Es war einmal ein treue Husar
Der liebt sein Mäedchen ein ganzes Jahr…
Und als man ihm de Botschaft bracht,
Das sein Liebchen im Sterben lag,
Da liess er all sein Hab und Gut
Und elite seinem Hertzliebchen zu.
Ach, bitte Mutter bring ein Licht
Mein Liebchen stirbt.

(There was once a faithful hussar/ Who loved his girl all year long . . ./ And when he was brought the news/ That his sweetheart lay dying,/ He left all his goods behind/ And rushed to his heart's true love./ Oh please, Mother, bring a light,/ My sweetheart is going to die.)

This song seems all the more ironic when Colonel Dax, after listening to it, is informed that his troops have been ordered back into action. As he walks into his quarters and closes the door in the face of the camera, Gerald Fried's non-diegetic score picks up Gerdes's sweet melody, orchestrating it as military march. The absurd war goes on and the film ends with the survivors returning to their original roles. I suspect that what most people remember

about the picture as a whole is not so much the heroism of Colonel Dax as the brilliant photographic *grisalle* of trench warfare, the execution of three soldiers in the name of patriotic honour, and the brief interlude of nostalgia before the barbaric system asserts itself again. This may have been the director's plan from the beginning and the reason why critics have given relatively little attention to the film's production history, its relationship to a relatively unknown novel and its underlying political tensions.

III. Dolores, Lady of Pain

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, the story of a European paedophile's obsession with a prepubescent American girl (or, as the paedophile puts it, the story of an 'enchanted traveler' who finds himself 'in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet')[11], was first published in the United States in 1958 by G. P. Putnam's Sons, and has since become such a canonical work that the controversy surrounding its original appearance may be difficult to appreciate. Kingsley Amis, the author of *Lucky Jim* and other celebrated comic novels about sex, wrote in the British journal *The Spectator* that Nabokov's book was 'thoroughly bad in both senses: bad as a work of art, that is, and morally bad'. *Lolita* was denounced in the British parliament, banned in the UK, banned twice in France (where it had originally been published by the Olympia Press, a purveyor of what Billy Wilder once described as the sort of books you can read with one hand) and attacked as 'repulsive' and 'disgusting' by Orville Prescott in *The New York Times*. Before G. P. Putnam's took a chance with the novel, most American publishers had rejected it outright. Simon & Schuster reportedly turned it down because Mrs Schuster refused to have her name on 'that dirty book'. Even James Laughlin of New Directions, a press that specialised in avant-garde literature, refused to publish it. (Laughlin claimed it might reflect badly on Nabokov's wife and son.)[12]

But *Lolita* also had important defenders among the most distinguished literary figures of the day. Upon its original European publication, Graham Greene selected it as one of the best books of the year. When it appeared in the US, Lionel Trilling praised it as a story about romantic love, not about the mere sex he associated with another recent book, the best-selling Kinsey report. So intense were the public reactions for and against the book that it became a blockbuster success, selling 3 million hardback copies of its first US edition, remaining number one on the best-seller list for fifty-six weeks and quickly being translated into fifteen languages. At the height of the craze, unauthorised Lolita dolls were being sold as toys in Italy.

Nabokov was surprised by his good fortune. As he later boasted, he had dared to write about one of at least three themes that were virtually taboo in American publishing, the other two being 'a Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren' and 'the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106' (p. 314). His book even attracted the interest of Hollywood, where it fell into the hands of Stanley Kubrick, a director well suited to bring it to the screen. Nabokov and Kubrick had a number of traits in common, including an

intense aestheticism, a love of chess and a taste for dark humour. When Kubrick and James Harris read the novel just prior to its publication, they immediately acquired the film rights and began the struggle to create a script that would satisfy censors.

In 1958, Geoffrey Shurlock of the Production Code Administration sent Warner Bros., the studio that expressed interest in financing the picture, a memo summarising an apparently satisfactory discussion he had held with Harris and Kubrick. According to Shurlock, they had suggested having Humbert Humbert and Lolita Haze marry one another in 'some state like Kentucky or Tennessee', so that the film would involve 'humor arising from the problems of a mature man married to a gum-chewing teenager'. They also assured Shurlock that they wanted to prevent 'any objectionable sex flavor' and thereby prevent 'another *Baby Doll* uproar'.[13] Shurlock was referring to Elia Kazan's 1956 film, adapted from a Tennessee Williams story, which told the story of a triangle between a middle-aged southerner, his child bride and his business rival; the picture starred the young Carroll Baker as a thumb-sucking adolescent who liked to sleep in a baby's crib. It had earned a much-publicised condemnation from the Legion of Decency, but suggested a way of transforming Nabokov's outrageous plot into something 'legal'. (A similar suggestion had already been offered by Humbert Humbert in the novel, who argues in his defence that 'in some of the United States', a tradition is preserved of allowing a girl to marry at twelve [p. 135]).

In 1959, Harris and Kubrick approached Nabokov through his agent, Irving 'Swifty' Lazarr, about the possibility of having the author himself write a screenplay for the film. Their initial discussions proved unsuccessful, in part because they were still convinced that, to get *Lolita* past the censors, they would have to convert it into a story about a middle-aged man who secretly marries a teenager. When Nabokov declined the invitation, Kubrick assigned the project to Calder Willingham, who drafted a script that Kubrick rejected. Meanwhile, Nabokov travelled to Europe, where he began to have second thoughts about the screenplay. By this time, Harris-Kubrick had given up on the deal with Warner and formed a new arrangement with Seven Arts in England, where, if they used a mostly British cast and crew, they could enjoy tax advantages and a certain distance from Hollywood's usual ways of doing business. When Kubrick wired Nabokov, pleading that he reconsider and showing more willingness to battle the censors, Nabokov accepted the assignment.

By the summer of 1960, Nabokov completed a 400-page script, sacrificing nothing and even adding a few scenes he had omitted from the novel. As a result of an agreement he made with Kubrick, he was allowed to publish a shortened version of this screenplay in 1974, long after the movie had played in theatres. According to Richard Corliss's excellent BFI monograph on the film, the published version of Nabokov's script is much revised from the original and may even contain ideas from Kubrick; nevertheless, Corliss estimates that its running time would have been approximately four hours, whereas Kubrick's more radically shortened movie, paced in a characteristically slow style, runs 152 minutes. The published script has the same flashback structure as the film, but not the elaborate opening dialogue between Humbert Humbert and Claire Quilty; it preserves the form of the

novel by giving us two narrators – Dr John Ray, a quack psychologist who lectures to the audience, and Humbert, who is seen writing his memoirs in prison – and it gives us Humbert's full history leading up to his meeting with Dolores/ Dolly/ Lo/ Lolita Haze – the death of his mother, his childhood sexual experience with Annabel, his ludicrous marriage and divorce in Paris, his growing obsession with young girls, his theory of nymphets (delivered in the form of a crazed lecture on the 'divine' Edgar Allan Poe to a woman's literary club in America), his brief incarceration in an asylum and his arrival in Ramsdale to work as a French tutor for young Virginia McCoo. All the major incidents of the novel are dramatised, including Humbert's abortive attempt to murder Charlotte Haze while swimming in Our Glass Lake and his extended journey across America with the captive Lolita. At one point Nabokov even writes a cameo appearance for himself, in the role of a lepidopterist whom Humbert asks for directions.

The Nabokov screenplay is not only lengthy but also in some ways formally adventurous, making use of Fellini-esque dream images and other deliberately anti-realistic effects. When Humbert's mother is struck by lightning, 'Her graceful specter floats up above the black cliffs holding a parasol and blowing kisses to her husband and child.' When Dr John Ray narrates the story of Humbert's first marriage, he sounds like a bystander watching a movie he can't control: 'I think the cab driver ought to have turned left here. Oh, well, he can take the next cross street.' And when Humbert reads aloud from Charlotte's letter confessing her love, he appears before us in a variety of guises: 'In one SHOT, he is dressed as a gowned professor, in another as a routine Hamlet, in a third, as a dilapidated Poe.' Nabokov also does very little to bowdlerise the sex in the novel. When Humbert and Lolita sleep overnight at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel (inhabited by a Mr Swoon, a Dr Love and a Bliss family), Lolita leans seductively over his recumbent figure (we can see only his twitching big toe) and proposes that they experiment with 'a game lots of kids play nowadays':

> HUMBERT: (faintly) I never played that game.
> LOLITA: Like me to show you?
> HUMBERT: If it's not too dangerous. If it's not too difficult. If it's not too – *Ah, mon Dieu!*

Dismayed by the length of this script (James Harris quipped, 'You couldn't make it. You couldn't *lift* it.'), Kubrick and Harris effusively complimented the author and, with Kubrick's assistance, Harris quietly set about doing much of the cutting, rewriting and coping with censors in both Britain and America. In December 1960, after several months of revision, Kubrick submitted the revised script to John Trevelyan, OBE, Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors, who argued that the subject matter was unsuitable for comic treatment. 'We can see the possibility of an acceptable film on this book,' Trevelyan wrote, 'if it had the mood of Greek Tragedy.' Trevelyan was particularly upset by 'the juxtaposition of lavatory noises and sexual situations' and by the double-entendre dialogue, as in a speech by a frantic schoolteacher named 'Miss Pratt': 'And just yesterday, she wrote a most obscene

four-letter word which our Doctor Cutler tells me is low-Mexican for urinal with her lipstick on some health pamphlets!' [14]

One month later, James Harris sent the script to Martin Quigley, publisher of *Motion Picture Daily* and one of the original designers of the Hollywood PCA, having deleted most of Nabokov's descriptive language or 'interpretive material relating to characters and incidents', which Quigley had previously found 'highly objectionable' and conducive of 'a most distasteful odor'. Among various other concerns, Quigley insisted that the girl in the film be portrayed as not less than fifteen years' old. Both he and Geoffrey Shurlock were specific about lines of dialogue they wanted removed, including 'Because you took her at an age when lads play with erector sets'. Harris responded with a masterfully diplomatic letter addressing nearly all of the issues raised by Quigley and Shurlock. Much would be done, he assured them, in scenes such as the high-school dance, to make Lolita look fifteen or older; the 'erector set' line would be removed; care would be taken to assure that the murder of Quilty would not look excessively brutal; and in the seduction scene at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, 'We will avoid any criticisms by having Lolita wear a heavy flannel, long-sleeved, high-necked, full-length nightgown and Humbert not only in pajamas, but bathrobe as well.'[15] These promises were kept. Lolita looks like a sophisticated senior at the high-school dance, Quilty's death is discreetly shielded from view by a Gainsborough-like painting and Lolita and Humbert are properly buttoned up when they share a bedroom in the hotel. Only the first half of the sentence about the erector set makes it into the film: in the midst of reading aloud from Humbert Humbert's poetic denunciation of him, Claire Quilty comes to 'Because you took her at an age when young lads', and Humbert snatches the paper from his hand. 'Why'd you take it away, Mister?' Quilty asks in a country-hick voice. 'It's gittin kinda smutty there!'

The development of the script involved the jettisoning of nearly a third of the incidents in the novel and repeated concessions to the censors. After Shurlock and Quigley viewed the film in August 1961, they wanted to cut Charlotte Haze's reference to a 'limp noodle', as well as numerous sounds of grunting from a closed bathroom door. Harris agreed to make the changes 'so far as technical matters permit'. (The limp noodle remains; the toilet sounds are reduced to a few ambiguous murmurs when Humbert hides in the bathroom to write in his diary, and to a single loud flush when Charlotte exhibits the house to her prospective lodger: 'We still have that good old-fashioned crank plumbing,' she says. 'Should appeal to a European.') Despite these changes, the resulting film, distributed by MGM, belonged in company with several A-list pictures of the late 1950s and early 1960s that appeared slightly scandalous; it was given an 'A' or 'adult' Certificate by the MPAA, an 'X' by the British Board of Censors and it was initially condemned by the Legion of Decency, which relented only when ads for the film were captioned 'For persons over eighteen only'. (J. Lee Thompson's *Cape Fear*, starring Robert Mitchum as a sadistic ex-con who preys upon a pre-teen girl in tight shorts, was released in the same year as *Lolita*, but seems to have escaped age restrictions everywhere except in Berlin.) Nevertheless, on 24 March 1961,

shortly before the picture opened, *Variety* reported that a British group calling itself 'Christian Action' was attempting to have *Lolita* banned because it might be 'seen by people suffering from the same perversion ... and might, therefore, do great harm, perhaps even leading to rape and murder, which would otherwise not have occurred'.

This was one occasion when the screenplay credit on the finished movie, which listed Nabokov as the sole writer, was an underestimation of Kubrick's contribution, although the characteristically modest Harris had done a great deal of the work. When Nabokov attended the New York premiere in 1962, 'as eager and innocent as the fans who peered into my car hoping to glimpse James Mason but finding only the placid profile of a stand-in for Hitchcock', he saw that 'only ragged odds and ends of my script had been used' (*Screenplay*, xii). He praised many aspects of the film (his contract prevented him from speaking against it) and told *The Paris Review* in 1967 that he regarded Kubrick's 'borrowings' sufficient to 'justify my legal position as author of the script'.[16] For their part, Kubrick and Harris must have been happy to obtain the cultural capital that Nabokov's name bestowed upon the project. Even so, many critics were disappointed. *Time* said that *Lolita* was 'the saddest and most important victim of the current reckless adaptation fad' (22 June 1962) and *Newsweek* described it as a 'negotiated settlement' with the novel (18 June 1962). Outside the US, both *Sight and Sound* and *Cahiers du cinéma* published negative reviews.

