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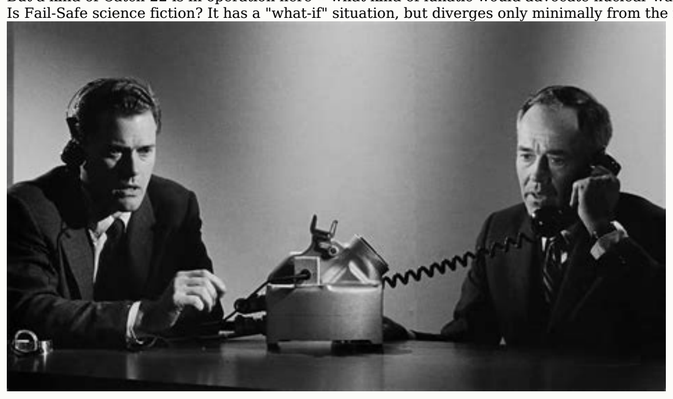
Fail safe movie analysis

Fail safe movies. Fail safe analysis.

Fail-Safe, written by Walter Bernstein from the novel by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, directed by Sidney Lumet, 1964, 110 min. Fail-Safe has always existed in the shadow of Dr. Strangelove. The similarities between the two films caused a deal of legal flap at the time, because the basic plots are indeed copies of each other (to put it diplomatically). Dr. Strangelove caused more of an uproar in its time, both critically and at the box office, but I feel that Fail-Safe is a superior film in some ways.
It has none of the same problems of pacing, and keeps the viewer tense and off-balance from beginning to end. Fail-Safe also boasts some excellent acting, especially from Henry Fonda as the President and Walter Matthau as a civilian advisor. I am glad that audiences over the years have recognized Dr. Strangelove for what it is -- an absolutely unique work of genius -- but I was also deeply impressed with Fail-Safe. Both movies do good work in emphasizing the profound lunacy of nuclear war. Fail-Safe opens with a dream sequence. General Black (played by Dan O'Herlihy) is dreaming of a bull being speared to death by a matador. He wakes up and goes to a meeting at the Pentagon. Meanwhile, a Senator and a businessman are touring a command centre in Nebraska. A blip appears on the big board -- is this the long-feared attack by Soviet forces? American planes are sent to the fail-safe point, a line beyond which they cannot be called back. When the blip turns out to be a non-threat, the planes are indeed called back, but some kind of malfunction in the system lets one plane go on with its mission to bomb Moscow. The President (Henry Fonda) gets called in to deal with the situation, and he gives some orders to General Black that tie the ending in with the opening nightmare. There are no laughs here, as in Dr. Strangelove, but Fail-Safe delivers the same message with a feverish intensity. In comparison to another very "serious" movie, On the Beach, the tight plotting is again very much in Fail-Safe's favour -- yes, the message is somber and sincere, but this movie also moves forward like clockwork. In a rather demented clock, considering the topic, which makes the movie only more effective. The characters are well-cast and well-portrayed. Henry Fonda does an especially good job as the President, who refuses to crack under unbearable pressure. This is staged very effectively by Lumet, who gives the President a naive young interpreter for conversations with the Soviets. All of these scenes are remarkable tribute to Lumet's power to tell a story and build tension and to Fonda's acting, considering that we only see Fonda in a bland, featureless room deep below the Earth's surface. Walter Matthau does a fine job in a rare dramatic role, this time as a civilian advisor on the subject of nuclear war. The kind of advisor who would say that as long as 40 million Soviets are wiped out, 30 million casualties at home are acceptable. He has an odd scene early on with an admiring young woman, that only hints at the twisted sexuality that permeates Dr. Strangelove. And his ruthless adherence to his own form of "rationality" makes the character coherent and above all, believable. I saw Fail-Safe on TVOntario, and the host, Elwy Yost, interviewed Matthau after the movie. Matthau said that he was proud of the role, but frightened that people would tell him that they agreed with his character. Just as many people certainly agreed with the real-life counterparts to Matthau's character. This would not be a problem for anybody acting in Dr. Strangelove -- Kubrick's extreme caricatures pushed the fact of their lunacy right into the viewer's face.



