

The history of the conquest of Mexico with the events recorded in the indigenous eyewitness accounts as well the observations of the first Europeans to see the great city of Tenochtitlan and its tragic aftermath have led each of us to form our own individual visions of this epic. This seems to be even more so for artists. With so little left to see, each artist, then, becomes his own expert as he follows his inner vision, and in this sense all artistic points of view are valid. I say this, because in almost thirty years of studying this subject, my brother Scott and I have certainly developed our particular points of view. From the first movie that we saw on this subject, "Capitain of Castile," (1949?), to the "Royal Hunt of the Sun" in the 1970's which sought to deal with the trauma of the conquests of Mexico and Peru, we have been left more or less dissatisfied. No convincing attempt has been made to break through the veil of our western, eurocentric thinking to convey at least some convincing sense of what the native peoples thought or endured. We commend you for your attempt to give the Aztec account of the Conquest.

It was with your attempt in mind that we read your script, "Mexico," and we sincerely hope that you will receive our suggestions in the spirit in which they are offered. We know that you are an artist of very strong inner vision. We also want you to know that we have no philosophical or political or moral axes to grind. The Conquest of Mexico and the other peoples of the Americas was probably an historical inevitability. This does not lessen the impact of its tragedy. But we should never lose our perspective about the uniqueness of the event. The invasion of the so-called "New" World by Europeans and Africans is, as you have stated in your general remarks, about as close a real life scenario to what it might be like to have our earth invaded by space aliens with a superior technology and a domineering culture.

We also must say at the outset that inspite of our own studies of these people, and our deep knowledge of their city and their religion, our insights do not make us Aztecs. We too bear the burden of our own time and culture. With this in mind, we ask you sincerely what it is that you want to say in your film? After reading your script we are, frankly, not sure. Your point of view from the script itself, from only the words, is more of an objective account. The visuals (which I think most films are about) may be a completely different matter of course.

Ironically I began to work on a play about the conquest of Mexico when I was a student in law school in 1965. I gave it up, because I realized that I really knew nothing about the Aztec mind or world view - which was one of the reasons why I wanted to write the play in the first place. It was this project that made me seek out an obscure nahuatl language manual in the super-rare book library at the University of Texas. Once she found the book (which took a week of searching) the librarian would not let me take it out of the room. So I spent the spring months of 1966 copying that book by hand. I still have it, and I still have the deepest love and respect for nahuatl, a highly articulate, beautiful and poetic language filled with

puns of great magic. I do not speak the language fluently, but I do have a good sense of it and some sense of how it molded the thinking of its speakers. I do believe that your script could be improved to impart a different quality to the Aztec speakers without being too prolix (which they were) or sacrificing clarity. Scott and I also can help you with some very important matters of Aztec etiquette which you may not know, since they do not appear in your script. I also think that our knowledge of Aztec kingship, their sense of their own history and their complex religion and view of the world could help in a unique way to explain many of the mysteries which are everywhere to be found in this story. And I think this could be done without sacrificing in any way the surrealist sense of wonder the Aztecs felt at the events that were unfolding before them with the coming of the Spanish. It's a tall order, because the film you have in mind is not a documentary. It must be concise and, above all, dramatic and very visual.

Finally - and this to me is critical to the conveying of this story from the Aztec point of view - the film must answer the intriguing questions, Why did Moctezuma who was well-known and feared throughout the land as a great warrior, priest and universally feared ruler of millions cave in to the power of Cortes? And why did Dona Marina betray her people? The answers are subtle, but very dramatic. The problem for the dramatist and researcher, however, lies in the fact that the answers can not be learned from a study of the histories left to us by the conquerors or even the indigenous accounts of the conquest themselves. Rather, we must get to the answers through the back door, through Aztec religion and their very different understanding of reality. Conveying some sense of that reality could be the source of a powerful and unique film.

One of the characters you have decided to portray in your film, Jeronimo de Aguilar might be the very person who could help you bridge the cultural gap between the Aztecs and the Spanish. But, alas, you kill him off on the causeway during the Spanish escape from Tenochtitlan on the Noche Triste. In truth the man lived well into his nineties, became a priest to atone for his role in the destruction of the Indians, and helped inspire Fray Diego Duran to write his history of the Aztec people in the 1570's. Aguilar had been marooned among the Maya almost a decade before Cortes ventured to Mexico. He joined Cortes early in the expedition and along with the Indian woman, Dona Marina "La Malinche" he served as Cortes's interpreter of Indian language and customs. He had seen the great island city of Tenochtitlan in all its grandeur, had seen too Moctezuma and the eventual destruction of the Aztec world. I believe that he could serve as a narrator which, though it is an old, much-used dramatic device, is almost necessary to make this complex story comprehensible.

