

Researching political films essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In 1963 Stanley Kubrick brought out his contribution to popular anti-nuclear films, the classic black comedy *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. The film, based on Peter George book *Red Alert*, tells the tale of an American air raid launched on the Soviet Union by a deranged general, Jack D. Ripper. Unknown to Ripper, the Soviets had installed a “Doomsday Machine” which would envelop the world in a lethal shroud of radiation should one bomb fall on Russia.

The film, much of it situated in the Pentagon War Room, becomes a satire on the military, and leaves few unscathed as it presents a host of insane characters in the midst of the greater insanity of mutual extermination. In preparation for *Strangelove* Kubrick read over seventy books on nuclear war, subscribed to *Missiles and Rockets* and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and talked with Alistair Buchan of the British Institute for Strategic Studies. Columbia Pictures spent over \$1.5 million on the film, including \$100,000 for a mock up of a B-52 bomber, when the Air Force, not surprisingly, refused to cooperate in the filming.

So realistic were the sets that one critic declared that “the movie could have very easily been written by Herman Kahn himself” and that its plot was similar to one of Kahn’s many “scenarios.” Large numbers of movie goers and the vast majority of film critics found Stanley Kubrick’s production and Terry Southern’s directing worth the price of admission. The film played to record-breaking audiences in 1964 and became a staple on college campuses and on television during the 1960s and 1970s.

The usually tough-to-please Time film critic praised the show as “ an outrageously brilliant satire -the most original American comedy in years” and declared the movie testimony to Kubrick’s arrival as “ the most audacious and imaginative director the U. S. cinema has yet produced. ” Robert Hatch praised Kubrick for taking “ a whole complex of America’s basic assumptions by the shoulder and giving them a rough shaking. ” Brendan Gill pronounced *Strangelove* “ the best American movie I’ve seen in years,” and “ one of the best pictures I’ve seen in years without regard to where it comes from. ²⁶ Even the conservative National Review praised Kubrick for his biting satire even if he had ridiculed only “ Birch Society type generals” and wistfully observed “ if Stanley Kubrick ever felt the urge, he could really do a job on the Communists. ”

In some ways *Strangelove* was the most profound of all the antinuclear films. Lewis Mumford saw the character Dr. Strangelove as the “ central symbol of the scientifically organized nightmare of mass extermination. ” Jay Jacobs of the Reporter declared that the filmmakers “ have set off a large cherry bomb in the intellectual fallout shelter that many of us hoped would exclude the unthinkable. ²⁹ He praised the breadth of their satire, noting that “ they have rounded up just about every sacred cow in the herd and slaughtered them one by one in a lunatic atmosphere of slapstick, bawdry, word play, and snowballing comic hysteria. ” Dwight McDonald of Esquire agreed and regretted only that *Strangelove*’s makers had left out a caricature of J. Edgar Hoover. Particularly appealing was the motion picture’s going beyond the question of the threat of nuclear war and its looking more closely into human nature itself.

Some critics praised the film's main theme which they saw as " the sheer ridiculousness of humanity's posture in its terrible complex life and death affair with the bomb. " 31 John Shields agreed that the real villain in the story was not modern military technology but " the latent impulses of the men who are given control of it. " Many saw the cinematography as reinforcing the plot. Jay Jacobs observed: " Even the photography has a looming surrealistic slickness that suggests an eerie absence of any human agency," while Midge Dector believed that the " War Room," which was the scene of much of the film's activity, was a perfect depiction

One may conclude that *Strangelove* clearly increased awareness of the nuclear issue among people who would not have been as affected by the print media. The motion pictures made nuclear war seem more likely and more real, and they made discussion of the nuclear issue more compelling. Yet, it must be added that none proved to be decisive in molding public opinion or influencing public policy on either side of the atomic debate. Perhaps their failure to do more lies in the fact that the commitment to nuclear warfare as national policy had been made well in advance of their appearance.