Subsequent commentators have typically compared the film unfavourably with the novel, not only because it leaves out a good deal of illicit sex, but also because its style is 'illusionistic', lacking cinematic equivalents for Nabokov's self-reflexivity, allusiveness, narrative complexity and Joycean word-play. The best examples of this argument can be found in Richard Corliss's BFI monograph on *Lolita* and in Robert Stam's *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*. Stam is particularly good at pinpointing signs of what he calls the director's 'aesthetic failure of nerve' and 'consequent incapacity to create a filmic equivalent to the novel's self-flaunting artificiality'.[17] On the other hand, as Stam points out, something can also be said for Kubrick's relative self-effacement, which makes the film 'more pleasurable on a second viewing. Lovers of the Nabokov novel can forget the literary qualities of the book to better appreciate the film's specifically cinematic pleasures: its fine-tuned performances and subtle *mise en scène*' (p. 235). Surprisingly, the positive qualities Stam mentions were also admired upon the original release of the film by none other than Jean-Luc Godard, the least illusionistic of directors, who was pleased by the fact that *Lolita* was less cinematically 'show-offy' than Kubrick's previous work. Godard had thought little of *The Killing*, but he praised *Lolita* as a 'simple, lucid film, precisely written, which reveals America and American sex ... and proves Kubrick need not abandon the cinema'.[18]

Kubrick and Harris had, in fact, deliberately set out to keep the film 'simple'. Their aim was to create a respectable and largely straightforward production that would both perpetuate and, in some ways, parody the well-made Hollywood romantic comedy. Much was

done to give the film a slick look and sound. Kubrick asked British photographer Oswald Morris to borrow from the US a set of lenses that MGM had used in the 1950s, which gave the studio's black-and-white imagery a glossy sheen (as one example of what these lenses did for the polished look of MGM film noir, see *The People against O'Hara*, directed by John Sturges in 1951). When Bernard Herrmann turned down an offer to compose the music (on the grounds that James Harris's brother had written a theme song for the picture), Kubrick and Harris commissioned Nelson Riddle, the arranger of Frank Sinatra's famous albums in the 1950s and 1960s, to compose a lush, romantic score. Kubrick favoured a conventional editing style (see, for example, the game of 'Roman Ping Pong' between Humbert and Quilty, which starts with an establishing shot and then ping-pongs from shot to reverse shot),[19] and he confined his elaborate, Ophulsian tracking and craning effects to the early scenes in the Haze household, where the camera moves up and down the staircase, glides past walls à la *The Killing* and at one point (involving a masked cut) seems to travel down through the floor of an upstairs bedroom to the kitchen below. The resulting film eased the studio's nervousness about the novel's sensational subject matter and at the same time achieved a blend of sophistication and kitsch that captures some of Nabokov's most important effects.

The plush but ironically inflected style is established immediately in the credit sequence (designed by the British firm of Chambers and Partners), which uses elegant white lettering over the glowing image of a girl's pointed, naked foot, held in the palm of a man's manicured but slightly hairy hand. As the man gently places bits of cotton between the girl's toes and begins painting her nails, Riddle's orchestration of the 'Lolita' theme, featuring a plangent, yearning piano, floods the soundtrack like the score of an old-fashioned woman's melodrama. The theme was written by Bob Harris and, at one point, it had a title and lyrics that would have pushed it more blatantly into the realm of satire. Kubrick and Harris commissioned the aging but still prolific Hollywood songsmith Sammy Cahn (who, when someone once asked him which came first, the words or the music, famously replied, 'the cheque') to pen the following, perhaps wisely omitted, verses:

'Never Before-Never Again'

Chorus (with great warmth):
Never before-never again,
One trembling kiss, told me this,
There and then.
Ours was a love as timeless as time,
As bright as a star, as warm as a rhyme.
Let others search for a dream, my search is through.
I have no need of a dream, I have you.
Sighing together, feasting or fasting,

Not just for now, but ever and lasting.
In all this world of women and men,
Never before and never again!!!
Never before and never again,
No love like ours, not ever again!!!

No doubt these schmaltzy lyrics were commissioned because the novel is deeply, even lovingly preoccupied with kitsch, or with what the Russians call *poshlust*, and it makes numerous jokes about American pop music. Alfred Appel Jr, the editor of *The Annotated* Lolita, lists several hit recordings of the period between 1947 and 1952 that are mentioned in Nabokov's text: Sammy Kaye ('I'm Laughing on the Outside but Crying on the Inside'), Eddie Fisher ('My Heart Cries for You'), Tony Bennett ('Because of You') and Patti Page ('Detour' and 'Tennessee Waltz'). Kubrick, who almost single-handedly invented the 'compilation' score for his subsequent movies, missed a good opportunity to use some of these recordings for *Lolita*. Even better, he could have used equivalent material from the years when the film was made – this was, after all, the era of Chubby Checker and 'The Twist'. He does better with allusions to movies. The novel, which is set mostly in 1947, contains an ironically appropriate reference to two of the many films noirs released that year: *Brute Force* and *Possessed*; Kubrick alludes to a scene in Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945), in which Edward G. Robinson paints Joan Bennett's toenails, and he includes an actual clip from a horror film, which we shall note momentarily.

The style and tone of the film presented one kind of problem and the plot another. Like any movie adaptation of a novel, *Lolita* needed to condense or cut a good deal of its source material in order to conform to the length requirements of a feature film; at the same time, because this particular novel was well known and admired, there was a pressure to deliver something akin to what Nabokov's readers expected to see. Fortunately, Nabokov's plot contains three distinct 'acts', much like the well-made drama or boy-meets-girl screenplay. Act I: paedophile meets nymphet and marries her widowed mother in order to be close to her. Act II: when mother accidentally dies, paedophile has sex with nymphet, travels across country with her in the role of stepfather and suffers horribly when she is stolen away by another man. Act III: after several years paedophile finds his lost love, unsuccessfully pleads with her to leave the man she has married and murders the man who stole her. The film preserves this basic structure. The most serious loss is at the beginning. The opening scenes 'hook' us with a tunnel shot of a station wagon moving down a foggy road, a comically surreal murder in a Xanadu-like castle and a flashback to a plane arriving in New York; nevertheless, in deference to the censorship code, the film omits Humbert's account of his childhood sex with Annabel and his life as a paedophile before his arrival in Ramsdale. Kubrick originally intended to show a montage of Humbert's involvement with a series of nymphets but, under pressure from the censors, he cut these scenes, leaving the theme of paedophilia implicit and allowing at least some viewers to think of the film as a dark comedy about a middle-aged academic who is besotted with a teenager.

The other major cuts came from the second act of the novel, in which Humbert and Lolita take a couple of lengthy cross-country tours in the Haze automobile, aptly named 'Melmoth'. The film elides most of this material, in the process eliminating sordid details of Humbert's treatment of his child captive and sacrificing Nabokov's panoramic view of America. *Lolita* might have been a trip to rival *2001*, documenting a felon's marathon westward trek through an array of motels and curio shops; but to do the job properly it would have needed at least another hour of screen time during which not much happens to advance the plot. Kubrick contented himself with brief but nicely photographed views of highways, main streets and houses that he and his second-unit crew photographed in a score of locations in the eastern US and in the western desert. A great deal of this footage appears in skilfully engineered process-screen images viewed from within Humbert's car. We see almost nothing from the point of view of the driver; the countryside is mere background to Humbert's attempts to cope with Lolita, who munches potato chips and makes teenaged comments ('Oh, did you see that? A squashed cat!' 'Have you seen any of those, you know, those foreign films? . . . I don't like 'um.'). As a result, the film has a more claustrophobic feeling than the novel.

David Thomson has severely criticised this hot-house atmosphere, remarking that Nabokov's 'love story to America was ruinously shot in England' (p. 408). It seems to me, however, that the film actually gains something from being produced in the UK. The wit and pleasure of Nabokov's vision of America (which he described in his own commentary on the novel as a theatrical 'set' and a 'fantastic and personal' world [p. 315]) derive from the way the details of suburban Americana are mediated through a European sensibility. In roughly analogous fashion, the British craft workers and actors who constituted at least 80 per cent of the total personnel on *Lolita* mediate Kubrick's New York sensibility, creating an intangible but entirely appropriate air of America seen through a foreign lens. Along similar lines, it seems to me that in many cases Kubrick's decision to omit explicit sexual information and slightly de-eroticise the novel amounts to a virtue rather than a failing. Because Nabokov's medium was entirely words, he could render fleshly detail without creating the pornographic effect that photography almost inevitably produces. (This thesis can be tested by viewing Adrian Lyne's soft-core 1997 adaptation of the novel, in which the nymphet is indistinguishable from a Victoria's Secret model.) Even so, Nabokov had disappointed many of his Olympia Press readers by rendering his erotic scenes in a playful, elaborately literary style – a strategy quite different from the pornographic novel, in which, as he explained, sex should grow in intensity and perversity as the narrative proceeds, and 'Style, structure, and imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust' (p. 313). Kubrick and Harris understood this principle and saw no need to linger over Humbert's voyeuristic appreciation of little girls. As Harris has said, 'being explicit was never of any interest to us',[20] especially since virtually everyone who went to the movie already knew that the novel was about paedophilia; indeed, I suspect that some of the people who complained about the film's unfaithfulness to the novel were merely disappointed that it wasn't as sexy as they imagined it could be.

Still other trimming was to the film's advantage. The Nabokov screenplay, for example, takes nearly fourteen pages to go from the point when Humbert first sees Lolita to the point when he chaperones her high-school dance; these pages contain a few 'cinematic' devices, including a comic dream sequence, but they also contain a great deal of dialogue and business that retards the action. Kubrick accomplishes everything in four short, relatively wordless sequences. When the love-stricken Humbert seals the deal to rent a room in the Haze household, we cut from a soft-focus, glamour-girl close-up of the bikinied Lolita in her feathery sunhat, half-smiling in a knowing fashion and surrounded by an aureole of light, to a harsh close-up of a horror-movie mummy (Christopher Lee in *The Curse of Frankenstein* [1957]) who rips the bandages from his face to reveal decaying flesh. Cut to Humbert, seated between Charlotte and Lolita at a drive-in theatre where the horror movie is playing. Each of the frightened women takes one of Humbert's hands. He eludes the mother's grasp so as to better comfort the daughter. Charlotte places her gloved hand atop his, which is atop Lolita's, thus creating a perverse pyramid. Humbert releases Lolita and awkwardly crosses his arms. Fade out. Fade in to a bored Humbert teaching Charlotte how to play chess. Lo comes downstairs in a granny gown, gives her mom a resentful look and a perfunctory goodnight kiss, and then pauses to give Humbert a subtly sexy peck on the cheek; as Lo exits, Humbert takes Charlotte's queen, remarking, 'It had to happen sometime.' Fade out. Fade in to a close-up of Humbert peering over the edge of a book while on the soundtrack we hear bubblegum music and Lolita's voice counting 'thirty one, thirty two, thirty three . . .' Zoom out to show voyeuristic Humbert in a bathrobe, sunning in the

backyard and enjoying the sight of Lolita practising the hula hoop. Charlotte tiptoes into the scene wearing Capri pants and a straw hat and takes a flash picture of Humbert that startles him and causes Lolita to drop the hoop. She beams at Humbert: 'See how relaxed you're getting?'

These segments are remarkable for the way that they amusingly condense Nabokov's characterisations and themes. They clearly establish the triangle of desire that motivates the action, showing us Charlotte's pathetic aggressiveness, Lolita's pleasure in her new-found sex appeal and Humbert's mix of urbanity and naiveté. By cutting from girl to monster, they give us not only a grotesque shock effect but also a concise expression of the way Humbert in the novel sees himself as both a romantic swain and a guilt-ridden degenerate. ('The beastly and the beautiful merged at one point,' he tells his readers, 'and it is that borderline I would like to fix' [p. 135]). They provide mounting evidence of the rampant sexuality underlying Ramsdale's suburban propriety, and they repeatedly dramatise the masochistic encounter between European aestheticism and American vulgarity that is at the heart of the novel. The bikini and the sunglasses, the saccharine but sexy tune from the portable radio, the drive-in movie, the hula hoop, the awkward chess game – all these details reinforce the satire. Meanwhile, Charlotte's snobbish gentility and Humbert's baffled fascination with an apotheosis of American pop are demonstrated in the simplest, most comic terms.

