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HOLLYWOOD AND THE MASKS

By Catherine Ryan

It was a hot day in the jungles of the Mexican Southeast. So hot that the locals could only wait listlessly for the day to pass. The little Maya kids cooled off naked in the stream, holding their breath and playing like dead fish as far under as the shallow waters would allow. The mosquitoes were biting, the humidity was oppressive, and an eerie, anxious stillness hung in the air. Everyone was waiting for the show to begin.

Finally he emerged—the most wanted man in Mexico—to some invisible cue, materializing from a hideout even deeper in the jungle. Or perhaps he had been waiting nearby all these hours, assessing his audience from behind the thick foliage, and waiting for the tension to build. Marcos is a media master.

We watched him ride forward on a flashy bay stallion, leading a masked rebel cavalry detachment, presumably safe from the army amid so much publicity. The charismatic rebel leader was smoking his trademark pipe, ski mask in place, bandanna looped casually around his neck, bandoleers of bullets strapping down his somehow well-pressed uniform, M-16 carbine slung gracefully across his back, everything flawlessly arranged. The scene was surreal—too cool. It was straight out of the movies. He rode up to filmmaker Oliver Stone and introduced himself. The two men shook hands.

“Wow,” Stone exclaimed. “You have pulled off the most dramatic entrance I have ever seen in my life—better than any star in Hollywood.”

Stone mounted up to disappear into the jungle alongside the mysterious revolutionary. The two celebrities talked politics at a rebel hideout. The next day they rode back into the headquarters of the rebel army, the tiny hamlet of La Realidad (“reality” in Spanish), for the waiting press corps, both wearing ski masks and both puffing on pipes.

Riding behind them into the village were rebel Zapatista bodyguards and sharpshooters, and Richard Rutowski and David Veloz, who both co-wrote *Natural Born Killers* with Stone. Also on horseback were Mexican star Ofelia Medina and Cathy Dreyfuss, sister of actor Richard Dreyfuss.

The impoverished locals watched the star-studded affair with cautious curiosity. They are all members of the Zapatista National Liberation Army. But the villagers don’t watch movies. La Realidad doesn’t have electricity.

Cut to:

Same village. Two weeks later. Two a.m.

A million stars through a big break in the clouds. Jungle-size crickets chirping at a maddening pitch. Actor Edward James Olmos tossing and turning in his sleeping bag on the dirt floor of a thatched-roof hut, bitten relentlessly by exotic bugs. Howler monkeys slinking overhead through heavy, moss-covered branches. The moon casting slivers of warm gold onto the moist earth of the jungle, the slivers dancing and skipping back and forth as a warm, slow breeze rustles the treetops.

A dark figure slips into the hut to wake Olmos. The movie star sits up, finds a flashlight, pulls on his hiking boots, and quietly follows his escort down a pathway.

He sees ski-masked rebel bodyguards standing around with Uzis and other sub-machine guns, half-hidden in the trees, and figures Marcos must be nearby.

“Orale, ese, hay te watcho,” someone says from the shadows, surprising him. It is Marcos, stealing a line of exaggerated Chicano slang from Olmos’ character in the cult hit *Zoot Suit*. He steps out of the darkness and into the moonlight, and shakes hands. His eyes are twinkling. They laugh for a while and trade some similar movie lines. Then Marcos tells Olmos they’ve met before—in 1979 and 1982—at Hollywood premieres.

That was before Marcos was Marcos. He was, if the government is to be believed, Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, a worldly, middle-class Mexican, Paris and Mexico City educated student of philosophy, film and history, later professor of media and philosophy.

The second time Olmos met Marcos would have been just before Marcos shed his old identity and disappeared into the jungles of the Mexican Southeast, where he spent the next ten years helping prepare the locals to wage war against the Mexican government.

Olmos has been traveling to the area on behalf of UNICEF since before the rebels appeared on the scene. He’s made a point of distancing himself from the armed aspect of the rebellion, but he’s stated his staunch support for the rebels’ goals of bringing “liberty, democracy and justice” to Mexico.

Marcos and Olmos sit down in a nearby hut, and Olmos tells him: “You had a choice between going Zapata or going Gandhi, and you chose Zapata. I wish you had chosen Gandhi’s approach.”