In such documents as National Security Council-7 and in policy decisions of the late 1940s and 1950s the nuclear strategy had been cast. The films and the response to them offer additional evidence that military and foreign policy have ultimately proven extremely resistant to cultural pressure either in the form of narrow treatises aimed at an elite or of films seeking the widest possible attention. The plot of the film is the accelerating

technological inevitability of modern society, an acceleration that has as its products social stupidity and ultimate political impotence.

Man, the real enemy, becomes subject to his infernal machines. The crazy logic of the cold war is carried to its inevitable conclusion: not merely the triggering of the atom bomb but the further super deterrent of the diabolical doomsday machine. A brilliant director, Kubrick does not allow the resident neuroses of his audience to become neutralized. Just as the individual begins to laugh at the antics on the screen and forgets the seriousness of the plot, the director switches to another location.

There are only three basic locations in the film: Burpelson Air Force Base, the bomber, and the War Room. Each shift from one location to the other is accompanied by increasing the tempo of violence. The audience is not allowed to relax and regard the movie as merely a spectacle, but instead is caught in the progressive acceleration of the film. The increasing intensity of the mosaic of locations is accomplished by three different shifts of film styles. One style is antiseptic ironic counterpoint.

This style dominates the beginning of the film, most of the scenes in the War Room, and many of the exterior shots of the bomber as it waltzes and eventually waddles to its target. The second style is brute realism. (It is this style that forces the audience to call on the real world in relation to the reel one.) The hectic excitement inside the wounded airplane is conveyed by a jerky, accelerating, handheld camera technique. The invasion of Burpelson Air Force Base is shot in grainy newsreel texture, the camera movements are abrupt and shaky.

The third style consists of cool close-ups and minimum camera movement. Here, the camera is used as a window on “ reality” and the actors are allowed to carry the scenes into exaggerated absurdity. The purpose of this exaggeration was to raise the film from comedy to satire, thus neutralizing its potent appeals to fear. Unfortunately for the audience, the recent reality they were living was as absurd as the characters in the film. Thus the “ neutralization” failed to take full effect. When reality itself is absurd, it is doubtful satire is possible.

General Turgidson’s disbelief that the “ stupid Ruskie” could shoot down his planes is absurd until we remember our own anxiety about Sputnik. The intense concern over a doomsday gap appears as a form of ultimate insanity until we recall the United States is pockmarked by strategic missile silos inhabited by multiple-headed hydras. Turgidson’s advice to strike first and we will “ get our hair mussed a bit,” but we will only lose a few million people, may seem incredible until we recall a retired air force general who ran for the second highest office in the land.

Reason for the ambivalent audience reaction to Dr. Strangelove was the public’s inability to classify the film as a comedy, a satire, or as a clever projection of reality. This raises the problem of classification and the broader problem of understanding. The puzzled reactions to the film might also be explained by the inability of the audience to recognize it as a work of its own merits. Recognition, after all, demands that we draw distinctions.

Furthermore, it demands we then see the concrete work as an analogue of comparable productions. Dr. Strangelove did, indeed, appear strange.

This complexity may have made the film hard for many to comprehend. Another reason for the difficulty of understanding, however, was the film itself displayed facets that resist the attempts to classify it as a member of a genre. At first viewing, it seems as if *Dr. Strangelove* could be classified fairly easily in terms of its content, its plot or its theme. After all, the content concerns atomic warfare, the plot reveals the progressive enslavement of man by his own technology and the theme appears to be that modern man is his own worst enemy.

The film's plot is a broken mosaic that sometimes moves logically, but sometimes (such as in the revelation of the doomsday machine) by quantum jumps. Since there are three styles interwoven throughout the three locations, the photography techniques are variable according to the expressive demands of the situation and the personal tastes of the director. The theme of *Dr. Strangelove*, though subtle, eventually dominates and determines the plot extension. Kubrick is extremely careful in his use of music and utilizes it for three different purposes. His style is intensely personal.

It is a constantly shifting three-phase sonata, which could not have been done by a committee. *Dr. Strangelove* is simply not a standard Hollywood production nor even a standard studio production, such as *Lolita* or *Spartacus*. *Fail Safe* In the middle sixties, nuclear war advanced as a topical Hollywood product. It should be asked if these films posed significant questions, provided solutions or brought new perceptions concerning the threat of nuclear war. Although there is perhaps no subject of greater

importance than how a decision to use nuclear weapons might be made, there is probably no subject about which less is known.

