

## Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*: Desire and the Fragmenting of Character

Luis Miguel García Mainar  
Universidad de Zaragoza

### ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt at analysing several aspects of Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* from a point of view which includes concepts of both narratology and post-structuralist analysis. I study the level of the fabula and the characters (at the level of the story) in order to prove the existence in the film of a tendency to discard its apparently satiric aim and privilege a logic of spectacle. The contents of the fabula reveal that the film introduces fantasy to satisfy the audience's desire for identification and creates a self-conscious film which dismantles the satiric text. The study of the characters lays bare the existence of a complex web of signification around each one of them, produced by their being impersonated by well-known stars. The several interactions among the characters in the film, previous characters played by the actors and the actors as personae bring about a dissemination of meaning which deprives the characters of any satiric claim. They are transformed into mere objects to be enjoyed and incorporated to the pervading logic of spectacle, therefore pointing to the ever-present tendency of cinema to present itself as a product to be consumed rather than a text to be analysed.

Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) has been traditionally studied as a member of the satiric genre, therefore possessing both a humorous and a denouncing ingredient. Using, for instance, Northrop Frye's generic classifications the film can be placed in a preestablished system of genres according to the most salient characteristics or themes of the text. Such generic criticism as Frye's belongs to the traditional strand of criticism whose main aim is to provide accurate definitions of literary modes, which can be applied to the highest possible number of works. These definitions are reached through an inductive process which distinguishes within a group of individual works some common characteristics, which are then reformulated as defining features of the genre those works constitute. Being an inductive process, it involves considering some features of the different works as the most specific and discarding the rest as accessory ones which may

vary from one work to another. The generalisation inherent to any generic classification is bound to dismiss what is most particular in every work of art. These particular features are the most relevant when defining a work, as they provide us with what is most different from the rest of similar examples (Brunette, Wills 34).

In *Dr. Strangelove* it is those particular aspects that are in my view the most relevant. The basis of the satiric genre is the existence of an attack on a certain ideology while in this film fantasy and humour prevail over attack and render it accessory. The text's final effect is not one of condemnation but one of celebration of the actions and the characters. Kubrick's own opinion about his intentions in the film seems to dismiss this interpretation as he argues that "a recognition of insanity doesn't imply celebration of it; nor a sense of despair and futility about the possibility of curing it" (Phillips 126). My general thesis in this paper will be to show that the text provides a different reading from what the author's intentions on the one hand and the traditionally attributed condemning activity of the film on the other suggest. This reading will employ the conclusions drawn from the study of the fabulaic contents and of the characters.<sup>1</sup> *Dr. Strangelove* is the product of the interweaving of many different codes whose workings may correspond with the author's and the text's main intention or not. It is within this context that my following discussion of *Dr. Strangelove* as celebration must be placed, as my aim is only to prove that several of such codes are intimately related to the presentation of a textual logic which favours spectacle over other considerations.

*Dr. Strangelove's* fabula deals with a nuclear attack Jack Ripper, a mad American General, launches over Russia. The action develops in three locales through which the text takes us in turn: a B-52 attempting to reach its target according to the attack plan, the War Room where the American President Muffley tries to avoid the catastrophe; and Burpleson Air Base, where an officer, Mandrake, desperately searches for the secret recall code Ripper chose for the operation, which would allow the War Room to cancel the mission. Muffley warns the Russians of the uncontrolled attack, and he is in turn informed that the Russian retaliatory system will destroy the earth in the case of an attack. The three settings alternate, creating suspense as to whether the B-52 will manage to overcome all the obstacles the Russians set for it. In an ecstatic last section of the film the bomber finally drops the bomb and the world explodes just as Dr. Strangelove, a military scientist in the War Room, praises the excellency of the Russian retaliatory device. The film is peopled by caricatures in the different settings, and a both fantastic and comic atmosphere pervades all the scenes in a sharp satire of the Cold War.

## I. The Longing for the Absent

One of the critics who has adopted a traditional point of view on the film is Peter Baxter, but his decision to link desire and fantasy will prove helpful in our interpretation of the text. Desire has two dimensions in the film: sexual desire and the desire of death. The desire of death appears best represented by *Strangelove*, where it is related to the theme of composition and the creation of stories. When the film approaches its end and the characters in the War Room give up their attempts to prevent the explosion, *Strangelove*

