



Steven Heller:

Hi, I'm not Pablo Ferro.

Could there be a more biting Cold War satire than Stanley Kubrick's 1964 doomsday film, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. The film's frighteningly absurd humor was established from the very first frame of the hand-scrolled main title sequence designed by Pablo Ferro. As the sensual ballad "Try a Little Tenderness" plays, B-52 bombers engage with refueling ships in a midair coitus. The film's actual title credits — and I'm sure you all know it and you've seen it and clapped here — are full-screen graffiti-like scrawls of thick and thin Ferro-drawn letters, unlike any movie title that had preceded it. The titling masterpiece was Pablo's first of many. By the way, it also has a typo in it, but you can rent the movie and figure out what it is. Call me when you do.

Cuban-born Pablo Ferro became a film title pioneer after directing and editing scores of early television commercials, each a mini experimental film. In 1961, he founded the studio Ferro, Mogubgub Schwartz, later changed to Ferro Mohammed Schwartz, after Fred Mogubgub left. Mohammed, however, was a fake partner used only to retain the cadence of the studio name. Pablo's most innovative technique, developed for commercials, was the kinetic quick cut method of editing a montage of static images. He used engravings, photographs, and pen and ink drawings, presented with motion and sound. In the late 1950s, most commercials were shot with one or two stationary cameras. Conversely, Pablo took full advantage of stop motion technology, as well as shooting his own jerky footage with a handheld Bolex.

Unlike most TV commercial directors, Pablo loved typography, and in the late 1950s, he introduced type in motion on the TV screen with a preference for Victorian decorative display faces. Stanley Kubrick admired these commercials and hired him to direct trailers and teasers for *Dr. Strangelove*. Here the quick cut technique to convey the dark humor in the political immediacy of the film was perfect. Incidentally, he used as many as 125 separate images in one minute — you only saw a couple.

For the main title sequence for Basil Dearden's 1964 *Woman of Straw* starring Sean Connery and Gina Lollobrigida, he did something else. This now forgotten film gave Pablo an opportunity to experiment with a totally different technique: high contrast film that reduced all middle tones to solid black that was then bathed through red filters. During the seventies and eighties this technique is one of the most common conceits used as openers for dramatic TV series. But back in 1964, it was unprecedented on the silver screen.

For *The Thomas Crown Affair*, directed by Norman Jewison in 1968, Pablo introduced another first: multi-screen effects, which became the defining cinematic style of the late 1960s. He also used this technique in the body of the movie. When Jewison realized that the film was a little too long, Hal Ashby, the film editor, suggested that Pablo edit a key sequence as multiple screens in order to speed up the narrative. You saw that as well. Pablo cut a major

scene into thirty simultaneous frames, reducing the time from six minutes to around forty seconds.

For the 1969 *Midnight Cowboy*, directed by John Schlesinger, Ferro not only designed the main title sequence but was the second unit director and editor, filming a key live action sequence for the titles and, among other shots, the famous channel-turning television montage as Jon Voight, as a prostitute, is servicing Vera Miles in a hotel room. For its pure conceptual brilliance and narrative acuity, his titles for *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming*, a Cold War comedy about a mistaken U.S.S.R. invasion of a small New England island community by a lone Russian submarine crew, is my favorite. The main title is dueling Russian and American flags battling one another to chromatically occupy the screen. For the title itself, Ferro scoured type books for the most appropriate lettering until he found a Russian typeface where the R's were reversed. But he once told me that something was missing, the hammer and sickle in place of the G — how many times has that been copied? I couldn't tell you.

For anyone glued to the TV in the mid-sixties, you couldn't avoid the animated TV logo for Burlington Mills where Pablo quickly animated the stitching of the square to a staccato musical rhythm. Few brands were more indelible. To compress Pablo's career path would necessitate one of his own multi-screen special effects, but allow me a couple more bits of biography.

He was supervising editor for Michael Jackson's 1983 music video "Beat It. And he co-directed with Hal Ashby The Rolling Stones' concert film *Let's Spend the Night Together*, where he introduced time-lapse photography. He also directed his own short films, including my favorite, *The Inflatable Doll*, a black-and-white film about a man who sells rubber female companions. And in 1992, he directed his own feature starring George Segal and JoBeth Williams called *Me, Myself and I*. He's also an actor. He acted in his good friend and director Robert Downey Sr.'s films, including *Greaser's Palace* and *Jive*, where he debuted his dancing prowess — we might be able to convince him to do that up here.

