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WEB LORD IN CYBERSPACE

Postmodern technology meets premodern society

PHYLLIS GILLIS

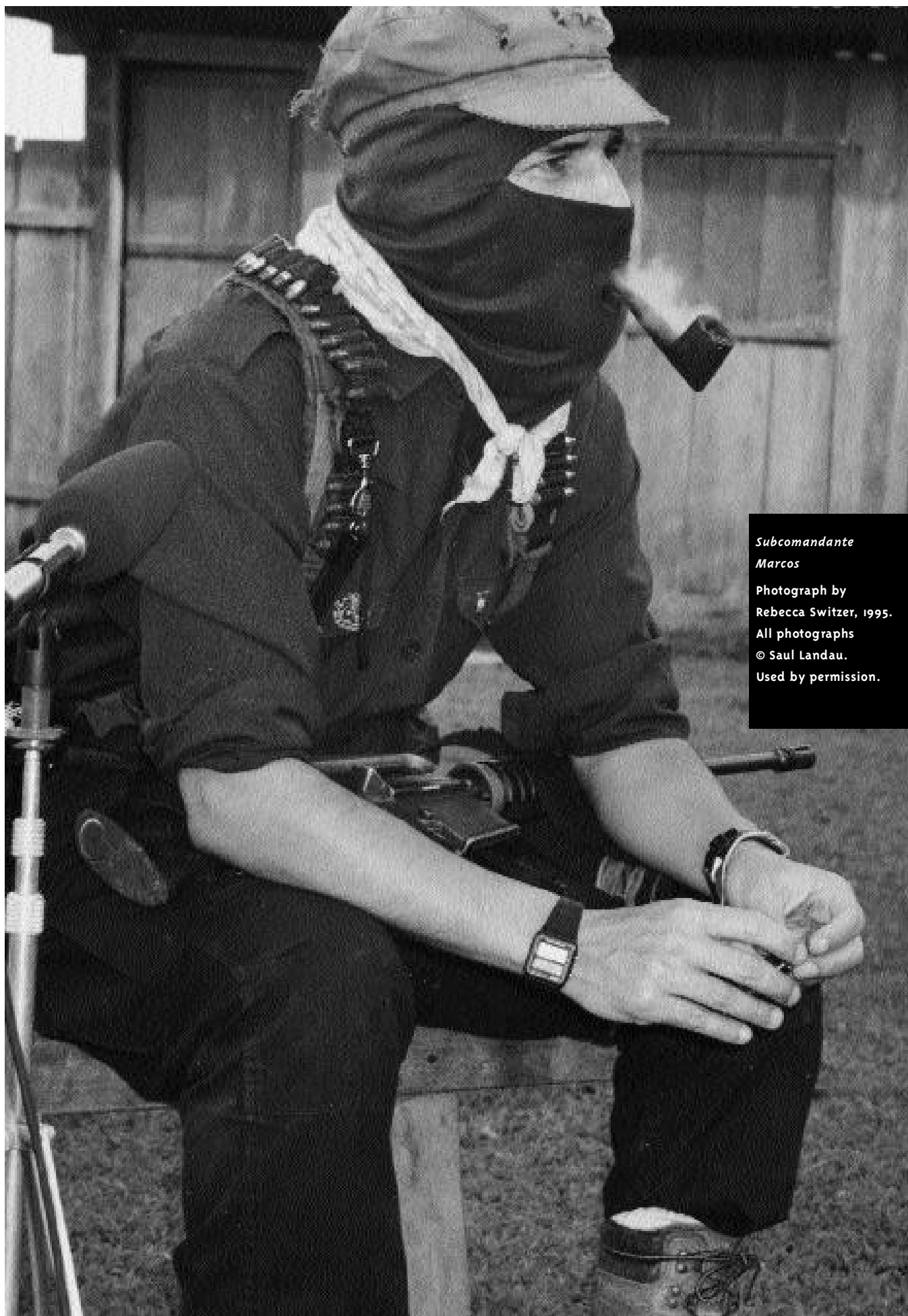


The Sixth Sun: The Mayan Uprising in Chiapas.
Written and directed by
Saul Landau. Independent
Television Service. 60 min.

On 1 January 1994, a date picked to coincide with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, Zapatista leader, poet, communicator extraordinaire from the Lacandon jungle of Chiapas, burst onto the global scene. Leading a guerrilla army of poorly armed, badly trained, malnourished, ill-equipped, mostly Mayan Indians, Marcos—nicknamed “El Sup”—and his followers, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), simultaneously seized control of the colonial city of San Cristóbal de las Casas and five towns in the surrounding highlands of Mexico’s southernmost state, an area geographically and culturally considered the northern extension of the Altiplano of Guatemala.