The masked man tells Olmos the rebels tried nonviolent civil disorder in the 1980s, and nobody paid any attention. “I didn’t choose the path,” Marcos says. “The indigenous people here did. I dedicated myself to remembering my roots and doing the right thing.”

Olmos, the relentless human rights activist, tells him violence never works. “A perfect example is the Mexican Revolution,” he says. “Zapata, Pancho Villa, and our other revolutionary

heroes overturned the existing dictatorship, only to give us the government Mexico still has today."

Olmos mentions the Hollywood interest in Marcos. "But the only way the financing in Hollywood really wants a story about the situation is if you are dead," he tells him. "They don't want to make the story of the rebels while you are alive, and maybe bring about a positive change in our understanding of the plight of the poor in Mexico. Hollywood is into the reality of tragedy. Tragedy makes more dollars."

He tells Marcos he aims to make a documentary about the rebels, with his long-time friend, director Robert M. Young. Young (*The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez, Dominick and Eugene, One Trick Pony*) accompanied Olmos, and also met Marcos.

A few hours later, back in La Realidad, I'm awake just before sunrise when Olmos returns to the camp. He recalls the details of their meeting, hands back the tape recorder I'd loaned him, and says he is trying to figure out a way to get a full-fledged movie made after the documentary is finished, hoping to draw more attention to the cause. He also recognizes the star quality of the Zapatista leader.

"He's definitely a Robin Hood figure," Olmos says. "He has brought out a style that is so romantic and so cavalier that he has become the ultimate dream of almost every woman who has heard about him. I mean, the guy has charisma and romance galore."

"And then there is the mystery," he adds, rolling up his sleeping bag and loading the four-wheel drive. "And Marcos speaks so clearly on the issues. The man is a giant among the shapers of the world and among the men who have revolutionized our way of thought."

He drives off on the one rough road leading out of La Realidad, heading into the rising sun. It is a long way to civilization. He's hoping to get there before nightfall, when bandidos traditionally begin to prey upon the few travelers traversing these remote roads.

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Two-time Academy Award–winning cinematographer Haskell Wexler and political analyst Saul Landau trekked down to the jungle to interview Marcos for *The Sixth Sun: Mayan Uprising in Chiapas*, a Corporation for Public Broadcasting documentary.

When they arrived at La Realidad, the Zapatista guards approached Wexler and Landau and asked what had brought them there. Landau handed them a note and explained that they had a date with *El Sup*. Marcos is also known as *El Sub*, short for *subcomandante*. The affectionate *El Sup* plays on that title, with a wink at *supercomandante*.

The chief of La Realidad tells the documentary makers to park their vehicle near the stream. They sit on a rough-hewn bench and watch—waylaid by the heat—as the day goes by around them. Morning turns to burning midday. The women spend hours standing knee-deep in the

stream, rinsing the chaff and dust off the day's baskets full of shucked corn kernels. In the afternoon, smoke curls from the soot-blackened thatched roofs of the cooking huts, and the aroma of beans and fresh, thick, toasty tortillas wafts through the air.

Then comes the night and with it the fifth column of disease-spreading insects. Typically, no word from Marcos. The frustrated men and their crew curl up to sleep. After a breakfast of beans and tortillas, Landau sends another note to *El Sup*, reminding him that they are waiting. The day passes hot and slow, until a guard comes to direct them to where Marcos will meet them, a ten-minute walk away. At 4:05 two men with ski masks and firearms come toward them.

"Good afternoon," says the one smoking a pipe, shaking hands and grinning through his mask. They sit down and talk politics, camera rolling. Eventually the discussion turns to movie rumors. Marcos jokes with his visitors that Hollywood producers won't know what to do with the scripts that have been written about him. "They don't know whether I'm going to sell out, or whether the Mexican army's going to kill me," he tells the camera. "They don't know if they want to portray me as a good guy or bad guy. They don't know which hat I'm going to wear."

The men laugh and the conversation falls back to politics. Their meeting lasts well into the night, and resumes the next day.

