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War and Cinema in the United States

Sergeant York and Dr. Strangelove: from Propaganda to Criticism

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Introduction

Among the many ways of interpreting History, studying the culture of a historical period is the one that offers the most information with regard to the social. The different cultural manifestations of a certain moment allow us to interpret, being the result of those, the social movements and the ways of thinking that, ultimately, are elements that influence the flow of History. Since its invention in 1895, cinema has become the most important cultural phenomenon in the last century, due to its ability to show and transmit at the same time; it shows a story to the public in the way that an artist, or an institution, intends to transmit it. All kind of historical events have been represented through it, but wars are surely the ones that have had the greatest role on the screen. It will be these two elements, cinema and war, around which this dissertation will revolve.

Throughout the 20th century, the United States of America got involved in an important number of military and political conflicts. The military participation in the World War II (hereinafter referred to as WWII), and the ideological conflict during Cold War, shaped the country in terms of economy, politics and society. Therefore, the warlike periods are susceptible to be analysed from different perspectives. And when it comes to the social and cultural ambit, those can serve as sources to understand how the war and its consequences affected the population of the country. The society suffered important changes between the 1940s and 1960s, including the culture and the perception of military conflicts.

The central theme of this work is the manifestation through cinema of the change in mentality concerning war, that took place in the United States throughout the 1960s. Or, in other words, how a specific historical process is perceived in film trends. This process would begin with the mobilization of society in favour of WWII, and it would turn into a growing rejection of the military conflicts that reached its peak during the War of Vietnam. Both

conflicts will be, then, the historical context in which this essay will focus. Two war-themed films, belonging to both periods, will be the source to interpret this social phenomenon through culture.

The chosen films will be *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941), within the time of the WWII; and, on the other hand, *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964), as representative of the Vietnam period. Both films have war as the main theme of their narration; however, despite proceeding on the same basis, both films are diametrically opposed in many senses, such as in their tone, message, even in their development. The analysis of the films will focus on various aspects, inside and outside the narrative, that contribute to the purpose of the films, as it will be developed further on. It will be those aspects what allow us to point out the differences between them, as well as the differences between the historical discourses they belonged to.

The objective of this work has a double approach. On the one hand, demonstrating that there exist aspects of the films that can be directly associated with a certain historical process in which they were chronologically located, emerging as a result of this process, and in turn, contributing to it. To achieve this, the films must be located within a historical context, paying special attention to the discourses or social movements. In the years of the Great War, this discourse would be the effort of social awareness through propaganda, to convince of the need for war. Meanwhile, during the Cold War, it would be the first voices of protest that arose among the intellectual class, the beginnings of the anti-war movement in the United States, until the US attitude towards conflicts changed with the War of Vietnam. On the other hand, analysing the change in cinematographic trends by contrasting both films, and relating it to a change in attitude towards war. We will see how, initially, society was committed to war, due to the social engineering carried out by the government, in which the cinema had a major role. However, with the end of WWII, the mentality would lean in the opposite direction during the following decades.

To achieve these objectives, the research will start by analysing historical, social and cultural aspects that set the context of the periods to study. The aim is to develop the shift in the US mentality towards war and identify the main factors that enabled that shift. Besides, the approach will focus on the film industry, especially on trends and the role that filmmaking had at a certain moment, dealing with the relationship between cinema and institutions and the reception that those trends had among the population. The purpose is to obtain background to develop a personal analysis of the films and draw conclusions about the thesis concerning us, as well as to contextualize the films to ease the interpretation of those.

After this, the films will be viewed in detail, paying attention to those elements that are of interest. Along with a general analysis, dealing with the plot, tone and content of the film, we will deepen the characterization of its characters. It will be this last aspect what will serve the most to interpret the film, what it shows and transmits, and put it in dialogue with the correspondent historical discourse. Through the analysis of the protagonists, or main figures, of the films, the aim is to justify and expand the ideas that are presented in the essay. The analysis of the characterization will focus on the resources and elements that are relevant to conform it, such as performance, dialogues and speeches, and technical resources. In essence, the method to follow consists of identifying aspects of the films that may serve as an interpretation of social, cultural and political context of their time, and their position regarding war issue and how this affected the country.