The rebellion was a transformative event, played out in the media through skillful manipulation of the channels of information previously controlled by those in power. Initially using print, video, cellular phones, and fax machines, and later, laptop computers, Web sites, e-mail, and the Internet, Marcos challenged the economic policies of the Mexican government under the leadership of Carlos Salinas de Gortari at the height of his power. Arguably, El Sup became the first leader of a jungle-based guerrilla rebellion to have a press office. Bringing the messenger and his message to the forefront of the world’s consciousness, the proliferation of global electronic channels of information changed insurgencies forever.

The Sixth Sun: The Mayan Uprising in Chiapas, a documentary written, produced, and directed by the award-winning filmmaker Saul Landau and photographed by a team of internationally renowned cinematographers led by Haskell Wexler and including Epigmenio Ibarra, Carlos Martínez, and Christine Burrill, tells the story of the Zapatista uprising. It is by far the best visual record of the Zapatista movement, and the comprehensive information and clear chronology it offers make it an invaluable historiographical source. The film is, moreover, a fine introduction to El Sup’s charisma and mysterious background. It is not surprising that Landau’s sympathetic account, which humanizes the conflict with a cast of colorful characters in which a peasant army and a controversial Catholic bishop, following the rallying cry “¡Basta ya!” [We’ve had enough!], are pitted against local landowners and global economic interests, has won so many awards, including Best Director, First American Indian Intercontinental Film Festival, Santa Fe; a Golden Apple Award; and Best Picture, North Carolina Smoky Mountain Film Festival.



*Subcomandante
Marcos*

Photograph by
Rebecca Switzer, 1995.
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Known for his work on foreign, domestic, and social policy issues, Native North and South American cultures, and science and technology, Landau—the first occupant of the High O. La Bounty Chair for Interdisciplinary and Applied Knowledge at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, and a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Policy Studies—is an unabashed activist whose body of work encompasses forty films, for which he has won the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award, the George Polk Award for Investigative Reporting, and the First Amendment Award. His oeuvre includes, among other films, *Conversation with Allende* (1971); *Brazil: A Report on Torture* (1971); *Land of My Birth: The Campaign Film for Michael Manley in Jamaica* (1976); *The CIA Case Officer: A Portrait of the CIA Angola Task-Force Leader* (1978); the Emmy-award winning *Paul Jacobs and the Nuclear Gang* (1978); *Target Nicaragua: Inside a Covert War* (1983), made for the Public Broadcasting Service, with Wexler as photographer; and *Papakolea: A Story of Hawaiian Homelands* (1993), which received a CINE award.

The Sixth Sun would be judged a success even if assessed solely on its merits as a story. But it goes far beyond the bounds of the conventional world-is-watching documentary. Its portrayal of sophisticated “information management” provides brilliant insights into a new era of multicultural

furnish emotional support for a movement that continues to challenge the Mexican government and the international community today.

In El Sup, Landau has the perfect leading man: soft-spoken, seductive, face always covered by a black ski mask, this new exemplar of the revolutionary captured the imagination of the world. Virtually every major international news organization, from the *New York Times* to the wire services, covered the story. *Sixty Minutes* dispatched correspondent Diane Sawyer to interview him; *Vanity Fair* was close behind. Marcos played the media like a maestro. The global audience became aware of the Chiapas conflict before the Mexican government did. Landau documents not only the uprising but also the news coverage, a story in itself. “I got a call from Miami and from London,” explains Samuel Ruiz in the film. Bishop of San Cristóbal for thirty-five years, he is called “the Red Bishop” because of his alleged Zapatista sympathies. Early on in the uprising and the film, he says, “‘What’s going on there in Chiapas?’ people asked. The BBC had the news. I looked at my watch. How is it possible that across the ocean they know what’s going on here and the people here don’t know?”

To orchestrate a preemptive strike as the uprising began, communiqués were faxed into newsrooms around the world. Designed to generate favorable public opinion before the Mexican government could stamp out the rebellion, they gave the press a story to pick up and replay.