"Well, the guy has a fantastic sense of humor," Wexler says later, when I ask if he thinks Marcos is movie material. Wexler gave Marcos a Hi8 camera. When Marcos was alone, he pointed the camera at himself, starting "his" film by drawing color bars. "You know, color bars," Wexler tells me, "On a piece of paper with crayons—color bars!—and then Marcos says, 'This is the Intergalactic Network,' and then he begins. Just really playful." He gave his video recording to the men.

"He's reaching out to not be swept under the rug," Wexler tells me. "In the modern world you must put on a show. Otherwise, you don't exist. Visibility in the media means you exist. If you don't exist in the media, you don't exist. Really, it is a contemporary tactic by a smart person to help accomplish the goals of the rebels. I mean, suppose he just said, 'Look, I'm a regular guy who's working with the locals, living a simple life down here, period.' You wouldn't be talking to me now. You wouldn't be writing an article about him, because nobody would be interested."

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When I asked Marcos what he thought about the idea of Hollywood making a movie about the rebels, he replied:

"When we rose up in arms, we never thought about the day someone would make a movie about it."

He thought for a moment, staring at the ground, as he's prone to do.

"It's a new fact, and we don't know what to say.

"But just like all the videos and documentaries that have been made, we ask that attention be put on the conditions that obligated us to resort to guns—to not only focus on soldiers with ski masks. This war has a history of reasons, and we hope that a movie would address these issues. It matters that the people at the cinema try to understand 'why?' Some Hollywood movies have so much shooting, blood, many deaths, and a species of only one type of rebel—the type that uses a lot of bombs and so forth. You go out from those movies and say, 'Good effects, special effects, blood and things blown up.' But what is the reason?

"We demand that a book, a movie, an interview explain our reasons. We are very proud, but not about our guns. We are very proud about our story, our words, and our thoughts."

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In 1994, Barbara Butler and Anne Moore were the first of various Hollywood figures to ask for the movie rights to my experiences as a journalist embedded with the rebels. Then, after writing their script, they wanted to meet Marcos. They accompanied me on my next journey into the rebel-held territories, becoming the first Hollywood screenwriters to visit him.

Marcos read their script, titled *Marcos*. He seemed to like it, but said he wished they'd take some of the focus off of him. He joked that he used to be a director in Hollywood, so he'd understand if the movie ended up less than realistic.

"How will we get to the Oscars?" he asked the ladies. He winked—he's stuck in that jungle.

Marcos has been courting Hollywood in a big way—the latest in a succession of his media-savvy public relations moves. He sent personal invitations to Stone, Olmos, and numerous other celebrities. He knows that various Zapatista-related scripts are floating around Hollywood, and that a feature film about the rebels could help their cause dramatically. Hollywood sees Marcos as a composite of Robin Hood, Lawrence of Arabia, El Zorro, Che Guevara, and Mexican Revolution hero Emiliano Zapata—with a slick, postmodern spin. He's already larger than life. With the right angle and the right leading man, a movie about Marcos could be a sensation.

Although the rebel uprising sent the Mexican stock market on a wild roller-coaster ride and frightened away many foreign investors, Marcos was instant big business for Mexican peddlers, who sell Marcos dolls, T-shirts, key chains, posters, and ski masks—even Marcos condoms. He's one of the hottest Latin sex symbols anywhere. Even Benetton asked Marcos to star in its catalog. The clothing company wanted the rebels to model a new line of camouflage wear. Marcos graciously turned them down. He also declined Patagonia. The cold weather-wear company wanted him to model ski masks.

If Marcos might one day be considered big business for movieland, he's still a big risk as long as he's alive and unpredictable. Hollywood doesn't know what to do with him.

Movies about revolution in Latin America are dangerous, anyway. Oliver Stone isn't easily dissuaded from tackling controversial political stories, but even he is wary this time. "There seems to be some kind of blight on such themes," he told me after his rendezvous with Marcos. "I mean even *Old Gringo* died, with Jane Fonda, which was not that revolutionary at all. It seems like a curse."

But as long as the cease-fire holds and peace negotiations continue with the government, the front line of the Zapatista Army is the media, and Marcos is playing it for all he's got.

