

The Uruguay That Never Was:
A Historian Looks at
Costa-Gavras's *State of Siege*

MARK FALCOFF

University of Oregon

The French writer Paul Nizan once remarked that the diplomatic correspondent was the historian of the present. Perhaps a generation or so ago that was still true; in the contemporary period the honor has passed in the industrial countries to television, and in Latin America, to the novel and especially to motion pictures. The cinema is a late-blooming Latin American art form and bears all of the marks of its recent emergence. Since in many cases it follows rather than precedes the advent of television-in marked contrast to Europe and the United States-it has rapidly developed a style which might be called "documentary": to speak here of a "social" or "political" cinema is nearly redundant, for clearly all important Latin American films are about politics. For one thing, in many of the republics there is simply nothing else for intellectuals to talk about; for another, no single aspect of life capsulizes the tensions generated by underdevelopment so much as the political scene; for yet another, almost no other kind of film stands a chance in a highly competitive export market.

The same rules apply to outsiders when they approach the region with a motion picture camera. Since for the inhabitants of the North Atlantic countries the abstractions "Latin America," "unrest," and "revolution" are all one and the same thing, many foreign filmmakers find it difficult to imagine

nonpolitical themes for productions set south of the U.S. border.¹ And when the cineast in question is a European, particularly one with leftist leanings and intellectual pretensions, the film habitually depicts the grim reality of U. S. imperialism, not only because it is good box office in Paris and Milan (and now in New York and Iowa City), but also because, for an extraordinary number of Europeans (and a growing host of Americans). "Latin America" has no internal life of its own, a life rich in contradictions and conflict, but rather survives as a kind of picturesque extension of the U.S. Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the United Fruit Company. Such, at any rate, is the Latin America-and specifically the Uruguay-which provides the setting for Costa-Gavras's most recent political thriller, *State of Siege* (1973).

Created by the director of *Z* and *The Confession* and scripted by Franco Solinas (*The Battle of Algiers. Burn!*), *State of Siege* has enjoyed an international success. Although banned in Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile (by both Allende and the junta), it broke all records for a first-week run when it opened in Buenos Aires in August, 1973. Although its commercial success in the United States has been somewhat limited (owing in part to the barbarously dubbed English version), it continues to enjoy wide and continuous exhibition on American university campuses: in Europe, especially in France, where it requires no subtitles. It has become a contemporary film classic.

This is so-let it be said immediately-not merely because Costa-Gavras and Solinas have successfully exploited so many misconceptions and prejudices about Latin America: *State of Siege* is excellent entertainment. Filmed in Chile with an international cast, marvelously photographed and edited, it utilizes authentic settings and human types to the point that it can be said that here, practically for the first time, southern South America appears on the screen as it really is." At the same time, *State of Siege* fully exploits the rich dramatic possibilities inherent in a crime of international consequence, the kidnapping by leftist guerrillas of an American police expert on loan to a South American government. The structure of the film calls for the parallel development of two themes: the frantic search by the local government unpopular, and under strong harassment from both left and right-for the victim, hopefully unharmed; and the simultaneous attempt by the guerrillas to

¹ Of course, there are scenarists who are attracted to Latin American themes primarily because they like to write about politics. For example, Franco Salinas, who in addition to writing film scripts is an active member of the Italian Communist Party, has declared that "I write scenarios which generally deal with political themes because in my opinion politics is a fundamental maner, I'm not interested in psychological stories; I have no use for literature in the traditional sense, the continual repetition of the same old patterns turned out with varying degrees of taste and intelligence, and presenting problems that are always personal and in the end uninteresting. This son of story can only serve to shock and confuse the audience and cannot give it a key for understanding reality." "Interview with Costa-Gavras and Salinas," in Constantin Costa Gavras and Franco Salinas, *Stage of Siege* (New York, 1973), p. 141.

negotiate the release of all political prisoners through an exchange. These two lines are periodically interrupted by flashbacks on the life of the American agent, which in their totality provide not only a background to the kidnapping itself, but a moral justification for the execution which follows. Although Costa-Gavras and Solinas reveal the "ending" in the first few minutes, it is a tribute to their cinematic skill that they are nonetheless capable of generating the kind of tension normally associated with the conventional suspense film. Finally, and perhaps here one merely expresses a personal preference. *State of Siege* affords the irresistible fascination of witnessing history close up: at the U.S. Embassy and in the Ministry of Interior, at the University and in the Chamber of Deputies; in the State Department and the National Palace-and in the eye of the storm, the "people's prison." where the sole object of a national dragnet is being held. Above all, there is the sense of traveling to a far country, underscored by the wonderfully gothic quality of the physical settings, particularly the National Palace and the University. There, archaic windows and doors, illuminated by a dull, gray backlight, flank Second Empire furniture and draperies, whose musty textures depict, in an apparently uncontrived but unmistakable manner, the decadence not only of a government, but of an entire way of life.

