

GEEK'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY CULTURE 03.03.18 8:50 AM

'DR. STRANGELOVE' IS BASICALLY A DOCUMENTARY



AF ARCHIVE/ALAMY

STANLEY KUBRICK'S 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove* is a black comedy that ends with the world being completely destroyed in a nuclear war. Many aspects of the film might seem absurd, but according to Daniel Ellsberg, who worked as a nuclear war planner in the 1960s, it's actually

pretty close to reality.

“That was a documentary,” Ellsberg says in Episode 297 of the *Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. “Everything in that film existed as an operational reality at the time.”

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He says that while the specific Doomsday Machine featured in *Dr. Strangelove* is fictional, the Russian and American nuclear arsenals function as de facto Doomsday Machines, since a first strike by either power against the other would be more than enough to plunge the world into nuclear

winter.

“If [the US] had followed their actual plans, and they did what they were supposed to do under wartime contingency, it would have destroyed nearly all human life,” Ellsberg says.

Not only that, but the idea for the Doomsday Machine in *Dr. Strangelove* was inspired by the real-life thinking of Herman Kahn, one of Ellsberg’s colleagues at RAND. “Kahn’s words

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are actually quoted in the movie, and Kahn himself wanted a cut, he thought he should get some royalties from this,” Ellsberg says. “And Kubrick had to assure him that wasn’t the way it worked.”

Unfortunately nothing has really changed since 1964, and the chances of an accident or misunderstanding leading to a nuclear holocaust remain terrifyingly high. “It is time for another *Dr. Strangelove*, or at least a revival of it,” Ellsberg says. “And I would be very interested in the reactions in the Pentagon to a viewing of that movie.”

Listen to the complete interview with Daniel Ellsberg in Episode 297 of *Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy* (above). And check out some highlights from the discussion below.

Daniel Ellsberg on Ronald Reagan:

“[SDI] was always said, possibly, to have attracted him—‘Star Wars,’ Strategic Defense Initiative—because he had been in a movie, much earlier, in which scientists had developed an actual kind of envelope over the country, a bubble that would protect against weapons and missiles—a quite infeasible project—which was fiction, which was a dramatic fiction, but that Reagan, almost alone in the government, took it seriously as a possibility, because he’d been in this movie, and movies had a great influence on him.”

Daniel Ellsberg on the military-industrial complex:

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“[Nuclear weapons] are associated with votes, profits, union membership—the unions have supported this on the whole until quite recently—campaign contributions. All this is embedded in a system of money and jobs and careers that keeps it going, even in periods when there doesn’t seem to be any rationale for it at all, as when the Cold War suddenly, unforeseeably evaporated for a few years. But nevertheless the money went on, and I think if it wasn’t there we wouldn’t maintain these doomsday machines, which have never been morally justifiable or served any real military purpose.”

Daniel Ellsberg on nuclear war:

“A first strike will have exactly the same effect as a second strike, which is that nearly everyone [on Earth] will die—assuming that hundreds of targets are near cities and burn the cities, and that’s almost certainly true for the larger options. So it doesn’t make any difference whether you go first or second, and these supposed ‘damage limiting weapons,’ through pre-emption—‘striking second first,’ as they say in the Pentagon, ‘getting the drop,’ ‘being first and being best,’ ‘having an edge,’ and all that sort of thing—counts for nothing, in the actual effect. It will save no lives, in the course of a year, as people starve to death. It will have no effect.”

Daniel Ellsberg on women leaders:

“The basis of our [nuclear] policy has been threats, and I believe that gender has a lot to do with that, and that’s one thing that makes me

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very happy to see that 390 women have been provoked by Trump into running for Congress right now. If we can totally change the composition of Congress—and with women who take on this issue, and see it as a women’s issue, namely preserving the web of life, the continuity of life, the preservation of our species—I do think there’s a bigger chance of that with women, on the whole, than with men.”