The Mexican federal army is steering clear of the filmmakers, trying to avoid more bad international press. But the military men in Mexico must be furious that their rag-tag enemies have so skillfully avoided renewed combat by engaging in a no-contest publicity war.

When the Hollywood types aren't around, the tension quickly mounts.

La Realidad is a small village of dirt-floored huts, between six hours and two days from civilization—depending on the weather. The heat, the humidity, the bugs, the poverty, and the monotony can make it unbearable. Nowhere to plug in the computer. No phones. I spent a month there this year, sleeping on the ground. No plumbing. No toilets.

Every day, the roosters crow at four a.m. and the women start making tortillas. They appear sanguine, but they worry about cholera—and about the convoys of Mexican federal army troops that roll slowly down the rough road through town, machine guns at the ready. Their barefoot children don't go to school. Instead, they wake up to wash laundry in the stream, sort lice out of each other's hair, and climb the mountainside in search of wood for the cookfires before heading out to help in the fields. The youngest kids have time to play—they sneak up and tackle me to the ground, giggling and screaming, vying for attention and pleading with me to join them for a swim in the stream.

The men, guns, ski masks and rebel uniforms hidden away, head out on foot, horse or muleback for a day working their rocky corn patches.

The women make extra tortillas and beans for me at siesta time, and also shyly share their hopes and dreams.

Late in the afternoon the rebel soldiers collapse in their hammocks, returning from the fields. They strum the gently rousing refrains of the Zapatista Anthem on their guitars, or, in chorus, sing any of the other local story-telling corridos. They patiently teach me to play the marimba, and hang out until late into the night to hear stories about life on the other side.

Behind the sleepy facade, a drama is playing out in and around La Realidad that has all the elements of a Hollywood blockbuster.

Guns, spies and danger. Drama, fear and hope. Good guys and bad guys. Mystery and intrigue, love interests, adventure and adventurers. And through it all, amid the heat, humidity and imminent threat of violence, runs the inspirational struggle for liberty, democracy, and justice that gave rise to the rebellion.

And then there is Marcos, the scene-stealing hero, who appears, vanishes, and reappears unpredictably, provoking one media frenzy after another.

The story also has all the behind-the-scenes Hollywood-style action. Bodyguards, attitudes, managers, would-be managers, groupies—and a hell of a lot of money at stake.

Mexico, despite its general poverty, is home to 24 of the world's billionaires. Five thousand armed rebels demanding rights to ancestral land, revision of NAFTA, democratization and an end to corruption have thrown a wrench into the nation's financial and political gears. International banks and the U.S. government are also uneasy about the destabilizing influence of the rebels, not only because of NAFTA, but particularly because the Clinton Administration, the IMF and other banking institutions just risked nearly $50 billion to bail Mexico out of economic collapse.

The Mexican government's strategy for stabilizing the region is to occupy it with some 40,000 to 60,000 soldiers. But Chiapas is far from stable, and unrest is spreading throughout the nation. The rebels have ignited a fire that is challenging to extinguish.

"The government might try to eliminate the Zapatista Army," Marcos told me soon after the conflict began in 1994. "We could all be destroyed. But others will rise again, because this political system is the basis of all the injustice that we are suffering. If we die, generation after generation will continue to rise up beneath us, and generation after generation will continue to fight for dignity."

Mexico's long history of violent repression continues. High- and low-profile figures are still gunned down with amazing regularity. But it would be a serious tactical mistake to take out Marcos—with his death a martyr of gigantic proportions would be born.

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It is the mostly peasant, mostly Maya, faceless locals who have the most to fear. Supposedly, the army can't do anything to them during the current peace-talk truce. But no one in Zapatista territory believes that. Military directives in Mexico have changed radically without notice before. Most of the villagers in La Realidad quickly vanish when the federal troops pass through town.

They peer through the slats of their huts, watching long convoys of armored vehicles inch along. The current truce agreement disallows the convoys from stopping in or near the rebel villages, and requires the soldiers to stay in their vehicles. The Mexican army men film everything with army cameras, even though what they see each time doesn't change much.

