

How They Write A Script: Terry Southern

[Scott Myers](#)

The screenwriter of an amazing array of movies including *Candy*, *The Magic Christian*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Easy Rider*, *Casino Royale*, and *Barbarella*.



Terry Southern

From the excellent book "Backstory 3: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1960s":

From 1962 to 1970, Terry Southern was the screenwriter who most embodied the sixties zeitgeist. He was an icon who entered the film world with

underground cult status as the writer, behind Candy (co-written with Mason Hoffenberg), Flash and Filigree, The Magic Christian, and Blue Movie. He was directly involved in the making of Dr. Strangelove and Easy Rider, two films that neatly bookend and encapsulate the apocalyptic obsessions of the hothouse decade. His contributions to the films The Loved One, Casino Royale, The Collector, Don't Make Waves, Barbarella, The Cincinnati Kid, The Magic Christian, and End of the Road varied from on-the-set script surgery and uncredited rewrites to hands-on coproduction.

Southern had one of the most fascinating journeys of any screenwriter... ever! There may not be much to learn about the craft in this interview, but the history and anecdotes are well worth the read.

ON WRITING "DR. STRANGELOVE"

When Kubrick and Peter George first began to do the script, they were trying to stick to the melodrama in George's book, Red Alert [published under the pseudonym "Peter Bryant" (New York: Ace Books, 1958)]. There was an outline. They didn't go into a treatment but went straight into a script. They had a few pages and in fact had started shooting, but in a very tentative way. Kubrick realized that it was not going to work. You can't do the end of the world in a conventionally dramatic way or boy-meets-girl way. You have to do it in some way that reflects your awareness that it is important and serious. It has to be a totally different

treatment, and black humor is the way to go. That was Kubrick's decision.

At our first meeting, he told me what the situation was... "It's too important to be treated in the conventional way. It's unique! The end of the world is surely a unique thing, so forget about the ordinary treatment of subject and go for something like a horror film." He decided to use humor. The flavor that attracted him in my novel "The Magic Christian" could be effective in this new approach. He would talk about the mechanics of making it totally credible and convincing in terms of the fail-safe aspect and then how to make that funny. And the way you make it funny, because the situation is absurd, is by dealing with it in terms of the dialogue and characters.

After my first day in London when he told me what he had in mind, I got settled into a hotel room not far from where he lived in Kensington. That night, I wrote the first scene, and then he picked me up at four-thirty the next morning in a limo. The limo was a big Rolls or Bentley. We rode in the backseat with the light on. There was this desk that folded down. It was very much like a train compartment. It was totally dark outside. If it got light, we would pull the shades down. He would read the script pages; then we would rewrite them and prepare them for shooting when we got to the studio, which was about an hour to an hour-and-a-half drive depending on the fog.

ON THE CREDIT FOR "DR. STRANGELOVE"

Stanley's obsession with the auteur syndrome — that his films are by Stanley Kubrick — overrides any other credit at all. Not just writing but anything. He's like Chaplin in that regard. That's the reason why he rarely uses original music in his films. [Since I had] written this great best-seller, "Candy," which was number one on the New York Times best-seller list for something like twenty-one weeks, my reputation eclipsed Stanley's; so I got total credit for all the *Strangelove* success in Life, the New York Times, and other publications. The credit I was getting was just so overwhelming and one sided that naturally Stanley was freaking out. He took out an ad in Variety saying I was only one of the three writers on the film, the other two being Peter, George, and himself. He just lashed out. But it was like an overnight thing. I wrote a letter to the New York Times explaining that there was no mystery involved, and that I was brought in to just help with the screenplay.



The infamous pie scene in 'Dr. Strangelove' which was cut from the movie.