Structurally, the work will be divided in two parts. The first one will deal with the movie *Sergeant York* and the WWII in the United States. After contextualizing the historical situation and its relevant aspects, the film and its protagonist will be analysed, relating it to those aspects and to the correspondent historical discourse. Next, the second part will focus on *Dr. Strangelove*, following the same guidelines and terms as in the previous case. Finally, as a conclusion, the deductions drawn throughout the work will be presented, along with a review of the main ideas exposed.

This would be, ultimately, the purpose of this work and the methodology to be used to achieve it. The starting point is the premise that film productions offer us an alternative interpretation of a period and its culture, and that a change of trends is linked to a change in mentality or social thought. For this, the study of the historical discourse and the analysis of the filmography would allow us to find related elements, that jointly explain the ideological and cultural change within a specific country, at a specific moment in History.

World War II, Propaganda and Sergeant York

Throughout the 1940s, society in the United States suffered a change in their mentality regarding war. During the years of involvement in WWII (1941-1945), most of society was positioned in favour of active participation in the conflict. However, this position progressively emerged due to several factors.

In the first two years of war, practically all the country claimed against the intervention. US foreign policy was based on isolationism, as “Many Americans remained convinced that involvement in World War I had been a mistake” (Foner 558). The author explains that Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration opted for a passive role, sending supplies and funds to the European democracies threatened by the Axis (560). Nevertheless, a sector of society had a different perspective; “those who believed that the United States must intervene to stem the rising tide of fascism tried to awaken a reluctant country to prepare for war” (Foner 560). An increasing number of people, especially among politicians, were convinced of the importance of this conflict for the United States, as they considered that the fascist powers were a menace for all democracies in the world. President Roosevelt shared this concern through his “Four Freedoms” speech, claiming that “Armed defence of democratic existence is now being gallantly waged in four continents” (Welch 11).

The event that propitiated the entrance into WWII was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour (December 7, 1941), as the US declared war on Japan, and consequently, Italy and Germany did the same with the United States. However, a large part of the population remained reluctant to actively participate, and this had to be changed in order to guarantee the support of the citizens. In this sense, experts agree that during WWII, most governments were alert to the importance in war of presenting their case home:

In modern warfare, propaganda is required to (1) mobilise hatred against the enemy; (2) convince the population of the justness of one's own cause; (3) enlist the active support and cooperation of neutral countries; and (4) strengthen the support of one's allies. (Welch XIV)

Concerned about this fact, the federal government faced a dilemma: how to convince people of the importance of participating in WWII. With this aim, rulers developed an unprecedented deployment of social engineering, to manipulate the general perspective in favour of war. The purpose was to spread the opinion that the US had to defend freedom and democracy, abroad and at home. WWII had to be presented as a struggle between good and evil, democracy and fascism, and the country had the duty to safeguard democracy and stop the fascist expansion. Apart from convincing people of this, the government needed them to support intervention, and also encourage the enlistment for war. This is the idea that David Welch defends in *World War II Propaganda: Analysing the Art of Persuasion during Wartime* (29-31).

The main tool in this campaign was a massive use of propaganda. The government hired many artists, such as writers, publicists and film directors to spread the message. An example of this would be companies such as Coca-Cola, that declared their support to the Armed Forces on their advertisements and urged people to purchase war bonds (Heide and Hilman, 129-130). The propagandistic function did not only include such media as press or radio, but was also present in the cultural ambit. The Office of War Information (OWI) was an agency created in 1942 that controlled the news and information about the war through broadcast, newspapers, posters and movies, according to the definition by Cull (283-284). From 1942 to 1945, the OWI Bureau of Motion Pictures revised every film script, modifying or even discarding those that may include an anti-war message. "The studios, except for the recalcitrant Paramount, resumed submitting scripts to OWI's Hollywood office on a regular basis" (Koppes and Black 112). Besides, the filmmaking business had been under institutional control since the implementation

of the Hays Code in 1934, that regulated the filmographic production to restrict what could be seen and listened to on screen. Generally speaking, there had already been a governmental restriction on film production, reinforced with the intervention of OWI in war times.