is the only one who reacts, proposing his mine shaft plan. He tries to fight the moment of death with a creation of his own, with a story which is only an illusion because the bomb has already exploded. Desire is also analysed by psychoanalytic critics as the wish to achieve the lost, *primaeva* unity a human being enjoys during, and previous to, the first stages of his/her life; before (s)he has gained consciousness of the world and of himself/herself, and before language (the symbolic) is born in him/her as both instrument of communication and proof of the nonexistence of that *primaeva* unity. Original unity does not require a language because it has not discovered the world yet and has therefore no need to name it. The appearance of language represents the moment of the split of the subject, as (s)he discovers that (s)he is not the only existing thing in the world; language will become the tool the subject will try to use in order to regain that lost unity: the comprehension of reality as such, not only of the signifiers language offers us. According to Christian Metz, the viewer, in the process of watching a film, identifies with himself as an act of perception which is "creating", by perceiving it, the play of signifiers that appear on the screen. It is in the viewer that the cinematic image enters the symbolic and becomes cinema, in the self-consciousness of the process of the viewer (49-50). The viewer becomes a searcher for what is absent, for his/her lost unity in the cinematic symbol. The desire to see governs the subject, a desire whose origin is precisely the absence of its object by the distance which defines and creates it: the distance of the gaze (58-59). Desire and fantasy have therefore a common origin: both have as their source the absence of a signified and the recognition of this absence. There is therefore a third type of desire in the film, the viewer's desire to achieve an identification (unity) with the text, which is inscribed in the film in the form of fantasy. Fantasy is the extremest form of language with respect to desire because it acknowledges its being just a signifier, an absence (a record, trace of desire; the viewer will cling to this signifier hoping to achieve unity), whereas conventional language still pretends to offer us a portion of reality. *Dr. Strangelove* reveals the existence, in its essence, of this desire inherent in fantasy, which in the film takes the form of a tendency to foster enjoyment of the fantastic, of the incredible, of a signifier which is presented as such through the text's constant activity of pointing to its artificiality.

Fantasy resembles the split subject because it acknowledges itself as signifier, a move which in a way defines it. The subject would not exist without the possibility of absence, of death, of the nonpresence of the signified which provides his/her unity. Fantasy does not provide as much a hope for unity as an approximation to the essence of existence which is based on *differance*, on absence, on what the signifier shares with the trace:

[T]his trace is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing. The outside, "spatial" and "objective" exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself, would not appear without the *grammè*, without *differance* as temporalization, without the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the meaning of the present, without the relation to death as the concrete structure of the living present . . . The presence-absence of the trace . . . (Derrida 42-43)

In *Dr Strangelove* fantasy emphasises this absence, but uses the desire produced in the viewer to engage his/her attention and divert it from considerations which stemmed out of the reflection on a world under attack. Besides, as the ultimate unity (= meaning) is impossible to achieve, the text proposes the enjoyment of a logic which allows both fantastic and comic elements to create a structure of spectacle above and independent of the contents of the film.

Fantasy constantly foregrounds its artificial nature in *Dr. Strangelove*. The self-consciousness of most stylistic strategies, typical of satire, turns into consistent exaggeration of the fabula at large, exaggeration (hyperbole) being one of the constituents of the fantastic discourse (Todorov 94). The nature of the story sets it off from any pretension of realism as it is based on incomprehensible behaviour and reactions to an incredible central event: human beings are going to be destroyed by the forces they created in order to guarantee their safety. The abandonment to the power of the structure is complete in this realm, but this structure can only provide an answer through the acceleration of events and the resolution of the fabula components. Nevertheless the textual structure does not provide a rational resolution at a fabulaic level: it leads the viewer to enjoy the inevitability of chaos; its meaning is emotional rather than rational and derives from a textual organisation which does not itself carry a meaning, but is a mere technique to engage and control the viewer's attention (crosscutting). This third type of desire will be revealed to be the most important one, as the denouncing activity of the text, which is based on the criticism of sexual desire and the desire of death, is replaced by the enjoyment of comedy and fantasy. The desire which leads the viewer to enjoy comedy and fantasy, the signifier on its own, will constitute itself as the main force in the development of the story; a type of desire which seemed to be only marginal and not very relevant for the study of the text comes to the foreground now. Fantasy in *Dr. Strangelove* therefore appears as ideologically conservative, which contradicts celebrated theories of fantasy as subversive artistic medium. R. Jackson sees in fantasy's use of non-signification, in the foregrounding of the distance between the signified and the signifier (between the real and the unreal), an activity which challenges the representation of the unities of time, space and character. This opposition to signifying practices attempts to disrupt rationalism, "attempting to dissolve the symbolic order at its very base, where it is established, and through the subject, where the dominant signifying system is re-produced." In short, she sees fantasy as subversive of predominant bourgeois ideologies whose faith in rationality and the symbolic has led them to reject the other, the fantastic (175-80). One of the "readings" of *Dr. Strangelove* seems, nevertheless, to foreground this gap in the communicative process in order to create a logic of supremacy of the signifier, somehow discarding the signified. From this point of view *Dr. Strangelove* does not challenge processes of representation but indulges in them, however deceiving they may be, as I will later explain.