Had the creators of so fascinating a motion picture been willing to recognize a clear boundary between art and life, there would be little reason to quibble over the actual historical details upon which it is based. But since they have so unambiguously claimed for their film all of the prerogatives of a documentary, they must allow their work to be judged by the canons which normally apply to that genre.² What follows, then, are a series of caveats which occurred to the writer after a third viewing of *State of Siege* and subsequent study of the script and the accompanying published materials. They are inspired, and I hope informed, by a long acquaintance with Uruguay and by residence in both Montevideo and Buenos Aires during the entire period depicted in the motion picture. These observations do not, of course, qualify as film criticism except in the broadest sense of the term. They are, rather, an attempt at intelligent commentary by an observer and student of the "reality" which *State of Siege* pretends to replicate.

² This contradiction is apparently resolved for some by calling films such as *State of Siege* a "fictional documentary." (See Joan Mellen, "Film and Style: The Fictional Documentary." *The Antioch Review*, 32:3 (1973), 403-425.) Unfortunately this category could be meaningful only to professional to professional filmmakers, critics, and political intellectuals -if even to them. The general public has but slight grasp of the concept of cinematic fiction, and normally regards even highly stylized political films such as *Joe* (1969) as "real." When the film in question has all of the rough edges of a television news film and rigorously replicates the setting and texture of an actual event, it is regarded as "documentary" by the viewing public, and probably rightly so. Such concepts as "fictional documentary" strike me as casuistic devices intended to relieve the filmmaker of the full responsibility for the accuracy of his material.

Before we begin, however, it might be useful to review some of the actual events which form the background of the film. On July 31, 1970, partisans of the Uruguayan Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN), also known as Tupamaros, simultaneously abducted from their homes in Montevideo American police advisor Dan Mitrione and Brazilian Consul Aloysio Mares Dias Gomide. Two other intended targets. Michael Jones, second secretary of the U.S. Embassy, and Nathan Rosenfeld. U.S. Cultural Attaché, managed to evade their captors and escape. As was customary, the purpose of the kidnappings was eminently political-to secure the release of a number of leftist and trade union leaders jailed by the government. When President Jorge Pacheco Areco vehemently refused to bargain with the kidnappers, on August 7 they abducted American AID agronomist Claude Ay. And at almost the same time a manhunt virtually without precedent in Uruguayan history yielded some sixty suspected Tupamaros, including lawyer Raul Sendic, generally believed to be the founder of the group. On August 9, their sense of urgency increased, the MLN announced that unless all political prisoners were set free. Mitrione would be executed. After hurried consultation with Washington, the Uruguayan government reiterated its refusal, and a few hours thereafter the corpse of Mitrione was found stuffed into a 1948 Chevrolet convertible parked in a suburb of Montevideo. Dias Gomide and Ay were released unharmed some months later.

Except for the return of Dias Gomide and Fly, all of the events enumerated above are depicted in the film more or less in the order in which they occurred. Only the names are changed-or omitted altogether. Mitrione becomes Philip M. Santore (pronounced, in the American manner. San-tor); Claude Ay becomes Mr. Snow; Dias Gomide becomes Fernando Campos B.; and Jones and Rosenfeld are metamorphosed into Anthony Lee, second secretary of the U.S. Embassy. One figure is apparently fictitious-Carlos Ducas, an elderly journalist whose inexhaustible energy and tenacious curiosity eventually unearth the true nature of Santore and his mission within the country. We say "apparently fictitious." because Ducas is obviously modeled closely on Carlos Quijano, publisher of" the left-wing intellectual weekly *Marcha*.