However, using the words by Clayton R. Koppes, “the conflict between the studios and the government, and the eventual cooperation between them, helped shape public opinion during and after the war” (16). In that sense, the film industry ended up being crucial when it came to influence society, as it was the most popular free time activity. In the shape of documentaries or fiction films, war was present in movie theatres to inform people about the situation in Europe and to concern them about the importance of that conflict. While the war lasted, Hollywood had a story of propaganda posing as movies. Several filmmakers of the period were hired to create war-promoting films, such as Frank Capra, who was recruited by the US Army to produce the series of documentaries *Why We Fight* (1942-1945), to maintain the morale among the troops. Therefore, the US government was in control of the film production regarding war, either by direct commission or adapting the content through institutions like OWI. “These assignments”, declares Major Clayton O. Sheffield, “fulfilled their service obligations, provided assistance to the United States government in its effort to mobilise the population in support of the war effort” (41). Most of the studios decided to impregnate a tone in their war-themed films that pleased the institutional interests, in order to avoid pressure and censorship. This was the case of Warner Bros. Pictures, which, under the direction of Howard Hawks, produced one of the most important war films in the period: *Sergeant York*.

The film *Sergeant York* was released in the United States on July 2, 1941, before the country officially entered the war. On the surface, *Sergeant York* is just a biography about one of the most decorated US soldiers in World War I, but it constitutes one of the best propaganda movies created in the 1940s. The success of the film was overwhelming, as it was the highest-grossing film of 1941. The good reception of the film was reinforced after the attack on Pearl

Harbour, defends author Lee B. Kenneth. Apparently, the patriotic theme in the film was an important impulse in troop recruiting; young men even went directly from the movie theatre to the enlistment offices (156).

The premise of the film is simple: it takes a war hero and uses him as an example of what the governmental propaganda expected from people. By exalting patriotism and the work of the American soldiers, the aim of the movie was to encourage people's involvement and convince them of the rightfulness of making war for a noble cause. Several elements, such as the dialogues, or its overall tone, are crucial for this purpose. But above them, it is the characterization of the hero what contributes to this message. To understand the importance of this film as a piece of warlike propaganda, we must take into account that:

“The parallel with American entry into World War I was exploited for all it was worth in *Sergeant York*, centring on an instinctive pacifist (Gary Cooper as the marksman-hero Alvin York) who wrestles with his conscience, concludes that the Allied cause is just, and enlists. By implication, the United States should follow their example”. (Schatz 268).

The movie shows the story of Alvin York, a young man from a rural area in Tennessee, whose life was chaotic and unruly until his attitude changes, devoting himself to working hard to build a new life, and refusing to use violence anymore. This mentality is tested when he is called to join the US army, because of the US entry into World War I. Initially, he declares himself a conscientious objector and refuses to participate in combat, something that changes after an internal debate, with the guidance of his superior officials. After realising that there are things that are worth fighting for, he kills several enemies and saves allied lives, coming back to the United States as a decorated hero, receiving honours and living the life he had dreamed of.

From the very beginning, patriotism is one of the central themes. The opening, showing the title with the national flag, includes a voice-over that talks about heroic figures and about the wish for peace. This patriotic message continues throughout the dialogues, especially those dealing with Alvin's superiors trying to convince him of the rightfulness of fighting to achieve peace and freedom. Besides, there is another relevant concept that the film insists on, the American Dream. This concept, traditionally associated with freedom and rights, is represented in *Sergeant York* through the protagonist's objectives and expectations. The term is related to the ideology of American exceptionalism which, according to political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset, is based on freedom and equality, but also on hard work and individual responsibility. All of this is shown in the first half of the film, showing Alvin chasing his dream, and the peaceful life in the village. This lifestyle, together with values such as freedom and peace, is worth fighting for. Freedom comes with the American Dream, but it also carries the liability to defend it.

