

movie review by W. George Lovell

The Devil's Dream, by Mary Ellen Davis. National Film Board of Canada, 1992. 58 minutes.

Tierra Madre, by Mary Ellen Davis. Productions B'alba, 1996. 54 minutes.

The signing of a peace accord on December 29, 1996, the terms of which are supposed to be "firm and lasting," formally brought to a close thirty-six years of civil war in Guatemala. Armed combat between guerrilla insurgents and government security forces began in the 1960s, lulled somewhat as the hard-hit rebels regrouped in the 1970s, and reached intense levels in the 1980s. By any standards — quite a thing to assert in our age — numerical indicators are chilling: some 150,000 killed, 35,000 to 40,000 "disappeared" (the highest number in all Latin America), 75,000 widowed, 125,000 orphaned, and a million or so people (one in eight of the population when the conflict was at its peak) displaced internally. In meaningful human terms, however, coming to grips with civil war in Guatemala lies beyond the reach of statistics, as does a lucid understanding of the vicious social and economic inequalities that triggered unrest in the first place and that still stalk the lives, and deaths, of most Guatemalans, especially the country's five to six million Maya Indians. Two documentaries by the award-winning Canadian filmmaker Mary Ellen Davis, *The Devil's Dream* (1992) and *Tierra Madre* (1996), allow us not only to contemplate Guatemala's tragic recent past but also to look forward and try to imagine how the country might ever be anything other than its tortured, unresolved self.

Davis is a staunch believer in narrative and so both *The Devil's Dream* and *Tierra Madre* inform the viewer by the trust she places in having the protagonists of her films tell stories. Off-screen voice overs are seldom resorted to, restricted mostly to the questions we hear Davis herself ask quietly while on location. We are made to feel, at all times, part of a conversation between equals, not the dependent voyeurs of one side of a "talking head" interview. As with the ethnographic film work of David and Judith MacDougall — see Nichols (1983; 1991) and Barbash and Taylor (1996) for comparative elaboration — one watches *The Devil's Dream* and *Tierra Madre* without the sense of intrusion that often pervades other less skilfully constructed documentary efforts. Like the MacDougalls, Davis takes care not to rush her subjects but instead lets them present us with information in a layered, cumulative fashion, demanding that the viewer, like her and her crew in the field, be patient, alert, and discerning, above all else disposed to mull things over before reaching a conclusion. The viewer, in short, is challenged to think, not remain passive and inert as words, sounds, and images are articulated and screened.

The Devil's Dream is the more artfully structured of the two films, operating on two very different but powerfully connected narrative levels. At one level, Davis utilizes footage of the Dance of the Twenty-Four Devils, a popular drama enacted on the streets of the short-lived colonial capital of Ciudad Vieja, to create a vast, symbolic allegory: having declared war on humanity, the Devils form a pact with

Death and seek to capture human souls with the avowed goal of bringing to an end the human species. As the Dance of Death unfolds — jangly folkloric music accompanies campy theatrical performances — the iniquities of everyday life in Guatemala are interspersed in a series of grounded, self-contained vignettes: the assassination of José María Ixcayá, once an active member of an Indian rights association; the migration of entire Indian families from their homes in the mountains down to lowland plantations, where they work in the scorching heat for starvation wages; the concern of Indian mothers that the children they bring into the world, destined to be inadequately fed and thus prone to constant sickness, will not survive infancy; and the massacre of Indian residents in Santiago Atitlán by government soldiers who were stationed there. Almost everywhere Davis looks, she observes a military presence: parading from the presidential balcony, grim-faced and sun-glassed, dressed in camouflage or cloaked in medals; overseeing with macho pride the Miss Guatemala beauty pageant; patrolling a fairground, guns at the ready, during a village fiesta; and blocking roads so that a demonstration planned by striking workers will at least be disrupted, if not abandoned altogether.