Alas, to faithfully depict events "as they happened" does not amount to explaining or interpreting them properly. This is preeminently the case in the miscast portrayal of Mitrione/Santore by the distinguished French actor Yves Montand. The script calls for something more than a transplanted Indiana cop; at all events, Santore resembles no American policeman this writer has ever met or heard about. To start with, Santore possesses a kind of Satanic elegance: as the script indicates, he is "dressed in a dark, well-cut suit"; his face "shows little emotion; he is obviously in control of himself."³ He lives

³ *State of Siege*, p. 29. Subsequent quotations from *State of Siege* are from the edition cited. The page reference follows the quotation in the text.

in a house in Montevideo which "resembles a home in any American town" (p, 44), which is conceivable provided the town in question is Bel-Air, California or Palm Beach, Florida. Above all, he is endowed with a kind of dialectical skill which is at least the equal, and at times the superior, of that possessed by his captors, who after all are supposed to be Marxists.

SANTORE. I don't meddle in politics I'm a technician.... There might appear to be some contradictions. But I'm a traffic and communications technician, and the problems are the same whether you're dealing with a democracy or a dictatorship. . . . [p. 46]

HUGO (Tupamaro interrogator). And the Brazilian bishops who denounced the tortures, are they Communists too?

SANTORE. Who knows? ... [p. 47]

SANTORE. Our task [in the Dominican Republic, 1965-66] was to reorganize the police force and to restore order.

HUGO. What type of order, Mr. Santore?

SANTORE. Civil order! Which is the opposite of chaos, theft, and looting.

HUGO. You must mean the order of the United Fruit Co., don't you? And the role of the other Yankee Companies in Latin America? [p. 62]

On one hand, Santore is a kind of police ideologist, a worthy companion of Victor Hugo's Javen. "Governments come and go," he declares in one of the pithier statements in the film, "the police' remain" (p. 73).

HUGO. You belong to a special breed?

SANTORE. You might say so, yes.... We're cut out for law and order, which means we don't care much for change. We're conservatives.

HUGO. Here a lot of people turn cop because they're hungry, not because they're cut out for it.

SANTORE. Yes, but they join the police force. While others, if they're hungry, turn into thieves.

HUGO. You think hunger leaves a man a choice?

SANTORE. I think a man, a *real* man, always chooses. [p. 74]

On the other hand, he is a highly polished Cold War dialectician, who sounds as if he spent most of his spare time reading Gerhan Niemeyer, Stefan Possony and Robert Strausz-Hupe, and perhaps (strictly for methodological purposes) Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

HUGO. You say you're defending freedom and democracy.... Your methods are: war, fascism, and torture.... Surely you agree with me. Mr. Santore?

SANTORE. You are subversives, Communists. You want to destroy the foundations of our society, the fundamental values of Christian civilization, the very existence of the free world. You are an enemy who must be fought in every possible way.

HUGO. I don't think we have anything more to say to each other.

SANTORE. I don't either.... [p. 100]

SANTORE (to ESTE, another Tupamaro interrogator). As for you, you have no choice. If you kill me, it will be an act of cruelty and impotence. If you don't kill me, it will be a proof of weakness, thus of impotence. [p. 124]

Anything being possible, one cannot say that such a policeman, even such an American policeman, might not exist: although it requires an enormous stretch of the imagination, perhaps he might find his way into the overseas operations of the Agency for International Development, And pushing the matter to its ultimate extreme, perhaps he might even land in Uruguay. BUI he would not resemble the real Dan Mitrione in the slightest. This we know because the Tupamaros published their interrogations of Mitrione after his death, and those dialogues were fully available to Costa-Gavras and Solinas, who claim that they recast them for dramatic purposes, but that they remain "faithful to the spirit of his character and [that] of the Tupamaros" (p, 154). Here are some selections: let the reader decide,

MITRIONE . . . let me say this. I hope you get the problems solved before you have to kill any more on either side. That doesn't accomplish anything, really.

TUPAMARO. Ah, we hope it too, but we don't see it very soon.

MITRIONE. I hope so. Miracles have happened before. The thing I say is that the Tupamaro... are not people from Mars. You are all Uruguayans ... that want to see your government do things, what you consider better, because it isn't a case like in the United States, where we do have a very definite separation between the black and the white.

TUPAMARO. That's a pretty rough problem, isn't it?

MITRIONE. Oh yes, my goodness, it is a rough problem. But here you don't have that. Everybody is an Uruguayan, but the philosophy and the ideology is different, that's all.

