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Welcome to a Contra base camp in Honduras

Bleak Houses

or how murder becomes a mystery.

An interview with Allan Francovich

by Robert Spiegelman

"The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintain their neutrality."
- Dante Alighieri

BBC's chief of Documentary Features gives American filmmaker Allan Francovich the good news: BBC's TV documentaries regularly get higher ratings than *Dallas*! As evidence, Francovich's searing three part/three hour masterpiece on Central America's agony, *The Houses are Full of Smoke*, airs on BBC-2 - on prime time - for three successive Friday nights (May/June) to very large audiences, hefty media attention and critical acclaim. A rural Englishman is so overcome he telegrams, pledging to do whatever it takes to stop the daily mass murder that *Houses* indicts.

Playing in seven cities in ten days, Francovich shepherds *Houses* through Britain's network of British Film Institute-affiliated regional cinemas, and its UK bookings continue beyond his recent return to the States.

Yet what in Britain seems a political documentarist's dream-come-true won't dispel Francovich's unrelenting American nightmare: *Houses* is being blocked from a U.S. mass audience. Shades of Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity's* 1970 boycotting by French TV, Francovich's "journey to the center of evil" stands rejected on the grounds that it duplicated their programming by America's most suited nationwide

vehicle - the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). Portions of *Houses* were offered without luck to CBS' *Sixty Minutes*, while several cable systems, after initial enthusiasm, backed off citing its three hour format as a stumbling block.

Francovich, at 45, has produced a politically-engaged cinema spanning 25 years. His Latin American childhood included "escaping miners trying to kill my father, evacuating an American embassy, and learning horseback-riding on saddles of the U.S. Marines who hunted Sandino." The early '60's saw Francovich at the Sorbonne deep in movie-watching and studying film criticism. His documentaries emerge from the mid-60's cauldron of anti-Vietnam protests at Berkeley, California. The first (1965) captures Berkeley's first peace march under assault by Hells Angels. *San Francisco Good Times* (1973) depicts the '60's generation's evolution through the anti-war/counter-cultural perspectives of a popular underground newspaper. *Chile in the Heart* (1977) savors the last years of Chilean master poet Pablo Neruda, whose tragic death coincides with the murders of democratic Chile and its president Salvador Allende by Pinochet's savage coup of 1973. And *Allies* (1983) exposes the surrogate role played by "sovereign" Australia on behalf of U.S. political strategy.

Francovich is no stranger to PBS. In 1980, it broadcast his acclaimed *On Company Business* - a riveting three hour/three part expose of decades of CIA malfeasance - as winner of PBS' own competition for new documentary. But having broadcast the first hour, several PBS affiliates were cowed by fierce conservative political pressure into cancelling the rest. Controversial, the film was both denounced in Congress and awarded 1980's top documentary prize of the Berlin Film Festival Critics.

Houses (1987), Francovich's latest work, has already screened at 15 festivals from San Francisco and London, through Moscow and Havana, to Berlin and Vallodolid, Spain, where it won Best Documentary (1988). His standing proposal to PBS offers *Houses* for free broadcast, with any "wrap-around" - commentary or rebuttal - by any spokesman - Francovich requested

Lionel Sisniega heads the Mano Blanco, death squads in Guatemala

that policymaker Elliot Abrams introduce the film -, before and/or after the showing - all to no avail.

Houses is not about victimization - it seeks justice: "At a certain point you have to point the finger in some direction and say this is what's happening and these are the people responsible." Mixing incredible interviews of death squad members and policymakers with precision use of archival/newsreel footage, *Houses* carefully unveils the conscious instigation and cover-up of mass murder at the center of U.S. Central American policy.

"The challenge", Francovich insists, "is to test reality outside oneself and create something irrefutable." To make *Houses* irrefutable, Francovich risked his life documenting death squad activity from the inside: "As you learn too much", he reflects, "you become a player, you become dangerous." His exposures of their savage crimes through interviews with still powerful players, forbids his safe return to El Salvador and Guatemala. *Houses* is dangerous. Using eyewitness testimony, it focuses new light on the "still unsolved" Salvador killings - including those of Archbishop Romero and the American churchwomen -, cases where "it's in nobody's interest to have a solution."

America's households are full of a smoke - truth suffocating - which Francovich is determined to clear: *Houses* shows us how murder can become a mystery. Accordingly, the film is uncompromising: its viewers bear witness to state-sponsored murder and, when the smoke clears, their knowledge either makes them accomplices or opponents of murder. PBS notwithstanding, the battle for distribution has only begun. As his interview makes clear, Francovich's battle is also our own: "A country that loses its ability to tell itself the truth about every aspect of itself is a country on the verge of losing its soul."

