Saul Landau Interview, 2/10/03 Pomona California

JG: I would like to talk about the film.

SL: Haskell Wexler and I were in Santiago, Chile in January 1971 and we read in the newspaper that 70 Brazilians had been flown to Santiago for Brazil, in exchange for the Swiss ambassador, and so Haskell said, "Why don't we go down and check it out," and I said, "Fine,"

JG: What were you doing in Chile.

SL: We were in Chile to film an interview with Salvador Allende which we actually did. So we went down to the place where the Chilean government had housed the newly arrived Brazilians and we told them who we were, that we wanted to make a film for the United States about what had happened to them in Brazil. All of them had been brutally tortured. I guess there is no other way to torture anyone. You always put that adverb in there.

JG: Politely tortured.

SL: I spoke Spanish to them and they answered either in Portuguese or in Portuñol. Some of them were unable to speak, and some of them were still in a traumatic state, literally unable to describe anything or say anything, but others in the film I think were quite articulate. It turns out that it really was a film so much about torture as it was about heroism and political courage. The interesting thing about it was that we had to restrain them in the recreation of the torture. They wanted to go in a much more realistic way.

JG: In what way did they want to go?

SL: Well, they wanted to show how truly terrible it was, and we said, take it easy. People can imagine, you.

JG: So they wanted to strip their clothes entirely?

SL: Yeah, and there was one scene in which they insisted on… we were a little queasy, Haskell and I.. where rope is tied around one the prisoners testicles and the prisoner has to remain in a 45 degree angle propped up on his hands because if he lets go he literally castrates himself because the rope is hanging from the ceiling. And we said, OK, that's enough, and he said no, no, you can tighten it, get in close. They really wanted people to see the incredible brutality of it and we said people have good imaginations. They'll be able to take from one little picture they'll be able in their own minds to know what is going on. So we did this and I think that we filmed for three of four days, doing interviews and then going along, introducing the Brazilians introducing them to some Chilean friends that we knew. And then they compared tortures which is a funny little scene.

JG: Chileans who were tortured in Chile during the Frei…

SL: Or claimed they were. Not during the Allende period but during the previous period. They claimed that they were tortured. I don't know if they were. I never checked it out. Anyway that was the circumstances of making the film and then the question was how to cut the film, and we decided to do it in a way that called attention to the fact that we were filming rather than to any sense of realism so that the audience would know that you are watching a film about torture, you're not watching real torture. And I think that this was a good decision, so we put slate boards in and we put camera beeps and all kinds of things to indicate…

JG: the making of the film

SL: Little pieces of that to show that we're making a film and that this isn't the real thing. But nevertheless one of the first showings, some guy passed out watching it.

JG: The reason was to cause a distance between the audience and…

SL: Yeah, to reflect on it rather than to, you know, I guess there are two ways to deal with films, stomach and brain, and stomach is the usual way, heart and brain, emotions rather than reflections. Most films as you know, the grammar of film is essentially and emotional appeal and because of that we thought that we should take a little distance here. This is a film that people have to think about rather than emote about.

JG: Was this the first film that you are aware of that was done about torture in this.

SL: That I am aware of, yes.

JG: I'm just thinking. Was there a film about torture in Greece? Because what's happening internationally is that the first really international campaign against torture is Amnesty International picks up the campaign on Greece in 1967 and 68, but I'm not aware about any…

SL: Well, the Battle of Algiers was about torture.

JG: That's true.

SL: Although it was a fiction film shot in pseudo documentary style, it was really about torture as a successful means of repressing an urban underground movement. Most people missed in that picture they saw that somehow the underground triumphed. It didn't, but torture is a very successful means of repression. I don't know of any other films subsequently. One of the guys that we interviewed in the film, a guy named Saenz, I can't remember his first name, he went from Chile to Sweden, because after the Pinochet coup all of these people had to leave and so they were sent elsewhere, and Saenz made a film about the same experience, only he did his realistically and I thought it was a complete dud. I though it was boring, hard to watch, although he went took great care with lighting and so on, but it had in a sense an opposite effect. Jean Genet made a film; it really wasn't about torture, but it involved torture. It was called um Change de amor. It was really about homosexual love in prison whereby the prison guards get off with torture and the prisoners in romantic love, but that was.