TUPAMARO. Yes, and it's pretty hard to do it without violence, you know. I've been trying for long before I decided to work with violence, you know. I didn't care about my life. I cared about hunger and exploitation.

MITRIONE. I'm strictly at your mercy, really. And I understand that.... Well, the only thing I regret about all this: I don't like one thing and that is that too many innocent people suffer. My wife and children, there is no reason for them to be suffering.

TUPAMARO. I have a wife and children too, but you know, you do it for money and I don't. You choose your work and the States choose a political way to do things and you are engaged with your country and so you are under your own law.

MITRIONE. Y cab.

TUPAMARO. I am sorry about them too, I am sorry about other families of all friends who are in prison being tortured or killed. There are many really, many innocent people have to suffer. But do you know about one million boys and girls under five year die every year in Latin America?

MITRIONE. Of hunger?

TUPAMARO. Yes sir, and that is not a way of control, birth control, you know. And how do you feel about other guerrilla movements. You know that we don't work all the same way. You have seen that.

MITRIONE. Well, every one of them has to work according to his surroundings. What everyone can work best. From what I have read. I think that the Tupamaros are a little bit smarter than some of the others, because Tupamaros don't kill unless they have *to*. I think the others indiscriminately kill. I think they shoot and ask questions later....

TUPAMARO. What do you think is going to happen with all Latin America?

MITRIONE. Well. Latin America is going to be all right. I don't care. I don't know how long it is going to take, but there are people who love life, there are people in every country who love life. Governments have problems, but some day it's going to be solved, you mark my words.

TUPAMARO. Yes.

MITRIONE. It's going to be solved. All these buildings and all these stores and all these schools and all these football fields are not accidents. They were built by intelligent people. They are not going to be destroyed overnight.

TUPAMARO. No. we hope not.

MITRIONE. No. I know they are not. It's just going to be a case of how long it is going to take. Some countries will take longer than others.⁴

Now, there is no point in claiming that Mitrione was a political innocent. Attached to the published version of the script is a summary of his activities provided by "Police Inspector X." which claims that while "advising" the Uruguayan security forces his innovations included the establishment of a spy underground in high schools to assemble dossiers on rebellious student leaders, the placing of hidden cameras at Carrasco International Airport to photograph persons leaving for socialist countries, the use of agents provocateurs to discredit and confuse left-wing movements, the introduction of explosives for political purposes, and so on. Since "Inspector X" remains anonymous, there is no way of establishing the veracity of his allegations. But at the very least, we might hazard the judgment that Mitrione was a man engaged in dangerous, highly paid work which, whatever its official cover, amounted to espionage. He was not a humanitarian and he was not engaged in the reestablishment of "law and order" in the conventional sense (although that fact was determined as much as anything else by preexisting Uruguayan conditions). But neither was he the elegant police ideologist-cum-Cold War intellectual represented by Philip M. Santore. Rather, he was something more and less than this: he was, at least insofar as the published documentation allows us to

⁴ From *Dialogue before Death* (Washington, 1971), quoted in Nathan A. Haverstock and Richard C. Schroeder, eds., *Dateline Latin America: A review of Trends and Events of 1970* (Washington, 1971). pp. 14-15. To judge by the rather curious syntax of the interrogator, these dialogues took place in English.

infer, a brutal and ruthless American policeman whose authoritarian impulses simply got out of control in an environment in which he was subject to few restrictions, in which the "enemy" professed the (to him) supreme heresy of Marxism and appeared capable of effectively subverting the government, perhaps of bringing it down altogether. The difference is important: Montand conceives the character he plays in terms of "a perfectly respectable man... [sharing] certain parallel[s] with a convinced Stalinist ... a man on the Right who is equally convinced of his own righteousness" (p. 139). But this merely makes Santore a tragic, possibly even a heroic, figure, depending merely on the ideological predisposition of the audience.⁵ The real Mitrione lacked Santore's precise if amoral calculus of means and ends: and he filtered the world around him through an ideological prism which was extraordinarily distorted in its refractions. In the "people's prison" he was by turns frightened, cowardly, and morose, and at all times obsequious to his captors. But Costa-Gavras and Solinas cannot allow that his was the banality of evil, for that would amount to admitting that Americans are not ten feet tall, that their operatives can be contemptible rather than fearsome, and above all, that their intelligence and espionage apparatus is not the omnipotent force in Latin America (and elsewhere) which their conspiratorial imagination requires.⁶

This last point is important as well, for in order to explain the nature, origins, and purpose of Mitrione's activities. Costa-Gavras and Solinas find it necessary to explore the larger relationship between the United States and Uruguay. Here too, the result is something less than successful. As defined early in the film, the motive force of U.S. policy is economic.