As might be expected, Harris and Kubrick spent a good deal of time and generated publicity in searching for the girl they cast as Lolita. Given the fact that Hollywood has been preoccupied with child-women since the days of Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford and that US visual culture and advertising since the 1950s has been increasingly devoted to images of sexy children (Kirsten Dunst in *Interview with the Vampire* [1994], the Olsen twins on TV and Britney Spears in her pre-adolescence are only a few examples from the *fin de siècle*), it might seem that there would have been many candidates for the job. The novel, however, is quite explicit about matters that the nation preferred to deny or treat coyly, and any screen incarnation of the title character required an actor of talent as well as charm. Kubrick and Harris passed over the brilliant Tuesday Weld, who had played carnal teenagers in several movies of the 1950s but was approaching twenty at the time when *Lolita* went into production. With Nabokov's approval, they selected Sue Lyon, a dyed blonde fourteen-year-old whose previous experience consisted of playing a few bit roles on television and winning the title of 'Miss Smile' from the Los Angeles County Dental Association. When the film began shooting, Lyon was just young enough to qualify as a nymphet under the terms set by the novel: 'Between the age limits of nine and fourteen' (p. 16). Her inexperience as an actor and the slightly artificial look of her hair and make-up, especially at the high-school dance and at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, where the film bows to censorship by trying to make her look older, are in some ways beneficial, adding to what Humbert describes as 'a mixture of tender, dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity'. Without doubt her most eerily artificial scene is the one in Humbert's living room at Beardsley,

where she behaves like a cross between a frustrated, bored wife and an angry, sulking child while wearing tarty make-up and a flimsy costume for her role as a wood nymph in Quilty's school play, *The Hunted Enchanters*. Even when she is assisted by editing and other tricks, however, she has an extremely difficult role, requiring oscillations between bratty teenager and bemused temptress, provincial dope and cynical sophisticate, innocent victim and crafty manipulator – sometimes within the same sequence. She also has the problem of aging into a married and pregnant young woman by the end of the film. If she never fascinates the audience in the way she fascinates Humbert, she at least achieves sexy moments and tricky emotional transitions – an achievement that probably owes both to her native skill and to Kubrick's coaching.

As Charlotte Haze, ShelleyWinters is physically different from the woman in the novel, who is described by Humbert as 'a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich' (p. 37). She nevertheless gives a vivid caricature of the female type that Humbert finds most revolting: 'a big-breasted and practically brainless *baba*' (p. 26). Her job, as Richard Corliss observes, is 'to make a strong, bad impression, then get off' (p. 42). At this point in her career she was well suited to the task, having specialised in lower-class blondes who are murdered halfway through the picture – by Ronald Colman in *A Double Life* (1947), by Montgomery Clift in *A Place in the Sun* (1952) and, most memorably, by Robert Mitchum in *Night of the Hunter* (1955). Her deeper value to these films and to *Lolita*, however, lies in her ability to appear both annoying and touching. When she sashays around waving a cigarette-holder while describing her spare room as a 'semi-studio affair . . . very male', and when she announces that West Ramsdale is a 'culturally advanced' community 'with lots of good *Anglo* Dutch and *Anglo* Scotch stock', she seems ludicrously vulgar. In other scenes she makes the audience wince not only at but *for* Charlotte. Her bedroom conversations with Humbert represent some of the novel's ability to shift suddenly from comedy into pain and, in the cleverly written scene (not from the novel) in which Charlotte soliloquises to the ashes of her late husband Harold – 'the soul of integrity' who tried to commit suicide and who, in a photograph, scowls down at her bed – she manages to elicit a degree of compassion alongside the satire.

The most important figure in the cast is of course James Mason, who was always Kubrick's first choice for Humbert. A romantic heart-throb of the 1940s and early 1950s who contributed both sex appeal and an aura of intelligence to films directed by Carol Reed, Max Ophuls and Joseph Mankiewicz, Mason was a versatile performer who could play both troubled characters (*A Star Is Born* [1954], *Bigger than Life* [1956]) and amusing villains (*20,000 Leagues under the Sea* [1954], *North by Northwest* [1959]). Because he was British, he helped fulfil the national quota that Harris-Kubrick needed in order to obtain financing for the picture. He looked sufficiently like the character in Nabokov's novel, who describes himself as 'despite *mes malheurs*, an exceptionally handsome male; slow moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanor' (p. 25), and his voice was perfect – suave, possessing a velvet musical

quality suitable for both the polished diction of an aesthete and the 'fancy prose style' of a murderer (p. 9).

By any standard, this is one of the finest performances in Mason's distinguished career. Nearly all the comedy and sometimes painful emotional effects arise out of Humbert's struggle to maintain his *savoir faire*. As a vengeful lover, he confronts Quilty garbed in a dashing, fur-trimmed topcoat and bearing a pistol and a poem, but is repeatedly thrown off balance by his opponent's lightning wit and chameleon-like behaviour. As a prospective lodger trapped in Charlotte's house, he backs away from her relentless advances and tries to keep his smile from becoming a grimace. As a chaperone at the high-school dance, he sits awkwardly on a folding chair, balancing a cup of punch in one hand and a slice of cake in the other, while Charlotte and the partner-swapping Farlows (Jerry Stovin and Diana Decker) stand over him and discuss ways of getting Lolita out of the house. As Charlotte's 'glamour date', he is forced to drink pink champagne and participate in a clumsy cha-cha. As her would-be murderer, he snaps open a revolver and spills the bullets on the floor. As Lolita's instructor in the art of verse, he is made to behave like a trained seal while biting a fried egg. As her seducer, he arrives at a motel during a police convention and ends up sleeping on a collapsed cot. His one moment of relaxation is after Charlotte's accidental death, when he reclines in a hot bath, pie-eyed from a day of boozing, with a glass of whisky balanced on the floating tendrils of his hairy chest. In the midst of his steamy stupor, he learns from the Farlows that Charlotte had only one kidney and might not have lived much longer, and he unwittingly manoeuvres the weaselly, bow-tied

Frederick Beal (James Dyrenforth), who is seated on a nearby toilet lid, into paying for her funeral. In all other cases his plans fail. His discomfort mounts as the film progresses, producing a facial twitch, a nasty-sounding head cold and, finally, a dull pain in the arm that portends a heart attack.

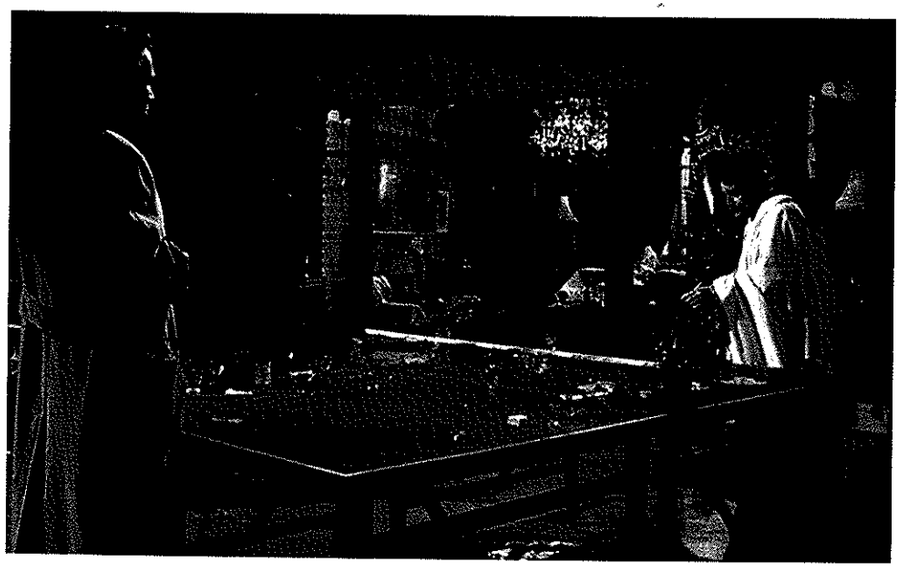
Throughout everything, Mason conveys a blend of refinement, ineptitude and romantic agony, all the while allowing us to see Humbert's the dark shadow of his obsession and his ignorance of a modernised world. One of his finest moments, cleverly staged by Kubrick, is the dramatic peripeteia that transforms Humbert from a lovesick swain into a gleeful monster. The episode begins with a hirsute Humbert rising from his bed, donning a silken dressing gown and peering unhappily out of a window as Lolita prepares to board the family stationwagon for her summer trip to 'Camp Climax'. Seen from his point of view, she looks up and tells her mother, 'I'll be right back.' In a crane shot, she dashes into the house wearing a white dress and high heels, her petticoats billowing, and runs up the stairway to the sound of Nelson Riddle's music. A maudlin piano breaks through the orchestration at the moment when she arrives on the landing and embraces Humbert. In close-up, she says, 'I guess I won't be seeing you again, huh?' Humbert nods and tragically replies, 'I shall be moving on.' Lolita smiles. 'I guess this is goodbye.' She winks at him. 'Don't forget me,' she says cheerfully, and runs off. The piano launches into the 'Lolita' theme and, from a slightly low angle, we see Humbert forlornly gazing down over the balcony. The camera rises and cranes in to a closer view of his misery as he leans over and watches her go; then it follows him as he turns and wanders into her room, where, surrounded by her girlish possessions (including a magazine ad tacked to the wall featuring a photo of Claire Quilty), he sits on her bed, buries his head in her pillow and weeps.

It's as if we were watching a Douglas Sirk picture with the gender roles reversed, so that a 'feminised' man suffers for love. (Actually, Sirk himself once directed such a film: *There's Always Tomorrow* [1956].) At the lowest point of Humbert's despair, however, the hand of the family's black maid (Isobel Lucas) enters the frame to give him a letter from Charlotte. Sitting on the edge of the bed and sniffling, he reads aloud in a congested, contemptuous voice: 'Last Sunday in church, my dear one, when I asked the Lord what to do about it, I was told to act as I am acting now .... Go, scram, *departez*! ... The fact that you are remaining would mean only one thing [Humbert begins to smile through his tears, relishing Charlotte's clichés and hypocritical piety, and then he gives a deep, delighted chuckle]: that you want me as much as I do you, as a lifelong mate [more laughter] .... Goodbye, dear one! Pray for me [laughter], if you ever pray!' Triumphantly, the unshaven, evil-looking Humbert tosses his head back and lapses into diabolic laughter. He drops blissfully onto Lolita's pillow and continues to laugh as the camera pans over to the magazine image of Quilty endorsing Drone cigarettes, the brand with the 'real, true taste'.

The casting of Claire Quilty was Kubrick's most radical choice. An ubiquitous presence in the novel, Quilty is often alluded to but is fully recognisable only retrospectively, after Humbert discovers his identity and tracks him to his gothic lair. His big scene comes at the

end of the book, when he appears for the first time as himself – a fantastically decadent character who frustrates Humbert's revenge. A grotesque struggle breaks out between Quilty and Humbert, who tells his prospective readers from 'the first years of 2000 AD' that they shouldn't expect the 'ox-stunning fisticuffs' of a Western movie: 'He and I were two large dummies, stuffed with dirty cotton and rags. It was a silent, soft, formless tussle on the part of two literati, one of whom was utterly disorganised by a drug while the other was handicapped by a heart condition and too much gin' (p. 299). At the climax of the battle Humbert repeatedly shoots Quilty, who shivers, squirms and complains in a fake British accent as he retreats upstairs. Humbert is amazed: 'I was injecting spurts of energy into the poor fellow,' he remarks, 'as if the bullets had been capsules wherein a heady elixir danced' (p. 303).

Because Kubrick places his version of this scene at the beginning of the film, the screen Quilty achieves a greater presence and is always recognisable in whatever guise he adopts. His function as Humbert's *doppelgänger* also becomes more immediately apparent. Nabokov had designed the two 'literati' as mirror opposites. Humbert is a romantic and a masochist – a civilised, anachronistic, alienated European who is excited by the philistine Lolita and enslaved by his emotions to such a degree that he becomes a servant to his captive. He makes her sandwiches ('loaded with mayonnaise, just the way you like it'), paints her toenails, buys her presents, does all the housework and ludicrously tries to supervise her education by taking her to museums and offering her a copy of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Always out of his element, he never stops desiring his young charge, even when she grows older and gets pregnant. Quilty, on the other hand, is a cynic and a sadist



– a writer of American television shows and Hollywood films ('I got fifty-two successful scenarios to my credit') who easily makes a conquest of Lolita. He whisks her off to his castle, tries to force her to act in pornographic 'art' movies, and then casually tosses her aside. The master of every situation, he enjoys humiliating Humbert and makes wisecracks even when he is being shot to death.

To play this evil twin, Kubrick chose impersonator Peter Sellers, who had acted in numerous British comedy films, including *The Ladykillers* (1955) and *I'm All Right, Jack* (1959), but who was even better known in England for his wildly irreverent collaborations with Spike Milligan on BBC radio's surreal *The Goon Show*. Kubrick and Sellers shared a bizarre comic sensibility and Kubrick especially admired Sellers's improvisatory skills, which had the effect of a jazz musician riffing on a basic melody. Much of the dialogue Sellers speaks in the film was, in fact, scripted – his most important lines in the opening scene, for example, come straight from the novel – but Kubrick also encouraged him to invent speeches and bits of business, sometimes as the camera was rolling. The film shifts into a slightly different mode whenever he appears, abandoning realistic illusion to create something rather like a vaudeville show or a speciality act. Although Sellers had the ability to subsume his personality into whichever voices or mannerisms he adopted (by all accounts his off-screen character was almost as blank as 'Chance', the childlike idiot he portrays in *Being There* [1979]), in *Lolita* he usually seems to be 'himself' – that is, a comedian who does funny impersonations. At the high-school dance he's such a cool jitterbug – in contrast to Humbert, who can barely keep time by clapping his hands – that he virtually stands still, snapping his fingers and glancing at his watch as he twirls the wildly Bohemian Vivian Darkbloom (Marianne Stone). When Charlotte whispers in his ear to remind him of an afternoon they once spent together, he looks straight down her neckline and smirks, 'Did I do that?' Then he breaks into alliterative, literary-hipster talk, slyly alluding to Algernon Charles Swinburne's decadent poem, 'Dolores, Our Lady of Pain': 'Lissen, din't you have a daughter? Din't you have a daughter with a lovely name? Yeah, a lovely, what was it now, a lovely, lilting, lyrical name? . . . Lolita! Yes, that's right. Diminutive of Dolores, "the tears and the roses" . . .' . Later, when he and Vivian arrive at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, Kubrick photographs him with a cartoon-like wide-angle lens. His exchange of innuendo with Mr Swine, the hotel clerk, sounds less like Nabokov than like a sketch from *The Goon Show*:

SWINE: Maybe you could use me sometime.