This patriotic defence of freedom, the message that the movie sends to the audience, is also the lesson that Alvin York must learn. The character is depicted as a hero, based on an actual soldier with great achievements, that are even exaggerated in the film. York is not only a brave soldier and a great sniper who kills dozens of enemies; he is also a merciful man, as he takes 132 German prisoners and spares their lives. His virtues make a hero out of him, an inspiring figure for the average American, and a motivation for soldiers who aspired to be honoured and rewarded after the war.

However, more than Alvin's heroic feats, the evolution of the character is the central theme of the film. It is a story of how a man changes his behaviour to chase his objective in life, a marriage, and works for it. Then, when he must face a moral conflict regarding war and duty, he finally finds his way, heroically serving the country. This evolution gives us a round character, one whose depth, complexities and contradictions can be noticed throughout the story. The character shows a psychological complexity that is vital to the story, as this goes

forward due to his choices, thoughts and actions. His internal conflict is as relevant as the external conflict.

Through Gary Cooper's performance, we obtain an image of the character's personality. Initially impulsive and rude, Alvin becomes a calm, even timid person, with a gentle attitude and deep religious beliefs. In this sense, the physical performance is measured, with paused movements; the actor, on several occasions, tilts his head down or looks at the ground while he interacts with other characters. Besides, the speech pattern is generally slow, paused, without grandiloquence, and full of references to religion and Bible. With this personality, it is unavoidable that the character's convictions enter in conflict with his duty, as he does not desire to fight and kill anyone.

This internal conflict is the most important moment in the movie, manifested through the script, in the shape of dialogues between characters and through the protagonist's inner thoughts. After a conversation with his superiors, Alvin has an inner moral debate, struggling between his pacifist convictions and what he is expected to do. The words by Major Buxton aim to touch Alvin's patriotism, reminding him about the heroes that gave form to their country, and how "all men were pledged to defend the rights of each man, and each man to defend the rights of all of them". It is a reminder of the values and ideas that the United States represents, and that must be defended inside and abroad. As it happens with Alvin's desire to get married and own lands, each man's chase for a dream is their heritage. But with this heritage comes a responsibility, and as Major Buxton notes, "sometimes it takes all we have to preserve it, even our lives". After this, an individual scene shows Alvin's internal struggle, feeling his devotion divided between God and his homeland. A lengthy close-up shot allows the viewer to focus on the character's inner debate, while off voices repeat his superior's words, making the effect that Alvin is thinking about them. This technique that can be noticed on several occasions, to put the spotlight on Alvin's reaction to the patriotic messages he receives, and on his reflexive

attitude. We see that not only the script, but also the performance and the technical issues such as the framing, take the character, his internal conflict and his evolution as a focal point.

Finally, the internal conflict ends with Alvin's resolution to fight for his country, deciding that it is fair and necessary to fight for certain rights and values. This revelation that Alvin obtains throughout the movie is the same that it was pretended to cause among the audience. This film, patriotic and propagandistic, aimed to convince a reluctant society to support war, providing reasons why this war had to be fought. It is an exposition of all that had to be protected from the fascist threat. The film attempts to remove people's conscience, by reminding them of all the privileges and opportunities that they have, but also that those may not prevail without sacrifice. The ending of *Sergeant York* maintains the usual justification for war: some must die to allow others to live and preserve their freedom (Willis 171). To achieve this, the audience was given a model in the figure of a hero, a common man who overcomes his doubts and finds a reason to fight. This complexity of the character, with faults and virtues, and passing through a hard choice, aims to inspire a reaction in people. The process that York undergoes, finally realising the necessity of the conflict, is the same that the audience was expected to undergo. Within the attempt to shape the popular mentality, "the theme of 'conversion' emerged as central to the wartime film industry, both as a narrative template of war-oriented films and a touchstone for the reorganisation of production processes" (Langford 112). In a few words, it was the message that young men, like Alvin did, should fight for democracy.