The film with credits begins at dawn on a trail beneath the great volcano Popocatepetl. A friar in the middle distance rides a donkey. Two Indian guides lead the way past a small

ruined aztec temple upon which stands a crude, whitewashed cross. One of the guides plays on a bamboo flute. There follows a montage of forest and hills, of vines and tropical flowers. One suddenly sees the eyes of a black jaguar silently on the hunt. More images of birds, exotic flowers, a butterfly caught in a spider's web. The day is passing. The sun is overhead. The priest rests, The priest continues on his way. It is late afternoon. As the sun sets, the priest pauses on his donkey to look down into a valley. There are lights far off. The donkey begins to descend. The black jaguar growls and turns back into the dark forest.

A large, scarred wooden monastery door swings open. An old friar is standing there. Behind him, under the arcades, others monks have lined up to get their lanterns. A line of lighted lanterns files away along the corridors.

OLD FRIAR: (begins to lead Duran down the hallway)
How good of you to come, father. He has been calling for you for three days.

DURAN:
How is he?

OLD FRIAR:
He is sleeping now, but he spent a very bad night. Quite out of his head. Truly the worst I have yet seen. When he wakes he wants you. He keeps calling out that only you can relieve him.

DURAN:
My duty kept me in

OLD FRIAR:
I know, but you are here at last. Quickly, father, I don't think there is much time. He has already received unction but remains restless. Truly, he carries a great burden. (He looks at the two indians behind Duran. They are scribes with paper and ink pots in their hands.). Oh good, you brought them.

DURAN:
Your letter was specific. I brought his book as well, but it is a shambles. I haven't even begun to put it together. *I see it will be an impossible task without his help. Not as simple*

OLD FRIAR: *Page 68 New word*
No time for that now. Come. This way. (The camera follows them down a long corridor, through a foyer then down another corridor at the end of which is a heavy wooden door. As they get nearer to the door, the old friar continues . . .) We've had to keep him by himself. His affect, you know, on the other patients, what with his ravings and blasphemies. . . . *as many as we were* I knew some of the others, the old ones, the conquerors. They were all like him in their last days. A great weight upon their souls.

DURAN:

This man is different.

OLD FRIAR:

Oh, I'll grant you he is peculiar. Those heathen markings on his body. I know that he was one of the Marques's interpreters, that he saw it all, that he was there at the beginning. (He opens the door slowly. the room is dark. Only a single votive candle silhouettes the man on the bed.)

DURAN: (whispering)

He was there before the beginning. Marooned among the natives in the Yucatan ten years before Cortes came to this country.

OLD FRIAR: (whispering)

That explains it. He speaks in a strange tongue when his spirit torments him. It is not the language of Mexico, though he speaks that as well. . . . Oh, my brother, if you can help him in this release, you free us as well. It has been a cross. (The old man steps aside to let Duran and the two indians enter.) If you need anything, my servant, Roderigo, will be right outside the door. . . . May God be with you in this.

DURAN:

. . . and with you, Amen.

(Duran turns and enters the shuttered room. The two indians squat behind him. He walks over to the drowsy, half asleep man lying on the simple bed and places the lantern on the side table and lays several candles by it. He places the book and writing papers on another table that he has picked up and quietly moved toward the bed. He spends a moment arranging pens, ink and paper. Then he turns to the old man in the shadows and gently picks up his hand. There in the dim light we can barely see the outlines of bluish tattoos on the pale skin.)

DURAN: (softly)

Peace to you, my father.

(No answer. Duran nods toward one of the indians. The indian rises and comes forward. He picks up the pale hand to feel the pulse. Then he takes something out of his pouch and holds it before the sick man's face. The hand moves into a slight grip.)

DURAN: (leaning closer into the darkness. His head in the shadows.)

Tlazohcamatiliz notatatzin. Axcan nitlatoa can
Mexicatlatolli.

AQUILAR:

Ce cualli. Tlazohcamatiliz. Miactin tlatoa. In huey huey
Mecicatlatocayotl.

DURAN:

Ce cualli. I am here to listen, to set it all down just as you speak it. Do not waste your precious strength in haste. We will go as slowly as you wish.