A fragment of conversation in *The Devil's Dream* furnishes Davis with the subject matter she pursues at length in *Tierra Madre*, namely native views of the relationship in Guatemala between land and life, especially how Maya values in this regard are at odds with non-Maya ones. At one juncture in *The Devil's Dream*, Rosalina Tuyuc, among the Indian women in Guatemala most responsible for the emergence of the widows' rights group CONAVIGUA, puts it succinctly thus: "Without land," she says, "there is no life." This point of view, and the deeply rooted beliefs that anchor it, are developed in *Tierra Madre* by a number of individuals, among them a Maya Catholic priest, the Reverend Darío Caal Xí, and a Ladino lawyer, Fredy Ochaeta. We listen to Caal speak as the keen eye of Guillermo Escalón, Davis's cameraman for both films, pans the landscape and catches on celluloid bits and pieces of Guatemala's haunting beauty:

The earth is our mother. She gives life to humanity. The land belongs to God. It belongs to the people. We don't view the land as private property. We understand land as a divinity and as a mother. The earth divinity — *tierra madre, madre tierra* — is also bonded to humankind. The land nourishes humanity. The land allows us to live, to survive.

Caal, a Q'eqchi Maya, stresses the spiritual, collective dimension of land-life relations in Indian Guatemala. the perception of land as community, not as commodity, ties people living off the land together, linking them back to their ancestors' past and forward to their offspring's future. It is a relationship that, because it cherishes land as having a non-material, non-alienable essence, conflicts with the fundamental tenets of Western, Liberal ideology upon which an export-oriented "coffee republic" was first established in Guatemala in the nineteenth century and upon which the country has been exploited and run, at the expense of many for the benefit of a few, ever since. Ochaeta elaborates:

Our authorities have never asked themselves what it really means for native people to live and work in a community. Instead, they insist on imposing programs, studies, and so-called "agrarian laws" based on the individual, not on the community. The notion of private property does not figure in native people's thought, in

their view of the world. They see, instead, a bond between the earth and mankind.

While it is the relationship between native land and native life that receives priority attention in *Tierra Madre*, Davis is careful also to focus on the plight of poor Ladinos, people of mixed Indian, European, and African ancestry who make up, roughly, the other half of Guatemala's national population. Many Ladino families in rural areas have to contend with the same deplorable living conditions as their Maya counterparts, often with the added psychological burden of not having as strong a sense of community and identity to sustain them. As we endeavour to listen to native voices, Davis poignantly reminds us not to forget about decent, humble, Ladino ones as well.

She does this by reconstructing the events and circumstances surrounding what happened in the settlement of Las Dos Erres, the Two Rs, on December 7, 1982. Located in the tropical rainforests of the Petén, Las Dos Erres is inhabited by impoverished Ladinos who moved there years ago from other parts of Guatemala in search of a better life, clearing land and building new homes in what was then remote, pioneer terrain. In the early 1980s, however, Las Dos Erres found itself caught up in the civil war by having to send male members of its population to serve in a civil-defence patrol organized by the army in a neighbouring settlement some distance away. At first Las Dos Erres complied with army directives, but later refused to participate, arguing that if guerrilla forces were operating in the vicinity, then its male members were best to remain near their families and their fields in order to protect them from a possible attack. This line of reasoning did not please the army, who accused the people of Las Dos Erres of sympathizing with enemy forces, indeed of actually being guerrillas. Hundreds of men, women, and children lost their lives in a bloody massacre. As we watch the remains of some victims, years later, be recovered from the depths of a well, Davis asks a survivor who he thinks was responsible. "It's clear," he says in a hushed voice. "The army."

Towards the end of *Tierra Madre* we hear one of its protagonists declare that "peace is not a magic word." There is certainly nothing magic about the peace that has finally come to Guatemala. If it is to have any future, then the land issues that are at the heart of the country's woes will one day have to be dealt with seriously. This means not only listening to but also responding to native points of view, bearing in mind that poor Ladinos, too, have concerns that need to be heard and addressed. Anyone familiar with Guatemalan politics knows how mammoth a task this is. There are, at present, some encouraging signs, but the cause of human good, as the films of Mary Ellen Davis vividly attest, confronts obstacles dead set against it, at every turn, in the land of the devil.

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Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Barbash, Ilisa and Lucien Taylor (1996). "Reframing Ethnographic Film: A
Conversation with David and Judith MacDougall," *American Anthropologist*
98 (2): 371-87.

Film Availability:

Information concerning the availability of *The Devil's Dream* and *Tierra Madre*,
in celluloid or video format, with either English or French or Spanish subtitles, may
be obtained by contacting: Productions B'alba, 5727 Waverly, Montreal, Quebec,
H2T 2Y2, Canada; Telefax: (514) 270-7983.