One day, while the locals are home hiding, I'm hiking along a jungle pathway just out of town. The slow, deep rumble of the approaching heavy transports can be heard from far off. The raucous birds grow silent, and only the buzz of the bugs continues to compete with the army. The rumble eventually fades away.

Sometime later, less than a mile out of town, I emerge from the dense vegetation onto the usually deserted road, ready to head back. But I am suddenly face to face with the entire convoy. It has apparently been stopped here all this time, technically much too close to town, according to the truce agreements.

The always-packed vehicles are strangely empty, except for a few guards manning the fixed machine guns. They are watching me.

I instinctively glance back down the tangled path toward possible retreat, hesitating—where to go?—but immediately realize that all the missing soldiers, dressed in camouflage—more than a hundred—are surely hiding motionless amid the lush greenery. I have caught them breaking the rules, and they are obviously up to something. Planting listening devices, as the rebels tell me they do? Adjusting observation equipment? I lift my camera to shoot the scene, but two heavy metallic clicks just behind stop me cold.

In my head I know they're less likely to shoot an American journalist. But doubt creeps in, and my heart is racing.

A few quiet moments pass, and then a familiar, strained face rounds a bend in the road, coming at us—an old Maya man from La Realidad. He sees the situation, and stops in his tracks. He stands there, motionless too, our eyes quickly weighing each other's fears. He is bent over, a massive burden of freshly harvested corn on his back. His face is an anxious, wrinkled map, caught between three worlds and conflicting times.

I walk forward to join him, and we return to the village in silence.

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There's talk in Hollywood that the ideal blockbuster lineup might start with Robert Rodriguez directing, and Quentin Tarantino writing (at least re-writing). Rodriguez, an overnight sensation as director of *El Mariachi*, then *Desperado* and *From Dusk to Dawn*, said he was "not interested in commenting" on these industry rumors. But not talking about speculative projects is typical Hollywood strategy.

Director Luis Mandoki (*When a Man Loves a Woman*, *Gaby*, *White Palace*) and producer Corrinne Mann have said that they are planning to make a Marcos movie, and have commissioned David Veloz to write a script for them. They have not met Marcos, but Mann has visited the rebel territories.

Director John Sayles's agent says his client (*The Brother from Another Planet*, *City of Hope*, *Lone Star*) is planning to make a movie about events in Mexico titled *Hombres Armados*—Armed Men. The agent declined to say whether or not Sayles's movie would be about Marcos.

One thing should give the studio number-crunchers reason to take heart: Marcos is already an international star—although he is perhaps bigger abroad than in the U.S., particularly so in

Europe. Even while traveling on the other side of the world, I saw his masked face pop up regularly in the nightly news, even while working in Cambodia and Laos, broadcast from the Mexican jungle into country after country.

Spain's rock idol drummer Mikel Abrego recently paid Marcos a visit, as did Régis Debray, who gained fame as the journalist accompanying Che Guevara on his ill-fated 1960s revolutionary mission into Bolivia. Debray later served as an advisor to the late President François Mitterrand of France.

Mitterrand's widow, Danielle, made the pilgrimage to La Realidad in April of this year, just a week after Debray, also at the invitation of Marcos, arriving with Paris-based Chilean filmmaker Carmen Castillo. A thousand masked Zapatistas threw an outdoor dance party for the former first lady. Several comandantes offered speeches. Mitterrand was visibly tense, escorted by two masked women soldiers, arm in arm with her wherever she went. But she briefly took the microphone and told her cheering listeners, "I am on your side."

Marcos materialized later that night, ever the showman. "Bienvenue, madame," he said. He smiled warmly and kissed her hand under the stars, then offered her a red rose, symbol of her husband's party. Tears came to her eyes, and her strained expression melted away. As they sat at a picnic table in the expansive jungle, their faces lit by candlelight, he spoke to Mitterrand of the indigenous people's struggle. My tape recorder whirred softly on the table between them. When it clicked off at the end of the first side, Marcos stopped mid-conversation to turn my cassette over himself, ensuring every word was captured for posterity.

Before driving off the next morning, while we brushed our teeth with bottled water and freshened up together in the stream, Mitterrand told me she was "deeply moved" by the Zapatistas and their struggle.