DUCAS (to the representative of the AID). Whether it's by drinking beer, swallowing aspirin, brushing his teeth, cooking in an aluminum pan, using a refrigerator, or

⁵This apparently was the reason why the Allende government chose not to buy the film, after extending full facilities to the company when it was working in Chile (evidence to me of a Santiago-based West German journalist).

⁶This imagination excuses not even Claude Fly, the AID agronomist, represented as Mr. Snow in the film. As Costa-Gavras explains. Ay was an "intelligent, witty man." but "with all his sincerity" his report on the country's agriculture "could help bring about certain changes, but also-and above all-provide the United States with information on the country's agricultural situation." And what would the U.S. do with this information? Salinas suggests that Fly's report "would give a particular direction to the country's economy, indeed the direction most useful to the United States and the American economy. If Ay thought that a collective economy in agriculture would be more useful to the country's necessities, his plan would never be put into practice because it cannot be reconciled with the pattern and interests of the United States, or the interests of the bourgeoisie and national oligarchies allied to the United States" (p. 155). It is unclear whether Mr. Ay is a one-man barrier between latifundia and agrarian reform in Uruguay, or whether his (presumably good) advice would be ignored by the government which dispatched him. It seems strange to those of us more familiar with the day-to-day operations of the U.S. government that at no point is it suggested that Mr. Fly's activities might lead nowhere-for good or for ill.

heating a room. . . every day, each citizen of my country contributes to the development of your economy. This contribution takes on full significance when we enter the military sphere. [p. 41] [From gunshot to cannonshot, from mere jeep to tank or plane, our economy contributes to maintaining your armaments monopoly.]⁷

As members of the cabinet pass from their limousines to the Presidential Palace, Ducas reviews their extensive economic connections, especially with American firms. Thus, we are told that the Minister of Economy is president of four corporations, two of them American; the Minister of Foreign Affairs represents the Rockefeller group in Uruguay; the influential Clan Herbert heads seven corporations, three of them American. The evidence is clear: the United States, possessing a strong economic stake in Uruguay, cannot afford to be indifferent to its political life.

Unfortunately such crude economic determinism generates far more heat than light. In the first place, Uruguay has not for many years been a particularly golden field of investment for U.S. overseas capital, or for investment from any other foreign or domestic source.⁸ This is due not *to* the instability of its political life, which is a relatively recent development, but rather *to* a series of reforms dating back to the First World War which established a mixed economy. As one U.S. government publication characterized that economy in 1970, "most sectors [are] effectively controlled by the State, either directly or through public agencies. [The] State [is] also engaged in industrial and commercial activities, in some cases as a monopoly and in others in partnership with private companies."⁹ We infer here not that Uruguay possesses a socialist economic system in the full sense of the term, but rather, that at the time of the Mitrione affair it was a South American welfare state, possessing a correspondingly large administrative structure and an oversized bureaucracy which frequently made the principal companies (such as PLUNA, the state airline, or the Frigorífico Nacional, the state meatpacking house) unprofitable from a strictly economic point of view.

Accurate and up-to-date figures on investment in Uruguay by the United States (or any other country, for that matter) are extraordinarily hard to come by, but we do know that most of the major American concerns in southern South America have preferred *to* base their operations in either Argentina or

⁷ The comment in brackets is not spoken in the film; whether it was excised for technical or for political reasons is not clear.

⁸ The total fixed investment in Uruguay declined from 17.2 percent of the gross national product in 1955 to 11 percent in 1964, "at which level the net capital formation would be virtually nil." (Anon.), "Uruguay: The Difficulties of Economic Reform." *Bank of London and South America Review*, II, 22 (1968), p.559. U.S. investment in Uruguay actually dropped from \$55M in 1950 to \$47M ten years later. See Hugh Holly, "External Finance," in Claudio Véliz, ed., *Latin America and the Caribbean: A handbook* (New York, 1968), p.531.

⁹ Thomas E. Weil et al., *Area Handbook for Uruguay*, Department of the Army Pamphlet 550-597 (Washington, 1971), p.viii.

