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New Film by Costa-Gavras Examines the Chilean Coup

By FLORA LEWIS

Fact: A young American freelance writer named Charles Horman was killed during the 1973 coup that brought the Pinochet regime to power in Chile.

Fact: His father, a New York industrial designer, was told that his son was missing and went to Chile in what became a desperate search to find Charles. Edmund C. Horman, the father, gradually became convinced that the American Embassy in Santiago not only knew about the murder from the start but was intent on concealing it because it shared responsibility. He later sued 11 high United States officials for \$4 million, but after a year and a half the case was dismissed for lack of evidence.

Fact: A lawyer named Thomas Hauser was drawn into the Horman family's crusade and wrote a book about the incident called "The Execution of Charles Horman: An American Sacrifice," published in 1979.

Fact: Costa-Gavras, the Paris-based Greek director who made powerful political films about cases in Greece, Czechoslovakia and Uruguay, accepted an offer from Universal to make a movie from the Hauser book. It is called "Missing," stars Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek and it opens in New York on Friday at the Beekman theater. It is tautly well-made and cinematically convincing.

Fiction: "This film is based on a true story. The incidents and facts are documented. Some of the names have been changed to protect the innocent and also to protect the film."

This message is shown at the start of the film. In many cases real names are used, real events are evoked, real encounters portrayed. These devices and the director's art are combined to persuade the audience that the whole story and its charge that the United States helped plan the coup in Chile and s

But it isn't a documentary, and in the course of an interview Mr. Costa-Gavras didn't pretend that it is. "Don't ask a film director to be a political technician," he said after a showing here. "Either you give two points of view, or you say, 'Here's what I think. I draw my own conclusion.'"

That is the problem. The film gives only one point of view, essentially Ed Horman's, but its claim to present a basic historical truth puts it in a different category from other dramatizations and political thrillers. It is a technique which raises serious ethical, moral and political as well as artistic questions.

Mr. Costa-Gavras says he collaborated closely with the author of the book and spent a good deal of time with the Horman family "so I could reproduce them." But he made no effort to speak with the government officials he portrays nor to consult the records, particularly of the Senate Intelligence Committee headed by Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho, which made extensive investigations and issued a report on "Covert Action in Chile: 1963-1973."

"The director can't do everything," he said. "Hauser did the research and saw all those people, and I went through all his notes."

The difficulty is that the role of the United States in Chile remains an extremely controversial, emotional subject. A good deal has been made public and it documents some nasty episodes. When Salvador Allende's regime was overturned by Gen. Augusto Pinochet in a vast, murderous rampage, many people, particularly French Socialists, felt it showed the United States would go to any length to prevent the survival of another leftist government besides Cuba in the Western Hemisphere. The French left identified their own aims with Allende. The coup became a kind of litmus test for the Paris intelligentsia, a sequel to the Vietnam war.

Newspaper reports, especially those of Seymour M. Hersh in The New York Times, and lengthy records of the Church Committee in 1975 and 1976 showed that the United States had indeed been involved in Chilean politics. The most damaging evidence related to C.I.A. activity attempting to prevent Allende's election in 1970. At that time, it was revealed, an infamous operation called "Track II" linked American agents with violent right-wing groups.

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and the Secretary of Defense (then Melvin Laird). It was an extraordinary meeting.

Nonetheless, Allende was elected. After that, according to the Church Committee and statements by Nathaniel Davis, who was Ambassador in Santiago from 1971 until shortly after the 1973 coup, the United States channeled funds to political parties, press and radio stations in Chile but stayed away from violent right wingers and military plots.

The thesis, Mr. Davis wrote in the Foreign Service Journal in 1978, was that the Allende Government was putting such intense pressure on the opposition's capacity to survive that it might be unable to contest the next election scheduled for 1976. The secret subsidies, he said, were to enable opposition parties and distributors of information to compete with Government-supported parties and press.

"We still have not, as a society, thought through the practical and ethical implications of covert action," Mr. Davis said. He pointed out, and the record confirms, that he successfully opposed C.I.A. suggestions to support strikes and demonstrations to undermine Allende.

However, Richard Helms and Hal Hendrix, an I.T.T. official, were convicted of perjury for their testimony before a 1973 Senate committee on what happened in 1970. And there was the extraordinary Nixon order to Helms not to inform Ambassador Korry and two top cabinet members of that plot. Credibility became a serious issue in disentangling the Chile story.

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