ON "THE LOVED ONE" AND "THE CINCINNATI KID"

The Loved One was the most underrated film I've worked on. However, it has recently been released on videocassette and will finally be seen and, presumably, recognized. The cinematography by Haskell Wexler should have received an Academy Award. Everyone who knows anything about film agrees on that. The cast, which included John Gielgud and Rod Steiger, is one of the finest ever assembled. And working with Tony Richardson was extraordinary. He had just come off *Tom Jones* [1963], which won every award possible and made everyone connected with it a fortune — and yet such is the total sleaze and corruption of the studios that MGM refused to renegotiate his contract and made him abide by his pre-*Tom Jones* commitment to *The Loved One* for a minuscule fee. They thought they were being shrewd. Well, Richardson was so completely pissed off at them that he cast an American actor, Robert Morse, to play an English poet — at a time, when Tom Courtenay, James Fox, and Albert Finney, to mention a few, were available — and he barred [the producer] Martin Ransohoff from the set. We started each morning in the production office by opening a magnum of Dom Pérignon. The dailies were shown at the screening room of the Beverly Hills Hotel, with plenty of canapés laid on. In other words, their shrewd avarice cost them a pretty penny in the end.

Sam Peckinpah was the original director of *The Cincinnati Kid*. There is a sequence in the beginning where Slade, a

wealthy southerner played by Rip Torn, is at home with his wife and two children. He is shown to be a sanctimonious family man. In a subsequent scene, he is shown in bed with his mistress. Well, it was obvious that the full irony of his hypocrisy, in this citadel of southern virtue, New Orleans, could only be attained by her being black. So that's how it was written, and that's how it was shot with Peckinpah of course in enthusiastic agreement. When the producer saw the dailies, he freaked. "We're not making a message picture," he said and replaced Peckinpah pronto with Norman Jewison, who said something like "Hey, you guys must have been nuts to try that!"

It may have balanced out though, because there's a scene in the movie where the Kid [Steve McQueen] is very depressed because his girl [Tuesday Weld] has just left, and he's trying to get his head together for the big game with the Man [Edward G. Robinson]. Norman said, "Okay, let's create an atmosphere of really devastating loneliness. Maybe Steve walking along an empty street. You know, putting an emphasis on his solitary situation. Think that will do it?" "Yes," I said, "if it's at night." That gave Norm pause. "A night shoot? Very expensive, Ter. Well, I guess we can manage it." "Well, if you really want to max it for loneliness," I said, "it really should be raining as well." "A night shoot in the rain? Holy Christ!" So there we were with a couple of blocks in midtown New Orleans cordoned off, at night, with rain machines letting it pour from the roofs of several buildings. Of course, the producer, Big Mart Ransohoff —

the guy who had fired Peckinpah — freaked out completely. "Are you guys out of your gourd?" He kept shouting, "You're killing me, you're killing me!"