Quickly and effectively, Marcos’s message was delivered every-

Marcos played the media like a maestro. The global audience became aware of the Chiapas conflict before the Mexican government did.

change effected by multimedia communication. Marcos’s skillful manipulation of the press and (through professional political organizers) of the subsequent coverage it provided engaged the public. Homemade videos, Zapatista training videos, recycled news clips, press releases in the form of clever communiqués, and staggered interviews with selected high-profile journalists all helped create and influence public opinion, causing a global audience to bond with a man and to

where—businesses, schools, churches, private homes. And what communiqués they were! “All of this is nothing but the ‘scenery’ for the story I want to tell you,” Marcos writes, describing food, water, and rations in the jungle. “I didn’t let such a small incident bother me, as I was accustomed to seeing in these mountains things as apparently absurd as a little deer with a red carnation in its mouth (probably in love, because if not, why a red carnation?), a tapir with violet ballet shoes, a herd of

wild boar playing cards." Never had there been such a charming guerrilla leader, whose prose was likened to the magical realism of the literati of the Latin American "boom" period.

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Marcos's promotional and literary talents attracted correspondence from such figures as Carlos Fuentes, Carlos Monsivís, and Elena Poniatowska, whose writings about him provided further credibility for the man and generated even greater interest in the Zapatista cause. Marcos was just as amazed as their audiences. "It worked!" he tells Landau. "I don't know how, but it worked!"

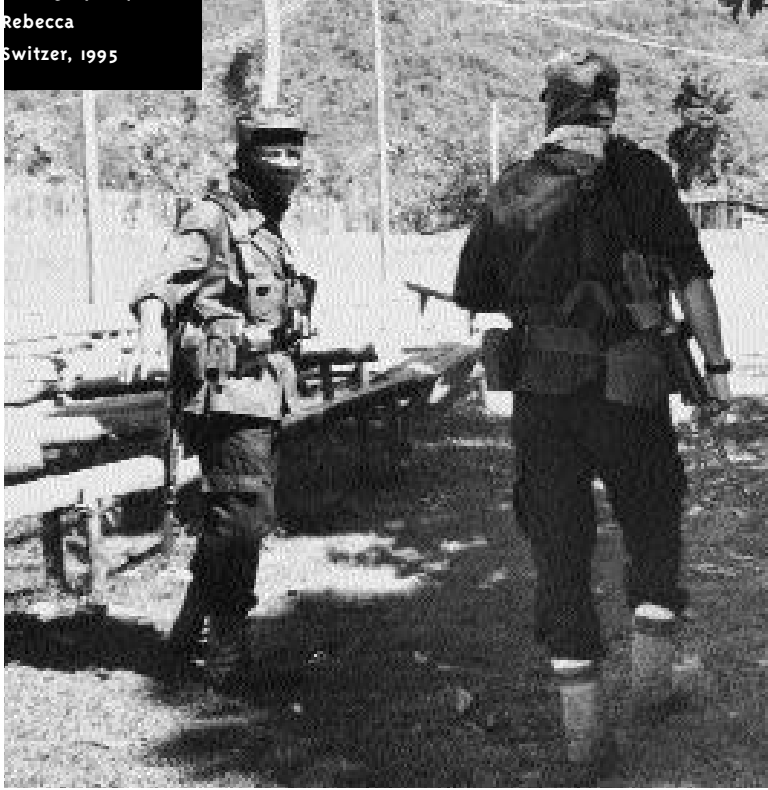
But *The Sixth Sun* does not become carried away with the romance of the revolution. Immersion journalism at its best, the film brings together a plurality of voices bearing witness to the clash between traditional cultures and modernity. Opening with El Sup seated at a table in a jungle setting, the film draws its audience in as Marcos chats with the camera crew, absently arranges his tie, and reviews his script. As if an anchorman on location in the jungle, he begins, "Good morning, sunrise viewers, . . . from the Zapatista Intergalactic TV network via satellite . . ."

Drawing inspiration from "guerrilla *testimonio*" like Mario Payeras's *Días de la selva*—which

*Marcos at a
press conference*

Photograph by
Rebecca Switzer, 1995





tells how sixteen members of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor, inspired by Che Guevara's example and rhetoric, spent five years in the jungle struggling against disease and poverty and then initiated an armed struggle—Landau wants his audience to empathize with the difficulties of survival in the dense Lacandon jungle. "The mountains reject you," Marcos says. "Rain. Cold. Insects. Everything

cutting in clips of Marlon Brando as Emiliano Zapata in the film *Viva Zapata!* Landau allows the actor to tell the story: "Do you know of any land dispute ever won by country people?"