One such film examining the decision-making process, *Fail Safe*, began its journey through the media as a 1962 novel. The impact of the book was thorough; the paperback version proudly boasts the banner “ Over Two Million Copies Sold. ” The story provided exciting reading for a public caught in an avalanche of ominous warnings of a mushroom cloud looming on the horizon. The authors, Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, composed an exciting story, yet one expects their enthusiasm came from effectively reading the public.

They could rely on success — nuclear warfare was an exploitable topic. But *Fail Safe* encountered difficulties even before it reached a film producer’s hands. Another novel and film concerning nuclear war became strangely intertwined in the *Fail Safe* story. *Fail Safe* attracted much attention when it was initially published, particularly from the author of a 1958 novel entitled *Red Alert*. The two stories were remarkably similar, and a suit for plagiarism ensued. No doubt, to the relief of Burdick and Wheeler, the case was finally settled out of court.

Interestingly, *Red Alert* returned to haunt *Fail Safe* — albeit changed in form and title — as Stanley Kubrick employed it as the basis for his brilliant and darkly humorous film, *Dr. Strangelove*. This interesting parallel continued — both films were released in the same year — 1964. (*Dr. Strangelove* premiered in New York in January, *Fail Safe*, in September.) Although political rhetoric was dominant at the time, the nuclear scare was waning. No

longer distributed were civil defense pamphlets, which mapped escapeways from congested cities and charted anticipated numbers of casualties in neat, regimented tables of percentages.

Man had survived, the race to oblivion seemed to have temporarily yielded. Two films were plunged into this curious cauldron of emotion with quite interesting results. It proved most unfortunate for the producers of *Fail Safe*, when Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* came out first. When *Fail Safe* appeared in print, it was a fairly accurate reflection of our growing concern about the nuclear threat. By 1964, however, society was much more attuned to the black humor of *Dr. Strangelove*, while *Fail Safe* tried to be serious after we had passed the point of all-consuming concern.

The key to the effectiveness of *Fail Safe* or any film of its genre is one's perception of the seriousness of man's condition in relation to nuclear war. Perhaps this perception is reflected in most productions concerning the bomb. The final holocaust is almost always triggered by an electromechanical malfunction. In fact, if any human miscalculation is involved, it is of the moment and almost totally unrelated to the fact that such weapons exist. Nevertheless, one must either accept or reject the story's premise: An accident similar to the one depicted in *Fail Safe* is mathematically inevitable.

But it seems that many did not believe this film when it was released. Reviews of *Fail Safe*, describing it as a "sciencefantasy," suggest the implausibility of the story. A brief historical review of the film should provide some insight into the film's limited effectiveness. *Fail Safe* contends the only

solution to a mechanical malfunction is the immolation of innocents. The malfunction at the Omaha headquarters of the Strategic Air Command sends bombers streaking past their fail safe points on a heading for Moscow. Their mission is to destroy the Soviet capital with nuclear bombs.

The president of the United States rushes to the hotline to inform the Soviet premier that not only are the planes beyond recall, but it is all a terrible accident. Two wrongs seem to make a right in international power politics. To prove the whole affair is an innocent mistake, the president (Henry Fonda), is forced to swap New York for Moscow, to trade one annihilated city for another. In the final scene, the screen resembles a painter's canvas or a still photograph. Director Sidney Lumet combines the zoom with the freeze-frame, creating a dramatic rhythm within the shot. The zoom-freeze selects significant details.

As one bomber approaches New York, for example, Lumet cuts from the plane to shots showing New Yorkers at work and play — a woman hanging out wash, an irate taxi driver, children happily roller skating, and birds in flight. Their behavior reflects the motions of life and normalcy. Then the bomb falls. Lumet uses a collection of stills from this sequence: he employs the zoom-freeze on each of the several figures of the previously shown stills, implying that the New Yorkers die in a single instant. The story effectively weaves a fictional version of what is at stake as a global community.

