

## *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. Falcoff's 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> Scholars such as Eugene McCreary have offered some tentative conceptualizations hoping to link film and history more closely.<sup>3</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> 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..