"Zapata evokes dignity. He evokes the history of the struggle. He never stopped fighting for his ideals," Javier Elorriaga, a strikingly handsome former political prisoner and alleged Zapatista guerrilla leader, tells Landau quietly but firmly. Pushed off their lands, first by the Spanish, then by the ladinos, it is difficult not to sympathize with the Mayan coffee and corn farmers who populate the lands via their *ejidos* [rural production units] and whose homes and lands have been torched by those in power, perhaps the army or the cattle ranchers and their gangs of "white guards" (named for the white shirts worn by private security forces), whose members are often drawn from the local population.

The event that unified the indigenous community was the revision of Article 27, the section of Mexico's 1917 constitution that established state ownership of all land and water resources, forests, and mineral deposits and empowered the state to limit private ownership and break up large estates. Article 27, the basis of the land-reform program, had established the *ejidos*. To encourage investment in Mexican land and businesses, the Salinas government, supported by the United States, revised Article 27 in 1991, enabling the buying and

NAFTA symbolizes "a great world market where nations become stores, or malls, as you gringos say. The politician turns into a sales manager; his country becomes a business."

is saying, 'Get out of here.' The armed struggle is a thing of the past and you're there dreaming. Dreaming. . . . That's the truth. Dreaming that what you're doing will serve some good purpose." He adds, "We first came to the jungle to teach them. But instead of us penetrating the community, the community penetrates us, and we moved from being a military army to a community army."

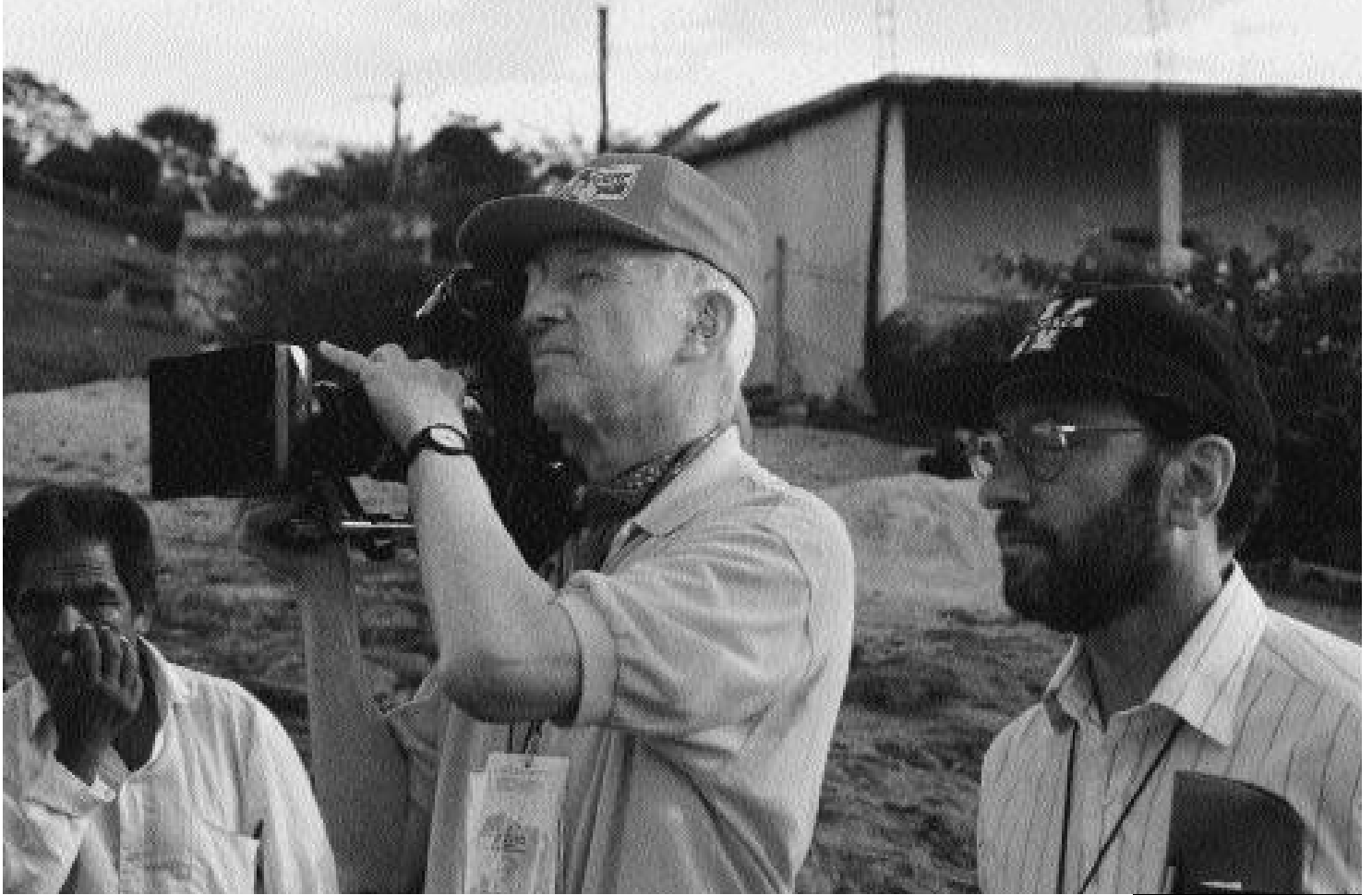
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As soon as the audience is hooked on his hero, Landau goes to the guts of the issue: land. Cleverly