Sergeant York is, essentially, a film with a clear purpose. It is a piece of propaganda made to shape public opinion through a message developed by the government, from top to bottom, to convince people of the importance of supporting the war, and to praise the fight of the soldiers. The main tool to achieve this is the protagonist, surrounded by a patriotic background, who pretends to be an example for the people. The film presents a common man, one that people can feel identified with, and shows how and why he decided to fight. With this

example, the audience was expected to have a similar reaction, realising that it was a fight for a better good, and even, having the expectation to become a hero as Alvin York.

Cold War and Dr. Strangelove

The use of massive propaganda during WWII had a deep effect on American society, and together with the victorious outcome of the conflict, gave place to an interventionist attitude that would lead foreign policy in the country for the following years. After defeating the fascist powers of the Axis, the United States occupied an emergent position in the world. First of all, in military terms, it was the most powerful country, especially with the nuclear capacity. Their economy was also reinforced after the war, due to the growth of the GNP by means of industrial production for war (Foner 568). But, above all of this, the country and its people considered themselves to possess the ideological supremacy, as they saw the US as the leader of the free world and the legitimate defender of democracy.

Nevertheless, the United States had an opponent in this outlook, the counterpart to the United States: The Soviet Union. Both superpowers took part in an unconventional conflict, in which the supremacy of their respective social model, democracy and communism, was in play. The US and the URSS fought a different war, in which they provided support to kindred countries in foreign conflicts and aimed to manipulate the international outlook to their own interest: the Cold War.

This ideological clash marked the tone for both superpowers between the fifties and the eighties, and for the rest of the world. The fight to limit the growth of the contrary, was the only aim of American foreign policy. All actions were taken with the objective of overcoming the communists, following the Domino Theory, “the fear that the loss of one nation to communism would swiftly ensure the fall of many more across Asia and the Middle East”.

(Grant 335). In domestic terms, the Cold War mentality was part of daily life. The general opinion was into what was called the Ideology of Liberal Consensus, that Hodgson defines with two assumptions: “that the structure of American society was basically sound, and that Communism was a clear danger to the survival of the United States and its allies” (75). This was the essence of the Cold War mentality, the concept of “Them vs. Us”, that President Truman introduced in his discourse, dividing the world between the oppressive communism and the democracies, led by the United States: “At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life”. The result was a generalised anti-communist feeling among the population, who considered the URSS an expansionist monster that could destroy their lifestyle. The national anti-communist was so intense that it made citizenship be wary of their own compatriots, of anyone who differed from dominant discourse. Besides, the nuclear escalation endangered the world as never before, a fragile stability only sustained by the fear of the nuclear power of the opponent.

However, this atmosphere of fear, hate and distrust proved to be untenable in the long term. Initially, the patriotic outbreak after the Great War guaranteed the national commitment to the anti-communist crusade, reinforced by means of informative manipulation. With time, people became sceptical about the exaggerated anticommunism that had even resulted in a witch hunt at a national level. Ultimately, the interventionist mentality that led the country to several conflicts abroad to stop the spread of communism, was getting weaker among the population, who saw the absurdity of sending their people to fight in a foreign country. Despite that, the foreign policy maintained that interventionism, moving the country to participate in conflicts abroad, such as Korea or Vietnam, to free them from communism. It was during the War of Vietnam that US society would turn against the consensus, seeing that this war was neither fair nor necessary. The distrust on the ideological and political convictions of the previous decades was what, throughout the sixties, would break the liberal consensus.

The first voices against the mainstream discourse on the Cold War came mainly from the intellectual class; a well-known example would be Martin Luther King, who delivered speeches against the War of Vietnam for years. Another example was journalist Walter Lippmann, who “In a penetrating critique of Truman’s policies”-expresses Foner- “objected to turning foreign policy into an ‘ideological crusade’” (647). Initially restricted to artists, intellectuals and a few politicians, that protest would spread among society throughout the 1960s, especially with the youth movements carrying out massive acts of protest. Therefore, those first sceptical voices were the initial rupture in the national consensus about the Cold War. They did not only claim against the unnecessary conflicts in which the country was participating, or the senseless anticommunism verging on paranoia. The protest also pointed to the secrecy and manipulation managed by successive governments, to maintain the national support and shape the international outlook, something that they considered a betrayal of the democratic values (Foner 811). Also, they warned about the potential danger that the nuclear escalation meant for the world, an uncontrollable power in the hands of untrustworthy people.