QUILTY: Yeah, maybe I could use you.

SWINE: I swim, play tennis, lift weights. Gets rid of the excess energy. What do you do with your excess energy?

QUILTY (looking at Vivian, who wears a shiny black raincoat): We do a lot of things with my excess energy . . . . She's a yellow belt. I'm a green belt. That's the way nature made it. What happens is, she throws me all over the place.

SWINE: She throws you all over the place?

QUILTY: . . . She sweeps my ankles out from under me and I go down with one helluva bang. I sort of lay there in pain but I really love it . . . . I lay there hovering between consciousness and unconsciousness.

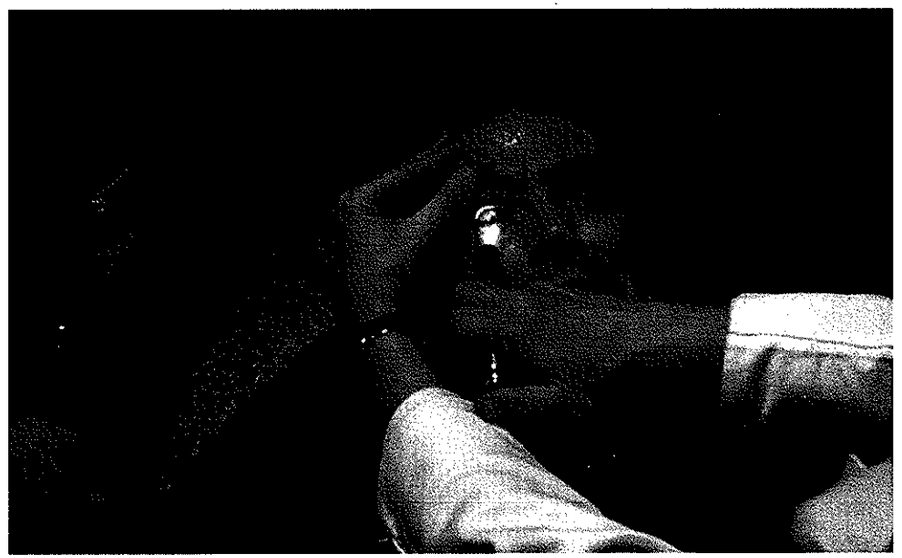
Sellers's American accent was reportedly based on Norman Granz, a celebrated Los Angeles jazz promoter, but Richard Corliss has noted that he actually sounds more like Lenny Bruce. I suspect that at times he was also imitating Stanley Kubrick. After all, Claire Quilty is a film director of sorts – at any rate he's a fellow who has experience in Hollywood and who wants to put Lolita in a movie. His first words to Humbert are a reference to Kubrick's recently completed *Spartacus* ('Come ta free the slaves or sumpthin?'), and his first action is to challenge Humbert to a game of ping-pong, which was one of Kubrick's favourite forms of recreation. In several of his appearances he wears a 35mm still camera strapped around his neck, much like the one Kubrick can be seen wearing in behind-the-scenes publicity shots taken during the production of the film. ('Go and get some Type-A Kodachrome,' he instructs his assistant at one point, using a distinct Bronx accent.) Although he's a far more dapper fellow than Kubrick, he has the same aura of New York artistic-ness, and his female companion is a comic stereotype of the sort of Greenwich Village women Kubrick knew in his youth.

As the plot develops, Kubrick allows Sellers to engage in increasingly flamboyant *schtik*. Such moments are roughly equivalent to passages in Nabokov's novel when everything tips over into farcical absurdity – as when Humbert daydreams about sneaking into Camp Q and visiting Lolita disguised as 'a somber old-fashioned girl, gawking Mlle Humbert' (p. 66). First, Sellers masquerades as a nervous, slightly effeminate delegate to the police convention who keeps his back to Humbert on the dark veranda of the Enchanted Hunters: 'Maybe you think I think you look suspicious, me being a policeman and everything . . . . I look suspicious myself. A lot of people think I'm suspicious, especially when I stand around on street corners. One of our own boys picked me up last week . . . . I said to myself when I saw you, I said, there's a guy with the most *normal* looking face I ever saw in my life . . . . It's great to see a normal face, 'cause I'm a normal guy. Be great for two normal guys like us to get together and talk about world events in a normal sort of way.' Then he appears as 'Dr. Zemf, ze Beardsly High School pzychiatrist', a sort of ur-Strangelove in thick eyeglasses, who sits in the darkness of Humbert's parlour, disguised with an obviously fake moustache, puffing Drone cigarettes and speaking in a stage-German accent: 'Vell, Doktor Humbarts, to *you* she's still za liddle girl vat iz cradled in za arms. But to zoze boys over zere at Beardsly High she's a lovely girl, you know, mit, mit, mit, mit der *schving*! . . . All ze time she iz chewing ziz gum! Und she hass private jokes of her own, vich no one understands zo zey can't enjoy zem mit her!'

In an interview with Terry Southern before the making of *Dr. Strangelove*, Kubrick remarked that he had treated these scenes as 'comic nightmare' à la Kafka, and that he was

'very pleased' because they opened 'an avenue . . . of telling certain types of stories in ways that haven't yet been explored in movies' (p. 3). There had certainly been cinematic precedents for such effects – Kubrick seems to have overlooked Welles's adaptation of *The Trial*, released in the same year as *Lolita*, which provides a much more thoroughgoing exploration of nightmarish humour – but *Lolita*'s particular mingling of grotesque caricature, deadpan realism and 'forbidden' sexual implication was quite rare in movies before the 1960s. Sellers's impersonations, moreover, are only a part of the film's shifting, unusually complex emotional tone. Its comedy ranges from the somewhat dubious slapstick of the scene in which Humbert and the aged hotel porter Tom (John Harrison) try to open a bedroom cot while Lolita is sleeping, to a number of minor and more subtle forms of visual wit, such as the moment when Lolita toys with a sculpture of a hand holding a quill pen while she is interrogating her mother about Claire Quilty. At another extreme, the film blends satire with pain and pathos. Consider the scene in which the feverishly ill Humbert, wild with grief and anger because Lolita has run away, is wrestled to the floor by hospital attendants; as Greg Jenkins has pointed out, this action is much more elaborately dramatised than in the novel, making Humbert appear 'overpowered and utterly humbled' and giving him a poignant exit line as he gets to his feet, tries to regain his dignity, and slowly walks off: 'She didn't by any chance leave a message for me? No, I suppose not.' [21]

After Humbert's forlorn exit, we leap over four years of the story and roughly twenty pages of the novel to arrive at the climactic, equally pathetic recognition scene. Humbert receives a subliterate 'Dear Dad' letter from Lolita: 'How's everything?' she asks. 'I'm going



to have a baby. I'm going nuts because we don't have enough to pay our debts and get out of here. Please send us a check.' Arming himself with a pistol, he drives to what appears to be a working-class district in a small city (the exteriors were shot in Albany, New York), where he finds Lolita married to Richard T. 'Dick' Schiller (Gary Cockrell). Humbert's expensive garb and upper-class manner are in vivid contrast to the shabby surroundings and with Lolita herself, who is bespectacled, blue-jeaned and great with child. When the partly deaf Dick (his hearing aid is a nice touch) opens a can of beer and steps out into the tiny backyard with his friend Bill (Roland Brand), Lolita explains how she ran away with Claire Quilty, her special lover, whom she describes as a 'genius' with a 'beautiful Japanese-Oriental philosophy of life'. She shows no resentment for the sordid way Quilty treated her, nor any emotional attachment to Humbert, who grasps her wrists and pleads with her to abandon her marriage and return to him. The idea is 'crazy', she says; she wants only to go off to Alaska and have the baby with her gentle but unremarkable husband. Broken-hearted, sobbing uncontrollably, Humbert releases Lolita and gives her cash, a cheque and the mortgage profits from her mother's house. As he makes a swift, grief-stricken departure, she apologises for 'cheating'. That's the 'way things are', she tells him, and calls out, 'Let's keep in touch.'

Kubrick explained to Terry Southern that he spent a full twelve days shooting this scene, trying to achieve the effect of a 'disparity' and 'incongruity' between Humbert, who is 'still emotionally involved', and Lolita, who is 'simply embarrassed' (p. 5). He believed it was the crucial moment in the novel, showing the metamorphosis of Humbert's desire for the nymphet into something like love for the grown woman – the point at which 'the

surface of comedy' was penetrated to disclose a 'tragic romance' (p. 7). He agreed with Lionel Trilling's description of Nabokov's novel as a modern love story in the tradition of such classic predecessors as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, all of which involve illicit passion of one kind or another; and he told Southern that he especially admired the way Nabokov had refrained from revealing his authorial approval or disapproval of the relationship between Humbert and Lolita. 'In fact,' he said, 'it isn't until the very end, when Humbert sees her again four years later, and she's no longer by any stretch of the definition a nymphet, that the really genuine and selfless love he has for her is revealed' (p. 2).

If indeed the novel and the film are about love, they treat the theme ironically, as if playing a black-comic variation on Proust's notion that love is never equal. All the intertwined passions in the story – Charlotte Haze's desire for Humbert, Lolita's for Quilty and Humbert's for Lolita – are wildly inappropriate, destined to arrive at the moment when the lover will be rejected. Nowhere is this sense of 'disparity' and 'incongruity' more evident than in the penultimate scene, when all the signs of class, age and emotion are marshalled to indicate how much Humbert's love for Lolita extends across a chasm of difference, transcending even sexual desire. Perhaps, as Lolita says, that's just the 'way things are'. Love begins as erotic attraction for an out-of-reach or forbidden object, but is always in danger of becoming hopeless idealism, somehow both admirable and absurd.

To my knowledge, no one has ever claimed that the Harris-Kubrick adaptation of *Lolita* is as artistically impressive as Nabokov's novel, nor has anyone ever offered a compelling reason why any film can or should exactly reproduce a literary text. But given the fact that Kubrick and Harris set out to evoke certain qualities they admired in one of the twentieth century's most brilliant works of fiction, it seems worthwhile to conclude with a sort of balance-sheet of their successes and shortcomings. The film effectively conveys the blend of romantic masochism and social alienation that underlies not only Humbert's obsession with Lolita but also some of the screen's great love stories, including what seems to me a better film, Ophuls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948). Its satire of philistine America is less complex than Nabokov's, lacking his particular mixture of lofty amusement and affection; but it's more pointed and relevant, less mingled with sentiment and moralising, than what we find in a superficially similar film like Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (2000), in which the leading male is treated as a kind of heroic rebel, free of criminal impulses. Unfortunately, however, Kubrick's *Lolita* shies away from the darkest irony at the heart of the novel: the fact that Humbert is both an idealist and an abuser of children. As a result, we have too little indication of Humbert's potential for violence or his occasional spasms of guilt, and almost no sense of why Lolita might prefer to be married to Dick Schiller. (In the novel, Humbert notes, 'It had become gradually clear to my conventional Lolita during our singular and bestial cohabitation that even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif' [p.287].)

Another important aspect of the novel is missing or attenuated in the film. Nabokov's ultimate subject is the transcendent value of art itself, which provides him with the only justification for writing the book and the only consolation for the folly, cruelty and mortality he observes. 'I see nothing for the treatment of my misery,' Humbert tells the readers of his confessions, 'but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art' (p. 283). The novel informs us that Humbert died of heart failure in 1952 and that Lolita died not long afterward while giving birth to her stillborn child. The film omits the last of these events and has no equivalent for the novel's moving last lines, which might be read as the voice of Nabokov himself, speaking through Humbert: 'I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita' (p. 309). This final meditation not only creates one of the novel's most poignant effects, but also gives force and substance to Nabokov's gorgeous prose and self-reflexive literary gamesmanship. Lacking an equivalent degree of artistic virtuosity (and perhaps thinking such things would be too rarified for the movie audience), the film makes the art theme less explicit; in place of Humbert's valedictory, it gives us bullet holes penetrating the 'durable pigments' of a painting. (A continuity error causes the painting to change places: in the opening of the film it sits at the bottom of the stairway and in the closing at the top.) The painting is nevertheless an appropriate image with which to conclude the film, because Kubrick is no less an aesthete than Nabokov. Here and in most of his subsequent work, the only recompense he offers his audience for pain and death is the somewhat detached beauty of his cinematic craft.

