identification with the crew's persistence and ingenuity, even though we know where this is going (346). First, when Kong gets the attack order, one crewmember asks if it might be a loyalty test.<sup>5</sup> Even though the audience knows otherwise, the question makes it so, for Kong displays his loyalty and obedience to the chain of command by dismissing all skepticism. After the missile hit, Kong is advised that the plane lacks the fuel to reach its primary or secondary targets, and he selects a target of opportunity. Finally, when the crew attempts to release a bomb, they discover that the electronics in control of the missile bay doors have shorted out. Undeterred, Kong descends into

the plane's belly to complete his mission. (The imagery evokes Jonah's ordeal in the belly of the big fish, except that Kong, unlike Jonah, has not resisted his orders.) Kong then fixes the bay door controls manually, and rides the missile down to his, and everyone's, death. General Ripper's confidence that other human decision-makers will advance his plan thus finds its own target in Major Kong, whose human (non-mechanical) qualities of resourcefulness and persistence in the face of setbacks trigger the Doomsday Machine's automated processes.

[7] Critics commonly see repressed sexuality as the major destructive force, and the film does have significant erotic motifs.<sup>6</sup> The question, then, is how sexuality relates to the machine-human dynamics. I will approach this question by taking an inventory of the proposed couplings, and looking for patterns. First of all, the imminent destruction of life on earth draws attention to the only heterosexual couple: General Turgidson and his secretary-girlfriend, Miss Scott (Tracy Reed). They appear together only in one scene, where Miss Scott mediates the phone call that summons Turgidson to the War Room. In a revealing shot sequence, Miss Scott, lying alone on the bed, answers the phone, tries to dissuade the caller, and then begins conveying information to Turgidson off-screen. That is, Kubrick only shows the couple together after the decisive rupture has occurred. Later, Miss Scott, off-screen, disrupts the War Room discussions with a phone call to Turgidson. His emphatic whisper that she is not to call him there reinforces the boundary between procreative and destructive *topoi*: when he walked out on her erotic overtures, the possibility of human reproduction went with him. Beyond Turgidson and Scott, heterosexuality appears only in deferral. General Ripper presents his impotence as a choice when he claims to "deny [women] my essence"; Major Kong keeps a girlie magazine in his safe aboard the B-52; and all of the men in the War Room attentively listen to Dr. Strangelove's

prescription of ten women for each man in a survivalist utopia that everyone on the scene should know cannot occur. In short, heterosexuality, with its reproductive potential, is never realized. It lies in the past, or in fantasy.

[8] Significant homoerotic imagery also contributes to the film's representation of sexuality. Here, General Ripper and Captain Mandrake are the prominent couple. Ripper's gestures toward Mandrake--the arm around the shoulders, the hand on the knee, the confidential tone and closely held faces--suggest a homoeroticism of which Mandrake seems more aware than Ripper. The latter appears anxious at the overtures, but begins to return the gestures and tone in an attempt to gain Ripper's trust and get the recall code. Their scenes contain the most tender touching in the film, and the revelatory, authoritative tone of Ripper's voice emphasizes his selection of the recipient, thus combining religious and sexual elements. Ripper and Mandrake, rather than Turgidson and Miss Scott, are the central (human) couple. As with their heterosexual counterparts, however, the possibility is entertained only to be thwarted. Ripper seems too repressed to act consciously on the attraction that his gestures betray. Had Mandrake been able to achieve a union of trust, the life-giving result would have been not a sexual encounter, but the recall code. Ripper's suicide thwarts this possibility, and Mandrake alone must decrypt the code from Ripper's oracular disclosures. Like most of the film's names, "Mandrake" carries the symbolic meaning of the allegedly aphrodisiac root, but why this character should have this name emerges only in contrast to Ripper. Captain Mandrake acts to preserve life, not to destroy it, and the name suggests an unrepressed sexuality that would further that purpose. Beyond this pair, the pervasive all-male groups in the B-52 and the War Room, and some of the physical action (e.g. Turgidson's fight and back-to-front fall with De Sadesky) further convey a

homoerotic undertone. Something obstructs all of these couplings from whatever mode of success (love, life) would be possible for each one.