The incommunicating role of language is one of the typical themes of traditional criticism when dealing with this film. The new decision to disregard satiric attack as the main activity of the text will modify our considerations about language too. Language not only detaches characters from their reality but also detaches us from the reality (attack) of the film. Attack is the reality of the film in the sense that satire seems to be the privileged

code in the text. The comic or inappropriate language characters use detaches the audience in two ways: either it makes the viewer reflect about the object under attack or laugh at what (s)he hears without any edifying purpose at all. Once attack is dismissed, the main effect of language will strictly be that of engaging the audience's attention by providing comedy and laughter. A clear example is the evolution of Muffley's language. At first his language is completely serious and obeys to a sensible attempt to impose order in the midst of the chaotic situation he is in. But during the short spell in which he appears as a prominent figure his language changes into the outrageously comic speech of the telephone conversation with Premier Kissoff: in this case language carries the weight of the purely comic scene. Kong's (the bomber's pilot) portrayal relies on the characterising function of language from the beginning: his extraordinarily vivid accounts and descriptions are presented more as comic elements than as examples of his unawareness. Nevertheless Strangelove is portrayed as the character whose use of language provides the best examples of comedy in the film. But the comic content of his language does not lie in what he actually says but in the way in which he says it and in the performance which accompanies that speech. Strangelove is an example of how a content which is obviously condemnable is rendered as comic through mainly Strangelove's funny German accent, facial expression and body posture. In this case the context of the utterance outweighs in importance its content and transforms the essence of Strangelove's appearances from denunciation into pure comedy.

Humour has always been analysed as an ingredient of satire, as it produces a detachment which derives into reflection about the world under attack. One of the ways of creating humour is the distortion of characters that renders them as caricatures. Nevertheless, the consistency acquired through recurrence will be the cause of their loss of a satiric meaning and their transformation into mere spectacle. The redundancy that is the basis of the classical style can also produce the opposite effect, as it may be set against a narrative structure which privileges change and difference (in this case its main elements are crosscutting and progress towards a deadline) and the denouncing purpose is therefore forgotten or taken for granted in order to focus on the developing aspects of the text.

The incongruities and absurdities the text presents the viewer with are not accompanied by any explicit moral position which would solve the intellectual problem posed here. The text attacks an ideology because it has bestowed a huge destructive power on the machine but it is not able to completely control that machine, as it has failed to include the human being in that scheme (and the human being still remains the basis of the system, an unreliable basis). The viewer is left on his/her own to make sense of the film and in order to do so (s)he will try to form a consistent whole out of the clues provided by the text. Humour will lead the audience to perceive the text as an absurd disruption of a military system, which will set the basis to accommodate any new piece of information as also an element of an absurd, comic portrayal of that reality. Nevertheless, the audience will oscillate between the involvement produced by the perception of a consistent whole and the observation of that illusion, fostered by the self-consciousness of the comic strategies (Iser 221). *Dr. Strangelove*'s comic devices will keep the necessary balance to excite the audience's interest and curiosity while, at the same time, maintaining a reflective attitude towards the object of satiric attack.

In this sense satiric comedy and humour in the film are metafictional strategies, because they actualise in a self-conscious way the dual process the activity of watching a film is. Humour will provide both involvement based on the construction of the illusion of a fantastic world it helps to create in a codified satiric manner, and reflection based on the implicit attack inherent to all satires. The interaction of the two processes will create the fictive world which works within the film. This metafictional device—to include within the text an element which reproduces one aspect of the communicative experience fiction is—will add the component of self-consciousness needed in order to achieve a balance in the viewing process: humour points to the artificiality of the text but never completely destroys the narrative illusion, it is rather a necessary element within the satiric genre without which satire would not manage to make its points. The process of constructing a coherent fictive world of the text is completed in the viewing process and the viewer becomes therefore another agent of the text. The audience will create a fictional world out of the comic and satiric material of the text, this active participation also being one of the features of metafiction (Hutcheon 27).

The self-consciousness of metafictional humour destroys the illusion that appearances convey the real truth of a given reality. It denies that the system the military mind has built is rational, and shows that human beings are in fact ruled by other forces, constructed for us by our illusory state of balance and perfection, “reminding us that we are all human, and mortal, and fallible; that existence is irrational; and that we have merely invented the reasons that keep us going.” (Mast 341). This ultimate meaning and function of comedy—to reveal the imperfect quality of the human being and present a certain scepticism about his/her possibilities of progress through self-consciousness—would disclose the artificial component of comedy to be its major working strategy. This artificiality can develop a comedy in three ways according to Gerald Mast (327): it may first portray the action as metaphor of a certain portion of reality and not as literal meaning. The action set off by Ripper’s state of paranoia, the attitudes it brings to the surface among the members of the War Room, are a metaphor for the chaos that a code of thought which does not acknowledge the existence of another reality than its own can provoke. Strangelove’s theatrical performance, his funny German accent and the struggle with his own mechanical hand, Major Kong’s final image in which he falls with the bomb as if he were riding a horse, are comic devices which clearly render themselves as artificial and contrived, which will prevent them from being understood as a literal description of an event. This artificial comedy may also present comic symbols and cinematic devices that comment on characters: Ripper’s cigar and pistol are sexual symbols (linking his prepotence in sex and in war), Strangelove’s orthopaedic hand reveals a man dominated by the machine; the President’s bald head and grey suit are symbols of his inefficiency while Kong’s cowboy hat ascribes to him a narrow American mentality. The third use of artificiality in comedy is its capacity to expound and communicate the character’s feelings and values: the atmosphere of outrageous actions and discourses will match Turgidson’s proposals or Strangelove’s ideas about a huge nuclear shelter. Their inability to respond realistically and practically to what is happening will be exposed through evident comic excesses. Artificiality is therefore the basis of this comedy.