JG: I can think of also scenes, or moments, in the film about the Tupamaros, State of Siege, there is a little vignette of a scene of a reenactment of alleged U.S. training of torture.

SL: Yes, but I think that that came afterwards.

JG: Yeah, it did. What was your main purpose in doing the film.

SL: I think that the main purpose in doing the film was to bring to the attention of the American public the fact that torture had become a routine and systematic procedure in Brazil, and that the U.S. government was backing a regime that was engaging in this kind of activity. I think that was it.

JG: So you did the film in January of 1971 and what happen then.

SL: Well, then we edited it at the time Haskell had a studio in Hollywood. I remember coming down. I was living in San Francisco at the time and you know sitting there and doing the editing on it. He paid for the whole thing. And then we released it and I think that it played in a couple of festivals, maybe LAX and then the Institute for Policy Studies organized a screening in the Senate auditorium.

JG: Do you remember when? Was it at the beginning of the year, the middle of the year…Church's hearings are in May. He does these hearings in May 1971 on Police Repression in Brazil. Could it have been before of after that?

SL: I honestly don't remember.

JG: Who organized it?

SL: The Institute for Policy Studies. And I remember that there was one senator from Florida who showed up. Senator Chiles (Child) and said "Jesus", that was his comment, Damn, and then he walked out. I mean he was obviously shaken by what he had seen. And then we had showings at the Institute. We're in the era of 16 mm. film. This is pre-video tape. And I don't know how many times we screened it at IPS, but one guy just fell out of his chair, he got so upset. We had to stop the screening.

JG: You know I showed this video, I had a study group this last semester at Long Beach. There were people working on this project with me and I had all of the students see the video on their own and write a two page paper. I was trying to figure out what the reaction might have been 30 years ago. Very different context, Vietnam War, a kind of cynicism about foreign policy. My students who are not very political were absolutely blown away by this film. One of them had a transformation about U.S. support for government policy. This is thirty years later in a film that by our standards today is a very simple documentary, not at all slick. Do you have any sense of what the impact was then, besides this one incident.

SL: It got very little play. Public television refused it. The New York Public Television station showed it with tremendous threats, so the program director at the time Jack Willis had to

overrule the station manager Jay Esselon, I think his name was, who said how are you doing to show this damn thing, we're going to lose all of our donations from Rockefeller, this was deep into the six figures here, and Rockefeller had labeled it as pure communist propaganda, that none of this was true, and Willis said we're showing it, and he showed it. I don't remember if it was reviewed or not. I honestly don't

JG: I can't find many paper trails with the press.

SL: I don't know, we made a few copies, we showed it in a few festivals and poof that was it. But the Allende interview also. Television wasn't interested, although they had no interviews with Allende. This is the only one that they had and I remember the guy from CBS or NBS says to me, does he speak English or Spanish, and I said Spanish but we've got subtitles. Forget it. If they don't speak English, forget it.

JG: What were the arguments that they used about Report on Torture when you went to PBS.

SL: No arguments. Just said, sorry, not interested. Remember this is the Nixon era, where Congress is starting to say, we don't want public television to represent this far left communist, pinko strain, so that the golden years of public television which were the 60s and into the early 70s had turned and the people in public television fearful that they would lose their jobs began to practice their own kinds of censorship, so it didn't get very far.

JG: Although 71, is the year of the huge anti-war demonstrations, it's after Kent and there is a cynicism about the war, but it seems to be not having an impact on these institutions.

SL: I remember that New Yorker films took over the distribution of it and I can't remember their doing any dramatic sales or rentals on it, so the Film sort of faded away.

JG: Impact? Long-term impact? Any impact? Importance?

SL: Well in 1996 I did an interview in the Lactan Jungle with subcommondante Marcos who granted me two days and of course I know who you are I saw your picture on Brazil when I was a student in Mexico. I didn't even know that it had shown there and he said that it had a great impact on me.