[9] Before we hastily conclude that repressive forces have subverted all couplings, let us examine *Dr. Strangelove*'s two successful couplings. By successful, I mean a union that is itself achieved, and that in turn achieves some intended purpose. Both of these include a machine as at least one partner. The opening sequence features a B-52 joined to another jet for refueling: lingering shots focus on the phallic fuel line, which undulates over the B-52. Rather than taking this as a visual cue for human sexuality, why not see it for what it is: a union of machines. If, for a plane, flight is analogous to life, then fuel is the life-giving substance. In the other scene depicting union, one partner is human. The penultimate sequence shows Major Kong riding and whooping his missile down to global destruction. Again, the sexual quality of the imagery has long been noted, but critics treat the missile as a simple extension, or visual analogue, of male sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Its full mechanical dignity, one might say, has not been recognized. Neither Kong nor the missile alone could accomplish what both do together, so it should be seen as an erotic union, not just a symbolic displacement of human masculine sexuality on to a phallic object. Alas, this union does achieve its purpose. The pattern should be apparent: human (organic) couplings fail, but machine couplings succeed.

[10] For this reason, human sexual repression by itself cannot account for either the film's narrative or the full range of its erotic imagery. On the contrary, organic sexuality has been taken up into the economy of human-machine interactions. Sexual unions are one locus of anxiety about the human-machine boundary, but the organic boundaries (male/female,

heterosexuality/homosexuality) are not independent sites of anxiety. According to Douglas, the greatest danger to purity systems is not the merely impure, for the system regulates movement across the pure-impure border. Anomaly is the true threat because the system does not categorize it; it thus shows up the system's incompleteness. *Dr. Strangelove*, then, discloses the destructive potential of too-orderly systems that fail to account adequately for a certain anomaly: the human-machine hybrid of the global military apparatus. Nuclear weapons do not launch themselves, nor does the most automated system program its own conditions. Conversely, human beings, however sexually repressed and violent they may be, lack the destructive capacity by themselves to annihilate all life on earth. If this mixture itself were not dangerous enough, the failure to apprehend its hybrid nature proves fatal. Indeed, both General Ripper and the Soviets try to eliminate mixture, only in favor of different purities. The anomaly proves stronger than either purity system.

### **Diabolical Cyborg as *Angelus Interpres***

[11] The film's representation of human-machine hybridity goes beyond the dance of men and their weapons, of organic versus automated decision-making. Dr. Strangelove himself embodies it. Both the timing of his entrance and his function in the film mark his intimate connection to the Doomsday Machine. One might say that the Doomsday Machine introduces Dr. Strangelove, for De Sadesky's disclosure of the Machine prompts a discussion in which Muffley summons Dr. Strangelove for advice. Ignorant both of the concept and of his own country's exploration of the idea, Muffley cannot understand this revelation without a mediator. Nor does Dr. Strangelove himself serve any other function. His actions are non-narrative; nothing he does or says alters events. In terms of the figures of ancient apocalyptic, Strangelove is the diabolical

variant of the interpreting angel. Both verbally and iconically, he interprets the Doomsday Machine.

[12] Critical reaction to *Strangelove* is strangely uncritical. In short references to the film, one finds frequent comments that notice *Strangelove*'s disabilities and question his humanity.<sup>8</sup> Yet the reasons for doubting his humanity, and the significance of his disabilities, are seldom examined. The likely historical basis for the character only highlights these problems. Kubrick apparently based *Strangelove*, in varying degrees, on Cold War scientists Herman Kahn, Werner von Braun, and Edward Teller (Kaplan; O'Leary 414; Schwartz 80). The thought and temperament are Kahn's, the Nazi pedigree comes from von Braun, and the prosthetic limb may well come from Teller, who lost a leg in childhood. However, most viewers would not catch the triple reference. Even if they did, the biographies of scientists do not explain the selection and composition of just these elements, or the composite's function in the film. We can take the measure of significance from the weighting of different elements. Kaplan points out that some of *Strangelove*'s lines come from Kahn's book *On Thermonuclear War*; they are essentially quotations, especially the rather chipper assessment of how survivors would feel. Nazism is more difficult to gauge, since its mere citation is so powerful that it tends to swallow ironies that call it into question. On a superficial level, the accent, the eugenic survivalist scheme, and the occasional slips in addressing the American president as "mein Führer" all remind one of the Cold War joke about "our" Germans versus "their" Germans. However, two considerations undermine any explanatory value of Nazism. In a film that overwhelmingly insists that the enemy is us, and we are them, all interlocked in a global Doomsday Machine, the Nazi at the table should not be too lightly (or even ironically) dismissed as the polluting Other. Further, Dr.