Notes

1. All quotations in this paragraph are from correspondence in the Production Code Administration files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.
2. Other significant contributors to the film included Kubrick's wife, Ruth Sobotka, who was the art director, and Betty Steinberg, who worked with Kubrick as the editor.
3. Mario Falsetto (ed.), *Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*, 2nd edn (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), p. 25. All further quotations are from this edition, and page numbers are given in parentheses.
4. As far as I'm aware, no previous movie had been organised in quite this way. Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), which is influenced by *The Killing*, employs an even more complicated time scheme without the aid of a narrator.
5. See Falsetto, *Stanley Kubrick*, pp. 4–5. To his two examples I would add a third, which is much less obvious and might be an error in my own calculations. The narrator tells us that Nikki is killed at 4.24, less than a minute after he shoots Red Lightning. At virtually the same moment, according to a later scene, Johnny is in the race-track locker room taking a shotgun from a box of flowers. But as Johnny opens the box, the announcer on the race-track public-address system tells us that Red Lightning has just fallen.
6. Kirk Douglas, *The Ragman's Son* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989), p. 249.

7. *Paths of Glory*, screenplay by Stanley Kubrick and Jim Thompson (undated), Kirk Douglas collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.
8. 'Terry Southern's Interview with Stanley Kubrick', <www.terrysouthern.com/archive/SKint.htm>, p. 3.
9. Production file on *Paths of Glory*, Lilly Library, Indiana University.
10. Alexander Walker, Sybil Taylor and Ulrich Rachti, *Stanley Kubrick, Director* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 69.
11. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Second Vintage International Edition, 1997), p. 166. All further references are to this edition, and page numbers are indicated in the text.
12. Quotations in this paragraph come from the clippings file on *Lolita* in the Margaret Herrick Library of the Motion Picture Academy, Los Angeles.
13. Memo dated 11 September 1958, in the Production Code Administration files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles.
14. Quotations in this paragraph are from correspondence in the Production Code Administration files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles.
15. All quotations in this paragraph are from correspondence in the Production Code Administration files, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles.
16. Quoted in Alfred Appel Jr (ed.), *The Annotated* Lolita (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 354.
17. Robert Stam, *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (London: Blackwell, 2005), p. 233. Subsequent quotes are from this edition, and page numbers are indicated in the text.
18. Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard*, ed. and trans. Tom Milne (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 202.
19. The editing style was in part determined by the actors. Anthony Harvey, the editor of the film, has said that the scene between Peter Sellers and Shelley Winters at the high-school dance involved 'about sixty-five takes' because Winters kept forgetting her lines. Sellers's performance lost steam as the work wore on and, as a result, Harvey, had to use an over-the-shoulder editing style that took the best moments he could find from a multitude of shots. Harvey is quoted in Ed Sikov, *Mr. Strangelove: A Biography of Peter Sellers* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), p. 161.
20. James Harris, quoted in Gene D. Phillips and Rodney Hill (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2002), p. 147.
21. Greg Jenkins, *Stanley Kubrick and the Art of Adaptation* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 1997), p. 65.

Part Four

STANLEY KUBRICK PRESENTS

I. Wargasm

On 15 November 1961, after *Lolita* was completed and he had returned to the US, Kubrick wrote to Anthony Harvey, his British editor, that 'even though I know NY very well having lived about 25 years of my life here, it seemed like a wonderland'. In the same letter he recommended two recent books on a subject with which he was increasingly preoccupied: Herman Kahn's *On Thermonuclear War* (1960) and Henry Kissinger's *The Necessity for Choice* (1961), both of which offered a rationale for the development of an atomic arsenal. The first volume, weighing in at 652 pages, had received a good deal of media attention and sold 30,000 copies in the previous year; the second helped to earn its author a position as an advisor for John F. Kennedy during the 1960 presidential election. Kubrick was deeply concerned about such matters. He had amassed a research library of over seventy books on nuclear war and was a regular reader of military magazines and the US Naval Institute's proceedings. '[T]he main thing,' he wrote to Harvey, 'is the immediate effects of a nuclear explosion, e.g. blast, heat, flying objects – then the short lived (two weeks maximum) deadly radioactivity that ensues .... Carbon 14, which effects [sic] you genetically, lasts 10,000 years without diminishing.'[1]

The novel Kubrick had been planning to adapt for his next film, Peter George's *Red Alert*, first published in Britain in 1958 under the pseudonym 'Peter Bryant' and entitled *Two Hours to Doom*, is a thriller reflecting the world's growing fear of nuclear apocalypse. A veteran of the Royal Air Force, George was an active member of the Campaign for Nuclear

Disarmament and his knowledge of strategic military planning was impressive enough to earn praise from Herman Kahn. In his novel, a rogue US general orders a B-52 bombing attack on Russia and then commits suicide rather than reveal the secret code that would enable higher authorities to abort the mission. The general believes that his action will save America from the Red menace, but, as the US president subsequently explains to the Pentagon, he could not be more wrong. The Soviets have buried dozens of cobalt and hydrogen bombs in the Ural Mountains; in the event of a surprise nuclear attack, the bombs will detonate, destroying the entire planet. As the Strategic Air Command speeds towards its targets, the US informs the Soviets of the impending attack. Soviet air defences, however, aren't sophisticated enough to ward off the approaching planes. At the last minute, a US Air Force officer notices that the dead general has scribbled the letters 'POE' (representing 'Peace on Earth') on a note pad, and deduces that some combination of these letters is the secret recall code. When the letters are broadcast to the bombing planes, the mission is successfully cut short. One plane, however, doesn't receive the recall. The 'Alabama Angel', piloted by the resolute Major Clint Brown, has been crippled by a Soviet rocket and can't receive radio transmissions. Even though Brown is wounded and dying, the bomber continues on course, ultimately crash-diving into a minor target and failing to create a full-scale hydrogen explosion. In the aftermath, the diplomatic skill of the US president helps to prevent retaliation by the Soviets. The brush with doomsday brings both governments nearer to peace on earth.

The novel is narrated in a quasi-documentary style that might have eventuated in a film quite similar to Sidney Lumet's *Fail-Safe* (1964), which went into production at the same time as Kubrick's picture under the auspices of the same distributor, Columbia Pictures. Kubrick hired George to collaborate with him on a screenplay; but from the time of his earliest conferences about the project with James Harris, he found it difficult to accept either the novel's optimistic conclusion or its bland seriousness. 'We started to get silly,' Harris recalled. '"What would happen in the War Room if everybody's hungry and they want the guy from the deli to come in and a waiter with an apron around him takes the sandwich order?" We started to giggle about it' (LoBrutto, p. 228). Harris believed it would be a mistake to bring this anarchic humour into the film (soon after he and Kubrick dissolved their partnership, he directed *The Bedford Incident*, a realistic drama dealing with themes similar to the Peter George novel), but Kubrick disagreed. By late 1962, he had made two crucial decisions: first, since it was by no means irrational to imagine that nuclear weapons could destroy the planet, he planned to show them doing exactly that; and second, given the absurdity of the arms race, he decided to transform George's story into a 'nightmare comedy' entitled *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, featuring Peter Sellers in the title role.

At Sellers's suggestion, Kubrick commissioned American novelist Terry Southern, author of *The Magic Christian* (1959), for a month's work helping him to add jokes to the script. Sellers himself added a good many more jokes through improvisation during

filming. When *Dr. Strangelove* was released, many people assumed its humour derived chiefly from Southern, who was strongly associated with 1960s' counter-culture. Kubrick insisted that the satire was his own idea and that the order of script credits on the screen (himself first, George second and Southern third) was proper. At one point, he threatened legal action against MGM for advertising *The Loved One* (1964), an adaptation by Southern of a novel by Evelyn Waugh, as a film by 'the writer of *Dr. Strangelove*'. In fact, Kubrick deserves a good deal of credit, if only because he recognised how easily the basic elements of George's story could be tipped over into absurdity (it takes only a minor alteration, for instance, to transform 'Peace on Earth' into 'Purity of Essence'). Because of this strategy, combined with Kubrick's direction, *Dr. Strangelove* became a box-office hit and one of the most effective black comedies in film history. A risky commercial venture at the time of the Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, it has never lost its edge and still looks refreshingly irreverent in today's world of global capitalism, nuclear proliferation and flag-waving militarism. (As I write these words, the George W. Bush administration is renewing and increasing US holdings of nuclear weapons.)

At the time when *Dr. Strangelove* was produced, Hollywood had long been involved in the nexus of profit interests that President Eisenhower dubbed 'the military-industrial complex'. During the Cold War, it was unusual to see any film about modern military hardware made without the active participation and endorsement of the armed services – an arrangement that allowed film-makers to obtain expensive equipment and the military to enhance its public relations. The credit sequences in war pictures invariably thanked some branch of the service and often listed the officers who were supplied as advisors. (The tradition is alive today in spectacular action movies such as Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* [2001].) The US Strategic Air Command had encouraged and received particularly lavish screen treatment of this type. The most awe-inspiring example was Paramount's *Strategic Air Command* (1955), directed by Anthony Mann and starring Air Force Reserve Colonel James Stewart, which took colour, Vista Vision cameras directly inside the huge nuclear bombers and showed stunning aerial photography of mid-air refuelling techniques. That film was followed by Warner's colour and CinemaScope production of *Bombers B-52* (1957), which was virtually a recruitment film for the Air Force. In contrast, the black-and-white *Dr. Strangelove* lists no military advisors and inserts a crawl that precedes its credits, every line of which invites the viewer's knowing scepticism: 'It is the stated position of the US Air Force that their safeguards would prevent the occurrence of such events as are depicted in this film. Furthermore, it should be noted that none of the characters portrayed in this film are meant to represent any real persons living or dead.'

Despite or perhaps because of its cheeky approach, *Dr. Strangelove* became the most popular film in America for seventeen straight weeks. It won a New York Film Critics Award for Kubrick, but not before it had prompted a remarkably large and contentious response from critics and intellectuals. Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris gave it mixed reviews,[2] *Sight and Sound* panned it and several of the established newspaper critics were downright offended.

Phillip K. Scheuer of the *Los Angeles Times* described it as 'snide' and 'dangerous', and argued that '[its] villains are not funny per se – especially when there are no good guys around to offset them' (2 January 1964). Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* admitted that it was 'cleverly written and most skillfully directed and played', but found it 'a bit too contemptuous of our defense establishment for my comfort and taste' (2 January 1964). Two weeks later, after a series of pro and con letters about the film began to appear in the New York papers, Crowther wrote a follow-up review in which he pronounced *Strangelove* 'malefic and sick', 'close to being irresponsible', 'a rather flagrant indulgence of free speech', 'defeatist and destructive of morale' and 'foolish and hysterical'. Not only was it a 'dangerous indulgence' of 'extreme anxieties', but also a misrepresentation of the US defence system 'based on military and political flaws that are so fanciful and unsupported by any evidence that they are beyond belief' (16 February 1964).

Soon afterward, the respected cultural critic Lewis Mumford came to Kubrick's defence in a lengthy letter to *The New York Times*, in which he accused Crowther of having failed to understand *Dr. Strangelove*'s satiric method and 'the soundness of its morals'. 'It is not this film that is sick,' he wrote.

> [W]hat is sick is our supposedly moral, democratic country which allowed this policy [of nuclear warfare] to be formulated and implemented without even the pretense of open public debate .... This film is the first break in the catatonic Cold-War trance that has so long held our country in its rigid grip.' (1 March 1964)

Of all the film's US admirers, however, theatre critic and director Robert Brustein gave the most persuasive explanation of its power. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Brustein contended that *Dr. Strangelove* 'may well be the most courageous movie ever made', in part because it 'pays absolutely no deference at all to the expectations of its audience' and creates 'the kind of total theater that Antonin Artaud would have admired'. In contrast to the 'weary meanderings of Resnais, Fellini, and Antonioni', who seemed to Brustein by the mid-1960s to be 'inexorably closing in on the spiritual lassitude of certain melancholy French or Italian aristocrats', Kubrick had made a picture that was 'fun' – enjoyable 'for the way it exploits the exciting narrative conventions of the Hollywood war movie ... and even more, for the way it turns these conventions upside down'. What was arrestingly new, Brustein argued, was the film's 'wry, mordant, destructive, and, at the same time, cheerful, unmoralistic tone'. This tone had 'rumbled a little bit under the conventional noises of *The Manchurian Candidate*', but here it exploded to the surface; if the film managed to remain open, it might even 'knock the block off every ideologue in the country'.[3]

The iconoclastic attitude Brustein was describing could be detected elsewhere in America in the 1950s and early 1960s – in Nabokov's *Lolita*, in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, in pulp fiction by Jim Thompson and Charles Willeford, in the early issues of *Mad* comics, in Lenny Bruce's nightclub act and even in certain episodes of Alfred Hitchcock's television show. But

the sheer popularity of Kubrick's Juvenalian satire was unexpected. Far from being harmed by negative reviews or picketed by right-wing bullies, the film prospered. Perhaps because of its gleeful, totalising cynicism, it especially appealed to young people (Elvis Presley was said to be one of its biggest fans). Without actually planning it, Kubrick had moved ahead of the cultural curve, tapping into a youth audience that would sustain him over the next decade no matter what the critics said.