selling of any parcel of land, including *ejido* land, and thus the reestablishment of large estates. Without the revision of Article 27, NAFTA could not have come into being.

Focusing on the stories of the landowners, peasants, politicians, and priests, Landau artfully lets the most recent players in a conflict dating back five hundred years speak. "For good or bad, the Spanish came and destroyed our culture," says one landowner. "And we made another one."

Another landowner adds, "We're not stealing the land. That's like blaming you for the territory you



took from Mexico—Texas, New Mexico, California. That's a dead issue. We're not going to live in the past. It's all right to remember history, but only the good part."

Marcos thinks otherwise: "The concept of land for indigenous people goes beyond what the

land produces or even gives life itself. For the Indian, it's also his link with history. I'm not referring to only the land he works but also the land where he lives, his community and his mountains, his rivers. It is the reference to his historic past that is not limited to something that has already passed, but it is something that is still happening." He saves his most pointed words, uttered against a vivid backdrop of peasant children standing beneath satellite dishes, for NAFTA, "a great world market where nations become stores, or malls, as you gringos say. The politician turns into a sales manager; his country becomes a business."

Landau, whose own ideology is visible in every shot, obviously agrees: "Once shopping becomes the only universal value, those who do not participate are devalued. The Zapatistas are one of the last chances to protect the old world order."



*Saul Landau
(center), with
Haskell Wexler*

*Photograph by
Chris Burrill, 1994*

*Left:
Landau and Wexler,
with Bishop Samuel
Ruiz and a sound
engineer*

*Photograph by
Chris Burrill, 1994*



Marcos at an interview

Photograph by
Rebecca
Switzer, 1995

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One of the paradoxes of modernity is the continuing growth of the international economy and of a global culture in spite of the persistent divisions among human beings. Ironically, technology, the ultimate postmodern symbol, may hold out the one hope for keeping the Zapatista cause and the old world order alive. Five years after the Chiapas uprising, the Zapatistas are still in the public eye. While the Mexican government wages an economic war of attrition against the peasants in the high-

has produced a creative anarchy by which information and ideas have been liberated from official channels. The struggle in Chiapas, open to the world, has become a war between Web lords. The sun in the film's title symbolizes justice. Running over the opening credits, a priest explains that every hundred years a new sun rises. On 1 January 1994 the sixth sun rose.

But not all is success. To debunk the Zapatista myth, Salinas's successor, Ernesto Zedillo, announced to the media who the real Marcos was:

Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, an ex-university professor from the Universi-

"The mountains reject you," Marcos says. "Rain. Cold. Insects. Everything is saying, 'Get out of here.' The armed struggle is a thing of the past and you're there dreaming."

lands, the rebels continue to press for greater democracy and Indian rights. Hundreds of Web sites are devoted to the Zapatistas; even the Mexican government has one devoted to countering information posted by El Sup and the EZLN. In the global communications environment, technology