How do you compare Houses *with* On Company Business?

Both show related political situations from the inside. *OCB* shows it at the bureaucratic level, interviewing the (CIA) people pulling the strings. But *Houses* is more a journey into the center of evil - because it's about mass murder. The people filmed are telling you what they've done while it's still going on ... In El Salvador, for example, *Houses* proves the death squads are the army. It's like having the SS in power and doing a film about it while it's active. The moral responsibility you feel having that kind of knowledge is tremendous. *Houses* is a much more difficult film for people to accept because it shows a level of violence, of people telling what it's like to be corrupted into that violence - the

death squads - that's ongoing, sponsored and being covered up. Now if I could show this - in a film produced totally independently - for an issue so important that it affects the lives and deaths of millions of people, why don't we all know about it? That's the real issue.

I felt terrified and especially, put on the spot by the film.

I've seen people deny it or defend themselves or get physically sick - and I don't mean because of the violence it depicts: It's like taking someone and saying, look, you thought what happened in the '30's in Germany could never happen again, but it's happening now. It's as if you awake one morning and realize that the government which represents you is involved with mass murder. What do you do about it? Do you just go back to sleep? That's the real question. Do you care enough to do something about it? And that is like having someone look at themselves in the mirror and have to take responsibility for themselves and their time. I think that's the finest thing a documentary - or any film - can do.

Houses *doesn't analyze how larger economic interests impact the situation: no naming of corporate players or perspective on imperialism. Why not?*

Houses' focus is different. It's already three hours and you've got to stick to your main themes. Its geopolitics and economics is really for another film - one like California Newsreel's very fine documentary, *Controlling Interest*. You can't put in everything. You can't totally educate someone or compensate for half an educational system. This is a real problem. If you really compared the level of public affairs programming in the U.S. with almost anywhere else - certainly in Europe - you'd be absolutely astounded by its mediocrity. There's the assumption by the people at the top - television and movie executives - that they know what they're doing and what the audience wants. But that's a self-fulfilling prophesy: How can you know what an audience wants if you've never given them opportunity for choosing anything else?

How do your films take on the problem of the uninformed and disinformed public?

In *OCB*, people say "this is what the CIA did." Then through very meticulous and precise research, both by finding other witnesses present at those events and by finding other footage - archival footage once used to create a myth, or a version of history - like newsreels and TV coverage, I put together a simple structure. *OCB* uses the newsreel footage shown in American movie houses - the version of "news" people got in the '40's and '50's and later television - and then presents insiders telling you what was secretly happening. By retrieving the history we were told by the mass media, and by creating a structure, you show how it's largely been a lie. I've seen American audiences become very sober because they've discovered how little they really know, when the prevailing myth is they know everything important their government is doing and what's going on in the world.