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Marcos's poetic communiqués—disseminated through the Internet—have also earned him a world-wide base of fans. Because of those communiqués, the literati of Latin America say he should be somehow considered for the Nobel Prize. He masterfully employs a magical-realist style, even playing on such magical-realist literary heavyweights as Gabriel Garcia Marquez—and he also manages to work frequent movie references into his work, too.

Marcos doesn't talk communism, and he carefully avoids socialistic lingo. Either he's learned from the failings of other revolutionaries, or he's just not telling us everything. One thing is certain, though: there is no rebel leader as fascinating anywhere in the world.

And he tries to appeal to everyone. He joked with a reporter once, telling her he'd worked at a gay bar in her hometown, San Francisco. (He told a journalist from Dallas that he'd been a cheerleader for the Dallas Cowboys.) The Mexican press jumped on the gay bar quote and

announced that Marcos was gay. Usually, the press reports that he is a womanizer—a notoriety he has never discouraged. This was a new twist. He responded:

"Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, Chicano in San Ysidro, Jew in Germany, feminist in political parties, pacifist in Bosnia, artist without gallery or portfolio, housewife on any given Saturday night in any neighborhood of any city of any Mexico, a guerrilla in Mexico at the end of the twentieth century, sexist in the feminist movement, woman alone in the metro at 10 p.m., campesino without land, unemployed worker, and, to be sure, Zapatista in the Mexican Southeast. In sum, Marcos is a human being, any human being in this world. All the minorities at the moment they begin to speak and the majorities at the moment they fall silent and put up with it. All that makes power and good conscience uncomfortable, this is Marcos."

"Todos somos Marcos"—We are all Marcos, scrawls author John Ross, autographing my copy of his book, *Rebellion From the Roots*. That phrase has become a popular slogan. Almost as popular as this poster, tacked up in towns throughout Mexico and circulating on the Net:

"Wanted: Age 39 years. Nationality: Mexican. Profession: Guerrilla and poet. Education: Master's in philosophy. Background: Honors student, university professor. Particular features: Wears a ski mask, speaks various languages, smokes a pipe. He is accused of speaking the truth, defending the indigenous, opposing the sell-out of the country, unmasking corrupt politicians and beginning the war to rescue the dignity of the Mexican people. If you know him—follow his example."

CBS TV's Ed Bradley visited Marcos in 1994. He asked the masked enigma about his politics, and also about his sex appeal. That *60 Minutes* interview was replayed on New Year's Eve 1995, Marcos having been chosen by the *60 Minutes* team as one of the three most interesting men they had interviewed in the past five years.

"You've become to many people in Mexico a cult hero," Bradley tells Marcos. "I mean, women have said that you've brought romanticism back to Mexico."

"I can't answer that," responds the soft-spoken Marcos, laughing shyly, looking at the ground.

Also in that program, Bradley interviews Guadalupe Loaeza, Mexico City columnist. "He has lovely eyes," she says. "He has very nice hands. And he has a very nice voice. And he writes very well. A lot of Mexican women, they dream about him, but they don't tell that to their husbands, because they would be so mad, can you imagine?"

In the face of this sort of idolatry, Marcos goofs on being the star.

When he arrived at the first round of peace talks, the month after the conflict began in 1994, 570 international journalists jostled each other for positions, waiting for Marcos to step from the Red Cross shuttle under heavy security. As he emerged, one of the photographers, held at bay

behind him, called, “Marcos!” Ever the performer, the masked man turned slightly, hiked up his trousers to show some leg, and then slipped quickly into the closed-door talks.

Shortly thereafter, while embedded with a contingent of the rebel army at a particularly remote jungle hideout, I asked Marcos why he had given up his old life to become a revolutionary.

“Well, it is a real problem for us to talk about this point,” he said. “I can tell you there are three persons in Marcos. One Marcos is the person you are talking with now. This person doesn’t exist. You are talking now with the voice, with the eyes, with the face of the Zapatista Army. Marcos is only a ski mask, and behind the ski mask is the Zapatista Army.