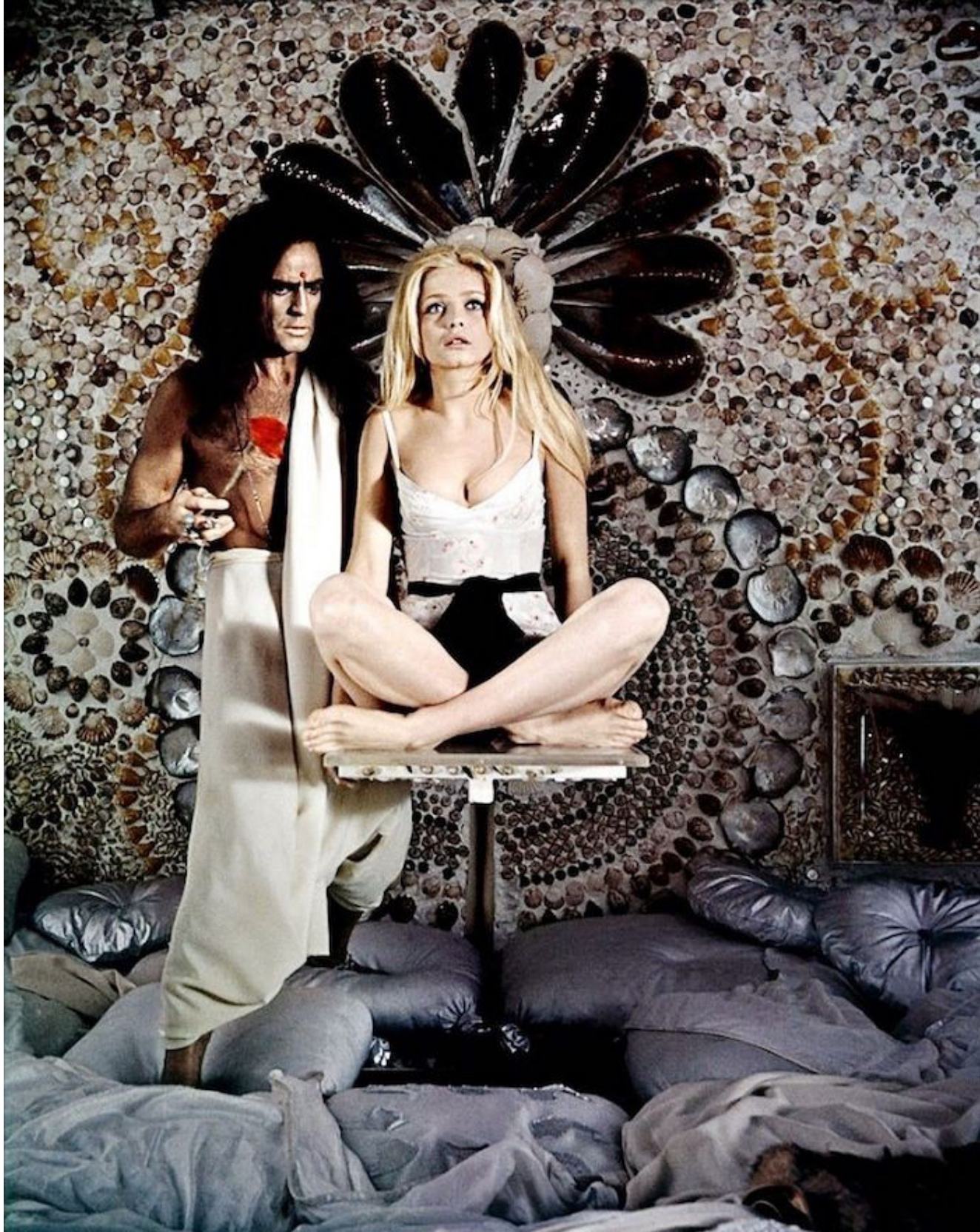


'The Cincinnati Kid'

ON THE MOVIE "CANDY"

The first plan for *Candy* was for David Picker, who was the head of United Artists at the time, to produce and Frank Perry to direct. Perry had just come off *David and Lisa*, [1963], so he was big. We were going to get Hayley Mills to play Candy. She was perfect. [However,] John Mills, her father, wouldn't let her do it. We were still in the process of trying to persuade him to let her do it when David Picker lost his position. Then, my good friend Christian Marquand, the French actor who was trying to break into directing and was certainly competent enough to direct at the time,

begged me to let him have the option for two weeks for nothing, so he could put a deal together. So I did, and sure enough, Marquand immediately put Brando in the cast because Brando was his best friend. They were lifelong friends to the extent that Brando named his first son after Marquand. So on the basis of getting Brando, he was able to add Richard Burton and having gotten those two, he was able to get everyone else. Then, he disappointed me by casting a Swedish girl [Ewa Aulin] for the lead role, which was uniquely American and midwestern. He thought this would make Candy's appeal more universal. That's when I withdrew from the film. The film version of *Candy* is proof positive of everything rotten you ever heard about major studio production. They are absolutely *compelled* to botch everything original to the extent that it is no longer even vaguely recognizable.



Marlon Brando and Ewa Aulin in the film *Candy* , based on Terry Southern's novel.

ON "BARBARELLA"

It was a good experience working with Roger Vadim and Jane Fonda. The strain was with Dino De Laurentiis, who produced the picture. He was just this flamboyant

businessman. His idea of good cinema was to give money back on the cost of the picture before even going into production. He doesn't even make any pretense about the quality or the aesthetic.

Vadim wasn't particularly interested in the script, but he was a lot of fun, with a discerning eye for the erotic, grotesque, and the absurd. And Jane Fonda was super in all regards. The movie has developed a curious cult following, and I am constantly getting requests to appear at screenings at some very obscure weirdo place like Wenk, Texas, or a suburb of Staten Island. Around 1990, I got a call from De Laurentiis. He was looking for a way to do a sequel. "On the cheap" was how he expressed it, "but with *plenty action* and *plenty sex!* " Then, he went on with these immortal words: "Of course, Janie is too old now to be sexy but maybe her daughter." But nothing, perhaps fortunately, came of it.