But a kind of Catch-22 is in operation here -- what kind of lunatic would advocate nuclear war to begin with? A lunatic who doesn't see lunacy. I liked the scene where Matthau's character comes to the conclusion that Soviets will simply surrender, showing how far separated he is from reality.
Is Fail-Safe science fiction? It has a "what-if" situation, but diverges only minimally from the reality of the time.



In the interests of raising the level of discourse in the genre, I would claim it as science fiction -- Fail-Safe is an excellent film that contributes a great deal to how we think about and understand the future. About how our choices in the "now" bring us to calamity or good fortune in the "then." But then my definition of science fiction is almost impossible to pin down from day to day. Whatever its genre, Fail-Safe speaks powerfully and simply to its topic -- the destructive power of the bomb and the mindset behind the bomb. As such, I respect it immensely. Last modified: September 24, 1998 Copyright © 1998 by James Schellenberg (jschelle@becon.org) Crystalline Sphere | Challenging Destiny | Reviews | Movie Reviews by Title | Movie Reviews by Rating “This is the President of the United States.” It’s a line that makes intrinsic sense when it comes from the mouth of Henry Fonda—a paragon of world-weary Hollywood integrity if ever there were one. In Sidney Lumet’s Fail Safe (1964), Fonda declares“I am the president” with the authority of a man whose face is already immortalized on our national currency. Watching Lumet’s film, however, you quickly grow to wish you were hearing it under better circumstances.The time is the paranoid ‘60s, during the long political tail of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The place: a constellation of government and military offices in the United States, ranging from Fonda’s post in an underground bunker to caverns of the U.S. Strategic Air Command at Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, Nebraska to the cockpit of a “Vindicator” bomber—the source of all the movie’s trouble.
The mood, predictably, is panic.Watch Fail SafeLumet, best known for films like 12 Angry Men, Dog Day Afternoon, and Network, has a knack for landing a tight, winning premise. Fail Safe, a box office failure in its time that’s been considered a classic ever since, is no exception. The stakes couldn’t be higher: a thermonuclear first strike by the U.S. on the Soviet Union has accidentally, or perhaps inevitably, been set into motion. Moscow is about to be obliterated, which of course portends a Soviet counterstrike, which further portends an all-out nuclear holocaust.It’s a premise beset with irony. In a way, things go as wrong as they do because the men fated to carry out this mission are good soldiers: they cannot be deterred. The U.S.’s military strategy is so well-honed and carefully planned, so prepared to set the vehicle of war into motion, that as they near their targets, the Vindicator bombers are trained not to trust any orders to abort their mission—not even from their own president. Because, you see, the voice of the president can be imitated. The Americans have thought of everything.Everything, that is, but their own failure. Fail Safe is based on a bestselling 1962 novel of the same name by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, which had been serialized during the Cuban Missile Crisis in the Saturday Evening Post. It was fiction, not journalism, but that made it no less terrifying.



And its adaptation to the screen by Walter Bernstein—a writer who’d been blacklisted by the studio system during the McCarthy witch hunts—has the added heft of an exile’s skepticism.



The film is, among other things, a riveting critique of boys and their toys—the boys being the people pulling the strings of these world powers, and the toys being weapons of nuclear annihilation.Rewatching it recently—spurred, maybe, by an urge to escape our own crisis by vicariously panicking through someone else’s—I got an eerie feeling. Nuclear wars and pandemics aren’t analogous. But they do share a penchant for wiping people out, speeding along to worst-case-scenarios while our heaving, indecisive bureaucratic structures trail them in the rear view. Like any other international crisis, they both depend on powerful people in rooms making decisions on behalf of the rest of humanity. Relatedly, they also depend on the public’s implicit trust in those powers.Which is but one reason that Fail Safe’s near-absence of a “public” makes it so intense.
With “us,” the audience, removed from the action—with almost no one on screen meant to approximate the average American, suffering laws rather than making them—we become all the more beholden to the incumbent tragedy . We imagine ourselves “out there” in the dramatic negative space of the movie, living our lives, completely unaware as a violent disruption—perhaps the end of society as we know it—looms invisibly over our heads.It’s no wonder Lumet makes some of the formal choices he makes here—an absence of music, for example, which makes the entire film not only quiet enough for a guy to hear himself think, but quiet enough to those most panicked, most paranoid thoughts upon him. It’s also no wonder that we get a real voice of anti-reason coursing through the film, a political scientist played by Walter Matthau and unabashedly inspired by the physicist and futurist Herman Kahn, who once asked us to think the unthinkable.Matthau’s confident but ultimately, in the heat of a real conflict, unpersuasive professor spends most of the film in the Pentagon, among the president’s closest advisers. From the moment we meet him, it is clear this is a bad idea. This is a man who weighs the toll of nuclear war in relative terms.