Both the opponents and the defenders of *Dr. Strangelove* assumed that Kubrick had taken great liberties with military and political truth. Even Brustein argued that the film was 'based less on verifiable facts than on unconscious terrors' (p. 137). What should have been apparent and has become increasingly clear is that much of it was derived without exaggeration from government practice and public discourse. There was in fact a 'fail-safe' system used by the Strategic Air Command, who adopted 'Peace Is Our Profession' as its motto and who kept at least a dozen armed B-52s always on airborne alert; there was a 'Go Code' by which the planes could be ordered to attack and a real-life general who was itching for a pre-emptive strike against the Russians; there was a procedure approved by the president to transfer war powers in case he was killed in a nuclear attack, and a plan for underground shelters where selected prominent people could survive and propagate; there was even a paranoid fear among right-wing Americans that socialists were turning the population into zombies by putting fluoride into their drinking water. Neither the Pentagon nor the White House had a surreal 'War Room' of the sort imagined by Kubrick and set designer Ken Adam, but when Ronald Reagan was elected president he logically assumed such a place existed and asked to see it.

Audiences of the time were certainly aware that various characters in *Strangelove* are based on actual persons, or at least on well-known political positions: President Merkin Muffley (Sellers) physically resembles Adlai Stevenson, the liberal Democrat who, after losing a presidential election to Dwight Eisenhower, became US ambassador to the United Nations under JFK; and General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) could hardly fail to remind viewers of Curtis LeMay, the gun-toting, cigar-chewing general who headed the Strategic Air Command and later became Air Force chief of staff. As for Dr Strangelove (Sellers again), he is usually said to be an amalgam of several figures: Edward Teller, the right-wing scientist who falsely led others to believe that he had created the hydrogen bomb and later spearheaded the vast military stockpiling of nuclear weapons; Wernher von Braun, the jet-propulsion expert who worked first for the Nazis and then for the US (a wag once remarked that Braun's autobiography, entitled *I Aim at the Stars*, should have been called 'I Aim at the Stars but I Hit London'); and Henry Kissinger, the foreign-policy guru who would later become Richard Nixon's secretary of state.

Strangelove's accent sounds a bit like Kissinger's but, according to Sellers, it was actually based on the voice of Weegee, who was hired by Kubrick as a still photographer for the film. Kissinger's *The Necessity for Choice*, which Kubrick had recommended to Anthony Harvey, is nevertheless particularly relevant to the characterisation. The book opens with

a lengthy chapter on the strategy of nuclear deterrence (a word Strangelove speaks with cruel relish), in which Kissinger feeds anxieties about the 'missile gap' between the US and the Soviet Union and the 'gap between our deterrent policy and the strategy for fighting a war'.[4] At one point Kissinger remarks, 'Ten million casualties may be unacceptable when a country can avoid any by maintaining the peace. But they may be seen to be the lesser of two evils when the country concerned believes it must either launch an attack or receive a blow that may eliminate its striking force and produce a hundred million casualties' (p. 17). Repeatedly he emphasises that the threat of nuclear war can work only so long as 'no doubts could arise about the willingness to resort to it' (p. 14).

The public personality who probably bore the strongest resemblance to Dr Strangelove, however, was the aforementioned Herman Kahn, a leading strategic planner with the RAND Corporation (called the BLAND Corporation in the film). Kubrick had become so interested in Kahn's *On Thermonuclear War* that he cultivated a sort of friendship with the author and constantly picked his brain for information about nuclear strategy. (When the film appeared, Kahn asked Kubrick for royalties, and Kubrick is said to have replied, 'It doesn't work that way.'[5]) A great deal of the film's nutty logic and language was inspired by Kahn, who had coined the term 'Doomsday Machine' and at the same time argued that there was less danger from radioactivity than people imagined. A charismatic lecturer, he spoke with a German accent and theorised about nuclear war on the grounds that it was not only conceivable but also winnable. He also contributed significantly to the widespread US belief that there was a 'missile gap' between the two superpowers; his statistical evidence in support of this claim was derived from wildly exaggerated Army intelligence, but it was convincing enough to the public that Jack Kennedy was able to use it to his advantage during the 1960 presidential election. On top of all this, Kahn was a leading proponent of the importance of bomb shelters and mineshafts in any survival strategy. When someone once asked him what people would eat in such places, Kahn, who was hugely fat, quipped, 'I personally intend to live with the chef at Lindy's who really understands sour cream herring and other quite storable delicacies' (quoted in Menand, p. 96). He was so confident of his plans that his book could well have been subtitled *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.*

In the film, Kahn's language is placed more or less directly into the mouths of Strangelove and his chief US ally, General Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott). When Turgidson tells the president that the US ought to strike Russia first in order to have a choice between 'two admittedly regrettable but nevertheless distinguishable post-war environments – one where you get 20 million people killed and the other where you get 150 million killed', his argument comes straight out of *On Thermonuclear War*, which contains a chart labelled 'Tragic but Distinguishable Postwar States'. And when Strangelove reassures the president that, far from being grief-stricken and envious of the dead, the underground survivors of nuclear attack will feel 'a spirit of bold curiosity for the adventure ahead', he is echoing Kahn's chapter on mineshafts, entitled 'Will Survivors Envy the

Dead?', which optimistically predicts 'a renewed vigor among the population with a zealous, almost religious dedication to reconstruction'.[6]

Some of Kahn's early readers were anti-nuclear advocates and pacifists who thought he had made the best possible case for dismantling the atomic arsenal; in fact, however, he was a statistician whose baggy monster of a book is filled with charts that support ever greater investment in bombs and bomb shelters. His is precisely the style of thinking that the film satirises. When Buck Turgidson refers to the Air Force's 'human reliability tests' and clutches to his breast a batch of top-secret folders labelled 'Megadeaths', he is speaking Kahn's language. Instrumental rationality, which helped to design the Nazi death camps in World War II, also lies behind Strangelove's gleeful presentation of his final solution in the closing scenes:

> STRANGELOVE [seen from a low, wide-angle perspective, silhouetted against the Big Board as he spins his wheelchair around, grins and stiffly cocks his head]: I would not rule out za chance to preserve a nucleus of human specimens. [Cut to a telephoto shot as he wheels toward us out of the shadow.] It would be quite easy, heh, heh, at za bottom of some of our deeper mineshafts.
>
> PRESIDENT: How long would you have to stay down there?
>
> STRANGELOVE [in close up]: Vell, let's see now. [He reaches into his coat with his gloved right hand and extracts a calculator. His left hand struggles to pull it free from the glove.] Cobalt Thorium G . . . . [He calculates] I would think, possibly one hundred years.
>
> PRESIDENT: You mean people could actually stay down there for a hundred years?
>
> STRANGELOVE [seen from a low angle, with the Soviet Ambassador and others gathered around, as he shouts triumphantly.] *IT VOULD NOT BE DIFFICULT, MEIN FUHRER*! [Twisting grotesquely in the chair, he grins and tries to speak in a normal voice.] . . . Heh, heh, I'm sorry, Mr. President . . . . Animals could be bred and *SLAUGHTERED* . . . .
>
> PRESIDENT [thoughtfully]: I would hate to have to decide who stays up and who goes down.
>
> STRANGELOVE [fighting to control his right arm, which drops toward the floor and nearly drags him off the side of the chair]: It could easily be accomplished with a computer!

Kahn may have provided another of the film's satiric targets when he reportedly said that the military proponents of the strategy of overwhelming force were dreaming of a 'wargasm' (quoted in Menand, p. 95). This idea motivates virtually everything in *Dr. Strangelove*, from the opening credits, which show a distinctly phallic refuelling rod being inserted into a B-52 as 'Try a Little Tenderness' plays on the soundtrack, to the astonishing climax, when Major Kong exultantly straddles a nuclear bomb that looks like a huge phallus. Throughout, nuclear war is a hard-on for the men who wage it. (The qualified exceptions are Merkin Muffley and Lionel Mandrake, both of whom are made to seem feminine and ineffectual.) Phallic symbols are everywhere – sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, but not when General Ripper smokes it – and the competition to possess a bigger weapon than

the other guy makes the characters look like little boys suffering from locker-room anxiety. The only woman in the film, Buck Turgidson's bikinied 'secretary' (Tracy Reed, stepdaughter of director Carol Reed), who can also be glimpsed in a *Playboy* centrefold with a copy of *Foreign Affairs* spread across her derriere, is an emblem of the way sex and war are linked, and of the way women in general are valued by warrior males. 'Of course it isn't only physical,' Buck whispers over the phone when she calls him in the War Room. 'I deeply respect you as a human being!' In the mineshaft utopia envisaged by Strangelove, there will be ten such women for every man. But sexually attractive women are also a threat. Jack Ripper orders the bombing mission because during the 'physical act of love' he suffers 'a profound sense of fatigue, a feeling of emptiness'. Women sense his 'power' but are attempting to deprive him of 'essence', in much the same way as the 'post-war Commie conspiracy' is attempting to destroy his 'fluids'. Only through death can he and the other warriors achieve potency. The theme is summed up at the end, when Kong's bomb goes off and Strangelove rises from his wheelchair like a mummy from its tomb. Standing erect in a spotlight, he is astonished by his own virility: 'Sir, I have a plan,' he says, then looks down at his legs and shouts, '*MEIN FÜHRER!* I CAN WALK!' As he clumsily steps forward, we cut to a montage of mushroom clouds bursting in orgasmic release.

In a more general fashion, as Robert Brustein observed, *Dr. Strangelove* also satirises the conventions of the Hollywood war movie: the planning sessions among the generals, the lightning strike to capture an important base, the intrepid bombing plane manned by a cross-section of American ethnicities and social types, and so on. All this action is superbly edited by Anthony Harvey and Kubrick, who greatly revised the original picture in the cutting room in order to achieve comic timing and dramatic tension; aside from the effective uses of direct cuts between major sequences, however, the film is utterly classical in construction, building suspense with cinematic techniques as old as D. W. Griffith. It establishes a deadline, initiates a chase and methodically cross-cuts between a few important locales. The B-52 keeps advancing towards its goal despite every impediment, always to the sound of a drumbeat and the stirring melody of 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home'. The audience is made to hover somewhere between rooting for the US and contemplating it in horror. Everything is insane, but the old-fashioned elements of the chase film are so skilfully executed that we may find ourselves falling into the same emotional trap as Buck Turgidson, who is momentarily carried away by the individual 'initiative' of Kong's aircraft.

The clever parody of Hollywood nicely supports the film's cheerful assault on what the exasperated Captain Mandrake (Sellers) calls America's 'flay-mouthed way of life'. *Dr. Strangelove* makes fun of every nationality in sight, including the Russians, the British and the Germans, but there can be no doubt that its primary target is the world's most powerful nation – not only its Hollywood entertainment, but also its fundamentalist religion (the crew of the B-52 is given miniature copies of a 'combination Rooshan phrase book and Bible') and worship of capitalism (a Coca-Cola machine becomes a subversive instance of product placement).

These iconoclastic jokes would never have been so effective if not for the brilliant design and direction of the film. One of Kubrick's most important decisions was to treat the comic material with solemnity, in a style that resembles a cross between a documentary and a noirish suspense movie. His major deviation from this strategy was a sequence that he cut from the picture after the first preview: a custard-pie fight in the War Room. The sequence survives in the British Film Institute archives,[7] and would make an interesting 'extra' for a DVD edition of the film. According to Ed Sikov, who has described it in detail, the action is initiated when the doomsday device goes off, causing Strangelove to fall from his chair and roll about on the floor. President Muffley demands that Soviet ambassador de Sadesky be strip-searched 'in view of the tininess of your equipment'. Buck Turgidson insists that the ambassador's 'seven bodily orifices' be examined. In response, de Sadesky snatches a pie from the banquet table and hurls it at Turgidson, who ducks, only to have it strike the President. Holding the wounded leader in his arms like a *pietà* Turgidson shouts, 'Gentlemen, our beloved President has been infamously struck down by a pie in the prime of life! Are we going to let that happen? Massive retaliation!' A fast-motion pie fight ensues, scored to silent-movie music. Characters climb atop tables and swing from the overhead lights; Turgidson sits atop somebody's shoulders, stuffing pie in his mouth between throws, and the circular conference table becomes a sort of boxing ring filled with white cream. Eventually, Strangelove fires off a gun and shouts, 'Ve must stop zis childish game! Zere is *Verk* to do!' The other characters sit around on the floor and play with the custard cream like children building sandcastles. 'I think their minds have snepped from the strain,' Strangelove announces. Soon afterward, we cut to the montage of nuclear bombs exploding as Vera Lynn sings 'We'll Meet Again'. (At an early stage of the production, Kubrick planned to have the lyrics to the song appear on screen with a bouncing ball.)

The pie fight seems like something from a Richard Lester movie or perhaps a Monty Python routine. Terry Southern later said that the studio was dead set against it. Kubrick withdrew it because it seemed not to fit with the tone of the rest of the film and because the assassination of President Kennedy just prior to the release of *Dr. Strangelove* made the joke about the president being 'struck down by a pie in the prime of life' sound inappropriate. His decision was undoubtedly correct, because the film achieves its best effects by avoiding pure slapstick and maintaining a relatively straight-faced style. Throughout, it manages a delicate balance of expressive, realistic and comic codes, playing its exaggerations off against ostensibly 'serious' techniques such as source lighting and sets with ceilings. Its wide-angle, low-key shots, sometimes illuminated with a single lamp against a black limbo, are reminiscent of Welles, especially in the smoky, fluorescent scenes in Ripper's office and in the expressionistic War Room, where a circle of light above the huge round table creates the impression of a ring of energy expanding out from a nuclear explosion.