AGUILAR:

Tlazohcamatilo. Nimah . . . nimah, yece amo tlatoa in
tlatocayotl Caxtilan, yece can tlatoa ce tlatocayotl Mexica,
ihueyaltepetl Tenochtitlan ihuan in tlatocayotzin ica inin
tlacami Cem Anahuac Tlalpan. Nocayotl iquiza ica ce acatl xihuilitl
ihuac oacique caxtolli ihuan yei acalli a chichiliuayapan.

(Dialogue changes to English as the old conqueror continues.) I know well now what was not known then - that for some time before our coming to this land of Mexico there had been powerful omens throughout the country foretelling some great change. All was uncertainty and foreboding. And with these omens came the first news of strange floating mountains off the shores of the Maya lands. The great Moctezuma himself told me that he had been aware of our ships years before the coming of the Marques Cortes, that he known of our expeditions along the coasts of Yucatan and of our hardships there and even of my being marooned and made a slave there in Champonton years before Cortes landed at Villa Rica. (Here the old man begins to cough. The indian comes forward again, pours a liquid out of his leather bota, sprinkles some powder in it. He lifts the old man's head and helps him drink. It is the first time we can see the old man's face.)

INDIAN:

Pahtli. Cualpahtli.

AGUILAR:

Tlazohcamatiliz notatatzin. (The indian lays the old man's head back onto the pillow. He continues to talk.) The Great Speaker Moctezuma was much troubled by these things, but to the members of his council, to his court and to his people he appeared as a pillar, he appeared hard. He acted as though not greatly perplexed. But in his heart he wondered if these early strangers who mysteriously came and went in their mountains of wood were but the vanguard preparing the way for some greater being.

It was not until the year 1519, the year One Reed in the Mexican calendar, that Moctezuma began to lose himself, to fall away from his people. For in the Spring of that year there came news of a great arrival of ships off the coast of his lands, more ships and strangers than had ever been seen. His worst fears were confirmed when he was told that these strangers, more than all the rest, seemed to have come with a purpose. Had they not waited for that year, the One Reed Year, to come in earnest? For surely they must have chosen the time, had chosen that year, because it was the very year of the calendar round that marked the birth and departure of the god Quetzalcoatl who had "Ce Acatl" the One Reed Year in his name - and who had foretold that he would return from the eastern seas in a One Reed year to reclaim the throne of Mexico.

As the days passed and events unfolded from the time Moctezuma first heard of Cortes's arrival, the king became more certain that the omens (Perhaps a montage of comets, lightning striking the temple of Xiuhtecuhli, the seabird with a mirror on its head.) had foretold precisely this.

Father? (The old man feebly grasps Duran's sleeve.) If you remember nothing of what I tell you, but only this. Remember that Moctezuma was not a timid man. He was not a coward. Whatever his fate and the part he played in the fall of his kingdom, he had in his youth been a brave and noble warrior and leader of men. He was a very devout priest who never departed from his duties to his gods. And as the Hueytlatoani, the Great

Speaker and ruler of his people for seventeen years, he had been greatly feared throughout the land. He told me that for all his power he had always known that he was the plaything of the gods, that he could be cast down at any time, whether he deserved it or not, by the very gods who had raised him up high. Surely the news of powerful strangers in his country, the omens and the heavy burdens he bore in his office weighed on his mind, eating away at his confidence like a cancer. And he was having dreams.

and he was having dreams."

This scene cuts away to the darkened bedchamber of Moctezuma. The king is alone lying on his bed. He is silhouetted by the light of glowing coals from a small brazier on the other side of his bed. His face is directed toward the ceiling, but because it is in silhouette, you can not tell if he is awake or sleeping. Far away at the great temples the conch shell trumpets of the priests signal the time for the midnight incensing of the gods. Just then you hear the delicate tinkling sound of the shell robe fringes of several shadowy figures who have arrived unseen just outside the king's door. Then you see the visitors' bare feet below the robe fringes. The men are priests who have not changed into humble clothing for an audience with Moctezuma as is the custom. They are here in their official capacity as priests.

MOCTEZUMA:

I am awake.

The priests are silent. They enter the room in single file as the king rises. They bow, touch the ground with their hands and bring their fingers to their lips. Then all say in unison, "Lord, my Lord, my great Lord." One priest has a bowl of water and a towel. The king rinses his hands and his face and takes the towel and turns to another priest who, like all the others, stands with head bowed, not looking at Moctezuma.

MOCTEZUMA:

I shall wear the painted xiuhtlalpilli.

PRIEST: (with robe)

The robe of your ancestors is here, my great Lord.