The growing tension gives rise to a feeling of personal involvement. Dramatic scenes of the president facing the inevitable decision, the grotesque hotline phone looming on his desk, and the placid looks of his interpreter in an

otherwise barren room, all emphasize the loneliness he must feel. That phone and the interpreter are all that remain of his nation's " security. "

Most of the action in *Fail Safe* takes place in only three settings, the Pentagon's War Conference Room, an underground room in the White House and Strategic Air Command (SAC) headquarters in Omaha.

Director Sidney Lumet maximizes suspense and emotional tension by permitting his cast to behave as intelligent men faced with an impending catastrophe. As the president, Henry Fonda soberly and emphatically instructs his Russian interpreter (Larry Hagman) to analyze not only the Soviet premier's words, but his thoughts: " I want to know. . . what you think he's feeling; it's important that we understand each other. " Unable to recall the American bombers or to shoot them all down with American fighter planes, Fonda instructs the SAC general (Frank Overton) to inform the Soviet Union of their location.

Intent on con-the Russians it was a mistake, the general makes available all necessary data — the Russians, with SAC's assistance, attempt to shoot down the bombers. In Omaha, the location and fate of the bombers is kept under surveillance by a large electronic plotting map. Grady (Edward Binns), the pilot of the single bomber to reach Moscow, refuses to adhere to appeals from the President and his own wife. Following set orders, he releases the megaton bombs which, in turn, forces Fonda to destroy New York City.

In *Fail Safe*, the President and the Soviet premier discuss the helplessness of their respective situations while waiting for Moscow to be razed by American bombers. The theme of their soul-searching conversation is that no one is to

blame. The decisions regarding nuclear weapons are almost of a mystical nature, beyond capacity to comprehend or control. Films about the bomb have consistently stressed that the action of the United States government in dropping atomic bombs on Japan quite probably sealed the fate of atomic energy for years thereafter.

From 1945 onward, the potential of a great and historic scientific discovery was doomed to the perversion of mass annihilation. Atomic energy, baptized in war, grew from an enfant terrible to a thermonuclear tyrant. One must, along with the rational leaders of our time, coexist with the threat. The historical record reveals that the unrivaled terror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki momentarily stunned governmental, scientific, and even military leaders into a serious reconsideration of the value of the atomic bomb and its inevitable progeny.

Fail Safe questions preventive nuclear war. In theory, an intimidated nation might force a world leader into using his awesome power to undermine an imagined threat — striking first in a defensive sense. But such a “preventive” maneuver would be a travesty in every sense; that nation could be initiating a worldwide holocaust. Such a philosophy makes use of Orwellian logic: The bomb is our deliverance; salvation will come through destruction. In the end, the irony of our nuclear “security” is the paranoia it creates.

This fear and panic is exemplified in Fail Safe by the fanatic scientist who advises the president to make the most of a hopeless situation — he asks the president to destroy the Communist threat forever with a total first

strike. But in this film the situation has been given added meaning. A terrified nation has not forced the president's hand; the first stroke was a mistake and cannot be halted. Thus, a preventive war becomes a war not to destroy the enemy but to placate him. Waging war on itself, the United States must forsake New York City to prevent a global fireball.

But for all the cinematic horror and suspense of the freeze-frame death of New York City, the film fails because it leaves one feeling more uneasy than truly fearful, more sorrowful than indignant. While portraying the world's precarious position, *Fail Safe* only furthers the myth and cruel hypocrisy of our nuclear age. The underlying theme of the story is that man was long ago overwhelmed by events; nuclear energy was preordained to become an all-powerful demon. Therefore, no blame may be affixed for man was impotent in the face of an irresistible force.

Yet history illustrates warnings were sounded. *Fail Safe* does not offer any hope that as a nation, and ultimately as a global community, we will acknowledge our responsibility for the present condition of man. Who is responsible is not so important as the fact that responsibility should indeed be assigned to someone. In the final analysis, man is the victim of imagined senses of impotence and innocence. Hollywood films about nuclear war seem to have failed in casting man in the starring role. Responsibility is placed elsewhere and, as a result, the audience is not insulted or challenged.