“There is another Marcos that is behind the ski mask, the Marcos that knows the people here, without a mask. This Marcos was born ten years ago here and became like an Indian, but with lighter skin. This Marcos is known by the people as the military chief. He teaches all the officers to fight. This Marcos receives general orders from the indigenous leaders. He cannot take political initiatives. I must talk with my people, saying: ‘This is the situation, what we can do?’

“I cannot say: ‘Vote for this candidate.’ I cannot say: ‘Begin again the dialogue’ or ‘sign the peace,’ and so forth. And there is another Marcos. The third, tercero Marcos. The person that came here. This person was dead ten years ago. He doesn’t exist anymore.

“So don’t worry, don’t speak about him.”

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Marcos can be as frustrating as he is ingenious. He picks and chooses his audiences, and cultivates his carefully crafted mystique by staying scarce. Journalists arrive almost daily—many of them prestigious—from all over the world. Most are turned away. No explanation. No apologies. The security-conscious rebels allow some visitors to unfurl their tents and hammocks and stay a while. But every day another writer gives up and leaves. Weeks pass, even months. And it’s not just the wait, the shortage of food, or the mosquitoes. Since Marcos typically, albeit rarely, appears in the wee hours of the morning (he’s thought to be an insomniac), each night is spent in a tense semi-sleep. Each snapping twig, each passing night-animal is another Marcos, another reason to sit up with a start, to not miss the big interview that usually never arrives.

This maddening scenario now keeps much of the press at bay. The guy can also shoot himself in the foot. He’s inexplicably snubbed some of his biggest potential forums—even *National Geographic*.

“If you put him in LA with a cell phone and a beeper, we’d all love him and hate him,” a retired producer/director says, insisting on anonymity because he’s hoping to meet Marcos. “Marcos has this rock-star thing going,” he continues. “First there was the Las Vegas phase. In 1994 his eyes were twinkling, things were going well with the revolution, and he got haughty.

Then 1995 was the Graceland phase. The army moved in, took back some control of the territory, forced them into hiding. They had to stow their arms and take off their masks and blend in. You didn't see hide nor hair of Marcos. This year he's made a comeback. Actually, it's a Maharishi phase. The devoted all come to try to touch him."

Even this critic is an admirer, despite his caustic comments. "Marcos is prone to all the foibles of stardom, but what's behind all of it is a really beautiful thing," he acquiesces. "Without Marcos, the Zaps would never have survived. Ed Bradley sure as hell wouldn't have gone traipsing through the jungle looking for one of the other leaders, and nobody would be talking about making a movie about the Zapatistas."

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Back in the States, during a Cinco de Mayo party this year at his San Diego home, I ask Leon Singer about his now-famous countryman. Singer played El Californio in the critically acclaimed *My Family* (1995) and plays a concert promoter in the upcoming *Selena*. He is a quintessential Mexican character actor.

"Of course a movie could be done about him," Singer says. "I mean there's no question—and especially Hollywood, because Hollywood is capable of many things—even turning Marcos into a musical!

"But in my opinion, he would deserve a true serious movie in the larger context of how his movement relates to the current political situation in Mexico, in connection with the government's helplessness."

"By the way, do you know that Marcos has a page on the Internet?" he asks me.

Singer dials up his Internet connection. There it is—the World Wide Web site, Zapata's face repeating across the screen, "Zapatista National Liberation Army." After the graphics, the options pop up: breaking news, all the communiqués, interviews, and a rebel photo section.

"But," Singer continues, "I think that what sells in the movie theaters are stories that do not affect people directly. Like Robin Hood, for instance. That's something that had to do with the poor and the rich and it happened a very long time ago. But here's Marcos, today, also talking about peasants, exploitation, money, and he's even talking about United States collaboration with the Mexican government. The financing in Hollywood is going to be afraid to get close to it because this is a sensitive international issue. But if you can get Kevin Costner to play Marcos..." he offers, laughing.

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Oliver Stone should be an expert on what sells and what doesn't.