Jane Fonda in 'Barbarella'

ON "EASY RIDER"

Very early on it was called "Mardi Gras" to identify it. The first notion was that it would entail barnstorming cars, stunt-driver cars, which do flips and things — a troupe who play a few dates and places, and eventually get fed up with that, so they make this score — but that just seemed too unnecessarily complicated. So we just settled for the straight score of dope, selling it, and leaving the rat race. We forgot about the commonplace thing of daredevil drivers. Finally, we forewent any pretense of them doing anything else other than buying cocaine. We didn't specify that it was cocaine, but that's what it was. They go to New Orleans to sell it. Then, once they got their money, they ride to coastal Florida or some place like Key West where they

could buy a boat cheap — not in New Orleans, because it would be too expensive. That was basically the story, which I then started to flesh out after our initial script meetings.

I did *all* the writing on it. They just had the idea in the beginning of the two guys making a score and using the money to buy their freedom from the rat race of America. Their pilgrimage on the road. That was all they had. No dialogue.

I did the *only* writing on it. Peter Fonda was the only working actor in the group. Dennis wasn't really into acting at this time. He was a photographer. He had acted a long time before and had been a child actor. He was in *Sons of Katie Elder* [1965]. Peter Fonda had been in several of these really low-ball series of biker movies for AIP [American International Pictures]. He had a contract for one more in a three-picture contract. Dennis had this idea they would do instead of doing one of their typical B-picture dumbbell movies: under the guise of doing a biker movie, they could maybe pull off a movie that might be more interesting, [and] Dennis would be able to make his debut as a director in one fell swoop. It seemed possible under these auspices, whereas he couldn't get arrested ordinarily. Under the setup where Peter Fonda owed AIP this picture, it would be possible to get this different approach in under the wire. He persuaded Peter to go along with this, "We'll get Terry to write the script!" I had this good reputation off of *Dr. Strangelove* and *Candy*.



Dennis Hopper and Terry Southern in New York City working on the script for 'Easy Rider'

ON "THE MAGIC CHRISTIAN"

The way it evolved was that Peter Sellers and Joe McGrath had been working together with Richard Lester on his *Running Jumping and Standing Still Film* [1960], so they got to be good friends. McGrath had been working as an assistant to Richard Lester. McGrath wanted to direct something on his own. He asked Peter what would be a good movie to direct. And that turned out to be *The Magic Christian*. Peter had bought a hundred copies of my novel to give out on birthdays and Christmas. Joe McGrath thought it was a match made in heaven, so Peter immediately started to develop the property. Peter had a contract with some studio which had produced his last movie. He told them *Christian* was going to be his next movie and he wanted Joe to direct. Did they want to finance

it, or did they want him to look somewhere else? Their first reaction was "Yes, we'll do it!"

Peter had seen me hanging out with Paul [McCartney], I think, and said, "Well, Terry knows the Beatles. Maybe we can get one of them." Ringo had said that he would like to be in the movie. So I said, "How about getting Ringo?" I've forgotten who came up with the specific idea of having one of the Beatles as Guy Grand's son, Youngman Grand, but I was willing to try it.

When I finally made it to the set of *The Magic Christian*, I spent a lot of time doing damage control. It was probably due to Seller's insecurity or a manifestation of that.

Although he loved the original script and it was the key to getting started, he also had this habit where he would run into someone socially, like John Cleese or Spike Milligan, and they would get to talking, and he would say, "Hey, listen, can you help me on this script?" They would come in and make various changes, sometimes completely out of character from my point of view. I found these scenes, a couple of which had already been shot, to be the antithesis of what Guy Grand would do. They were tasteless scenes. Guy Grand never hurt anyone. He just deflated some monstrous egos and pretensions, but he would never slash a Rembrandt — a scene which they had in the movie.

There's a scene at this auction house, where, just to outrage the crowd or the art lover, Guy Grand and his adopted son bribe the auctioneer to deface this great painting. Guy Grand would never do that. It was gratuitous destruction;

wanton, irresponsible bullshit which had nothing to do with the character or the statement. It was very annoying. They shot the auction scene and agreed to take it out for a time, but it stayed in the final cut. Peter did come around to seeing it was tasteless.