Strangelove's eugenic survivalist fantasy contrasts starkly with his own body: why did Nazi eugenic policies against the disabled fail to eliminate *him*?<sup>9</sup> These details throw the superficial significance of Strangelove's Nazi background into question. And what do the wheelchair and the uncontrollable prosthetic arm have to do with anything? An inventory of the visuals reveals the extent to which Strangelove embodies both disability and machine-human hybridity: neither pure machine nor merely disabled human, he is a disabled cyborg. In his first scene, the camera angles and shot composition highlight his wheelchair and prosthetic arm. Muffley summons him, and the chair clatters away from the table; then a long shot of his approach to Muffley and De Sadesky centers the chair in the composition. He comes to a stop, framed between the two leaders, from a low angle that places his face above camera level. Visually, then, the man in the chair dominates the screen. He smokes a cigarette, a gesture whose only purpose seems to be to display his apparently prosthetic right arm, with its gloved hand and jerky movements. If all that weren't enough, Strangelove also wears dark glasses in a dark room: is he visually impaired? Nothing about Dr. Strangelove's body is explained or narrated. It just signifies, but not just back to its historical bases.

[13] What it signifies can best be understood in the crosshairs of disability and cyborg theory. In dialogue with Douglas, literary critic Rosemarie Garland-Thomson uses the concept of purity and anomaly to note that excluded terms constitute the center. She coins the term *normate* to indicate the ideologically constructed "right" body. Cultural texts articulate the normate body both directly, and also by implication from the impure opposite. Garland-Thomson characterizes the normate body of modern liberal democracies thus:

The four interrelated ideological principles that inform this normate self might be characterized as self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress. Such a self-image parallels the national ideal in an individualist egalitarian democracy that each citizen is a microcosm of the nation as a whole. (42)

In such a construct, disability is *the* rejected anomaly because it figures a self marked with diminished autonomy, a body that belies the rough equality of ability that liberal democratic political theory assumes.<sup>10</sup> Decades before the theorization of disability began, Dr. Strangelove incarnated these refutations of the normate. He cannot govern his inert legs, much less his mutinous right arm; in normate terms, use of a wheelchair signifies diminished autonomy; and this body beyond the reach of smoothly functioning technological progress comments on what that progress is about to accomplish. Finally, disability disturbs because it lies outside the realm of choice which liberalism takes as the sphere of the definitively human. It could happen to anyone, chosen or not:

Even more troubling, disability suggests that the cultural other lies dormant within the cultural self, threatening abrupt or gradual transformations from “man” to “invalid.” The disabled figure is the stranger in our midst. (Garland-Thomson 43)

*Dr. Strangelove* manifests this other-within-self dynamic in many ways, from the shared venality of the Cold War opponents, to the presence of the disabled Nazi scientist at the table with able-bodied American dimwits.

[14] But Dr. Strangelove is not simply disabled (if disability is ever simple). Kubrick represents him as part machine, with an affinity for machines. Here, Donna Haraway provides useful theoretical guidance, both for the character Dr. Strangelove as an icon, and also for the

film as a cyborg apocalypse. Her essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” contrasts apocalyptic (how often she uses that word!) fear of the cyborg with a positive assessment, and Dr. Strangelove certainly lies on the apocalyptic side. Nevertheless, her description of the cyborg is *apropos*. First, she argues that the distinction between organism and machine has become leaky:

Late-twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (11)

Dr. Strangelove’s first appearance draws attention to his hybrid status. The man-wheelchair image provides one such composite, and the physical business with the cigarette displays the gloved and barely controlled prosthetic right arm. In one of the final scenes, the arm seems livelier than he is: it attempts to choke him, ostensibly to prevent him from speaking, but also iconically figuring in one body the imminent self-destruction of human life. His admiration for the Doomsday Machine and his proposal for computer selection of “human specimens” for survival demonstrate his affinity, even preference, for machines.