JG: Wow. Did he say more?

SL: No, he didn't. That's all he said.

JG: Any other vignettes over the years from people who saw the film and approached you in some way that said it made some difference.

SL: Some Brazilians a couple of years ago wanted the film and when we sent it to them, we got an email message you filled in a vital piece of our history that had been replaced. I guess that is about it. I can't remember anything else. Years later, Maria Auxiliadora, the woman who plays the major role in this film, we discover that she had committed suicide in Berlin in 1977, she had

jumped from a platform from an on-coming train. Did her torture have anything to do with the suicide, or was it simply an affair of the heart, I don't know. The guy who was studying to be a priest in this film, who tried to cut his wrists while he was tortured, successfully did cut his wrists subsequently. Marcos Arruda who is mentioned in the film and I still see once in a while has chronic cellulitice as a result of the electric shocks. People understand that electric shock isn't one tramatic experience that you have and some how you absorb it and it goes away, but that not only you suffer the mental, but the physical impact and long term as well.

JG: You have been a political activist for years and have used the media, film to promote left causes. Could you reflect a little on the campaigns around Brazil and subsequent activities on Latin America that came after it in the early 1970s.

SL: Well, Brazil was essentially the pioneer in absorbing what became the neoliberal economic model in Latin America, and I remember a wonderful quote from President Medici, I believe it was, 1971 Brazil was undergoing rather harsh economic times, especially in the Nordeste and he was asked to comment to a reporter on the model and he said well, the model is very good for Brazil, but not too good for Brazilians.

JG: In what way to you think that the neoliberal model was kicked off in Brazil? How do you see that.

SL: Well, I think that João Goulart in 64 was essentially proposing an alternative model of development, and although I haven't seen definitive proof, I feel intuitively that the United States inspired the 64 coup with Lincoln Gordon playing a major role. I haven't looked for the documents or seen it. I don't know if they are there. As I say, intuitively rather than documents. At this moment it was very important for this model to be implanted, and if a country like Brazil, the largest, obviously in Latin America, was going to go an independent way, it could set a very dangerous trend, so Goulart was displaced, not because he was a left-winger, I don't think that he was, he was displaced because he was disobedient, and this was, I think the signal to the rest of the world, if not being leftist or revolutionary per se that is going get you in trouble with the United States, it is being disobedient and it doesn't matter what side of the spectrum you're really on. Noriega was subsequently hardly a left-winger when Marcos in the Philippines began to disobey orders, they made short shrift of him, even Pinochet, their own creation in a certain sense, when he became disobedient, they pushed really hard to hold those elections and get rid of him.

JG: Somoza refused to leave when he was asked to leave.

SL: And even previously you could see it when the CIA tried to assassinate Trujillo in the Dominican Republic in 61, disobedience. It continues to this day with Sadaam Hussein. Briefly, there is no argument made, that he poses a threat to the region, certainly to the United States, and you can see it in the petulant manner, not as a child but as a parent. I have given you your last chance. Instead, … you know his mother probably said, this is your last chance, I'm sending you to your room and you'd better get up there at your earliest convenience. I'm going to count to 200,000. Well, I think that that is the Brazil problem too.

JG: I want to follow up on one thing that you mentioned. You said that Brazil was the economic precursor to the neoliberalism that is pervasive now, but in terms of Brazil, the repressive regime and the opposition to that, the movement against that, what impact do you think that the small modest activities had on Brazil had on the larger picture?

SL: Well, every time you have an illegitimate government, the opposition looms larger and larger because of its legitimacy. I don't know if it is a biblical phrase, it probably should be if it isn't. But the guilty fleeth even when no one pursueth. You find it in Richard III and so on. It is not a new idea. That governments that ascend to power through illegitimate means tend to see much larger opposition than really exists. But I think that it was understood even at the time that the only way to successfully impose a neoliberal model in much of Latin America was through military dictatorships. Indeed the only country where it has had some semblance of success in Chile, you had seventeen years of  military dictatorship. IN all of the other countries, I think that it has been a demonstrable failure. You could argue maybe that they didn't have dictatorships long enough. Maybe they didn't destroy not just the institutions of resistance, but memory as well. Because that in my mind is the key factor in Chile, which is the destruction of historical memory. At least that I encounter with people that I know. My old friends. They don't want to talk about stuff that happened after 73.