*Dr. Strangelove*, a satiric film, fits the model proposed by such criticism on metafictional writing as Patricia Waugh's. She states:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

In the case of satire the already mentioned fluctuation between the creation and breakdown of illusion is obviously a way of attacking the underlying reality of the military mind. This world is laughed at through, among other devices, the exaggeration of a language which is shown to be an inappropriate means of communication, since it does not help the characters analyse their reality: in fact it prevents them from doing so. The characters' reality is structured through language, and the text indirectly comments that the characters' problem is similar to that of the viewer: they fluctuate between a language that constructs an illusion of order and stability through detachment, and the breakdown of that illusion, which in the text appears in the form of a nearly subhuman impulse to destroy and massacre. The film refers to the viewer's difficulty in apprehending the meaning of a text, and therefore its connection with reality, which constantly oscillates between two functions of language: Roman Jakobson's referential and metalingual functions (352-58), the referential providing a frame of reality (denunciation in the case of *Dr. Strangelove*) within which the metalingual self-reference takes place. The film therefore criticises its own mechanisms and renders them inappropriate to convey a concrete meaning about reality, besides pointing at a vision of reality as a structured whole, a fictional entity created by language and based on convention. Therefore, *Dr. Strangelove* is a satiric text whose object of attack is ultimately its own status as satire, its proficiency in conveying its criticism of a given reality. The textual tendency to introduce elements of fantasy, in an attempt to satisfy the viewer's desire for identification, results in the dismantling of the satiric text.

## II. Fragmenting the character

An interpretation of the text as straight satire inevitably concludes, when it comes to the study of the characters, that they are flat entities embodying one thematic aspect/object of attack each. They are depicted as types, which produce detachment between the text and the viewer. This interpretation gives credibility to the satire and fosters an intellectual, rather than emotional, approach. Detachment, which relies on the criticism of the characters, is based on the implicit existence of counter-figures which embody the right attitudes. A clear example can be found in the shot which most frequently shows Turgidson, the leading, most enthusiastically militarist General in the War Room. The shot

is a two-shot including Turgidson together with another general who really looks what one would expect a military man to be like: serious and businesslike.

However, this implicit structure is not in fact confirmed by the text. At first, Ripper is introduced as the only responsible character for the attack on Russia. The rest of them are assumed not to share whatever reasons Ripper might have to do what he has done. But this assumption is dismantled as Turgidson in the War Room and Kong in the bomber lead the characters in their respective locales to act in a similar way to Ripper's: they, knowingly or unknowingly, support the attack Ripper has launched. Within the War Room, Muffley embodies some hope of regeneration as we see how he refuses to take Turgidson's ideas about a definitive attack on Russia seriously; but later on the President will rely on Strangelove, who is as mad as Turgidson or Ripper: Muffley fails to realise the insanity of the German scientist, trusts him when Strangelove explains the workings of nuclear weapons, and in the end will even take into consideration his proposal for a scheme to choose the most necessary men and preserve human life in mine shafts. Muffley, in his desperation, is shown to be almost as mad as Turgidson or Strangelove. This progress towards insanity leaves the Russians as the only possibility of finding a bit of common sense, but this possible opposition Americans-Russians does not hold either because first De Sadesky (the Russian Ambassador) and later Premier Kissoff give abundant proofs of their insanity: De Sadesky's incapacity to understand what is going on and Kissoff's exaggerated distrust, which led him to create a retaliatory Doomsday Machine despite its destructive power. In the end, no character stands as identification figure and the basis for an attack based on the positing of implicit right attitudes disappears.

This aspect of the text (the absence of an implicit right attitude) cannot be accounted for by means of compositional motivation any more, and the characters are no longer understood as helpers of the satire. The characters emerge now as comic, outrageous elements which cannot be put down to realistic or compositional motivation. They are to be accommodated within the structure of the text through artistic and intertextual motivation. Characters, in this reading of the film, are drifting devices ready to be absorbed by the stream of a logic favouring spectacle. In order to prove this I will study the characters from three points of view. I will try to expose the intertextual references to previous characters in the history of cinema that the appearance of stars in *Dr. Strangelove* suggests, which will result in the fragmenting of such characters. I will also analyse the relationships between the actors (stars) who play the characters and the characters themselves in order to prove that the stars prevail over the characters. And finally I will compare the actors' personalities, and the knowledge the audience might have about their lives and ideologies, with the way actors are presented in *Dr. Strangelove*, in a search for meanings these actors provide in this film and which contradict and parody their assumed personalities in real life.