ANOTHER PRIEST:

Will you wear the white and red foam sandals, my great Lord?

MOCTEZUMA:

Yes, the foam sandals. . . . Who will bear the Cloud Serpent?

PRIEST:

The lord Cuauhtemoctzin will carry the staff.

MOCTEZUMA:

Not my brother Cuitlahuac?

PRIEST:

No, my great lord. Your brother is still with the council.

MOCTEZUMA: (Somewhat annoyed at hearing this.)

Where are they meeting this time, at the Euacalco?

PRIEST:

No, my great Lord, but not far from there. They are gathered at the Temple of the Eagle Knights.

MOCTEZUMA: (with gentle sarcasm)
Is my councilor, the Cihuacoatl, there too?

PRIEST:
No, my great Lord. He awaits at the House of Darkness to pay the blood debt and enter the four day fast with you.

Moctezuma puts on the cloak and his turquoise crown. Then, accompanied by the four priests walks to the northeast gate of the royal palace where Cuauhtemoc and several others, mostly priests await him.

At the King's appearance all salute him. They bow, bend over and touch the ground with their hands, then bring their fingers to their mouths. Several priests are standing by an elegantly decorated sedan chair, their heads bowed. But the king waves his hand for the chair to be taken away.

MOCTEZUMA:
This night I go on foot to the Temple of our ancestors. I shall walk as our Mixcoatl walked through the Teotlalpan, the desert garden of Mixcoatl. I will cut the Maguey thorns there to pay the blood debt. Do not have them cut for me. I will cut them myself.

At hearing this one of the priests hurries away into the darkness to announce the king's arrival at the Temple of Mixcoatl at the eastern gate of the Great Temple enclosure.

PRIEST:
Will you be bathing at the coaapan first, my great Lord?

MOCTEZUMA:
No, I will not bathe. I will wear the dust of the Teotlalpan when I come into the presence of the God as my ancestors did.

The small party, led by two torch bearers, moves out into the darkness which is punctuated here and there by burning braziers. They walk through the alley formed by the northern side of the palace and the great wall of the Templo Mayor rising twenty-eight feet on the party's left. They come to the eastern end of the great wall and turn into the gardens and zoo which lie outside the wall. There has been no talking. The king notes that the usual night sounds of the jaguars, ocelots and wolves are silent. As he walks Moctezuma turns to one of the priests.

MOCTEZUMA:
Tell me, priest. Why are the animals quiet tonight? Is it not most unusual?

PRIEST:
Most unusual, my Lord.

MOCTEZUMA:
Perhaps an earthquake?

PRIEST:
Perhaps, my Lord.

Suddenly the king stops in front of the cage of a black jaguar. The torch bearer brings the light closer.

MOCTEZUMA:
Not too close.

The audience can barely see the animal in the torch light. It is reclining in the shadows, looking away. Slowly the head turns to reveal menacing amber eyes. The animal emits a low growl.

MOCTEZUMA:
So this is the new one.

PRIEST:
Yes, my great Lord. And quite untamed. You can see that it has not eaten since brought here from the hot lands.

MOCTEZUMA:
Bring me some meat.

PRIEST:
But Yes, my Lord.

In an instant a keeper, as if by routine, appears with a plate of meat strips. He bows then hands the plate to the priest. The king takes a strip of meat and steps closer to the cage. The animal growls more menacingly, and the rest of the party takes a slight step backward.

KEEPER:
The animal is most restless, my great Lord. It does not eat or sleep . . . most dangerous!

MOCTEZUMA: (putting his hand with the meat slowly through the wooden bars.)
He will take it.

The jaguar snaps the strip of meat out of the king's hand and gulps it down. The party is amazed. Then Moctezuma does something quite remarkable. He slowly reaches back into the cage. The cat looks up. It snarls. Its ears are down as though threatened. But it allows the king to place his hand gently on its head. Its snarling growl becomes a gentle gurgle. Moctezuma's gold ring flashes in the torchlight.

MOCTEZUMA:
What keeps you from your sleep, my wild black one?

The king slowly withdraws his hand. He pulls the ring off his finger and places it on the bottom of the cage. He leans forward and closely scrutinizes the animal's eyes for several moments. Nothing is said. Moctezuma slowly rises and continues his walk to the eastern gate.

As the party approaches the columns of the Gate we can see a group of priests with their long straggly hair and black robes assembled with their smoking incensors in their hands ready to incense the king and his followers. This is an act of great respect and purification.