For him, winning means that American civilization will at least have a chance of surviving, even if millions of Americans do not. His ability to neatly parse these things—civilization, citizens—sums him up. And the movie. Somehow, without even showing us the public whose lives are at stake, Lumet forces you to imagine the real, material consequences of what, in Matthau’s mouth, feels like an abstract game of numbers. It is almost impossible to discuss Sidney Lumet’s Cold War thriller Fail Safe without also considering its more financially successful cinematic foil and fellow 1964 Columbia Pictures release, Stanley Kubrick’s Cold War satire Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. The two films reveal striking structural and narrative similarities and almost no tonal ones. As such, however, they also make for fascinating companion pieces, and throw their directors’ respective visions into sharper relief.Both movies show men operating within remorseless systems (in fact, both show men operating within the same remorseless system, namely the United States nuclear apparatus), but in Strangelove’s case, there’s a liberating nihilism to Kubrick’s vision, as the system unleashes the characters’ monstrosity—their zeal for war, their twisted notions of civilization, their fantasies of survival. With Fail Safe, while the system defeats the characters, the film allows them to assert their humanity in small yet profound ways, as Lumet puts us in the middle of this drama with an immediacy that evokes the title of one of the CBS television shows on which he cut his teeth in the fifties: You Are There. Kubrick may still make us weep for the world (albeit by first making us laugh at it), but Lumet makes us weep for ourselves and our loved ones. But one does not need to have seen Dr. Strangelove to appreciate the countervailing humanism in Lumet’s film. It’s there right at the beginning, as we’re shown some of the central characters in the context of their personal lives: somewhere in New York, General Black (Dan O’Herlihy) wakes from a recurring nightmare about a bull being speared by a mysterious matador, hugs his sleeping sons goodbye, has an intimate conversation with his wife; Professor Groeteschele (Walter Matthau) holds forth at a Washington, D.C., dinner party, his articulate, provocative ruminations about the winnability of nuclear war drawing the attention of a beautiful young woman; in Omaha, Nebraska, home of the United States Strategic Air Command, General Bogan (Frank Overton) retrieves the proud, forlorn Colonel Cascio (Fritz Weaver) from a ratty basement apartment where his alcoholic parents are living in squalor. These incidents are all taken from the film’s source novel, by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, but in the hands of Lumet and screenwriter Walter Bernstein, they are given a messy, lived-in vibrancy. “It’s a procedural thriller set in a world that is both physically and philosophically isolated—but it is also haunted by a real-life churning beyond its immediate borders.” “In Lumet’s hands, Fail Safe becomes a film of faces, at times immense, downright expressionistic ones.” A master class in dramatic tension and pacing, Carl Franklin’s neonoir masterpiece explores the desperate energy and desperate deeds that fuel real crime. The protagonists in Budd Boetticher’s five classic Columbia westerns are paired with opponents who, venal though they may be, almost always have their reasons. In his five collaborations with actor Randolph Scott and producer Harry Joe Brown, Boetticher presents an unsentimental vision of honor-bound men competing and banding together in a desolate landscape ruled by chance. Martin Scorsese drew on the influence of Hitchcock and Kafka for this anxiety-ridden tale of one bizarre night in New York City—a movie that energized him during a tumultuous period in his career.