Firstly, I will attempt to analyse the intertextual references to previous characters that the appearance of stars conjures up. *Dr. Strangelove* contains a certain number of intertextual components which provide the film with added nuances. Ripper is played by Sterling Hayden, whose most famous role had been the main character in Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954). The connotations of masculinity, self-assurance and courage, which created a prototypical American hero character, are introduced in our film with this actor.



This meaning is obviously subverted by the new context in which it is placed, and here Hayden will embody the nationalistic, alienated man, suggesting that the logical conclusion of America's pride and confidence is paranoia and prepotence. Strangelove introduces the connotations produced by his resemblance to the villain Rotwang in Lang's *Metropolis* (1926). Strangelove is a parody of this classic character, of his extreme faith in the performance of machines and of his prepotence towards the low classes: in our film it is Strangelove who suffers the attacks of his own mechanical hand and not the workers as in *Metropolis*, but his disregard for the people is still present. For R. Dyer the close-up is a basic device in the presentation of the unmediated personality of the individual: "this belief in the capturing of the 'unique person' of a performer is central to the star phenomenon" (17). In our film the rejection of orthodox close-ups in the portrayal of Ripper and Strangelove are proofs that the film subverts connotations brought by the stars from their intertextual relationships with other characters in previous films. The low angle close-ups employed by the film in order to present both characters involves a clear rejection of the text to emphasise their status as stars. *Dr. Strangelove* chooses in this case a stylistic device which makes it difficult for the audience to recognise in these stars the characters they impersonated in previous films, therefore subverting their relationships with those characters. *Dr. Strangelove*'s characters are then inscribed within the film with a disseminatory function: the construction of meaning they carry out is not stable as previous connotations comment on the present characters and vice versa.

Characters are revealed to be the outcome of pretextual elements which cannot be controlled by the narrative. The use of stars as the actors who embody the characters derives in a tendency of the text to a type of characterisation which only includes a few significant traits. The characters are flat<sup>2</sup> because stars provide a clear-cut definition of themselves as personae, which is very often the outcome of previous appearances in other films. The same process which renders them flat on the one hand, their being the result of previous texts, can also be the cause of their breakdown as unified characters. According to Jacques Derrida, several copies can be produced from an original but the copy can never be identical with its original. A sign's meaning is the result of its position within a system of differences, as Saussure has proved that signs are produced by their context. When a sign is placed in a different context, it will keep a trace of the context in which it was created but it will also acquire a different meaning provided by its new context. A text, a collection of signs, only offers a group of references to life whose relationships with reality are constantly transformed by its medium—it only offers a collection of traces, not of presences (Brunnette, Wills 179). Characters in *Dr. Strangelove* contain several references to different contexts. This indeterminacy and interaction transform them into rich comic figures, setting them apart from any satiric purpose which would demand a more coherent characterisation. The disseminative force of characters brings about spectacle. The text does not use such dissemination and spectacle for satiric purposes because the rhythm of the film does not allow it: the constant introduction of disseminative elements produces such redundancy that their denouncing force is codified and transformed into mere visual brilliance to be enjoyed. Ripper's connotations as hero are placed within a completely ridiculous portrayal and help to deprive the character of any pretension of seriousness. Strangelove's link with Rotwang contributes to creating the obviously ludic, exaggerated

characterisation of our mad scientist. In the end the laying bare of the artificiality of the elements which help the understanding and creation of the characters does nothing but inscribe them in the logic of spectacle. The instability of the characters derives into a celebration of the text's artificiality.

Secondly, the consideration of characters in terms of the actors who play them is interesting: the relationships between the characters in *Dr. Strangelove* and the connotations the stars suggest. Characters played by stars disseminate meaning rather than render them more consistent because they are versions of something previous which they incorporate to the new text. In classical cinema there is a tendency for texts to present the development of a character towards a meaning which existed in the character from the start and which is provided by the actor/actress who plays it in his/her condition of star. The film tends to present this star with this meaning "as if for the first time" when in fact it is a meaning obtained through different previous appearances, and was present there in the text from the first moment the actor/actress appeared on the screen (Bordwell et al. 14). In *Dr. Strangelove* the characters of Strangelove, Muffley and Mandrake are under this strain because Peter Sellers' histrionics seem to be always emerging, proving the existence of an everpresent tendency towards denying the satiric effect of the text. This fact is at the same time a proof of the complexity characters provide in their inner essence, which sets them apart from the typically one-sided, satiric characters.