Within this small movement of protest, artists and intellectuals found in culture a way to manifest their criticisms of the Cold War and show the public the dangers of unjustified hate and uncontrolled escalation. The cultural production that dealt with the Cold War and nuclear issues had the aim to entertain, as well as to criticize and concern the audience. We find an example in the novel *Red Alert* (Peter George, 1958), the underlying inspiration for Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*. Dealing with film production, those whose main theme was the Cold War constituted a mere entertainment more than a critique to military and political leaders that carried the Cold War on. Until that moment, “very few filmmakers challenged the wholesome look and noble actions of the military until the 1960s. The American populace envisioned their country as peace-loving and the military as brave warriors fighting evil empires to uphold democracy” (Sheffield 6).

A critical approach, or at least, sceptical to the general consensus, was possible due to the weakening of the Hays Code influence, which finally disappeared in 1967 (Gardner 204-206). After that, the Hollywood industry was turning into a more transgressive representation of reality, one that found reception in the nonconformist sectors of society, especially the youth. Under the Hays Code, the film industry had been unable to show that criticism other means of culture had, such as literature or music. With the end of the institutional control, filmmakers could finally go against the mainstream, with a transgressive, or rebellious tone that defined some film productions of the period, such as *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1972) or *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969). One of the first films to criticize Cold War consensus, and probably the best-known of all, was *Dr. Strangelove*.

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb was released on January 29, 1964. Its comedy and irreverence towards the established powers had a good reception, although the generalised consensus about the Cold War in the film hindered the spread of its message among certain sectors of the population. However, “*Dr. Strangelove* anticipated by several years the widespread disillusionment among the youth with Cold War rhetoric and much of the military technology that had been spawned by it”, exposes the professor of cinema Paul Monaco (172). So, it is the critical intention of the film, product of the convictions of an individual in opposition to the mainstream discourse, what identified it as a revolutionary portrayal of its time.

The movie offers an answer to the question that triggered scepticism among those who rejected the Cold War mentality: what could be the consequences of that ideological conflict? By showing a hypothetical outcome of the Cold War, the film warns about the dangers of patriotism and the defence of the ideals once they have been corrupted and turned into fear and hate. With this film about the possible annihilation of humanity, Kubrick offers “dark satire ridiculing the American political consensus that supported cold war policies” (Charles Maland 111). Through its ironic tone, that lies on the dialogues and on the parodic use of stereotyped

characters, *Dr. Strangelove* attempts to show the manipulation and the stupidity that may lead to the end of humanity.

The plot deals with General Jack D. Ripper, who, convinced of a communist conspiracy against the United States, orders several nuclear attacks on Russian territory. Besides, he orders his troops to defend the base even from their compatriots and disables the communications with the bombers. The main political and military figures, including President Muffley, General Turgidson and the ex-Nazi scientist nicknamed Strangelove, uselessly try to solve the situation, collaborating with the Russians. After knowing that the USSR had a defensive system, the Doomsday Machine, that would automatically deploy nuclear bombs over all the planet, they try by any means to stop the American aircrafts. Finally, they manage to make those return; however, one of the bombers successfully lands its nuclear arsenal, activating the Doomsday Machine. In the last moments of humanity, people in the War Room still think of surpassing the Russians, planning the survival of the leaders together with the citizens they select. All in vain, as the world gets immediately destroyed.

The central theme of the film, more than the war itself, would be the questioning of the integrity and the capacity of the military and political figures involved in the nuclear conflict. From the very beginning, those figures face a serious issue, as it is the total destruction, just to treat it in not such a serious way. The parodic tone of the film highlights the inefficiency of the authorities, who are unable to solve the problem; furthermore, some seem to ignore the functioning of their own nuclear strategy. The participants get lost in useless and irrelevant conversations, or set their convictions before the responsibility of avoiding the war. Thus, “at the root of the problem is the issue of safety and command and control, which played on the fears associated with potentially unreliable military leadership and personnel”, argues Sean M. Maloney in *Deconstructing Dr. Strangelove* (174).