Peter insisted we had to shoot that scene under the [real] Statue of Liberty. The producers resisted because of the expense of the trip. They were ready to shoot it there in England. So Peter, in a fit of pique and rage, said, "Well, I'll pay for it!" and then they said, "No, we'll pay for it!" We were going to fly first-class to New York and shoot the scene. Then Gail [Gail Gerber, Southern's companion since the midsixties], of all people, noticed this ad saying the *QE2* [*Queen Elizabeth II*] was making its maiden voyage. She said, "Wouldn't it be fun to go on the *QE2* instead of flying?" Peter thought that was a great idea. He assumed that it wouldn't be any more expensive than flying first class, but it turned out to be much, much more expensive. Flying was like

\$2,500 a person; but going in a stateroom on the *QE2* was \$10,000 a person, because there were all these great staterooms on the *QE2*. The dining room was beyond first-class. Like, really fantastic. Instead of eating in the ordinary first-class place, [we] had this special dining room. It was called the Empire Room. It was a small dining room with about six tables in it. That was another \$2,000 right there. But the producers were committed to it.

Before we left, I'd introduced Peter to this Arabic pusher, who had given Peter some hash oil. Peter put drops of it on tobacco with an eyedropper, and smoked the tobacco; or if he had cannabis, he would drop the oil on that and smoke it. It was just dynamite. Like opium. Peter became absolutely enthralled. He couldn't get enough of it. It was very strong stuff. So we all went on this fantastic five-day crossing. The whole trip was spent in a kind of dream state.



Ringo Starr and Peter Sellers in 'Magnum Force'

ON "A CLOCKWORK ORANGE"

When Michael Cooper turned me on to that book [*A Clockwork Orange*], I read it and said, "This is really good and so cinematic." I sent the book to Stanley, circa 1966, and said, "Look at this." He got it and read it, but it didn't

appeal to him at all. He said, "Nobody can understand that language [Nadsat, the newspeak-type lingo Anthony Burgess created for his novel]." That was that. The whole exchange occupied a day. Still, I thought someone should make a movie of this book.

At one point, I was making so much money on movie projects that I needed someone to handle paying the bills. I got involved with this friend of mine, Si Litvinoff, who had produced some showbiz things in New York like off-Broadway theater. He did a couple of things for me as a lawyer. I showed him the book and told him how it would make a great movie. He said, "You have enough money. Why don't you take an option on it?" So I took a six month option on *A Clockwork Orange* [by Anthony Burgess (London: Heinemann, 1962)] for about \$1,000 against a purchase price of \$10,000 and some percentages to be worked out. I wrote a script, adapted it myself. I thought I'd show the book around, but meanwhile, I would have the script too. After I finished the script, I showed it to some producers, including David Puttnam, who was working with various companies like Paramount. He was one of the people who read the script and saw the cinematic possibilities of it. In those days, you had to get the script passed by the Lord Chamberlain [then British censor of film and theater]. When we submitted it to him, he sent it back unopened and said, "I know the book, and there's no point in reading this script, because it involves youthful defiance of authority, and we're not doing that." So that was that.

About three years later, I got a call from Stanley, who said, "Do you remember that book you showed me? What is the story on that?" And I said, "I was just showing it to you because I thought it was a good book, but later I took an option on it." He said, "Who has the rights to it now?" What had happened was that there was a renewable yearly option. I had renewed once, and when it came up for renewal for another thou[sand], I didn't have the money; so I told Litvinoff I was dropping the option. So he said, "Well, I'll take it out." Then he held the rights. So I told Stanley, "As far as I know, this guy Litvinoff has it." He said, "Find out how much it is, but don't tell him I'm interested." I tried to do that, but Cindy Decker, the wife of Sterling Lord, my agent at the time, found out about this inquiry of Kubrick's; so she passed the word on to Litvinoff and his friend Max Raab, who had put up the money for *End of the Road*. He and Raab sold it to Kubrick and charged a pretty penny for it. Around seventy-five thou[sand], I think.

Well, when I learned that he was going to do *A Clockwork Orange*, I sent him my script to see if he would like it. I got back a letter saying, "Mr. Kubrick has decided to try his own hand." It wasn't really a relevant point because it was an adaptation of a novel. You're both taking it from the same source.



For more on Terry Southern, a [New York Times article \(4/3/2003\)](#) about the New York Public Library acquiring Southern's literary archives. The [original NY Times review of Dr. Strangelove](#) and his obituary [here](#).

[Comment Archive](#)