We then follow the king through the tall columns of the gate into the sacred square where the back of the Temple of Mixcoatl comes into view. At the base of the Temple and in front of the king is an elevated cactus garden - the Teotlalpan, which is a recreation of the craggy desert country that the original Aztecs migrated through to reach the fertile Valley of Mexico. Beyond the Teotlalpan and in front of the Temple of Mixcoatl the light of great braziers can be seen illuminating the backside of the great Temple of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc rising out of the picture.

Cuahtemoc hands the king's Mixcoatl scepter to the aged priest whose body is painted in white and red vertical stripes and the black face paint of the god whose temple is in his care. The old man looks at Moctezuma and does not exhibit the etiquette toward the monarch shown by the others. He looks the king directly in the face and hands him a piece of flint with the peculiar shape of a sacrificial blade.

OLD PRIEST:

You may now enter the Teotlalpan to cut the thorns.

The king leaves the party. As he approaches the stairway of the Teotlalpan he removes his sandals, climbs the steps and enters the desert garden. He falls to his knees before a great Maquey cactus and crosses his arms on his chest in supplication.

MOCTEZUMA:

Oh, our mother, our great mother Maquey, Jade Goddess of the Craggy Lands, life giver of my ancestors, consort of Mixcoatl, I must take two of your thorns. Forgive me. (He then cuts two of the Maquey leaf tips) Fade out.

The party of priests looks up to see the feet of Moctezuma descending the Teotlalpan steps. All immediately look down or away from his face, all but the old priest who holds the Mixcoatl scepter in the crook of his arm. The old man steps forward and holds out a plate for the thorns. The plate has a grass ball on it into which the thorns will be stuck when the king has drawn his own blood. The party then proceeds around to the front (apetlac) of the shrine of Mixcoatl where other priests await. There is much smoke from the priests' incensors.

Moctezuma mounts the five steps of the apetlac where a large uncut boulder emerges from the stucco flooring. The king touches the rock and brings his fingers to his mouth. He then

removes his turquoise crown and hands it to Cuauhtemoc who stares at it intently. Both men for a moment look each other in the face - a suddenly forgivable breach of etiquette. The king smiles gently almost absentmindedly. You can see that his thoughts are elsewhere, to his impending confrontation with the god. The old priest steps forward and places the medicine gourd neckless around Moctezuma's neck so that the single gourd hangs down the king's back between the shoulder blades. An assistant hands the old man a netted cape of simple Maguey fiber. The old priest takes it and places it over the king's blue Xiutlalpilli cape.

The old man reaches for the incense bag held by another priest. He places it in the crook of the king's left elbow. The old man then takes the plate with the grass ball out of the king's hand and offers him one of the thorns. Moctezuma then pierces his right earlobe so that it bleeds profusely. He smears the thorn with his blood and then sticks it into the grass ball. He then repeats the ceremony with his left ear.

The old priest looks at the plate and then hands him a long handled frying pan like clay incensor that rattles. Without warning he leans forward and roughly rubs Moctezuma's bloody ears and smears the blood on each of the king's temples. The priest then turns and begins to ascend the temple steps. He enters the temple, closing the curtain behind him. Below, all stand in silence.

In few moments the priest reappears and with considerable spryness for one so old, quickly descends the steps. Two priests then take their position at Moctezuma's elbows, gently supporting him by the arms. The king and the two priests then begin their ascent. Five steps from the top the two priests stop while Moctezuma goes on ahead.

Note:

The god Mixcoatl was the main ancestral male deity of the Toltec and Aztec Mexica peoples. In fact he was thought of as the quintessential leader of the wandering primitive desert peoples of the north and northwest known as the chichimecs, the ancestors of all those who eventually settled the Valleys of Mexico, Puebla and Toluca etc. and who were loosely united by the common language of Nahuatl.

Mixcoatl was the pioneer par excellence. He was the master and teacher of desert survival skills. He taught them how to hunt and trap animals and how to use fire. He invented pulque, the essential drink of desert dwellers made from the sap of the wild maguey cactus. Since he was always at the head of the advance guard, it was he who brought his people into the fertile southern valleys and exposed them to the softer civilizing influences of cities. Thus he was the initiator of great changes, the beginner of new cycles. He was worshipped as the great progenitor, for he impregnated the valley women and brought about a new kind of civilized chichimec man.

From the North he led his people to the South to a new life. This North to South road of ancestors was recognized and deified in the Milky Way with its clouds of stars symbolizing the ancestors. The Aztecs often used the word "coatl" for the