In the case of *Dr. Strangelove*, the patriotic defence of the homeland against the opponent takes a negative perspective. The patriotism that, in previous decades, came along with the premise to protect freedom and peace in their own nation and abroad, has been distorted to the absurd. Now, it is based on the distrust of the contrary, which makes any collaboration impossible, even to avoid a major disaster. Besides, it is this ironic patriotism that, ultimately, moves the characters to cause great evil to others, and in consequence, to their own country. This is the case of Major Kong and General Ripper, who initiate a nuclear war with the conviction that the nation depends on them. Moreover, General Ripper, a madman moved by an irrational theory, justifies it with his conviction of “protecting peace and freedom”. In the final scene, where leaders prioritize themselves to be saved from holocaust in order to “maintain the established order”, the director compares the United States of the film with Nazi Germany, concluding that the country was becoming what it vowed to stop in the past.

Therefore, the satire of the film also extends to the characters. In opposition to the first film, those characters are merely caricatures of what the director criticises, or fears, about the leaders and institutions. All characters are flat, without any evolution or depth; they do not show complexity or change, but they have a defined role within the plot. The fact of associating characters to a unique characteristic or profile, attempts to show the stereotypes of politicians, scientists, the military and soldiers that, in Kubrick’s eyes, are unable to put an end to the conflict. Besides the parodic purpose of those stereotypes, this shows the insignificance of the individual against the collective mentality, with its lies and mistakes. Or, in other words, that people have lost the capacity to question the established paradigms, and therefore, to distinguish what is fair or good, and what is not. Jerold J. Abrams, who defends this idea on several occasions, claims that “they are merely products of their institutions, and this is ultimately the cause of their insanity and the war” (10). Characters do not have a private self; they are simply pieces of the machinery of fear and manipulation. To explain this better, we

will analyse military characters in *Dr. Strangelove* and their commitment to an absurd conflict, in contrast to the heroic characterization of Alvin York.

The most relevant figure is General Ripper, whose out-of-control fear initiates the conflict. He is the stereotype of a military leader, performed with intensity in his voice and physical expression. He maintains an authoritarian tone in his speech, and in most of his appearances, he walks straight and firm; even the cigar he holds points to a typical military official. Ripper represents the leader corrupted by an irrational fear of the communists, as many of those who carried out a witch hunt against everyone who did not follow the mainstream ideas. His own troops attack their compatriots convinced that they are infiltrated communists, an example of how the exaggerated anti-communist message had manipulated the people. Although Ripper was convinced that his actions were in defence of the country and its freedom, he carried out an unjustified act of aggression, a patriotism turned into hostility that Kubrick also observed in his own society.

The second military figure to analyse is General Turgidson, one of the members of the War Room. He personifies the radical anti-communist that had led the foreign policy of the United States during the Cold War. His performance rests on exaggerated gestures, almost theatrical, which makes him a hysterical character in a serious situation. The histrionic tone, together with a speech that is all but restrained, prevents Turgidson from being a reliable authority. With this, his anti-communist attitude becomes irrational, as his arguments lose credibility due to his behaviour. Also, his hatred towards Russians prevails over his common sense, being unable to cooperate with the Russian ambassador even to avoid a nuclear disaster. Moreover, Turgidson even suggests launching a major attack to prevent the Soviet Union's response; he is more interested in victory than in peace, justifying a mass murder provided it does not affect the United States, which is another example of the corruption of patriotism. Turgidson is, therefore, a caricature of national anticommunism, and the performance of the character aims to ridicule this feature, exaggerated to portray it as senseless.