JG: A state wide trauma that allows people to consider possibilities other than the ones presented to them.

SL: So neoliberalism grows best in the culture of temporal atrophy you could say. And I think in Brazil that was the first way, because if you had allowed political democracy at that time, there is no way that you could have brought that model into Brazil. That is union unrest and popular protest would have stopped it before it ever got the ground. And I think that this is true everywhere. When it was brought into places like Jamaica, it was brought in by left governments, Michael Manley brought it in and as a result brought himself down in the 19890 elections. As he put it, he go the IMF and the Jamaican people for whatever reasons removed him and put in a guy who had pledged himself to the IMF and immediately reneged on the promise. The right-winger, ? seeing that it would have been impossible for him to maintain his government under IMF rules. This was the guy who was the first visitor to the Ronald Reagan White House, so that much of this political model which of course Henry Kissenger just adored because it was so much easier to deal with dictatorships than with democracies, so much of this political model was linked to impose an economic model as well. That this was a long-term strategy and indeed to this day, much attention is now paid to the aggressive military imperial role but it goes alongside the economic as well. Tom Friedman wrote the book The Lexis and the Olive Tree, he should have called it the Lexus and the F-16.

JG: Any other last thoughts about the film and what you feel about having done it? What are your reflections today when you think about that in your long c.v. of activities.

SL: I think that it is one of the most important films that I have done, on reflection. Even though it didn't have much obvious impact at the time. It preserves memory that is very important for you people, especially students to now learn. Because I think that students relate to this film in a very special way, because it is about people. It could be them. It is about people mostly their age.

It is people who understand that they are playing a role in the drama of their own lifetime. Of perhaps the most important lesson that students can learn. As a teacher in my fading years if there is one thing I want to teach to young people is that you only have one shot at it and if you don't play a role in your own history, you will die in a sense of irrelevance in your own mind. Dreaming about the Mazzaradi that you got or didn't get rather than anything important. You were here on earth and you didn't contribute anything other than you bought and sold.

JG: So it made a difference?

SL. You played a part.

JG: You made a difference.

SL: Maybe, we'll see. Too early to tell.

JG: Sounds like people have already said you did.

SL: Well, we'll see. I don't know what my life experience has meant. I think it would be immodest to try to say it. I know that some people have learned from me and I feel good as a teacher about that. I mean my kids, and some of my students and some of my colleagues. I try to send my writings out to people, so I do what I can do. I contribute to the extent that I have a brain I try to put it to the use of social justice and equality. Often times it is obviously very frustrating.

JG: But you're arguing that individuals can make a difference.

SL: Well, they have throughout history. I mean some individuals make a big difference and some individuals make a little difference.

JG: I'm talking about the little person not the political figure, the leader but the little person can make a difference.

SL: Well, there was a film that Ken Loach made about the Spanish Civil War. I can't remember the title. Freedom and Land and it was about a regular Joe, Englishman, who decides he has to do something and he fights in the Spanish Civil War and later he is a labor activist and so on and he dies and he didn't, he was one of many, yesterday and the day before millions of people marched throughout the world without everyone of their contributions the size of that demonstration would have been less, less, less and less, so everyone of them in that sense makes a difference. You become part of a larger chorus. The people who are speakers at these demonstrations aren't necessarily more important than the people who are part of the crowd. If they're less important I don't know. Most of them don't have much to say, but the fact is that from time immemorial, people have been participating in a struggle for greater justice and greater equality. During my lifetime I went through that. It makes a difference. It doesn't make a difference, I won't know. But I've got to do it. People before me did it, and people after me will do it.

Good. Thanks so much for your time.