The recognition of a star behind the mask of a character provokes a tension between the meanings the two provide. The star is supposed to be the "perfect fit" for the character, which will create the "flat" characters (following E. M. Forster's classification) so characteristic of classical cinema.<sup>3</sup> When this is not so, when the star provides a different meaning from those of his/her character, then it creates complex characters, the opposite of the typical types needed in satire. In our film stars provide characters with contradictory information: for example Strangelove is a mixture of the references it suggests to similar military scientists who existed at the time in the USA, the satiric side of the character, and of the connotations of histrionics which Sellers' persona carries, the spectacular side of it. In Dyer's terminology, stars as characters may make use of only a restricted number of the connotations the star provides (selective use), the aspects of a star may fit all the traits of a character (perfect fit), or the nature of the star may result in problems for the construction of the character (problematic fit) (142-49): does the personality of the stars overwhelm other meanings provided by their characters? How does the text work out the contradictions between these different meanings? How does the film mask those contradictions and creates unity, if it does create or require unity at all?

In order to answer these questions I will again resort to an intertextual reference the text offers us and which may throw light on the relationships between actors (stars) and characters. The obvious presence of Peter Sellers playing three roles finds a precedent in *Lolita* (1962), where his character Clare Quilty follows the couple Humbert-Lolita across the USA and adopts different disguises in order to obtain information about them. The connection between both films presents the theme of the difference character-actor: in *Lolita* we have a character conspicuously playing other characters he invents; in *Dr. Strangelove* we have an actor who is playing three different characters behind whom the audience recognise the same actor. *Dr. Strangelove* suggests, by means of this intertextual

relationship, how artificial the notion of character is, how it demands a strong suspension of disbelief in order to mask the fact that a character is nothing but a real person outside the text. Besides, the presence of a fictional entity playing other fictional characters in *Lolita* suggests that the status of the actor in *Dr. Strangelove* (who is doing precisely the same) is also partly fictional, that the actor may be also transformed by the characters he plays and that he as person may be essential for the understanding of those different roles. The actor provides a link between Muffley, Mandrake and Strangelove in the same way as the character of Clare Quilty did with his different impersonations in *Lolita*. And finally, these considerations about the actor lay bare the manipulation the text carries out, a manipulation which may provide a meaning or not but which is clearly pointed at here.

Peter Sellers is the representative star of the histrionic, theatrical, insincere actor, a reputation he had already acquired by the time he made *Dr. Strangelove* in previous appearances as a comedian. His performances constantly lay bare the presence of the actor behind the mask of the character, making of the audience's recognition of this fact (facilitated by his faithfulness to a very personal way of performing) the central force of his characterisations. In the case of Muffley, Sellers appears more controlled than usual; the character manages to impose over the star as he scarcely uses comic mannerisms (except for certain instances such as the telephone conversation). Mandrake as a character is the loyal, polite, British officer. Sellers exaggerates his politeness and British dignity, which in fact conceals an essential cowardice to deal with extreme situations: when he has to demand the code from Ripper, he only timidly requests it and immediately tries to leave the office as he is afraid of the General. Sellers' comicity stems partly from his performance and accent, and partly from the audience's knowledge that Sellers is actually British. But the main source of comedy is the connotations Sellers had acquired, previously to his intervention in *Dr. Strangelove*, in the *Goonshow*, a television program where he took part in comic, parodic sketches. The contradiction character-star is resolved, in the case of Mandrake, through the force of the star and the added connotations he brings along: in the end he is accommodated as a comic figure. *Strangelove* is a similar case: the link with Rotwang provides the satiric component. He is identified as the mad scientist who allies with the powerful classes of society in order to control the destiny of the people. He mixes this political aspect with an exaggerated love for machines, which he sees as proof of his intelligence and imagination. But the star powerfully emerges behind the character's mask and turns the character's meaning into part of his exaggerated performance. In the case of *Strangelove* the contradiction character-star is also resolved by transforming the star into the powerful sign, which eliminates the apparently satiric side of the character. The orthopaedic hand covered by a black glove and his German accent recall Rotwang's appearance and origin, and the Nazi tic reminds of the German nationalism which was attributed to *Metropolis*. But Sellers' persona transcends all this and, through a constantly and very self-consciously exaggerated performance, makes *Strangelove* look like another one of his typical disguises, therefore masking the condemnable side of the character.

Sterling Hayden's persona seems to conjure up a view of the attractive outcast, of integrity in the face of difficult situations. Critics even see this view confirmed in the actor's private life, so Weinrichter says when reviewing *The Killing*:

Lo mejor de *Atraco perfecto* es Sterling Hayden. Hay películas como *Johnny Guitar*, *La jungla del asfalto* o *El largo adiós* que, aparte de sus virtudes (y ninguna baja de magnífica), ocupan un lugar especial en nuestro recuerdo en buena parte gracias a la presencia de este actor. Después hemos sabido, y tras su reciente muerte lo hemos recordado, que su actitud ante la vida era tan *fronteriza* como sus mejores personajes nos habían hecho imaginar . . . Hayden estaba mejor en tramas en las que su imponente presencia física se metía en la piel de un ser que se encontrase en un callejón sin salida, fuese éste concreto o existencial. (8)<sup>4</sup>

In *Dr. Strangelove* Hayden also plays a character in an awkward situation, but the actor's persona provides an added meaning of goodness, helplessness and beauty which reveals a more sympathetic treatment of the character than it would seem at first sight. A meaning which has its origin in Hayden's previous roles in noir films like *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) or *The Killing* (1956), both of which presented the hero as a loser who did not manage to carry out his plan as expected. The similar circumstances in *Dr. Strangelove*, a similar characterisation in an office which is lighted in the noir fashion, seem to mask the fact that Ripper is not an innocent creature at all and that he is not the one who is at the mercy of circumstances, as in the previous films, but rather the cause of all the trouble.

