

A State of Siege That Never Was

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In his lively essay "The Uruguay That Never Was: A Historian Looks at Costa-Gavras's *State of Siege*," (pp. 239-256, above) Professor Mark Falcoff repeatedly regrets that the film's distinguished director infused fact with fancy. Yet readers need not finish the first paragraph of the essay before they are awash in a mythology of Latin American film affirmed as fact. The Latin American cinema is by no means a late bloomer as Mr. Falcoff asserts, On the contrary. Latin Americans were making films within a few months after the Lumiere brothers had projected their first films in Paris. The Argentine, Brazilian, and Mexican film industries witnessed some of their busiest years during the reign of the silent screen. Also, the Latin Americans' interest in documentary-style film long antecedes the television era despite Mr. Falcoffs statements. In fact, that was their first interest. The pioneer filmmakers initially sought to capture "natural events" on celluloid and their concern with the present soon expanded to include curiosity about the past. They devoted much of their efforts to reconstructing history on film, and the past has provided a constant source of thematic material explored by successive generations of filmmakers. A remarkable early example of the efforts to fuse contemporary documentary with historical reconstruction was the unusual *El Ultimo Malón* filmed in Argentina in 1917 by Alcides Greca, The film focused on an uprising of the Mocovi Indians in Santa Fe in April of 1904. The first part was purely documentary, using techniques which did not come into vogue until nearly half a century later. It showed the conditions of the

Mocovi in 1917 and commented on their poverty and exploitation by the landowners. The second pan re-created, using the Indians themselves, the actual uprising.¹

I call attention to these details of cinema history principally because they forewarn the reader of Mr. Falcoff's essay of his lack of familiarity with Latin American film and by extension imply his neglect of that medium in general. In his criticism of *State of Siege*, Falcoff, an able historian, treats film in terms of his profession without any particular effort to adapt to a filmmaker's, film critic's, or even a film student's perspective. With their concern for the past, filmmakers are contributing new methods and ideas to its study. Roberto Rossellini, for one, has made major filmic contributions to our understanding of the past as well as called for new approaches to the study of history.² Scholars such as Eugene McCreary have offered some tentative conceptualizations hoping to link film and history more closely.³ Journals such as *Film & History* and *University Vision* regularly do the same. Seemingly oblivious to these efforts, Professor Falcoff treats film's imagery exactly as he would a sixteenth-century written document. There may be similarities in the treatment of the two, but differences exist as well. We should admit at least that all of us social scientists are untrained in the use of the image and should approach it with caution as well as willingness to learn and to experiment. There exists the possibility that it might expand our rather traditional historical perspective.

Professor Falcoff exhibits a common suspicion among social scientists that the camera and filmmaker conspire to trick the viewer whenever and however possible. (Obviously abundant examples can be marshaled to prove that point.) But not all films have that intention. In reality, films probably engage in "trickery" no more than authors and the printed word do. In fact, one could argue that films might even be less prone to deceit than books. The camera's eye, after all, takes in much more than the object on which it focuses; it includes a background which often serves to keep it honest or expose its dishonesty. Further, the film transfers the image directly to the mind of the viewer eliminating the need for interpretation which each written word, symbols after all, requires.

A disdain for the vocabulary and methodology of the scholar who has adopted film as a source for historical study permeates the essay; Mr. Falcoff

¹ Jorge Miguel Couselo. "El aporte de Alcides areca al cine argentino." *Todo Es Historia* (Buenos Aires), no. 49 (May 1971), 74-79.

² Roberto Rouellini. "A Panorama of History," *Screen* (London), 14:4 (Winter 1973/74), 83-111.

³ Eugene C. McCrary. "Film and History: Some Thoughts on Their Interrelationship," in E. Bradford Burns, *Latin American Cinema: Film and History* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center, 1975), pp. 47-66..

takes a dim view of the genre of "fictional documentary." He chooses to reject it despite the growing body of literature describing and discussing it and determines to treat *Stage of Siege* as a "nonfictional documentary," a term I am sure he would not-and does not-e-use.⁴ He speaks only of "documentary," but the context in which he uses the word suggests that he is speaking of the "nonfictional documentary." That refusal to accept the Costa-Gavras movie as a fictional documentary and his insistence upon treating it as a "documentary" are precisely what invalidate the essay. If "The Uruguay That Never Was" bothers Professor Falcoff, "A *Stage of Siege* That Never Was" concerns me.

