

Arts

"State of Siege" examines American involvement

by Geoff Martin

It has often been said that there is a fine line between journalism and fiction, especially in the context of a Costa-Gavras film.

In the realm of political cinema, the controversy stirred up by the director will either be applauded or condemned by the audience. Like *Missing* (Gavras's latest film), his 1973 film *State of Siege*, the first of the Latin America Information Group's Fall Film Series, is a grisly but largely accurate description of one urban guerrilla group's most famous kidnapping. Yet at the same time it is an indictment of American involvement in Latin America.

The movie revolves around the factual 1970 kidnapping of Dan Mitrione, an American assigned to the Uruguayan office of the Agency for International Development as a police adviser concerned with "Security and Traffic".

The bulk of the movie is devoted to the interrogation of Mitrione by

the Tupamaros, the urban guerrillas. Costa-Gavras has always been the type of director to do the maximum amount of research possible, and, along with writer Solinas, acquired the tapes of the interrogation from the Tupamaros and then reproduced them for the film.

Mitrione, without saying so in as many words, acknowledged the existence of American 'terrorism schools' for Latin American policemen, government-trained death squads, American-supplied electric torture equipment and government political assassination teams. This was all for the purpose of protecting the "Christian...free world from people like (the Tupamaros)".

Costa-Gavras has always admittedly favoured the 'freedom fighters'; in 'State' he portrays the guerrillas as young, handsome and intelligent (as he said he perceived them), while the government and American operatives and diplomats tend towards obesity, hyper-

ambition and sadism (the scene with the 'torture school' is great!).

Mind you, Costa-Gavras also insists that he is not anti-American, but anti-oppression, a statement he has backed up with his production of "The Confession", a 1970 anti-Soviet film.



Gavras also used what could best be called 'black comic relief' very effectively by simply exaggerating everyday Latin American events (like campus rioting) so as to cause comic relief.

While it is true *State of Siege* is a 'commercial' film, it makes its point very convincingly. That point is: American aid (and Canadian complicity) is for *our* benefit (to protect our way of life), not for the benefit of the people in the countries we 'aid'. In fact, Gavras took great pains to remind the audience that the President's cabinet in this government were all bankers who represented American Corporations.

The one weakness of Gavras in a film like this is that it will not change people's biases: Those who see American intervention in Latin America as good will probably leave the theatre more so convinced of that. Conversely, I and others who dislike the intervention will also be reinforced in our beliefs, so in this way Gavras fails

in that he cannot satisfactorily establish the right and wrong of the situation, if there is any.

Yves Montand did a wonderful job as Mitrione, though unfortunately the original French script was dubbed in English rather than subtitled.

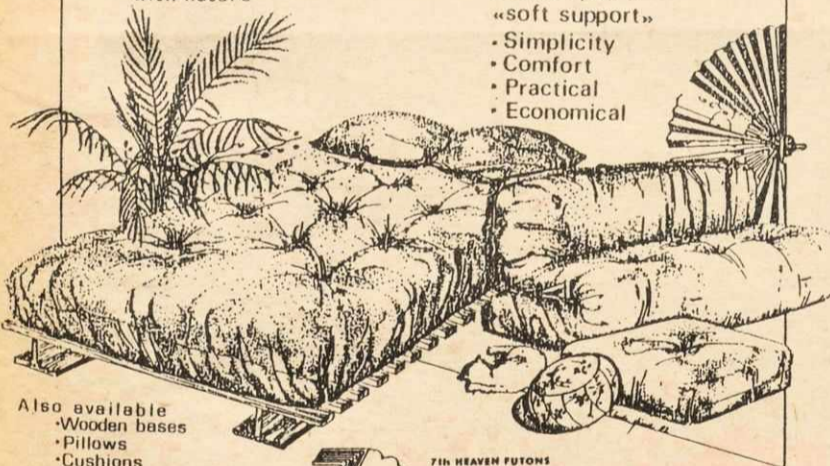
The unique thing about *Mitrione* as directed by Gavras was his calm, cool constitution throughout the film, and his loving and supportive family. One would guess he was the typical American businessman, a man convinced he was right.

It was the sympathetic portrayal of Mitrione by Montand that Gavras was looking for.

The film was produced in Chile in 1973 just before the military take-over, which is ironic because Gavras' next film, *Missing*, discusses the same military takeover from the perspective of the family of a 'disappeared American'. Next in the LAIG film series is *Missing*, on October 11, at the Wormwood Cinema on Barrington Street.

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