George C. Scott adds connotations to Turgidson which completely correspond to the description of the character in the film. The actor's four-year stay as a marine in the American army had given him the aura of a defender of militarism and the American people's rights all over the world. The character is in this case reinforced by casting. Slim Pickens also contributes to a stronger composition of Major Kong as he was well-known at the time for his appearances in low-budget westerns from the mid-forties. The connotations of the western clearly help the parodic portrayal of this new air-force cowboy. Therefore, apart from Turgidson and Kong the rest of the main characters are examples in which the connotations brought by the actor's persona manage to overwhelm the character. *Dr. Strangelove* presents the actors as more essential than the characters, and uses their connotations for various purposes. The text seems to relish its artificiality in the process of construction of characters and to indulge in its privileging actors' personae over them.

Thirdly, the film's use of these stars also suggests constant comparisons between the personalities of the actors, the considerations about them which stem from the knowledge of their lives and attitudes (and connotations from appearances in previous films, as they were perceived before and at the time the film was made), and the way the actors are presented in *Dr. Strangelove*. In this respect, Peter Sellers keeps his universally acknowledged reputation as a histrionic comedian to the point that it seems as if the film had been devised in order to use his wonderful acting expertise. The film relishes his constant exaggerations at the expense of the alleged condemnation of the reality in which they are inscribed. The rest of the actors nevertheless seem to provide meanings which contradict and ultimately parody their previous views as personae. Sterling Hayden defended liberal political views in his private life and was very concerned with the defence of human rights. This was accompanied by an everpresent ambiguity in the characters he used to play, characters who concealed a good heart behind a tough, insensitive

appearance. In *Dr. Strangelove* Hayden acquires connotations of political dogmatism and intransigence, and his portrayal of Ripper is as unambiguous as it might be, in a clear reference to his previous, subtly complex roles. George C. Scott seems to be parodying his reputation as faithful believer in the American doctrine, by carrying it to its extremest form. Slim Pickens is a parody of the simplicity and unaware happiness of the prototypical cowboy he had played in previous films. Actors provide meanings in this film which contradict and parody their previously acquired reputation as personae.

The presence of stars playing some characters also has an influence on the workings of identification. Characters represent individuals but they must be representative of something else in order to create identification. Identification is an ideological tool: it helps to reinforce the norms (the audience interiorise norms in the process of identification with a character who embodies a set of rules) and masks this process: by making the audience feel that they identify with a unique person, they ignore the fact that they are identifying with a normative figure (Dyer 108-109). In the case of satire, identification works by opposition, the audience identify with what the text is implicitly posing as the right attitude, which is the opposite of what the characters show. In *Dr. Strangelove* the development of the text, and more specifically its temporal structure, will make the audience identify with the characters and mildly relish the logic of events, the characters' longing for the end. Besides, the characters, due to the influence of the previously commented on presence of stars, are gradually shown as more outrageous and self-indulging, which drifts the attention away from their denouncing purpose. Identification is not therefore a reinforcement of the implicit norms in *Dr. Strangelove* but of the explicit ones (love of death, detachment from reality, etc.) which are therefore turned into the "proper" norms.

It is a general tendency of stars to individuate social issues, transforming them into personal matters which lose their component of social commitment in the process. Stars weaken people's awareness of themselves as class members "by reconstituting social differences in the audience into a new polarity pro-star/anti-star . . . collective experience is individualised and loses its collective significance" (Dyer 31). In *Dr. Strangelove* characters are at first understood as types and later become individuals through the overall workings of the text and the audience's recognition of them as stars. As the film becomes a vehicle of suspense, characters begin to be considered with respect to their individual responses to the predicament, and the audience begin to search them for individual actions which may prevent or accelerate the end. Mandrake is now more interesting as the individual who tries to phone the President than as type representative of an incompetent military command. The individuation that takes place in *Dr. Strangelove* is in some degree effected through the transformation of characters into stars. The connotations stars offer set them apart from one another as different individuals, and at the same time place them within the overall textual dynamics of comedy and fantasy. Stars in this film not only individuate social issues but also deprive those issues of any subversive intention as they become the basis of the stars' self-indulgence. Turgidson is at first a representative of the detachment of the military command from reality, but later indulges in his private dreams of annihilation of the Russians and sexual bliss in Strangelove's mine shaft scheme. Mandrake is first a straight characterisation of the loyal military man. Later on

characterisation indulges in his comic side, especially in the scenes with "Bat" Guano. This comic side partakes of his individual approach to the affair, still within sanity and common sense. *Strangelove* is all throughout the film an example of self-indulgence in his particular view of the world as the object of conquest, and of machines as the new gods. Kong and Ripper also appear as self-indulgent from the start, the text rejoicing in the former's faith in America's narrow-minded view of the rest of the countries, and in the latter's feeling of America as home of religious, transcendental beliefs.