To understand *Stage of Siege* and extract a maximum benefit from it, it seems to me, the viewer must appreciate the understanding which a fictional documentary can bring to bear on a subject. It is a type of film made with increasing effectiveness by Latin Americans to explore their own societies and to study the past of their nations.⁵ Jorge Sanjines in his provocative *Blood of the Condor* depicts the conflict between the Indian community with its own firmly rooted culture and the Europeanized national government, a dominant theme of the Andes for more than four centuries. Ricardo Wullicher's *Quebracho* (Argentina, 1974) details the economic role of a foreign company in a remote Argentine province, a study of economic imperialism in a local community. One of the major goals of the Cuban Film Institute is to recreate Cuba's past on film, and if Humberto Solas's *Lucia* (Cuba, 1968) serves as a representative example, it is succeeding brilliantly. The Cubans, in fact, have been among the most successful practitioners of the fictional documentary.⁶

Scholars using film as a means of studying society have been paying increasing attention to the documentary and they generally concur with its division into two broad categories: the fictional and nonfictional. Both share much in common: they are concerned with reality; they interpret reality; they treat it creatively and imaginatively. Perhaps the major difference between the two lies in where and for what purpose the filmmaker applies imagination. The nonfictional documentary uses imagination in the technique of presentation, while the fictional relates something imaginary or semi-imaginary, taking some license with reality. Imagination is used to reconstruct situations that

⁴ One of the most rewarding studies of the fictional documentary as a genre is Joan Mellen, "Film and Style: The Fictional Documentary," in Burns, *Latin American Cinema: Film and History*. pp. 67-92.

⁵ E. Bradford Burns. "The Latin American Film. Realism, and the Historian." *The History Teacher*. 6:4 (August 1973). 569-574.

⁶ For a statement regarding the Cuban use of fictional documentaries see Daniel Diaz Torres, "Notas sobre el cine como arma de la Revolucion: Dos filmes cubanos." *Cine Cubano*, no. 86-87-88. p. 11.

reflect and symbolize reality. A fictional documentary conveys the essence of an actual event. It is the creative search for reality. Gino Pontecorvo's *Burn* serves as an excellent example. It details the causes for the declaration of independence of a mythical Portuguese island. Queimada, in the Caribbean in the nineteenth century. No one tries to argue that Queimada actually existed. It obviously did not. Still, most regard this film as a suitable case study of the reasons which prompted the elites to declare the independence of most of the Latin American nations. The causes the film reveals for the declaration of the island's independence parallel those discussed by R. A. Humphreys and John Lynch in their introduction to *The Origins of the Latin American Revolutions, 1808-1826*, which tersely synthesizes the experiences and aspirations of various independence movements. The film's depiction of the success of English economic domination of the island is purely fictitious; yet few would deny that it represents what actually happened throughout most of nineteenth century Latin America. Here again the film's distillation of many experiences into a composite would not be unlike the similar efforts of Stanley and Barbara Stein in their concise *The Colonial Heritage of Latin America*. *Burn*, as a fictional documentary film, offers in representative form some of the major trends in the western hemisphere during the past century.

In the search for reality and the interpretation of the past, the imaginative re-creation of situations and experiences that could have happened is not unknown--or unused--by historians. Those making generalizations about life-styles or multiple experiences engage in an activity similar to the fictional documentary filmmaker: the creation of the composite in which a distilled example represents a model beyond the single component. Historians cultivate what they call "historical imagination" as an asset to their research and writing. a better insight into the topics they study. Indeed, the historical manuals used to train young historians place a high value on the proper use of imagination. One advises. "History involves the imaginative understanding of experience and its communication to an audience. It is closely related to the art of the novel, for both tell a story, the main difference lying in the amount of imaginative reconstruction of facts and personalities." ⁷ Perhaps Louis Gottschalk provides the best link between fictional and nonfictional, between the filmmaker and the historian, in his discussion of "verisimilitude" in a text which has been used by generations of young historians:

It might be well to point out again that what is meant by calling a particular credible is not that it is actually what happened, but that it is as close to what actually happened as we can learn from a critical examination of the best available sources. This means verisimilar at a high level. It connotes something more than merely not being preposterous in itself or even than plausible and yet is short of meaning accurately

⁷ Robert V. Daniels, *Studying History: How and Why* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966), pp. 72-73

descriptive of past actuality. In other words, the historian establishes verisimilitude rather than object truth⁸

The application of imagination to the study of the past is one bond between historians and the makers of fictional documentaries, while another is the willingness of the two to accept a fictional example—the construction of a composite—as representative of multiple experiences.