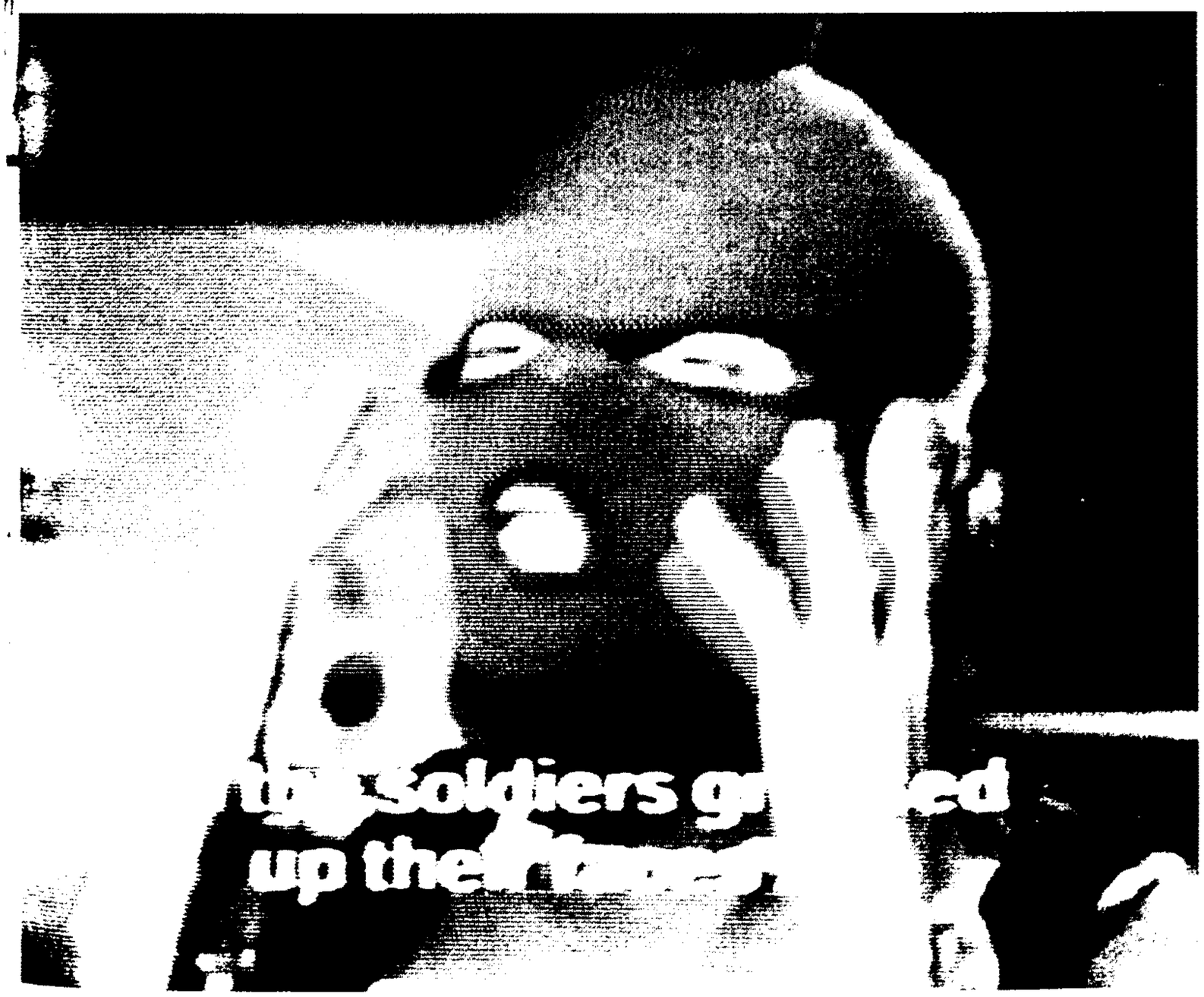
So you don't present archival film at face value as the historical record?

Documentary use of archival footage has been very sloppy. It is a record, that's really there, accumulated year after year, but it lets you see how certain things were reported. Then you can look at the history of what really happened and you will find things are quite different. The newsreels become just an extension of propaganda, not at all concerned with truth but with forming public opinion. Using them, my films deconstruct a (semi-official) version of history while showing an audience how little they know in a country priding itself on a free media. This requires a simple structure: the contrast between someone telling you something and someone else telling you something.

In Houses, *this structure gives every player his say plus there's no narrator to impose conclusions. Don't you risk not making your point?*

With Houses the idea was like doing a very simple story where three or four witnesses tell overlapping versions - whether different or the

Private confession of a Salvadorian death squad killer



Jeff Perkel

same - or a story. *Houses* interviews victims and executioners. It takes you inside the death squads from top officers - some CIA-trained secret police chiefs - to triggermen, interviewing them separately and finding very precise archival footage - so that the whole gist is to create something irrefutable.