[15] Further, Haraway contends that the cyborg, unlike biological organisms, has no myth of origin:

In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense; a “final” irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic *telos* of the “West’s” escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space. . . . The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense. (9)

This observation is multi-layered. In terms of literary and cultural history, it indicates that creation myths posit an origin and *telos* for biological organisms, especially for human beings, but do not account for cyborgs. More subtly, since a cyborg is, by definition, an organism-machine hybrid, the composite being has no single starting-point. Only a portion of a cyborg body began biologically, and the machine parts had different origins. A cyborg as such cannot have a single origin. Given the close connection between origin myths and purpose, such a composite being lies outside the world-historical economy of purposes. As Haraway succinctly puts it, “The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history” (8). Never having a unitive origin from which it could fall, the cyborg has no *eschaton* of re-founded unity. Dr. Strangelove is just such a cyborg. The script, in fact, cues us away from the easy and reductive answer that he is an exiled Nazi. In a side conversation, General Turgidson tries to fix Strangelove’s origin by asking Staines (note the polluting connotation of that name) whether Strangelove is a “Kraut” name. Staines replied that the Doctor changed his name when became a citizen; his “original” name was Merkwurdichliebe. The obvious back-translation of “Strangelove” into German cannot be “original”; the name has no origin, except in the person. But Strangelove lacks an origin in the most fundamental way: his bizarre body is presented with no explanation at all. The child’s question, universally encountered by disabled persons, “What happened to you?” is never posed or answered. Did all three disabilities (arm, legs, eyes) occur simultaneously, or does each have an independent etiology (origin)? The film presents Strangelove’s body just as a given; no biography explains it, any more than his English name is explained by its German translation. Strangelove has no origin.

[16] Finally, Haraway describes the latent negative potential of cyborg existence:

From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star War apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. (13)

Nowhere does she explicitly cite *Dr. Strangelove*, and yet its images and narrative only exemplify her diagnosis of the dangers of mono-vision in a hybrid world. Strangelove, more than the other characters, fantasizes the full mechanization of biological life. His loving description of the Doomsday Machine is marred only by his contempt for Soviet bungling: "The whole point of the Doomsday Machine is lost if you keep it a secret. Why didn't you tell the world?" When everyone else has run out of ideas, Strangelove proposes a survivalist scenario in which machines select people for survival, men on the basis of intelligence and status, and women on the basis of sex appeal. The viewer easily notices Turgidson drooling at the thought of his ten women, but does Strangelove see himself at the bottom of one of those mines? His description clearly includes the assembled leaders, but whether he includes himself is obscure. Be that as it may, Strangelove seems to like the post-holocaust world precisely because it is more amenable to control. The human-machine mixture would be just right.

### **The Monster in the Disabled Cyborg**

[17] If Dr. Strangelove is a monster, he is not a traditional one. In his global inventory of monsters, anthropologist David Gilmore notes that monsters are invariably animal-human hybrids from primordial times (6). Many modern film monsters fit this mold: Timothy Beal has insightfully juxtaposed biblical monsters with King Kong, Godzilla, and other ancient revenants of mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century film. Although a universal human anxiety about the animal-human

boundary can account in part for the continued popularity of such monsters in the industrial and post-industrial worlds, O'Leary includes many of Beal's movie monsters under the rubric of nuclear apocalyptic anxieties (401-402). If this association is correct, then anxiety about the destructive potential of advanced technology still taps a primordial layer of human culture: the common motif of radiation as a trigger that will transform or stir some sleeping beast to global destruction feeds technology back into the oldest loops of monster-making, only with a twist. Now, the human reach beyond our animal nature, rather than the danger of sliding back into it, becomes the occasion of sin against category. Dr. Strangelove emerges from the same mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, newly atomic culture, as these more morphologically obvious monsters.

[18] Strangelove is different, however, and the differences are not random. First, his physical hybridity is not animal-human but human-machine. Cyborg monsters vary in the degree to which they maintain or simulate human appearance, and Strangelove inhabits the less mechanical end of the spectrum (compared to, say, Darth Vader or the Borg of *Star Trek*). Nevertheless, his arm has a mind of its own: its attempt to choke him, and his fight to dominate it, expose the seam between the man and the machine. Further, Strangelove also transposes the traditional monstrous excesses. An ancient animal-human monster typically combines extreme size with diminished cognitive or moral ability (Gilmore 6-7). In Strangelove, the excess-deficiency combination remains, but is reversed: excessive intelligence and scientific acumen inhabit a physically impaired body. These features contrast strongly with the other characters in the War Room, who are able-bodied, lusty for women, food, and alcohol, and not quite as bright as the scientist in the wheelchair.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Strangelove lacks the traditional anthropophagus quality. Rather than wanting to eat human beings, he wants to engineer them--a fate that is

