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**Review of: Case George, Calling Dr. Strangelove. The Anatomy and  
Influence of the Kubrick Masterpiece**

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ture editions.

Iain Banks was possessed of an indomitable spirit and prodigious imagination; the greatest strength of this book is its celebration of the scale and scope of that spirit as it manifests itself in the Culture series. The fan in me reveled in the opportunity to relive the intricacies of these novels as fleshed out by Caroti's carefully nuanced close readings. Indeed, Caroti's considered intertextual analysis of *Use of Weapons* and *The State of the Art* is enlightening, as is his excellent stylistic analysis of *Excession*. However, the academic in me, very much interested in the British Boom and socialist utopianism, wished for a more developed and sustained critical drive. However, while the book is a bit uneven, attempting not altogether successfully the difficult task of balancing a critical summary of the Culture's phases of development, an overview of the critical and academic reception, and the author's own particular critical argument, all of the pieces are substantially present – an admirable success in a single, short, and accessible volume. As such, it provides a useful introduction to Banks' monumental series, and should be sought out by critics and readers.

## **Calling Dr. Strangelove: The Anatomy and Influence of the Kubrick Masterpiece**

Simon Spiegel

George Case. *Calling Dr. Strangelove. The Anatomy and Influence of the Kubrick Masterpiece*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co. 2014. Paperback, 212 pages, \$40.00, ISBN 978-0-7864-9449-1. Ebook ISBN: 978-1-4766-1848-7.

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THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT that Stanley Kubrick's 1964 movie *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* is a classic. It is generally regarded as an iconic film and one of the very few truly successful filmic satires. Among other outcomes, it was also the film that definitively lifted its director into a higher sphere. Kubrick's next project

was the groundbreaking SF epic *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and from then on until his death in 1999, the director seemed to play in a league entirely of his own. This rise into the Olympus of cinema would not have been possible had it not been for the success – both critical and commercial – of *Dr. Strangelove*.

Although the movie's status seems of little dispute, George Case feels that time has not treated it kindly. According to him, it has been "divorced from the social and historical context in which it originated, and its underlying themes and incidental details risk going unrecognized by contemporary audiences" (2). While some of its images, like the one of Slim Pickens riding the atomic bomb at the end of the movie, or phrases like "Gentlemen, you can't fight in here. This is the War Room!" have long since entered pop culture, Case thinks that its specific Cold War background is lost to younger audiences. This assessment might be true to some degree, and a proper account of the situation in which the movie was produced is certainly in order. However, Case's other declared goal seems rather irritating. In his eyes, *Dr. Strangelove* does not get the credit it deserves because it is overshadowed by Kubrick's later works.

Saying this about a movie that regularly makes it into all kinds of "best of" lists seems odd. Even odder is Case's effort to show that "judging as successful integrations of screenplay, acting, set design, photography and editing, *Dr. Strangelove* stands above the rest [of Kubrick's films]" (3). According to Case, one reason for the the movie's unique quality is that the director relied more on the contributions from other artists than in any other production. In other words, *Dr. Strangelove* is Kubrick's best movie because it is not a proper Kubrick movie.

Case is, of course, entitled to value *Dr. Strangelove* more highly than other Kubrick movies. But his approach to "prove" its superior quality by using its director as a kind of evidence against itself is more than peculiar, especially given the fact that Kubrick always relied heavily on his collaborators. They might not always have received proper credit for their work, but one of Kubrick's great strengths had always been choosing highly capable contributors whom he pushed to – and often beyond – their limits. Above all, *Dr. Strangelove* simply does not need such a rehabilitation. Case's zeal to vindicate his subject gives his study a completely unnecessary bent.

The book tracks the movie's genesis and its impact in five chapters. While the first is dedicated to its

prehistory and the second to its production, chapter three is a detailed walkthrough of the actual movie with background information for basically every scene. Chapter four then deals with the immediate reactions to the movie, while the last chapter is dedicated to the movie's heritage and Kubrick's later career.

*Calling Dr. Strangelove's* goal is an accessible account of how the movie came to be and of its major themes, and not some highbrow interpretation. Accordingly, the emphasis is on facts. We get little to no theory, but instead short biographies of basically everyone who was important for the movie, from military strategist Herman Kahn to set designer Ken Adam and novelist Peter George. Among other goals, Case wants to redeem George's novel *Two Hours to Doom* – published in the US as *Red Alert* – on which the movie is based. He strongly emphasizes that George's thriller "portrayed the mechanics of nuclear brinkmanship as comprehensively and as accurately as any scholarly or journalistic study of its time" (15). Indeed, one of Case's main points – and one that Kubrick himself was notoriously proud of – is how realistic *Dr. Strangelove* is, even and especially in its most absurd moments.

The story of how Kubrick, during the writing of the screenplay, regularly came up with situations that seemed too grotesque for a serious film, and how he finally decided to turn this weakness into a strength, is part of the folklore surrounding *Dr. Strangelove*. Case cannot shed new light on this part of the story, but he convincingly shows how this approach fitted a general cultural trend, ranging from Tom Lehrer

to *MAD* magazine, which mocked the prospect of a nuclear war. The American writer Terry Southern, coming from a Beat-infused New York background, intensified this ironic over-the-top attitude even more. Equally important for *Dr. Strangelove's* peculiar flavor of comedy was Peter Sellers, with whom Kubrick had already worked on *Lolita*. Sellers was the star of the picture who not only played three different characters – originally he was also meant to act as Major Kong – but whose salary accounted for almost half of the movie's budget. His improvisations, which Kubrick strongly encouraged, shaped the movie in significant ways.

While there is nothing really earth-shattering in *Calling Dr. Strangelove*, it does contain many nuggets of fascinating information. Case also debunks some dearly beloved myths like the story of how Ronald Reagan supposedly asked to see the War Room when he became president. Apparently, there is no source for this anecdote; rather, it seems to be an invention by some of Reagan's opponents.

*Calling Dr. Strangelove* lives up to its claim to give a comprehensive account of Kubrick's movie. Nevertheless, Case's curious insistence that *Dr. Strangelove* is Kubrick's underappreciated masterpiece infuses the whole book in a strangely unproductive way and leads to some completely pointless side blows; for example, when Case mocks the fact that Kubrick was married three times. This is really unfortunate: *Calling Dr. Strangelove* would have been a much better book if its author had not followed such a strange agenda.