Therefore, some characters lay bare their intertextual nature, their artificiality, and indulge in it. Characters are overpowered by stars, and the contradictions between characters and stars are resolved by the prevalence of the star's connotations as unifying elements. Stars prevail, which means another concession to artificiality. In the case of Peter Sellers, the text relishes his histrionic performance and celebrates his star's reputation as comedian. The rest of the actors' previous connotations are parodied: in both cases the film uses the meanings stars as personae offer and their presentation in this particular instance in order to elicit a smile from the audience. Finally, the processes of identification and individuation of social issues work to destroy the apparent satiric effect of the text. Characters have therefore evolved from satiric, one-sided entities to complex products of intertextuality. The final effect is nevertheless a return to the first interpretation of characters although with an important difference: characters are flat now because their intertextual nature has shown that the film favours their celebration as artificial and parodic comic constructs, rather than their status as meaning disseminating elements.

The analysis of *Dr. Strangelove*'s fabulaic contents and of the characters has therefore thrown a new light on the film. The study of these two aspects, and of their interaction with the audience, proves the existence of a tendency to favour the spectacular side of cinema: fabulaic exaggeration and textual visual brilliance finally prevail over any satiric consideration. The fabulaic contents show the existence of a kind of desire which generates fantasy which, in its turn, destroys the satiric claims of the text. The close examination of the characters reveals an underlying dissemination of meaning which manages to fragment and transform them into vehicles of spectacle. This tendency of the film may not be considered relevant by other critics; its disruptive force may be even ignored and spectacle analysed as a natural ingredient of the satiric genre which the film manages to redirect towards its denouncing activity, but the existence of such potential in the film cannot be denied. The critics' prevailing attitude of disregarding this side of spectacle is, in my opinion, the result of criticism's readiness to always qualify fantasy and spectacle as subversive, often refusing to consider alternative effects of commonly studied concepts.

#### Notes

1. I am here following Mieke Bal's terminology which distinguishes between fabula, story and text within the narrative work of art.

2. Stars are identification vehicles and, consequently, require a certain stability and definiteness which will reward the audience's previous assumptions about them. A reward which is essential for the process of identification.

3. R. Dyer has described one of the possible relationships between stars and characters as the "perfect fit", where "all the aspects of a star's image fit with all the traits of a character. That is, all the various signs of character, including those achieved through the use of stars, accord." (145-46). Bordwell sees in Dyer's work the proof that "the 'roundness' of the novelistic character is lacking in Hollywood film characterization" (14). The influence of the connotations stars provide in the construction of the character is so strong, that films themselves try to exploit it by creating characters which perfectly correspond to those connotations. Classical films prevent the 'roundness' which would stem out of the confrontation between the character's traits and the connotations brought by the star.

4. "Sterling Hayden is the best about *The Killing*. Films such as *Johnny Guitar*, *The Asphalt Jungle* or *The Long Goodbye*, excellent films in all respects, have a special place in our memories in part because of this actor's presence. We have later discovered, and remembered after his recent death, that his attitude towards life was as unconventional as his best characters had suggested to us . . . Hayden worked best in plots where his imposing physical presence could impersonate a human being placed at a concrete or existential dead end."

#### Works Cited

- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Trans. Christine Van Boheemen. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985.
- Bordwell, David, Janet Steiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Brunette, Peter, and David Wills. *Screen/Play. Derrida and Film Theory*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Of Grammatology." *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. Ed. Peggy Kamuf. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1991. 34-58.
- Dyer, Richard. *Stars*. 1979. London: BFI, 1986.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. 1980. London, New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. London: Longman, 1989. 212-28.
- Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. 1981. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Jakobson, Roman. *Ensayos de Lingüística General*. Trans. Josep M. Pujol and Jem Cabanes. Madrid: Seix Barral, 1975.
- Mast, Gerald. *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979.
- Metz, Christian. *Psicoanálisis y cine: el significante imaginario*. Trans. Josep Elías. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1979.
- Phillips, Gene D. *Stanley Kubrick: A Film Odyssey*. New York: Popular Library, 1975.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *Introducción a la literatura fantástica*. Trans. Silvia Delpy. Barcelona: Buenos Aires, 1982.
- Wagh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London, New York: Methuen, 1984.
- Weinrichter, Antonio. "Atraco perfecto de Stanley Kubrick." *Dirigido por ...* 138 (1986): 8-9.