KINONIK

WARGAMES (1983)

Directed by John Badham

WEDNESDAY August 5th 7PM

SATURDAY August 8th 2PM / 7PM



In 1983 Ronald Reagan watched **WarGames** at a private Camp David screening arranged by one of its writers (Lawrence Lasker had grown up attending the same Brentwood cocktail parties as the Reagans). The president was reportedly so unsettled that he spent the following week's national security briefing asking the Joint Chiefs whether any of it could actually happen. The answer, essentially, was yes. Within fifteen months, Reagan signed NSDD-145, the first presidential directive on computer security. A fizzy Matthew Broderick thriller about a teenager playing tic-tac-toe with a supercomputer changed American defense policy because the right people saw it in the right living room.

The film arrives at a strange intersection of anxieties. In the same year Reagan called the Soviet Union an evil empire home computers were proliferating in American households for the first time — the Apple II, the Commodore 64, the TRS-80. An entire generation of teenagers was developing a fluency with networked systems that the adults managing those systems did not possess. WarGames takes that gap and wires it directly to the launch codes. Broderick's David Lightman is not a rebel or a criminal. He's a kid who wants to play a game and discovers that the game is real, and that the men in charge can't tell the difference.

WarGames was not originally a John Badham film. Director Martin Brest was fired after producing footage that the studio found lifeless. Badham watched the dailies and identified the problem immediately: the kids weren't having any fun. Broderick and Ally Sheedy were playing the hacking scenes as if they'd stumbled into a terrorist conspiracy. Badham understood that the appeal of showing a pretty girl you can change her grades on a computer is that it's thrilling, not sinister. He rebuilt the film's entire tonal register around that insight, and he was right; the movie doesn't work without Broderick's delight. But it's the same instinct that drives every Badham film: the audience should be having a good time, even when the subject is annihilation.

This lovely 16mm print from John Badham's personal collection is itself a kind of metaphor about what the CIA once called “circular reporting” — four decades after its release we’re entirely suffused by the paranoid digital milieu it both predicted and inspired. When the WOPR delivers the film's most famous line, it might be worth considering who's still playing, and why.