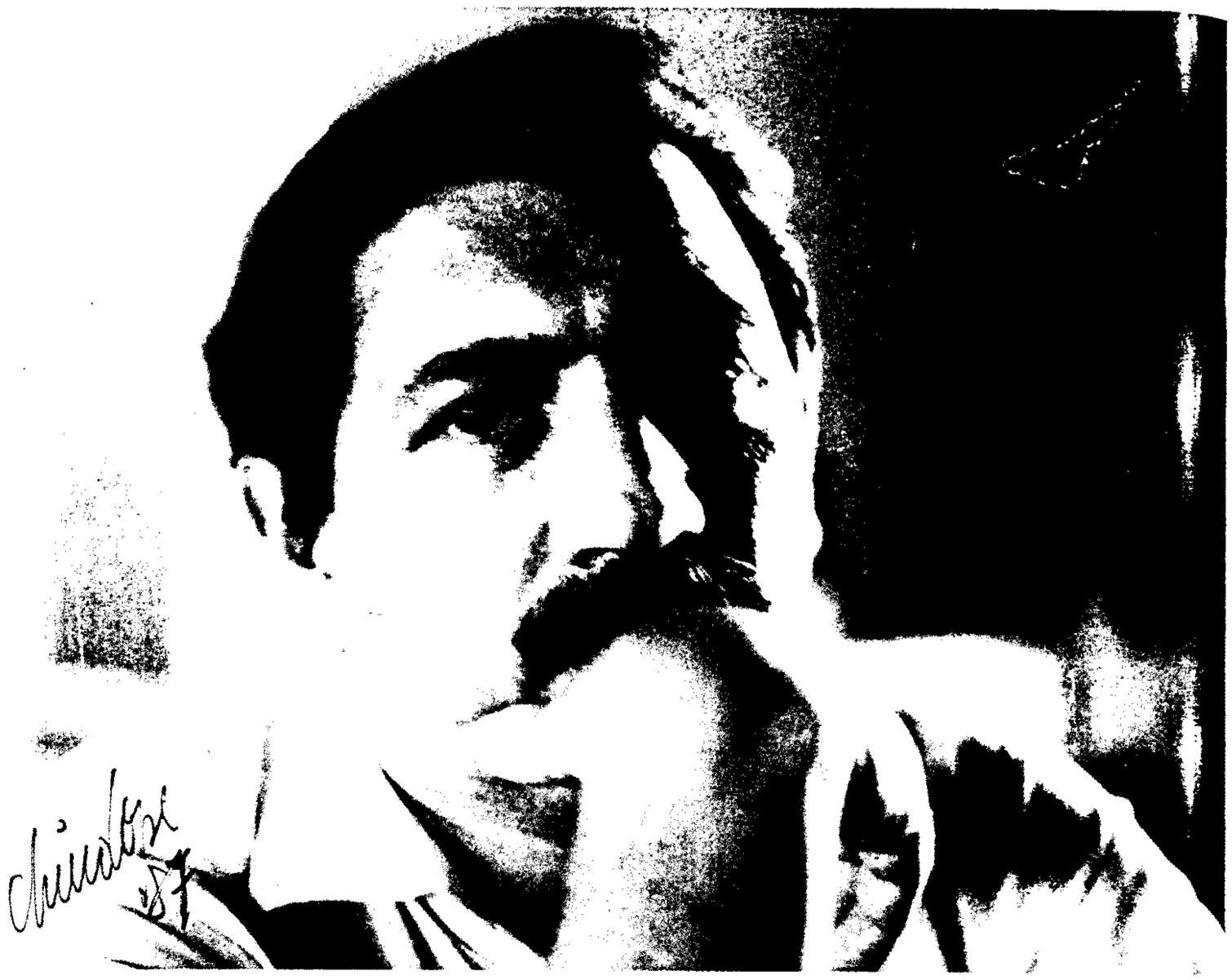
What's involved in getting people who have committed mass murder - exactly what Houses *indicts - to talk to you?*

I've interviewed all kinds of people who tell me they're involved in political murder. The point is they're not hypocrites - but they rationalize. To think that an Adolf Hitler was a hypocrite? No!, he was an authentic man - he rationalized what he did, believed in what he did, then acted on his beliefs. As a filmmaker, often all you have to do is make it apparent that you're not going to be judging them. You're there to have them talk to you. It's a drawing out. somewhat like that between a psychoanalyst and a subject. Making *Houses,* people would tell terrible stories, and it was like an exorcism to them - like they wanted to unburden themselves. And a lot of emotional power comes out of that.

How do you overcome your fear while doing projects like Houses?

There's a certain flow of adrenalin. I've always liked to do things that have a certain audacity and elegance to them. But nevertheless there are aspects of this which really, absolutely horrified me. When you confront governments which murder their citizens day after day, citizens who are just insisting on a minimum of justice, and it isn't reflected by most literature and most film, it gives you a level of anger, it gives you a level of despair. It also gives you a sense of humor about so many things you're taking seriously that are not at all serious - your self-importance.

Costa-Gavras recently argued that political filmmakers use the "rules for commercial success" to reach beyond the already convinced to a mass audience: so the really "revolutionary" thing is "to go for the biggest audience with the least possible number of compromises". Given funding and distribution realities, isn't it necessary to pull some punches, so the real game is to try forcing the inevitable compromises on the best possible terms?