When I ask Stone about a Marcos movie during our recent interview for this article, he says he has no plans to make one. And yet I know he's been fishing around for a script that could make such a film salable. I know this because he'd previously called me into his offices to ask about buying the movie rights to my experiences. By then, the rights had been sold, but I spoke at length with Stone and two of his prominent producers. Next, a screenwriter Stone had hired called, hoping to meet with me and pick my brain. Later, one of Stone's producers asked what I thought of the script Stone had commissioned and handed me a copy. I found Stone's official denial frustrating, since I'd come to talk to him about his interest in making such a movie.

Sitting on the couch in his Santa Monica office, Stone tells me it would be difficult to put the financing together for a Marcos movie. "It would be hard to get a lot of money," he says. "It might work as an art film, where you'd have to scrape together the financing. We all fight for our Latin America projects, believe me. Haskell Wexler put up his own money for *Latino*, and was wiped out. I mean he killed himself for two million bucks or something like that."

Stone says he isn't convinced the American public would go to the theaters to see a movie about Marcos. "I'm skeptical, as you know," he said. "This story is familiar—heavy militarization and America backing an artificial government. *Salvador*, which I made, made no money practically, and the success that it had was based more on its humor and its sense of American-ness than on the struggles of the Salvadoran people. *Romero* [directed by John Duigan]. No business. The movie *Viva Zapata!* No business. I loved it. It was a great movie. Elia Kazan directing, with Marlon Brando, Anthony Quinn, Darryl Zanuck, and Twentieth Century Fox. Didn't do any business."

"And you don't think this guy is unique enough to break into the American scene?" I ask.

"If Emiliano Zapata doesn't make money, isn't the answer clear to you?"

I'm not buying his end-of-a-long-day cynicism. No, I tell him, there is no comparison. Marcos has panache we can relate to. He is modern, worldly, multilingual, and ultra-hip. Zapata was a mean-looking fellow with a big sombrero and a handlebar mustache.

"I don't know," Stone backpedals. "I think Marcos is a wonderful man. I really like him. Perhaps you could find a way to make a movie about an intellectual who becomes a peasant leader—a character study. I'm not sure that I'd be the right person to do it. How many times can you try to make the Latin movie?"

"I think Latin movies are very tough for American people," he continues. "I don't know what it is. Our race, perhaps, not wanting to engage the brown brother. That's not to say you can't break the mold sometime."

I prod him a little more.

He pauses for a while.

"I think you could do it like a *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* kind of movie," he finally responds. "You've got to do it with a bit of fun for people to understand—that kind of thing that Mexico brings to American palates. You know, a sense of outrageousness. And then you've got to get American actors and it has to be identifiable in an American audience. I'm not pandering to that reality, I'm just saying that that's what it would take. *Sierra Madre* was probably one of the most successful pictures ever set in Mexico, and there have probably been a few others. They always involve whites or American characters with interesting Mexicans in subsidiary roles."

"So, the story would revolve around the American going there," I clarify.

"Yes. I think that would be the way. Maybe you can get Anthony Hopkins to play Marcos [he laughs]. I'm kidding. You know what I'm saying."

"Olmos or Banderas," I suggest.

"Al Pacino," tosses in Eric Hamburg from Ixtlan, one of Stone's production companies. Hamburg co-produced Stone's *Nixon*, released last year. Hamburg is listening to our conversation.

"Al Pacino could play Marcos," Stone affirms.

I tell him that Banderas has the eyes.

"Yeah, Antonio Banderas is good, but he is a foreigner. There's some kind of racism, perhaps."

"What if Kevin Costner was playing Marcos?" I query.

"He could do it. But there's no financial guarantee on a Kevin movie either, is there?"

"At least a very good shot," I counter.

"You better have some good shoot-em-ups and action and so forth, and some tension," Stone says, almost opening up.

"But, no movie," he adds, staring me down with that devilish grin of his.

He's in denial now, but I think he just needs a break.

Later, I'm standing in the hallway, saying good-bye to Hamburg. Stone comes up behind us to wait for the elevator. I tell Hamburg that Stone should have at least admitted he was considering the project and that his calculated air of indifference really pisses me off. The elevator takes a while to rise to Stone's sixth floor, so I keep complaining, in good humor, knowing Stone is listening.

Stone steps inside the elevator. "Viva Zapata!" he calls out. I turn in time to catch his grin before the doors slide shut.

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