

# Dr. Strangelove: Deterrence as a Power of Absence

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## Dr. Strangelove: Deterrence as a Power of Absence

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CHENGLONG YIN, AUG 23 2022

Security is the absence of threat (Buzan, 1991). As Buzan argues, insecurity to deter emerges as a consequence of the omnipresence of threat in international anarchy. In alignment with this analysis, scholars have perceived deterrence as a counter-measurement in declaring the *presence* of power (see Huysmans, 1998). However, drawing on Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, [1] this essay seeks a close examination of nuclear weapons as a power of *absence* — discussing how the discourse of deterrence is sustained through a series of exclusions and negativities. Specifically, this essay offers two sideway reflections on how the absence of sex and violence in the world of strategic nuclear defense has constituted its power to deter. This essay will begin by first examining how the absence of sex in the defense studies promoted a phallogocentric discourse of deterrence and constitutes the subjection of female bodies; then, through analysing the logic of deterrence, this essay suggests that deterrence is sustained by the absence of violence. To demonstrate arguments better, I would also illustrate how the film *Dr. Strangelove* has effectively reflected this power of absence in the discourse of nuclear deterrence.

### The absence of sex

#### *A world of misogyny*

Sex has been long eliminated from the study of politics and international relations, especially in a highly militarised subfield such as strategic nuclear studies. As a field dominated by male researchers and policymakers, femininity as another sex is absent from the genesis of nuclear defense — or any security research field (Cohn, 2011). However, or rather consequently, such absence instead inscribes perpetual misogynistic violence into the logic and the language of nuclear deterrence. For example, as Caldicott (1984) argues, the nuclear build-up is never 'rational'; instead, its fundamental logic shares an irreducible similarity with phallic worship, in which phallic envy is expressed as a 'missile envy' of absolute possession of nuclear weapons, both quantitatively and qualitatively. It is a reconfirmation and exhibition of masculinity instead of problem-solving. Compromise and negotiation were futile during the Cold War standoff precisely because "if disarmament is emasculation, how could any real man even consider it" (Cohn, 1987, p. 696)? Furthermore, this phallogocentrism is confirmed and enhanced by the very language and metaphors that male researchers deploy in strategic studies as well (Caldicott, 1984). For example, the successful explosion of a nuclear bomb in a country is referred to as 'a loss of virginity' while the bombs that demolished Hiroshima and Nagasaki are named 'Little Boy' and 'Fat Man' (Cohn, 1987) — only the male could make a girl lose her virginity.

This misogynistic aspect of nuclear deterrence is well criticised in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. Female characters are absent throughout the film — from the Air Force base and the War Room to the cockpit of the B-52 Stratofortress bomber (Kubrick, 1964). However, from Soviet Ambassador de Sadesky (sadism) to General Jack D. Ripper (Jack the Ripper), sexual suggestiveness remained (Siano, 1995). Accompanied by an instrumental version of *Try a Little Tenderness*, the film opens with two military planes conducting a mid-air refuel. However, shots from a position below the refuel conduit and a close-up of the docking process give this mundane military praxis another layer of eroticism, as a subtle metaphor for sexual intercourse. As Macklin (1965) indicates, the film itself is a 'sexual allegory' — it opens with penetrative intercourse and ends with an orgasmic climax represented by a series montage of mushroom clouds.

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## *Women as metaphor*

Nonetheless, the omnipresence of misogynic images and language could be explained as the absence of sex in the nuclear defence discourse. Language interpellates subjectivity. The subject is not a pre-existent being outside of language; it is instead called into shapes through the deployment of language (Butler, 2014). Therefore, metaphors and wording serve as critical instruments in selecting different representations of one's being. However, as Butler (2014) writes, the interpellation of subjectivity often functions as a categorical assignment in accordance with the binary gender exclusion, in which one's identity is established through the exclusion of another sex. Deborah Nelson (2002, as cited in Higgins, 2018, p. 803) has also suggested that the subjectivity of a nation is a highly gendered image: while women represent 'a possibly treacherous incapacity to defend the boundaries of home and nation', men signify stoicism, responsibility, and custodianship of boundaries and orders. Therefore, the female body constitutes an ideological category that must be relinquished for its innate incompetence in complying with the duty of protection. In this light, it could be argued that an effective deterring subject is interpellated through a serial suspension of femininity in order to express an image of authoritativeness and menace. Through the rejection of both the physical presence of the female body and the femininity it represents, the singularity of gender in nuclear defence studies constitutes the possibility of constructing a male and misogynistic deterrent subject.

This violence of negation that dwells in the absence of the other sex has been illuminated in the film as well. The film's 'fluoridation theory' has disclosed how masculine paranoia represents the nature of nuclear deterrence. General Ripper's direct authorisation of an irrevocable nuclear order, which ultimately destroys the whole world, was based on his revelation after post-sex fatigue that Americans' bodily fluids had been contaminated by the Communist plot of fluoridation. "I can no longer sit back and allow Communist infiltration ... to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids" (Kubrick, 1964, 23:50). This idea perfectly exhibited the fragility of masculinity (Higgins, 2018). As Higgins points out, what nuclear weapons summon on the subject is an invisible threat signifying feminine impotence. Therefore, in order to eliminate the vulnerability and insecurity imposed by this potential destruction (nuclear war), the masculine deterrent subject (often male) sometimes even requires a paranoid complement of persecutory delusion in which the male body must suffer explicit harms in order for the subject to visualise the threat, and thus, negate its potential femininity (Higgins, 2018). Therefore, insofar as the deterrent subject is constructed through gender signification, women would permanently be excluded as the absent sex in the discourse of deterrence.