Pablo's work is not always as stylistically identifiable as it is in *Dr. Strangelove*, which he reprised and stopped making since the *Addams Family Values* and *Men in Black*. Nonetheless, much of his film work varies in concept and technique because he has always been more interested in making good film than in establishing an overpowering personal mark. I now would like to present the very personable, Pablo Ferro, to receive this wonderful award. [applause]

The AIGA board of directors on behalf of the entire design profession — that's you all — award its greatest honor, the 2009 AIGA Medal, to Pablo Ferro, "recognized for his innovation in film design, changing visual expectations, and demonstrating the power of design to enhance storytelling." Congratulations.

[Applause]

Pablo Ferro:

Well, thank you so much for being here. After what he said, [laughter] I have to think about things. One thing, I'd like to thank the board for giving us this award, with my colleagues, and which to me is very important to recognize people's work because an artist works all their life for their work to improve, and they should be recognized. It's like, I think of Vincent van Gogh, which he knew his work was really very good but he was totally ignored all the time, and I think, you know, that's what drove him crazy. [laughter] Because, you know, you have to, which I sympathize with him because I see a lot of great artists not being recognized and they should, and I'm very proud that AIGA is doing these things to artists. I think it's wonderful, you know, because they need it.

I guess I could tell you a little bit about *Strangelove*, how that happened. When Stanley and I were, I thought we were just having a conversation, and he asked me what I thought about human beings. I said, Well, everything that humans invent is always very sexual. Then we looked at each other, B-52 refueling in midair. I said, Of course, and that's what the movie was about. You know the B-52 going out there to bomb Russia. And he loved the idea so much. He had the models. He wanted to shoot it. I said, No, let me check the stock footage because I'm sure they were very proud of their accomplishment. And they had every angle you could think of. [laughter] And there's one shot that I show Stanley, where the two planes were together and they were doing this. [laughter] So I asked him, You think we could do that? He says, No. Use the stock footage. So while I was cutting it and just about when I was finished cutting it, he came in with this music and said, Try this, Pablo, and see how this works, which was "Try a Little Tenderness," an orchestration of it, and it fit it perfect. I didn't have to change anything. It floated with the movement of the plane.

And Stanley was just amazing with music. He just knew what to use. He was great with that stuff. What Steven Heller was talking about — the mistake that I made in the film, in the titles because I can't spell. [laughter] And even though I did titles first, where I put a letter in here and there and he didn't like it, he said I don't know whether to watch the lettering or the plane. So I said, Oh, then we have to fill the screen with lettering, and then that's when I used that thin lettering, and he loved the lettering. And it worked perfect because we could see two things at one time. Because I'd tried to use that lettering before and I always got turned down. After Stanley loved it, then everybody loved it. So there is a word there that says, "Based on the book." I left out the D, so it says "base." [laughter]

He called me up because they didn't find out until six, seven months later [laughter] He called me — he was mad. And he said, Pablo, why did you do that? I said, Stanley, you know I can't spell. I thought you would catch it. Then he thought about it, and he says, Oh, yeah, I guess it's very satirical. All right, then he loved it. After that, he didn't want to change it, you know, and it would have been hard to change it anyway because even though the planes — I cut the planes — but the lettering was always on the screen. It dissolved from one lettering to another so you would have to do the entire thing over again. So — mistake — I know that was

great. We all have to thank Stanley for that, you know. I think I had another thought about it, but it flew out of my mind.

But this one thing I just love to do is come up with new ideas, and I always try to tell artists, never be afraid to make a mistake because many times a mistake is really a great idea. Like I use this optical house — they were showing me things and there were mistakes and sometimes I would love it. I'd say, That's great. How did you do that? And they would say, We don't know. [laughter] I'd say, We've got to figure out how you did that because it was wonderful.

And again, here I am, a kid from Cuba, 12 years old, coming to America. I never wore shoes because I worked with my grandfather's farm all this time, and I had to wear shoes. I said, Okay. Here I am. Like in the sixties I used to listen to The Rolling Stones, all that music — I never thought that I'd be working with them. All of a sudden here, I said that's amazing. I said only in America this could happen. And things like that has happened to me many times and no matter how many times that has happened, I'm still surprised. And I thank you so much.

[Applause]