When both the fictional documentary and history claim responsibility to observable data, they share a fundamental characteristic which in the long run accents their similarity. From there both go on to shape the facts in conformity with predetermined thought patterns. After all, it can come as no surprise that history—no matter how narrative—is not simply brute facts. The mind first selects those facts it determines essential and then goes on to mold them into comprehensible meaning and form. Fictional documentary follows a similar process of adopting and adapting known facts to patterns determined by thought. Reality and fiction can be linked and both the historian and the maker of fictional documentaries do so through imagination. Reality is the brute facts; fiction is the meaning and form given those facts. The historian and the maker of fictional documentaries apply their imaginations to the known and brute facts about the past to form patterns. Those patterns reveal a perception of the past. The intimacy of fiction and reality is a provocative idea, and in the last analysis the cogent argument validating the use of fictional documentaries for the study of the past.⁹

Superficially *State of Siege* might seem to bear resemblances to some events which have occurred in contemporary Uruguay. However, Constantin Costa-Gavras was not really concerned with details in the history of that small and unhappy South American republic. His vision was wider: the interplay of imperialism and dependency. Latin America, with its obvious client-metropolis relationship with the United States, offers the perfect example of the interaction between active imperialism and passive dependency, a dialectic affecting the lives of billions of people in the world today. Of course imperialism and dependency do not explain exclusively the contradictions of widespread poverty amidst potential plenty, long the most notable and frustrating characteristic of Latin America. They do go a long way, however, in offering a rational explanation, and further they imply the existence of complementary institutions which confirm the explanation. The theme of the film, then, concerns a basic reality which needs to be discussed in order to arrive at a better understanding of the complexities of contemporary Latin America. Costa Gavras directs a film for a larger screen than Mr. Falcoff gives him credit for.

⁸Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method* (New York: Knopf, 1964), pp. 139-140.

⁹Murray Krieger, "Fiction, History, and Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, 1:2 (December 1974), 345..

In the particular case of *State of Siege*, one finds it difficult to deny that it effectively shows how imperialism behaves. The known facts authenticate this fictional film as a useful case study. The increasing evidence from congressional investigating committees, the newspaper exposes, and the first person account of CIA activities in Latin America seem to validate most of the accusation *State of Siege* hurls against U.S. imperialism. Is it so incredible that the leaders of a nation who plotted to assassinate foreign chiefs of state, concocted the bombing of Guatemala City in 1954, fed drugs to innocent and unsuspecting persons, and approved the napalm bombing of Vietnamese villages would find torture of alleged "subversives" an acceptable device to achieve political ends? The filmmakers have shaped known data into a believable story which details how imperialism might work or seems to work in dependent countries.

Since Mr. Falcoff chose to view the film as a reconstruction of contemporary Uruguayan political history rather than a case study of the interplay of dependency and imperialism, it is easy to understand why the discrepancy between Uruguayan history and film disturbs him. He is correct: the "facts" of the Uruguayan past and this film vary. I view the film as a fictional documentary case study. I understand Costa-Gavras to be operating on a rather exalted level, one of grand theory, causality, and accusation. Therefore, Falcoff's criticism seems irrelevant to me.

Possibly Costa-Gavras distracted Mr. Falcoff with his own imprecise talk of "documentary." But an historian must always question his source and learn to interpret it within its own context. Regardless of whatever pronouncement the director might have uttered about the "documentary" nature of his film, the fact is he remained vague about specifics. For example, the film never directly states the scene of the action, already a clue to its fictional nature. After all, if the filmmaker wanted the film to duplicate events in Uruguay, why didn't he just announce the locale of the film to be that country? Mr. Falcoff's determination to make this film fit recent events in Uruguay and thus to take it literally-leads him into prolix and frankly inconsequential arguments which deflect attention from the real importance of the film: a fiction case study of imperialism in full operation. Indeed, the scriptwriter, Franco Solinas, who never claimed the film was a history of events in Uruguay, emphasized the dominant theme. "What our film, *State of Siege*, tries to show is the mechanism by which the United States controls Latin American countries." He went on to say. "This film was based on the Mitrione story. This is not a documentary telling exactly what happened, but are-creation of the facts."¹⁰ The Argentine film critic Homero Alsina Thevenet praised the film for its revelation of "the essential truth." and added. Time

¹⁰ William Tuohy. "Stage of Siege Details a Bad Neighbor Policy," *Los Angeles Times Calendar*, April 22, 1973. p. 18.

will show surely that *State of Siege* was not a very precise document on subversion and repression in Uruguay, but it is obvious that it was not meant to be."¹¹ That critic thought it sufficient that the film depicted the connection between imperialism and dependency and explained what it signified for Latin America. Such statements suggest how Mr. Falcoff's essay obfuscated the real significance of the film.

Costa-Gavras's insight into the interplay of dependency and imperialism is reduced to insignificance if one tries to force it into the mold of Uruguayan political history. Doubtless inspired by the sad events of Uruguay, it transcends the confines many of its critics seem determined to impose on it. *State of Siege* is an excellent example of the fictional documentary-historical imagination and perception-useful to illuminate trends and themes. The important question is how the film helps the viewer to understand better the workings and interplay of imperialism and dependency. To ask any other question of this film is to miss its major point.

¹¹ *Filmar y Ver* (Buenos Aires). 1:2 (September 1973):9 and 11.