Finally, Major Kong, the official in the bomber, is the last military stereotype. The performance is one of a soldier: calmed, methodical, focused on the mission, using an impersonal tone in dialogue lines that consist mostly of military speech. In the speech he gives to motivate his crew, he shows total conviction on the orders they have been commanded. When he says: “That folks back home is, uh, counting on you, and by golly we ain’t about to let ’em down”, the aware spectator knows this is not real. This is another ironic resource, as the audience knows the truth, but Major Kong takes the role of the blinded soldier, who does not question the orders no matter how unexpected they are. Kong represents the troops that, submitted to institutions, do not question the actions of the country or the motives behind those, even if they are wrong. Even the appearance of the Major is ironic, as his cowboy outfit seems to be an anachronism, a figure from the past lost in a changing time. The scene where he falls riding the bomb as in a rodeo, is a veiled criticism that Kubrick addresses to his own country: a stereotypical American leading to the destruction of the world.

All in all, *Dr. Strangelove* presents a satire about the situation of the United States during the Cold War and the possible outcome of the conflict. Instead of a raw critique, the film uses humour and irony to transmit the absurdity of the obsession with an enemy that, ultimately, is not worse than themselves. Kubrick’s distrust of institutions and leaders is reflected in the characters, capable of carrying the worst actions in defence of the ideals that they themselves are destroying. The political figures turn out to be inefficient, and unable to control the madness they have created with their policies; and the military, the supposed defenders of fairness, are now the real danger to peace. *Dr. Strangelove* is one of the manifestations of a sceptical minority that, in opposition to the political consensus, denounced the madness behind the war. Their protest was against the unreliability and lack of rectitude of the institutions that, through the manipulation of society, had distorted the values that the country used to defend. Instead, those values had turned into a threat to peace, while the

manipulation and secrecy carried by politicians and militaries, attacks the democracy of the country and to the national freedom.

The film was one of those critical cultural productions that anticipated the generalised tiredness and refusal to interventionism and Cold War consensus. Some years after *Dr. Strangelove* was released, in the late sixties, the active involvement in Vietnam War generated doubts among the population. Apart from witnessing the reality of the conflict through television, people realised that what their country and soldiers were doing was not for a greater good or justice, but due to the conviction that the United States had to win at any price. Besides, Vietnam showed the manipulation carried by successive governments to maintain the public support; for instance, “During the 1964 campaign, Johnson insisted that he had no intention of sending American troops to Vietnam” (Foner 810). Vietnam was the ultimate rupture of the Ideology of Liberal Consensus. The nonconformism that until then was limited to a minority, was now spread among the youth, and each day, among more citizens in the United States.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we have developed the most relevant aspects of both films, as well as those of the historical moment in which they were created. As a cultural production, they are an expression of its society, ideologies and convictions, and of the dominant discourse, from which they adopt several characteristics. The differences between the films answer to a shift in the trends, that comes along with a change in the mainstream thought. In a period when the government aimed to convince people of the necessity of entering the war, *Sergeant York* was a piece of a propagandistic display aiming to boost patriotism. The propagandistic deployment during WWII, and the victorious outcome for the United States, convinced Americans that they were the protectors of freedom and democracy, against any of his enemies. A conviction that spread for two decades, in which the Cold War mentality, based on interventionism and anticommunism, conditioned every aspect of the country, from its foreign policy to the daily life. However, this caused tiredness and distrust of rulers; initially, among a reduced group of people, but soon it would reach the majority of the population. Those first voices of protest found in culture a mean to transmit their nonconformity, as it happens in *Dr. Strangelove*.

The differences between films are due to the fact that, at one moment, culture was used by institutions to convince the population, while several decades later it was a means for the population to express their nonconformity and distrust on institutions. For this reason, *Sergeant York* was the patriotic portrayal of a heroic story that aimed to praise the virtue of the soldiers and show the rightfulness of participating in WWII. Meanwhile, *Dr. Strangelove* manifests the absurdity of a conflict caused by the convictions of the past, but that had been maintained by the manipulations of unreliable leaders that, in last term, were endangering their own country.

In general terms, we can assume that propaganda, with the aid of cultural production, constructed a social consensus about war, reinforced by victory in WWII and by an artificial feeling of opposition to the rival's ideology. At the moment that consensus started to break up, even before the total rupture caused by the disaster in Vietnam, culture became the first means to criticise, the first one to get free of the established paradigms and to offer an alternative perspective of what the ideals and the mentality of the United States had become.

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