

Dr strangelove and fail-safe

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The world held its breath during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, as the United States and the Soviet Union pushed each other to the brink of nuclear war. The amount of nuclear weapons possessed by these two superpowers in the 1960s is a frightening thought. The threat of a war was present each and every day, with the United States having bombers in the air twenty-four hours a day, ready to make a retaliatory strike on any Soviet attacks. What would happen if these bombers were accidentally ordered to bomb Moscow?

This is the situation addressed in two 1964 films, *Dr. Strangelove* and *Fail-Safe*. It is very rare to see two movies with virtually the same plot line released in the same year. *Dr. Strangelove* and *Fail-Safe* are two such movies. Released on the heels of the Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of President Kennedy, the two films came along at a very uneasy and paranoid time in America, and accordingly had quite an impact. Each film has a very different style, which creates two completely unique stories. While *Dr. Strangelove* focuses on the unlikelihood of such a situation ever happening, *Fail Safe* presents the harsh reality of a nuclear war.

Both films do however touch on a common theme: People are too reliant on machines. Watching *Dr. Strangelove* is a bit like reading a comic book or watching a fantasy movie. From the all out crazy Jack Ripper, to the almost Nazi presidential advisor Dr. Strangelove, none of the characters seems like they could really exist in the real world, which makes the overtone of the entire movie that of a joke. The music being played throughout the entire movie is upbeat, and happy. The film simply makes you laugh. Is it strange to be smiling about a matter of such severity as nuclear war? Sure, but that's why it is so effective.

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This film creates a sense of calm and relief about a situation that should be utterly terrifying. It is not surprising that Dr. Strangelove is a very popular and critically acclaimed film, because of the way it makes you feel. It presents a very terrible story in a way that lets the audience off the hook morally, because the situation is impossibility. Fail-Safe is dark, disturbing, and scarily realistic. The two movies create completely opposite feelings on the same situation. Fail-Safe is filled with an eerie tension that is present from start to finish. The characters seem to be so real.

Henry Fonda could have actually been the president of the United States. The realism of characters in this situation automatically creates a very dark, serious tone. Adding to this tone is the lack of music in the movie. It creates an uneasy feeling. Fail-Safe really makes you feel as if the situation is happening, and that's a very scary thing. The plot is presented in a gloomy, direct way that directs the enormity of the situation directly onto the audience. The emotions that it brings out are very powerful. The differences in the two movies can be seen when comparing similar scenes in each.

One of the big scenes in each movie is when the President of the United States calls the Premier of Russia to warn him about the impending attack. In Dr. Strangelove comedy is very prevalent. The president's Soviet counterpart is apparently drunk and out on the town when he is contacted by the president. This phone conversation is one of the funnier moments in the movie. The phone call takes place in the large, circus like environment that is the war room. After informing the Soviet leader of the impending attack and saying " I'm sorry" the president gets into a ridiculous argument:

" 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 are more sorry than I am, because I am capable of being just as sorry as you are. So we're both sorry, alright? All right. "(Dr. Strangelove). Having the two leaders argue about who is more sorry about the situation completely takes away any negativity that would normally be generated by such a phone call. Fail-Safe presents this phone call in a much different, darker manner. First of all, the setting is very minimal, which makes you focus on exactly what is happening.

There is no big board or lots of people to distract you. It is just the president, a desk, and a translator. The use of a translator in this scene furthers the seriousness and reality this scene creates. One would imagine that in a real situation similar to this, a translator would be used to make sure the two parties understood each other. Finally, there is nothing to take away from the severity of the phone call. There are no jokes, no one is drunk. It is just a gloomy phone call from one man to another informing him that his homeland may be destroyed.

Watching this scene gives you chills, while the same scene in Dr. Strangelove makes you smile. The biggest difference in the two films can be seen in the endings. This is where the directors' views differ the most. In Dr. Strangelove, Kubrick again uses comedy. When the bomb is finally dropped over the USSR, it gets stuck. While trying to dislodge it, an American Major falls from the plane with the bomb, riding it like a cowboy at a rodeo. This is obviously not very realistic, and it reflects Kubrick's theme that the entire

situation is unrealistic. The comedy is used to mock the situation. Fail-Safe presents a very different view.

Once the United States has bombed the Soviet Union, the president has a very tough decision to make. He decides to drop a nuclear bomb on New York to show the USSR that the first bomb was indeed an accident. While one could argue that this act is more unrealistic than a man riding a bomb, it really defines how bad a war could be. A man is forced to kill millions of his own people in order to save many millions more. Watching this scene makes your jaw drop. Lumet uses this action as a final blow to show the enormity of a situation like this, and the importance of avoiding it.

While Dr. Strangelove and Fail-Safe present differing opinions on the likelihood of an accidental war, each does express concerns with the over mechanization of war. Fail-Safe presents this theme throughout the whole movie. US planes are inadvertently sent to the Soviet Union by an automated system. The planes are unable to be recalled because of Soviet technology that jams their radios. Technology is completely at fault for the deaths of millions. This makes the viewer take a step backward and wonder how much automated military really helps. It is not worth it to risk such a disaster by trusting technology so much.

In Dr. Strangelove, a human initially orders the strikes on Russia, but it ultimately mechanical malfunctions that prevent the planes from being recalled. The final conversation between the president and Dr. Strangelove mockingly addresses the issue of technology playing too big of a role. When asked how people would be picked to go into underground bunkers, the

doctor replies " It could easily be accomplished with a computer, and a computer could be set and programmed to accept factors from youth, health, sexual fertility, intelligence, and a cross-section of necessary skills. "(Dr. Strangelove).

This is a joke poking fun at how reliant we are on computers. Computers continue to be the solution, even though they played a role in creating the problem. The same story has been told twice; in polar opposite manners, that changes the story completely. While expected, is interesting that Dr. Strangelove received higher accolades than Fail-Safe. Perhaps this is due to people not wanting to deal with the reality of a world-destroying war. While neither film has a happy ending, the ending in Dr. Strangelove can be discounted because of the comedic, unrealistic nature of the film.

Fail-Safe is a much more effective movie that leaves a lasting impression on the viewer. The images of death and destruction, and the intensity of the movie tend to stick with you. While Dr. Strangelove gets its message across, and makes the viewer feel happy, Fail-Safe provided a story that was not only depressing, but unforgettable. Fail-Safe's direct approach definitely helps the viewer to imagine that a war could be easily started inadvertently, and the results would be catastrophic. It is amazing how different two versions of the same story can be.