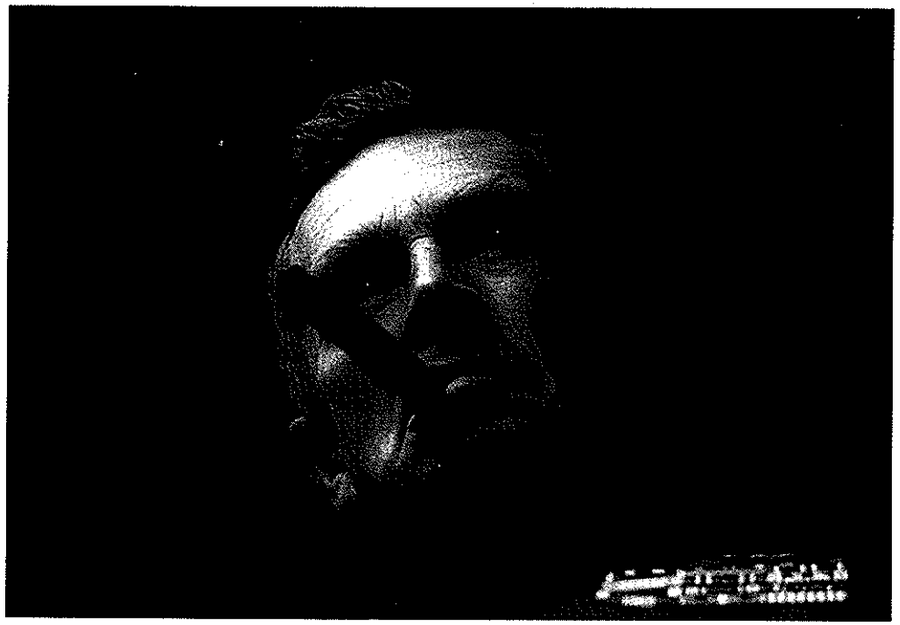
By contrast, parts of the film are shot in pure cinéma vérité style. The battle of Burpleson Air Force Base is photographed by Kubrick himself under what appears to be newsreel

conditions, using a hand-held 16mm camera equipped with a telephoto lens. (One of the base defenders indirectly comments on the authenticity of the images: 'You've sure got to hand it to those Commies .... Those trucks look like the real thing!') Kubrick also operated a hand-held camera for the rapidly edited sequences inside Kong's B-52, which involve lots of panning and zooming and produce lens flare when the camera shoots directly at light bulbs. (The Air Force was troubled that the film might have used spies to unearth classified information about military aircraft, but the instrument panels and technology were copied straight from aviation magazines.) Here and elsewhere the soundtrack adds to the feeling of realism: everything in the B-52 is heard through the tinny earphones of the pilot and crew, and in the War Room the quality of volume and reverb shifts with the camera angles. But of course the film also deviates from realism in obvious ways. The title and credits announce a stylised, satiric purpose, which is reinforced early on when Peter Sellers appears wearing a fake nose and a guardsman's moustache. (Informed by his superior that a shooting war has commenced, he replies, 'Oh, Hell! Are the Russians involved, Sir?') The exterior shots of Kong's B-52 are accomplished with models – skilfully executed by the British designer Wally Veevers, who later worked on *2001*, but nevertheless recognisable as artifice. And the music score, which is Kubrick's first use of pre-existing recordings, comments derisively on the action; like Brecht's theatre, it puts the audience in the position of critical observers rather than emotionally absorbed witnesses.

The most intriguing affective quality of the film is the sustained tension or dialectic between realistic suspense and outrageous satire, as if we were being pulled into emotional involvement only to be pushed back with a joke. A good example of this tension can be seen when Lionel Mandrake rushes into Jack Ripper's office to let him hear an innocuous broadcast from a portable radio, thus proving that the world isn't under nuclear attack. Sellers portrays Mandrake as a parody of British reserve, but Kubrick gives the sequence a noir-like mood, viewing most of the action in a long take and deep focus with an unmoving camera positioned at some distance behind Ripper's desk. A wide-angle lens brings the ceiling and walls into view and dramatically elongates the shadowy room, which is illuminated chiefly by a fluorescent lamp above Ripper's head. Everything is played at a sombre, deliberate pace that involves many pauses in the dialogue. After Mandrake enters and demonstrates that the radio is playing ordinary music, Ripper, a big, imposing man, silently rises from the desk, walks the length of the room and locks the door in the distance. 'The Officers' Exchange Program does not give you any special prerogatives to change my orders,' he says to Mandrake. He returns to his desk, sits with his back to us, clips the end off a cigar and lights it. 'My orders are going to stand.' Mandrake pauses to absorb this command and then, in a polite, David Niven accent, tells Ripper that this seems 'rather an odd way of looking at it'. Ripper responds patronisingly: 'Now why don't you take it easy, Group Captain. Make me a drink of grain alcohol and rain water and help yourself to whatever you'd like.' A long pause follows. Mandrake primly comes to attention, clicks his heels and salutes: 'General Ripper, Sir, as a member of Her Majesty's Air Force, it is my clear duty under the present circumstances to issue the recall upon my own authority.' He crisply executes an about face, walks to the door in the distance, tries to open it and finds it locked. Then he tries another door, which is also locked. 'I told you to take it easy,' Ripper says. 'I'm the only person who knows the three-letter code.' Mandrake marches forward and stands rigidly in front of the desk: 'Then I must insist, Sir, that you give them to me!'

At this point, the long take ends with a sudden cut to a huge, intimidating close-up of Ripper's face. In the previous shot he was seen from the middle distance and from the back; now he looms above us, viewed with a telephoto against a black limbo, his sinister visage lit by the lamp above his head. Photographer Gilbert Taylor uses an additional light to give a mad gleam to Ripper's dark eyes. We see an insert of his hand reaching into his desk and taking out a pearl-handled .45. A medium close-up shows Mandrake's astonished, comic reaction: 'Do I take it, Sir, that you are threatening a brother officer with a gun?' Cut to a close-up of Ripper from an even lower angle, his broad chest covered with ribbons, his thick cigar jutting out of his mouth. He puffs the cigar and speaks slowly in a grim tone, building to a wacko climax without ever dropping his intensity and seriousness:

RIPPER: A decision is being made by the President [puff] and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the War Room at the Pentagon. And when they realize there is no possibility of recalling the



> Wing, there will be only one course of action open. [Pause] Total commitment! [Long pause] Mandrake, do you recall what Clemenceau once said about war? He said that war was too important to be left to the Generals. When he said that [pause] he might have been right. But today [pause] war is too important to be left to the politicians! They have neither the time, the training, nor the inclination for strategic thought. [Long pause, takes cigar out of mouth, blows smoke] I can no longer sit back and allow Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion, and the International Communist Conspiracy [pause] to sap and impurify [pause] all our precious bodily fluids!

Sterling Hayden, a stranger to comedy, told interviewers that he was terrified during the shooting of this scene because of his respect for Kubrick and the other actors; a slight uneasiness can be sensed in his performance, but it combines with his thick-set, commanding presence to make him look all the more menacing. He dominates his scenes with Sellers, who plays Mandrake as a somewhat slow-witted twit attempting to maintain a stiff upper lip. One of Sellers's best comic moments in the role comes when he sits on the edge of a couch and silently, methodically folds and unfolds a chewing-gum wrapper, trying to maintain his calm as the madman Ripper sits down next to him, throws a big arm over his shoulder, and asks, 'Mandrake, have you ever seen a commie drink a glass of water?'

Despite the fact that the film allows Sellers to display a range of accents, he never seems to be the star, perhaps because two of the three characters he plays are comparatively rational. Mandrake is a self-effacing fellow even when he tells Ripper what it was like to be tortured by the Japanese: 'It was just their way of having fun, the swine. Strange thing is they make such bloody good cameras.' When Colonel 'Bat' Guano (played by the ever-reliable Keenan Wynn, who was once singled out by James Agee as among the best Hollywood actors of his generation) accuses him of being a 'deviated prevert' who wants to commit 'preversions' in Ripper's bathroom, he responds with sputtering but civilised outrage.

According to Ed Sikov, Sellers intended to portray President Muffley in a more theatrically effeminate style, but Kubrick toned the performance down so that we see only a trace of the original conception, in the form of a nose spray and handkerchief. Sellers's one chance for broad comedy in the presidential role is the telephone conversation with Premier Kissov, a partly improvised scene that resembles the routines made popular during the period by comic recording artists such as Bob Newhart and Shelly Berman:

> MUFFLEY: Dimitri, could you turn the music down just a little? [Pause] You're coming through fine. I'm coming through fine, too, eh? Well, it's good that you're fine and I'm fine. It's great to be fine. Well, now, Dimitri, you know how we've always talked about the possibility of something going wrong with the bomb? The *bomb*, Dimitri. Well, now, what happened is, one of our base commanders, well, he went a little funny in the head, and he went and did a silly thing. [Pause] Well, I'll tell you what he did. He ordered his planes [pause] to attack your country. Let me finish, Dimitri. Well, listen, how do you think *I* feel about it? Why do you think I'm calling you? *Of course* I like to speak to you! I'm just calling you up to tell you something terrible has happened. Of course it's a friendly call! Listen; if it wasn't friendly you probably wouldn't even have got it!

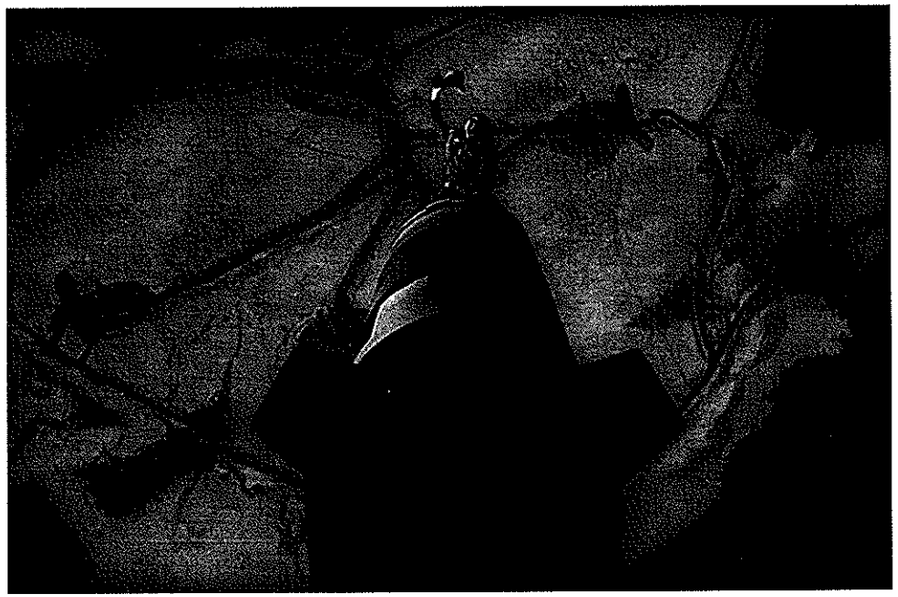
By far the most important contribution Sellers makes is in his unforgettable interpretation of the title character, a performance Kubrick photographed with three cameras in order to be sure not to miss any of its improvised moments. Strangelove doesn't assume centre stage until more than halfway into the picture, when he sweeps out from the War Room conference table and glides across the polished floor in his wheelchair. He wears an elegant black suit and sports a wavy blond pompadour that peaks at a crazy angle. His body is grotesquely twisted and everything about him is governed by a comic principle I've described in another book as 'expressive incoherence': his legs are dead and his torso alive; his eyes, gazing wildly out from a pair of sunglasses, are mismatched with his frozen grin; he tends to speak through clenched teeth; and his black-gloved right hand is in systematic rebellion against his ungloved left hand.[8] In his first close-up, he struggles to free a cigarette from the steely fingers of the glove and strains to keep his nasal, high-pitched speech under control. Now and then his mask of condescending politeness drops away and he involuntarily shouts key words as if he were Hitler on a podium:

> Mr President, the technology required [for the doomsday device] is within the means of even the smallest nuclear power. It requires only the *VILL* to do so .... That's the whole idea of zis machine, you know. *DETERRENCE* is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy [pause] the *FEAR* of attack .... The automated device rules out *HUMAN MEDDLING*!

It was Kubrick who suggested that Strangelove should wear the black glove. Kubrick was probably thinking of Rotwang, the mad scientist in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, but Sellers improved on the idea by giving the gloved arm an independent life. It expresses Strangelove's storm-trooper instincts and keeps bursting through his every attempt to restrain it. At the climax of the film, it declares all-out war. First, it tries to take control of the wheelchair, but the left hand beats it back, striking it savagely again and again until it goes limp and forces Strangelove to slump rightward in exhaustion. From a tilted posture, Strangelove tries to explain sweetly to the president that the survivors of nuclear war won't feel despair. 'There vill be no shocking memories,' he says. Then his Nazi self begins to take over, promising that 'the prevailing emotion vill be one of nostalgia for those left behind, combined with *A SPIRIT OF BOLD CURIOSITY FOR THE ADVENTURE AHEAD!*' Suddenly the right hand jumps up in a Nazi salute. The left hand grabs it by the wrist, pulls it into his lap and starts beating it into submission. It jumps up and socks him in the jaw. He bites it, and his

left hand struggles massively to push it back down. It grabs him by the neck and starts choking him. Eventually, the attack subsides, at almost the same moment when Strangelove regains his ability to walk and the world ends.