Allan Francovich: pulling no punches

The way to answer that is to ask Costa-Gavras if he were making films under the Nazi occupation, and tricked his studio into giving him a budget and making a film about what was really happening in France - let's say before the mass deportation of the French Jews: Would it be his obligation to make a film about something that was going to affect the lives and deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, or would he just pull his punches so he could make a commercial film with just an allusion to something which is a terrible human tragedy? That's the question.

The whole rationale that if you start pulling punches you can still basically make your film and trick an audience into changing its mind gradually, that's not the issue. What you're basically saying by this is whoever puts up the money owns the film. He makes up his mind what's going to be said. If he doesn't want to stir up trouble and is obsessed with making money, he's not going to let you say things very clearly. It's nothing to do with the filmmaker, but with who owns it. The only way you're able to make a film - dramatic or documentary - which goes to the center of things is to control the financing.

How does a film like Houses *that's so opposed to government policy get funded?*

If you have a level of conscientiousness and you really insist on what has to be said, your funding has to be independent. It can't be beholden. I'm in a much better position than most because I've never depended on state bodies for funding, never got a grant from NEH or NEA. My films are basically funded by individuals. *Houses* was funded by individuals who respected my earlier films, so within three weeks I was literally able to raise more than enough to get the project going. But I think that to do this kind of documentary in the future, to have it survive, you must view it internationally.

Internationally?

There's going to be an explosion in Europe because in 1992 there'll be a Common Market. They're going into

satellite and big cable television for the first time. It's something very similar to what happened here with video cassettes five years ago when a lot of feature filmmaking became possible because of video cassette dealers and no market saturation. Also in Britain there's now a decree where 1/4 of British TV production must be produced outside the networks. So there's going to be an incredible need for product in Britain and - as satellite channels go on - in Europe. Europeans have a higher level of television and even awareness of film possibilities, plus a diversity of film traditions. So I think it will be increasingly possible to do documentaries through coproductions.

What would it take for PBS to show Houses?

Re-do it as an Italian opera.

Did you have any reason to expect them to show it?

I was positive it would be rejected. Their grounds were it duplicated their programming. I asked what it duplicated: tell me any film you've broadcast showing what *Houses* does. Look, I'd be foolish to expect PBS, funded by the federal government, to air a documentary which essentially says the U.S. government's been involved in mass murder. I'd be very naive to expect bureaucrats, whose jobs depend on federal funding, to be concerned enough about the lives and deaths of hundreds of thousands of people - including Americans - to jeopardize their funding and their salaries. So my reason for approaching PBS as a system is to expose them. And to expose this false sense that Americans know what their government's been doing in its crucial aspects.

What's your response to being celebrated abroad but boycotted at home? What's at stake?

My reaction is more about the general problem of a country that's come to where it can't look itself in the face and confront the reality of what it's doing. When you see a country hardening in that way it becomes a real problem.

For instance,the BBC's doing a documentary on the death of Martin Luther King and sought an American co-producer, but no American TV network - including PBS - would step forward and co- produce it - and BBC's putting up the major money. Whether it's because they're obsessed with making money or not making waves, the kind of cowardice that reveals, the lack of vision, the deadening of any kind of conscience or sensibility, or any sense of humanity, it's appalling. When a country so loses its conscience, we're dealing with something very dangerous.

A prelude to fascism?

Yes, but with a smile; everything's packaged. Information's a growth industry in this country. But for an issue resulting in the deaths of people dismissed as "Latin Americans", information gets obfucated. *Houses* shows how murder can be made into a mystery. The issue's really whether the U.S. government instigated, trained and has direct knowledge regarding a whole series of murders - including American citizens plus hundreds of thousands of local people - and has covered it up. I think the answer is yes. But there's a constant obliteration of history; so the audience lives in a constant present. They don't understand they're being manipulated, that what they know about the world is controlled.

These issues are crucial to democracy. Without information, you can't expect the population to make decisions knowingly. This really is the central issue - whether it's my film or whether the French refused to show *The Sorrow and the Pity* years ago. The means of communication is one way society comes to terms with itself, reflects on itself, tries to correct what it's done. If this isn't possible, all the talk about freedom of speech is pointless. It becomes the freedom to sell one product as against another product - that's all it means. □

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Schlaudeman, U.S. representative to the bilateral talks with Nicaragua

The Houses are Full of Smoke. U.S.A. 176 minutes (in three parts). For further information or rental of film, contact James Francovich, 5740 Wurzbach Road, San Antonio, Texas 78238. Phone: (512) 680-4110