invariably represented as the destruction of the self, and thus as the cyborg counterpart to primordial monstrous man-eating. In a moment of relief that fills the War Room when the leaders believe that all of the planes have been successfully recalled or shot down, Turgidson proposes that they pray. He begins the prayer, and a cut to Dr. Strangelove shows the man in the chair, alone and silent, backlit by the map of the world, as Turgidson's voice-over thanks God for deliverance from the Angel of Death and the forces of evil. Strangelove may not physically eat human beings, but the apocalyptic cyborg does preside over mass death.

[19] It is strange to love the angel of mass death, and it is common to interpret Kubrick's reference to strange love in terms of the operative definition provided in the film's subtitle. Such a reading can be deepened if we view the object of strange love not just as the bomb, but as the central monster, the human-machine hybrid of the global military apparatus, as instantiated in Dr. Strangelove. That human-machine embrace is a strange love, with unprecedented possibilities for human destruction. The refusal of this embrace by competing purity schemes purifies nothing, but rather plunges the world into fatal collapse. Jeffrey Cohen proposes as one of his seven theses about monsters that "fear of the monster is really a kind of desire" (16). He elaborates:

The monster is the abjected fragment that enables the formation of all kinds of identities – personal, national, cultural, economic, sexual, psychological, universal, particular (even if that "particular" identity is an embrace of the power/status/knowledge of abjection itself); as such it reveals their partiality, their contiguity. (19-20)

Dr. Strangelove composes several abjected elements of liberal democracy: his Nazism renders "our" nationalism pure, his disability obscures "our" fragility behind an illusion of strength, and

most of all, his hybrid quality obscures ours. *We* don't have arms that attack us, and *we* don't depend on machines to transport us from place to place. *We* don't wear dark glasses in the war room, because we can see the madness. His clinical detachment contrasts with our horror at the prospect nuclear holocaust; somnolent as we are, at least we are not that bad. Yet this brooding cyborg angel of death fascinates: "We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair" (Cohen 17). What might a viewer desire, even envy, about Dr. Strangelove? Perhaps the very detachment we deplore. He welcomes the *eschaton* almost with glee at a new start, and thus betrays the will to destruction inherent in all apocalyptic thought and behavior. In his blithe thought about the unthinkable, as if the prospect is not really imminent but just another hypothetical scenario, Dr. Strangelove within the film encodes the aesthetic detachment of the viewer of nuclear apocalyptic film.

[20] Primordial monsters threaten cosmic order. Their post-primordial remnants threaten social order. With the cyborg standing at the threshold of nuclear *eschaton*, the mesocosm of life on Earth stands in danger. Haraway frankly acknowledges the two potentials of the cyborg, either for nuclear apocalypse or for affirmation of hybridity (i.e. freedom from purity). This double potentiality can be seen by juxtaposing one of her affirmative passages with Kubrick's film:

A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends) . . .

The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. (38)

For Haraway, the best potential of the cyborg can be freed when one abandons the quest for purity. In contrast, the quest for excessive purity leads to the final apotheosis of Dr. Strangelove

as destructive cyborg. As events move toward global disaster, Dr. Strangelove loses control of his arm, and with it, of his chair. Visually, he is the focal point of a circle formed by the generals on one hemisphere and Muffley and Turgidson on the other. The center does not hold. His body's parts refuse to work as a coherent whole, and the onlookers' gaze shifts from attention to avoidance. Finally, and apparently to his own surprise, Strangelove's parts come together. He stands up and walks a few steps toward Muffley. What a polysemous image: it evokes biblical prophecy that in the *eschaton*, the lame shall walk (e.g., Is 35:6, Mt 11:5); the man-machine, East-West composite begins to function and achieves its ultimate destructive power; and humankind's baby steps toward hybridity are also its last. "Mein Führer, I can walk!" he exclaims--the last line in the film, and in the film's world. The conflicting drives for purity, either organic or mechanical but not both, that propel the narrative are thus encoded non-narratively in Strangelove's body. If the Doomsday Machine is not just the Soviet device, but all the meshed circuits of East and West, human and machine, then we can revise Haraway's line for the apocalyptic variant by the addition of a single word: the Doomsday Machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. And Dr. Strangelove images that embodiment. The Doomsday Body *is* the Doomsday Machine.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>An early version of this paper was presented at a session of the Religion and Popular Culture unit of the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, 2005, under the title “The Doomsday Body, or Dr. Strangelove as Cyborg Crip.” Although such transgressive reappropriation of the term “crip” is current in literary studies and disabled theatre, I have encountered colleagues in religious studies who were unaware of this usage and saw the term as potentially offensive. Rather than be misunderstood as taking a derogatory view of disability, I decided to use a more neutral term. For the record, as a late-deafened adult with a cochlear implant, I am both disabled and a cyborg.