Sellers was also supposed to play the role of Major Kong, but he had difficulty finding a proper accent and injured himself when he tried to manoeuvre around the set of the B-52. Amazingly, Kubrick is said to have offered the part to John Wayne, whose response was predictably negative. He then approached Dan Blocker, one of the stars of TV's *Bonanza* and a Kennedy-era liberal, whose agent volubly refused on the grounds that the film was 'too pinko'.[9] Fortunately for posterity, Slim Pickens took the job. Pickens had previously done excellent work as a villainous sheriff's deputy in *One-Eyed Jacks*, a film Kubrick was briefly involved with, and he brings to *Dr. Strangelove* a similar feeling of violence underlying a slack-jawed, folksy exterior – a characterisation he would later play for even broader comedy in Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974). An ex-rodeo cowboy, Pickens may have inspired Kubrick to invent the famous image of Kong riding the bomb. The power of that shot derives in part from its audiovisual construction (Kong's scream echoes weirdly through the sound of a chill wind; the earth seems to rush up to meet the bomb at the last moment, and the explosion is rendered by cutting directly to white silence), but also from Pickens's ability to straddle the weapon with authority and yell 'Ya-hoo' with true cowboy zeal. Elsewhere he speaks his lines in an authentic western twang and he keeps a straight face while delivering some of the funniest speeches in the movie (written, one suspects,



by the Texas-born Terry Southern). Informed that 'Wing Attack Plan R' has been ordered, he responds, 'Well, I've been to one World's Fair, a picnic and a rodeo, and that's the stupidest thing I ever heard comin' out a set of earphones!' Realising the order is no joke, he then becomes patriotic, maudlin, and devious:

> KONG [putting on his cowboy hat]: Well, boys, I reckon this is it. Nukler combat with the Rooskies! . . . Now, look, boys, I ain't much of a hand at makin' speeches, but I got a pretty fair idea that something dog-goned important's goin' on back there. Now I got a fair idea the kind of personal emotions that some of you fellas may be thinking. Heck, I guess you wouldn't even be human be-ins if you didn't have some pretty strong personal feelin's about nukler combat . . . . Remember one thing. The folks back home is counting on you, and by golly we ain't about to let 'em down! Tell you somethin' else. If this thing turns out to be half as important as I figure it just might be, I'd say that you're all in line for important promotions and personal citations when this thing is all over. That goes for *ever last one of you*, regardless of your race, color, or your creed!

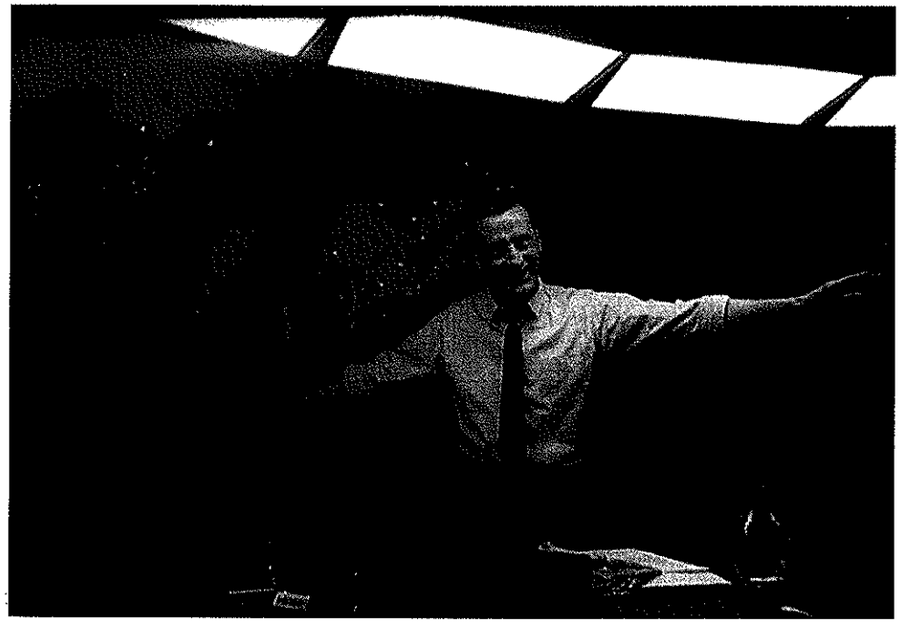
Despite all this, George C. Scott almost steals the picture. His achievement is surprising not only because he was associated with serious drama but also because we can easily imagine another kind of actor in the role of Buck Turgidson. As the name implies, the character is a blowhard politician and Pentagon bureaucrat who brims over with fake machismo, whereas Scott, who later gave a celebrated performance as George Patton, has a commanding physical presence – a burly chest, a broken nose and a gravelly voice capable of delivering lines in resonant, Shakespearian tones. Scott's natural face is something of a caricature, but one more suited to a tough guy or a crafty knave – Richard III, perhaps – than to a fool. And yet, as Roger Ebert has observed, his 'duet for voice and facial expression' rivals Jerry Lewis or Jim Carrey for sheer comic plasticity, and his performance is all the while 'hidden in plain view' by a complete emotional sincerity.[10]

Scott was unhappy because Kubrick chose takes in which the actor was mugging outrageously. But Turgidson, like Strangelove and Kong, lifts the darkly amusing film into moments of energetic absurdity. At one point, gesturing ostentatiously as he moves across the polished floor of the War Room, he slips, does a back flip and rises to his feet to finish his line – an accidental fall that Kubrick chose to preserve for the sake of its sheer goofiness. In his first scene, a long take in a mirrored bedroom, he enters like a figure in a cartoon. First, we hear his raspy voice coming from the toilet, relaying a message to his secretary, who has another officer on the phone ('Tell him to call whatshisname, Ripper! Grumble, grumble. I have to think of everything!'). Then he emerges into view from the distance, sporting a military crew-cut, an open Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda under-shorts. He takes the phone and stands bearing his slightly paunchy torso with pride: 'Fred? Buck,' he announces. 'What's cookin' on the Threat Board?' Hearing the news, he frowns, thinks a moment and postures grandly. 'Tell you what you better do, old buddy,' he says,

and punctuates the statement by loudly slapping his stomach – one of the film's most inspired gestures, immediately conveying the character's braggadocio and dumb-ass self-confidence.

In the War Room, Turgidson's behaviour oscillates wildly. Sometimes he's a gung-ho leader who feels superior to the president, and sometimes a sheepish little boy who ducks his head and stuffs chewing gum in his mouth. He gets most of his laughs from the stress he puts on certain words and from the way his face and attitude keep rapidly changing. Concluding his pompous report on 'Operation Dropkick', he suddenly becomes chastened and insecure: 'Now it *appears* that the order *called* for the planes to [awkward pause] attack their targets inside Russia.' President Muffley scowls and says that he is the only person who can issue such orders. 'That's right, Sir,' Turgidson replies, putting a stick of gum in his mouth. 'And although I *hate* to judge before all the facts are in, it's beginning to look like General Ripper exceeded his authority.' When Muffley points out that the 'human reliability tests' assured him there was no possibility of such things happening, Turgidson assumes an air of haughty politeness: 'I don't think it's quite *fair* to condemn the whole program because of a single slip-up, Sir!' The president says he is 'less and less interested' in Turgidson's opinions, and we see a low-angle view of Turgidson frowning sulkily and sticking more gum in his mouth. Soon afterward, however, Turgidson launches into a cocky, full-voiced lecture, explaining to the president that the Russians 'are going to go absolutely ape' when the US bombers strike. Forgetting that he learned of Ripper's actions while sitting on the toilet, he leans forward and grins conspiratorially from beneath heavy eyebrows: 'Now, *if*, on the *other hand*, we were to launch an all-out and co-ordinated attack, we stand a damn good chance of catching them with their pants down!'

When Muffley announces his plans to confer with the Russians, Turgidson is loudly dismayed. Squinting mightily, he cries, 'Am I to understand that the *Russian Ambassador* is being admitted entrance to the *War Room*?' Bug-eyed, he gathers his statistical reports protectively into his arms: 'He'll see everything! He'll see the Big Board!' When it appears that the discovery of the recall code has ended the threat, he climbs atop a chair, whistles for silence and calls for a 'short prayer of thanks'. He looks up and shouts '*Lord*' in a commanding voice, but just then somebody announces that one plane has ignored the recall. Suddenly he squints. 'Mr President,' he says, 'I'm beginning to smell a big fat commie rat!' As the president confers with Premier Kissov on the phone, Turgidson puts one hand atop his head and looks frightened and stupid. When the President turns and asks if there's any chance of one plane getting through, Turgidson's stunned expression gives way to intense gum-chewing and gleeful enjoyment. 'Mr President,' he says ardently, 'if I may be permitted to speak freely, the Ruskie talks big, but frankly we think he's short of know-how. You just can't expect a bunch of *ignorant peons* to understand a machine like some of our boys! You take your average Ruskie and we all know how much guts he's got. Hell, look at all them the Nazzies killed and they still wouldn't quit!' Lowering his voice, he explains that guts count for nothing because if the pilot is 'really sharp, he can barrel that baby in



so low . . .'. Suddenly he's overcome with excitement. 'Hee hee,' he giggles, spreading his arms like wings. 'You oughta see it sometime, it's a pleasure! A *BIG* plane like a B-52! *VA-ROOM*, jet exhaust frying chickens in the barnyard! *HA, HA*! Have we got a chance? *Hell yes*!' Then he recognises what he's saying and executes one of the most exaggerated double-takes in the history of screen comedy – face drooping, eyes bulging, one hand over his mouth in embarrassment.

This moment of comic recognition is deeply symptomatic of the film as a whole. In bold fashion, it mimics Kubrick's overall strategy of pulling the audience up short, creating laughs that stop in the throat and suspense that suddenly turns silly. As in Kong's lethal ride on the bomb and Strangelove's rise from the wheelchair, Turgidson's 'wargasm' is cut short by death, but without the swooning towards darkness that characterises the 'little death' of sexual climax. Here as elsewhere, the military-industrial complex and the masculine libido are directly and disturbingly linked to a regime of frustrated and destructive sexuality: as Freud suggests in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, war is love. Turgidson's double-take might even be described as *coitus interruptus*. For Kong and Strangelove, the effect is more like the instantaneous transformation of Eros into Thanatos; the world stops before it can register even a shudder of anticipation, leaving behind only the frightening beauty of nuclear clouds and a pervasive feeling of savage, Swiftian indignation. In *Dr. Strangelove*, Kubrick had arrived at the pure black-comic style towards which he had

been gravitating since the beginning of his career; it became the lodestone of his artistic temperament, but seldom again achieved such a powerful blending of zestful iconoclasm, misanthropic satire and unexpected horror.

II. Beyond the Stars

Kubrick's next and most ambitious project was released in 1968, one of the most traumatic years in US history: Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, the Tet offensive broke out in Vietnam and protesting students were shot by National Guard troops at Kent State University. A short time earlier, just as the youth rebellion was turning violent and the forces of repression were gathering against it, Kubrick moved permanently to England and began making an elaborate, apparently apolitical studio film about the distant future and outer space. Now that the millennium has passed, we're in a good position to ask how much *2001: A Space Odyssey* reflects the time when it was made and how much it got wrong about the years to come.

Despite its flickering video screens and 'keyboards' integrated into the sleeves of spacesuits, the film doesn't foresee the digital revolution and its miniaturised effects on computers. (Its astronauts use futuristic fountain pens and ordinary clipboards when they write.) It underestimates the degree to which spaceships can be automated and it overestimates the progress of Artificial Intelligence. And yet its vision of space travel, extrapolated from NASA's activities in the late 1960s, remains well within the realm of possibility. We've long employed a space shuttle – albeit of a less luxurious kind than the Pan-Am *Orion* in the film, which has TV screens mounted at the back of the seats, somewhat like the large passenger aircraft of today. The only reason why we don't have space stations and human space exploration beyond the moon landing is that the earth's major political powers decided such things would have insufficient military and commercial value and that computerised rockets and cameras could do the job for scientific purposes. *2001* therefore feels most dated not at the technological but at the social and political level. It doesn't predict the end of the Cold War, and its space travellers, apart from a small contingent of female Russian scientists and one member of the US group at the space station, are white males. One of the most obviously 1960s-ish images it contains, aside from the psychedelic effects in the concluding episode (reminiscent of Richard Avedon's colour-saturated photographs of the Beatles and exactly contemporary with Alfred Jenson's abstract paintings of cosmic energy), are the pretty young flight attendants and receptionists (the film calls them 'girls') who serve Dr Heywood Floyd (William Sylvester) on his journey to the moon.

2001 also shows its age in a more indirect fashion. Originally conceived for the Cinerama process, Kubrick's production was fully in keeping with the modernist project of fusing art and technology and was intended to suggest the future of cinema itself. In some ways typical of the Cinerama features that preceded it, all of which, as John Belton observes, were based on themes of nationalism and spectacular travel,[11] it used the 'engulfing' quality