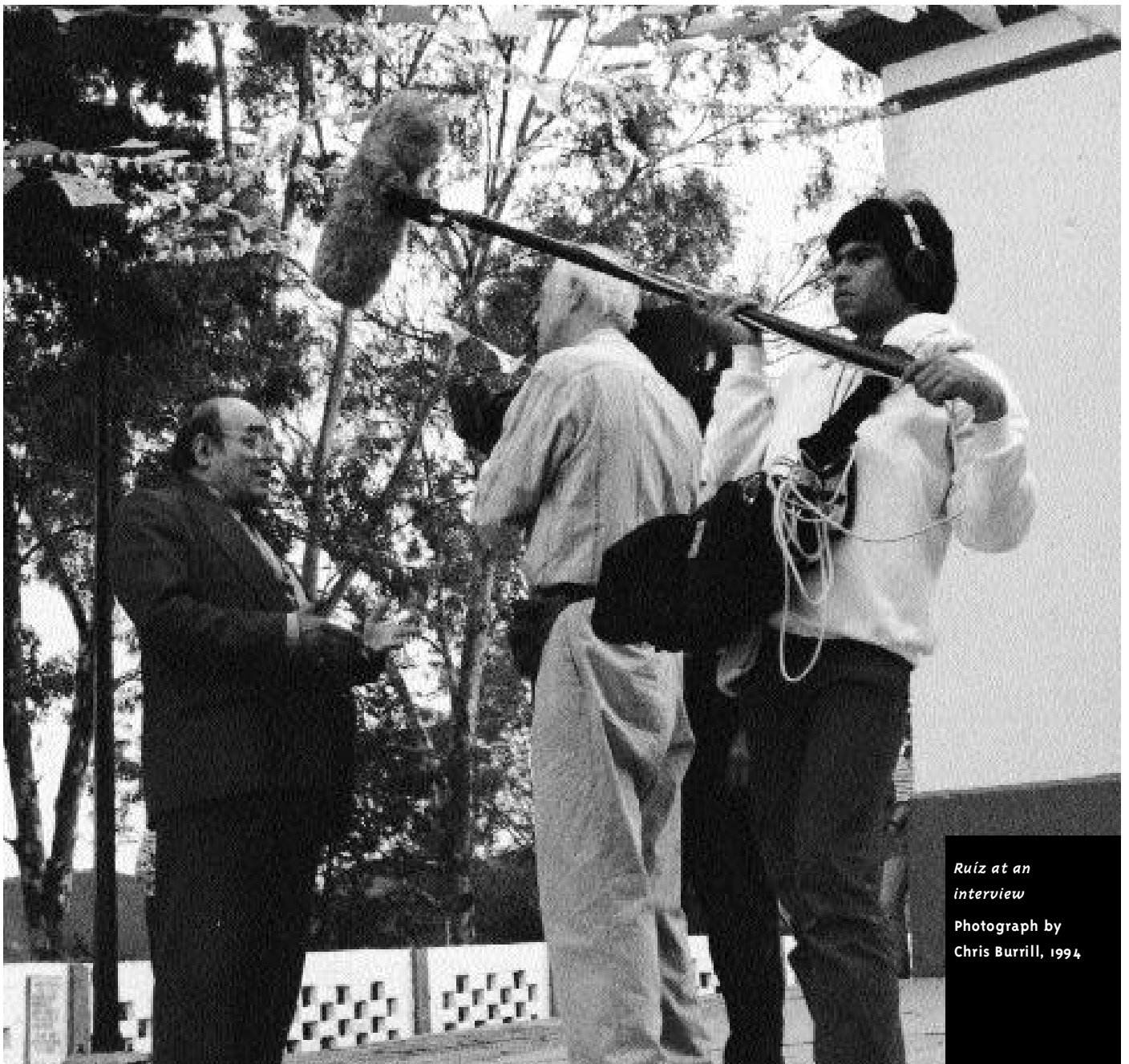
dad autónoma metropolitana in Xochimilco. El Sup recovered from this "unmasking," but during the past few years he has had trouble holding the world's attention. Rumors of his attempt to go from guerrilla hero to more conventional *político* spring up regularly, as do stories about his disappear-

ance, his break with the EZLN, and even his death. In mid-1998, for instance, the Mexican press avowed that the real Marcos had not been seen for months and that, like many a bandit before him, he had chosen to continue his role of freedom fighter in the jungles of Bolivia or Central America. None of it was true; Marcos returned to the spotlight soon after, even if he no longer made the same impact. This innuendo shows, of course, how he has become a legend. But it also highlights the increasing trouble the Zapatistas face as they move farther from the decisive 1994 date, when they surprised the world. For the time being, negotia-

tions between them and the government are at a standstill, and many of their political and military gains seem too fragile to be seized as triumphs.

Landau's film extends only up to 1996. As such, it is a foundational document. Through it, Subcomandante Marcos's dream of justice has been brought to the global community. "We are not terrorists," says El Sup. "We don't have nuclear bombs. We have only the truth of our words."

And these words are posted on the World Wide Web. ☺



*Ruiz at an
interview*

Photograph by
Chris Burrill, 1994