



Susan Mizruchi is the author of *Brando's Smile: His Life, Thought, and Work* (W.W. Norton, 2014) and she wrote this piece on the occasion of what would have been Marlon Brando's 90th Birthday

Brando for Our Times

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Marlon Brando was born ninety years ago today, and though he is best known as an icon of the 1950s—the Biker in *The Wild One*; the New Jersey longshoreman in *On The Waterfront*—and 1970s—the Godfather; the subversive Colonel Kurtz of *Apocalypse Now*—the man behind the image would have been very much at home in 2014. Brando was devoted to innovation: one of the first in Hollywood to own a personal computer, he used his private island in Tahiti to test methods of sustainability, from ocean-farming and discovering new food sources to air-conditioning via seawater technology. An avid reader of popular science, he recognized the democratizing potential of the information age to reach across cultural boundaries. It was Brando, for instance, who insisted that the southern air force pilot he played in *Sayonara* (1957) marry his Japanese lover at the film's end, anticipating that their prospective offspring—“half Japanese, half American, half yellow, half white, half you, half me” – would become commonplace. He was equally ahead of his time in the 1960s when he became the first leading actor to play, in profoundly sympathetic terms, the role of a closeted homosexual military officer in John Huston's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967).

But there was no aspect of our contemporary culture that Brando knew better than the power of the press and the destructive nature of celebrity. Launched into fame unexpectedly at the age of twenty-three by a bravura performance on Broadway as Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1946), Brando was thoroughly familiar with the costs and benefits of stardom. Brando's disdain for the celebrity that transformed his life was motivated by his bohemian tendencies and democratic politics. Like Emiliano Zapata, whom he played in film, Brando believed that the masses were doomed when they projected their own power onto idealized objects of worship. No one was worthy of such idolatry—least of all actors and entertainers.

As was his habit when something interested him, he collected dozens of books on media and censorship for his personal library, which numbered over 4000 volumes. In an interview on the *Today Show* in 1963, Brando lamented that his refusal to share his private life with the “a multimillion dollar industrial complex” of gossip had made him “an enemy of the people.” Still, he never stopped celebrating the exceptionality of America's free press.

Indeed it was Brando's basic faith in American values and principles that led to his outrage when they were violated. This included the threats posed by government surveillance, whose dangers he recognized, from firsthand experience. Brando's vast FBI file extended from the 1940s, when he was helping to raise money for the Zionist Irgun (an offshoot of his performance in Ben Hecht's *A Flag is Born*), through the 1950s and '60s, when he was among the first white actors to be part of the Civil Rights movement (one of the first among white actors to do so). He was an ardent activist for Native American justice from 1963 to the end of his life. His willingness to participate in acts of civil disobedience to publicize Native American grievances and claims made him a target of phone tapping and gained him visits from FBI agents.

Thus, Brando befriended Senator Frank Church, not only because of Church's ongoing participation in hearings on Indian Fishing Rights, but because of his inquiries into the operation and abuses of U.S. intelligence agencies (published in 1975 and 1976 as the "Church Committee Reports"). Noting his long discussions with Church, Brando marveled at how close the United States had come to "having a police state under the control of the FBI." Such insight went into his reading and preparations for his role as the renegade Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a movie portraying the horrors of Vietnam.

Brando's commitment to alleviating injustice and his contempt for celebrity coalesced powerfully in one of the most notorious but misunderstood events of his career: turning down the Academy Award for best actor in his role as "The Godfather." Brando knew the world would be watching the Academy Awards show on March 27, 1973, which was why charges that he should have appeared himself to turn down the award on behalf of Native Americans, missed the point. The replacement of himself—the ultimate Hollywood icon—with an unknown Native American woman was designed to give Native Americans the worldwide audience he had been struggling for over a decade to provide. It also supported his longstanding critique of a profit-driven media and the base cravings it fed. The situation was ideally suited to redress Brando's complaint that people ignored the problems of Native Americans, while feasting on every tidbit they could get about Hollywood stars. If he won the Academy Award, he could force them to listen to what he believed they should hear. "It was important for an American Indian to address the people who sit by and do *nothing* while they're expunged from the earth," Brando later explained, "It was the first time in history that an American Indian ever spoke to 60 million people. It was a tremendous opportunity and I certainly didn't want to usurp that time."

Brando's films will endure for generations to come. What we have begun to learn since his death in 2004 is how much this had to do with the values and aspirations of the man who starred in them.

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