## **The absence of violence**

### *Deterrence is the art of fears*

In *What is power*, Byung-Chul Han (2018, p. 1) denotes that "the more powerful power is, the more silent is its efficacy. Where it needs to draw special attention to itself, it is already weakened." As a power of creating fears, doesn't the efficacy of nuclear deterrence follow a similar logic?

In illustrating the use and threat of force, Michael Howard (1970, p. 11) argues that "force is an ineluctable element in international relations, not because of any inherent tendency on the part of man to use it, but because the *possibility* of its use exists." This argument discloses the indirect nature of the power in nuclear deterrence: a nuclear weapon is powerful not in its presence (its explosion *per se*) but for its overwhelming but abstract *potentiality* of violent destruction in the sphere of abstraction. It could be argued that fears of nuclear weapons stem from our delusional supplement of its destructiveness instead of its actual violence of annihilation. As Grigio Agamben (1993) suggests, such an absent presence constitutes a more salient power, since the imagination of potential violence is more fearful than its actual deployment. Therefore, the idleness of nuclear weapons, i.e., their representation of violence in their absence, marks the sources of their power to deter.

This implication is perfectly demonstrated in *Dr. Strangelove* by the definition of nuclear deterrence given by the ex-Nazi advisor Dr. Strangelove: "[d]eterrence is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy ... the *fear* to attack" (Kubrick, 1964, 52:18). As the art of fears, deterrence relies far less on scientific calculation than on the manipulation of the mind. The doomsday machine — the ultimate automatic nuclear counter-measure that ultimately leads to the destruction of the world — is absent throughout the film. There is no direct visual or musical representation of it in the

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film, except for the opening words: “[f]or more than a year, ominous rumours had been circulating ... that the Soviet Union had been at work on what was hinted to be the ultimate weapon: a doomsday device” (Kubrick, 1964, 0:42). Furthermore, from the Soviet ambassador de Sadesky, one could only learn that the doomsday machine is a self-destructing device with a half-life of 93 years, triggered automatically and irrevocably in the event of a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union (Kubrick, 1964). “In 10 months ... the surface of the Earth will be as dead as the moon” (Kubrick, 1964, 49:19). Here, it can be seen that the doomsday machine manifests its absolute presence with an absolute absence. The abstraction of fear is fundamentally sustained through the absence of being, just as death is fearful not as a process of physical decease, but as an abstract annihilation. As Lindley (2001) points out, the doomsday machine is an exaggerated representation of the same logic behind the Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) system in the real world of defence, in which deterrence is achieved by the fear that arises from the absolute death represented by the MAD.

## *It takes two to deter*

In *People, States and Fears*, Buzan (1991) denotes that apart from the destructiveness of weaponry per se, threats also emerge from the possession of it. In this sense, deterrentification is performative: to deter is to not directly declare but indirectly display the competence of nuclear weapons (Vuori, 2016). Nuclear deterrence is not an intentional verbal provocation because, as it can be seen from international practice, an explicit ultimatum constitutes a direct challenge to sovereignty and thus is essentially a declaration of war (see Buzan & Hansen, 2009). Instead, deterrence is a ‘perlocutionary effect’ of a syntactically non-threatening statement, in which its implication is signified through interpretations of its audiences (Vuori, 2016). Therefore, as a speech act, deterrentification requires the participation of both interlocutors to complete.

This interpretation helps explain why the physical presence of nuclear weapons, as violence per se, remains absent from the discourse of deterrence. As explained above, nuclear weapons are insignificant in the logic of deterrence, serving only as a device for ensuring the reliability of deterrent speech acts. As such, nuclear weapons as a figuration of violence must be excluded from the discourse of deterrence in order to ensure that military confrontation does not actually escalate into full-scale nuclear war. This absence perpetuates the illogic of deterrence: the nuclear arms race is to ensure no nuclear war would occur (Buzan & Hansen, 2009).

Following the aforementioned analysis, this scene in *Dr. Strangelove* now possesses a realistic connotation. When President Merkin Muffley learns that nuclear war has indeed been initiated by General Ripper and cannot be recalled, he calls Soviet Premier Dimitri Kissov and promises to assist the Soviets in shooting down all the bombers sent (Kubrick, 1964). Insofar as the abstraction of violence turns to a de facto nuclear attack initiated by either side in a deterrent relationship, the Cold War antagonism dissolves into meaninglessness. President Muffley’s apology over the phone perfectly illustrates how fragile this symbolic antagonism that depends on the absence of violence is: “I’m sorry too, Dimitri. I’m very sorry. All right, you’re sorrier than I am. But I am sorry as well. I am as sorry as you are, Dimitri. Don’t say that you’re more sorry ... because I’m capable of being just as sorry as you are.” (Kubrick, 1964, 44:11)

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has demonstrated two ways that deterrence functions as a power of absence. First, the discourse of deterrence establishes its subject through a phallogocentric gender signification sustained by the negation of female bodies. Further, by presenting the ‘fluoridation conspiracy’ and a series of sexual suggestiveness throughout the film, *Dr. Strangelove* adequately presents the misogyny behind the nuclear war. Second, as a power of violence, the violent nature of nuclear weapons is suspended by the logic of deterrence and reduced to an abstract metaphor in maintaining the performative antagonism behind the logic of deterrence. This aspect is effectively discussed in the film as it is reflected by the logic of the ‘doomsday machine’ and the satirical scene of the phone call.

## Notes

[1] In the following essay, the italicised *Dr. Strangelove* will signify the name of the film whereas the non-italicised

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name will refer to the character of the same name that appears in the film.

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