For helpful discussion of the ideas presented here, I am indebted to my Apocalypticism class at Texas State University in Spring 2005 and to the participants in the AAR Religion and Popular Culture session. For a pre-publication response to the manuscript, I thank Frances Flannery-Dailey.

<sup>2</sup>The screenplay was adapted by Kubrick, Peter George, and Terry Southern from Peter George’s novel *Red Alert*.

<sup>3</sup>O’Leary notes how the Holocaust and the atomic bomb cast the distinctive apocalyptic pall over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but he does not explore the special problems of human-machine mixtures (398).

<sup>4</sup>Peter Biskind notes the political verisimilitude of these preferences for human beings or machines, with centrists preferring technology, and the right idealizing the human spirit. As with Kubrick’s other historical modeling, the film takes on symbolic and religious dimensions that go far beyond his contemporary portraiture (345).

<sup>5</sup>I am indebted to my student, Eugene Villarreal, for bringing this exchange to my attention. Villarreal pointed out that the Bombardier (James Earl Jones) who questions the order is the only African-American or person of color in the film. By giving the only reasonable question to the only person of color, Kubrick iconically represented the minority status of common sense.

<sup>6</sup>On Ripper, Kim Newman remarks, “Unhinged by his impotence, which he puts down to a commie plot involving fluoridation, Ripper orders his bomber wing to attack the Soviet Union.” (157). Michael Rogin connects Ripper to a general theme of sexual repression: “*Dr. Strangelove* derived anti-Communism and nuclear holocaust from the free man’s fear of female sexuality. Ripper protects his bodily fluids from women by withholding his seed.” (18). On sexual repression as a causative or narrative force, Robert MacLean writes, “This pattern of repressed sexuality is satirized in *Dr. Strangelove*, as is suggested by the characters’ names . . . by the plans of the elite to inhabit a sealed off mine shaft and by the gradual verticalization of the falling bomb as if to suggest the erection of the Slim Pickens character riding it.” (3, ellipsis mine). This generalization finds its way into Richard A. Schwartz’s encyclopedia entry (79-80): “In *Dr. Strangelove*, sex lies at the core of the Cold War, not ideology, economic philosophy or national security . . . the countries’ leaders have subconsciously created a nuclear scenario that fulfills their greatest sexual fantasies.”

<sup>7</sup>See MacLean’s rather literal reading of this image in note 6 above.

<sup>8</sup>Schwartz calls *Strangelove* a “cripple” (80) without comment; Newman uses the epithet “crippled ex-Nazi” without a hint of irony (157), and later characterizes *Strangelove* as a “barely human” theorist (160) without indicating why his humanity should be suspect.

<sup>9</sup>For a short overview of American eugenic thought and its influence on Nazi practices, see Ruth Hubbard, “Abortion and Disability: Who Should and Who Should Not Inhabit the World?” in Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), 187-200.

<sup>10</sup>Noting that the attribution of cognitive, physical, or moral deficit provided a rationale for excluding women and people of color from political comity, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder point out that these groups claimed their equality by arguing that they did not have “real” deficits (3). This type of claim left intact the assumption that such deficits do and should exclude someone from full citizenship. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependence of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup>Moral deficiency, reflected in Strangelove’s detached calculations of nuclear scenarios, is shared by other characters and thus does not mark him out. I would say, however, that Strangelove has a far better grasp of the horrible consequences than Turgidson or the others. Of the War Room group, Muffley seems to have the best moral compass, and is the least effectual figure.

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