

The New York Times

Copyright © 1998 The New York Times

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 1998

\$1 beyond the greater New York metrop

FILM REVIEW

Examining Mexico's Zapatista Uprising

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Sorting through the political and social mess portrayed in Nettie Wild's clear-eyed documentary film "A Place Called Chiapas" is not easy. Nor do there seem to be any simple solutions to the simmering conflict examined by the film between disenfranchised Mayan Indians in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas and the ruling Government against which they have been waging a fitful guerrilla rebellion.

The movie, which opens today at Film Forum, was completed in eight months between June 1996 and February 1997. It takes us inside the Zapatista movement by indigenous Indians who are at the bottom of the Mexican social order. The demands of these desperately impoverished people include health care, education and control over their land.

Led by a charismatic, pipe-smoking intellectual known as Subcommander Marcos, the movement has always had a surreal quality. Marcos, who appears briefly in the film, talks in poetic metaphors and issues cryptic statements on the Internet. A well-educated mestizo (a person of mixed Spanish and Indian blood) he has dedicated himself to the Zapatista cause for 12 years.

Marcos and his freedom fighters have a flair for the dramatic. They take their name from Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican revolutionary who rode victoriously into Mexico City in 1914 with a peasant army but was tricked and assassinated by the Government five years later. Like their forerunners, the Zapatistas conceal



Film Forum

Subcommander Marcos in the documentary "A Place Called Chiapas."

their faces, swathing them in bandanas or black ski masks that cover everything but their eyes. Marcos is a shrewd manipulator of the media. When he calls for a convocation of journalists and observers, an international throng shows up for a gathering the filmmaker calls a "post-glasnost revolutionary Woodstock."

The history covered by the film begins on Jan. 1, 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect. The peasant rebels, protesting an imminent influx of cheap corn from the United States that would undermine their meager livelihood as corn farmers, took over 4 towns and 500 ranches in southern Mexico. The Government sent in troops, and at least 145 people died in the ensuing battle.

Since then, an uneasy cease-fire has prevailed, as the two sides have attempted to negotiate an elusive peace agreement. At the center of

the negotiations is Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, whom the Mayans call "grandfather" but whom the landowners who were dispossessed by the Zapatista rebellion view with deep suspicion.

With most of the ranches still in the hands of the Zapatistas, the area has been surrounded by the Mexican Army. At the same time, paramilitary troops who call themselves the Peace and Justice Party have aligned themselves with the Government (which denies their existence) and terrorized the Indians, driving 2,000 of them from their villages. Ms. Wild and her film crew accompany a group of peasants back to their village, where they face angry troops who accuse them of violence and (off camera) threaten to kill the Mexican members of the crew.

What is to be done? The filmmakers clearly sympathize with the Zapatistas, but they have no answers.

Zapatista Realidad

STUART KLAWANS

A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS

You've seen the images before: rows of poor Latin American villagers, bent over their candles at a nighttime vigil. You expect to see furrowed hands stretch toward a crucifix, touching feet carved and painted in an agony as roughly expressive as their own. You can even predict the voiceover.

The speaker will be Anglo, female, well educated. Recalling an instructive episode from the Spanish conquest, she will carefully modulate her tone, first hinting at suppressed anger on behalf of the Indians, then at a righteous compassion.

You decide it's business as usual in the anthropology department, division of bring-'em-back-alive. But then, amid the jungle images, a Web page pops up. Click-and-zoom graphics cascade over the screen; the soundtrack gears into wah-wah mode. Suddenly, you're confronting electronic artifacts generated by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN): the first movement of a rural peasantry to conduct a campaign on the Internet. From this point on, there is no business as usual in Nettie Wild's amazing documentary, *A Place Called Chiapas* (on view in New York at Film Forum until November 17). Whatever you encounter here of beauty, surprise, irony, sorrow or excruciating tension—and the film is full of these qualities—you will get it in a form as slick as the Zapatistas' own communiqués.

As Wild cleverly recalls through archival footage, the original Zapatistas were no strangers to modern image-making. There, with his sombrero and gunbelts, is Emiliano Zapata himself, riding along at the start of this century in black and white. The present-day Zapatistas prove to be equally familiar with the camera. "Give me 20 pesos for taking my picture," demands a peasant woman at the roadside, as Wild's crew drives past. "And another 20 pesos for my daughter's picture, and another 20 for my son's."

That's what you get when you go to a media event held in Reality (or, as the locals say, the village of La Realidad), where in summer 1996 the Zapatistas convened an international gathering. Wild's crew takes pictures of the journalists taking pictures of the Zapatista leaders, who have staged a photo opportunity by riding into the gathering on horseback. When not clicking away, visitors to this campground may buy souvenirs: keychains with photos of the Zapatistas, dolls of Commander Ramona and Subcommander Marcos, T-shirts with the EZLN logo.

Smile if you can—because all the publicity in the world won't disguise Reality. The purpose of this gathering, Wild explains in voiceover, was to provide a measure of security for the Zapatistas, who were engaged in faltering negotiations with the Mexican government. Hopelessly outgunned, unable (and perhaps unwilling) to rely on armed assaults as their principal tool, the Zapatistas could survive only if they overcame their physical isolation; and so, to exist as a popular movement, they had to function simultaneously as a media show, maintaining the attention of people around the world. Wild's achievement in *A Place Called Chiapas* is to document both the success of this strategy and its limits—the shortcomings being evident when the Zapatistas fail to protect their sympathizers, or even negotiate on their behalf.

We're able to follow that latter half of the story because Wild pulled off a feat of bilocation rare in field documentaries, splitting her crew in two. While continuing to cover the gathering in La Realidad and the peace talks, she also ventured into the north of Chiapas, where a government-allied paramilitary force calling itself Peace and Justice had driven some 3,000 villagers out of their homes and into the jungle. We see a two-man delegation from the refugees venture south to consult the Zapatista commanders, who essentially tell them to sit tight. Later, when the refugees can sit no longer, we accompany them back to their village, an episode that climaxes in a paramilitary attack.

It's no small inconvenience to be set upon by goons while trying to shoot a picture. Even so, Wild and her associates have put together a movie whose technical polish would be the envy of most Hollywood producers (among the principals: cinematographer Kirk Tougas, production manager Betsy Carson, editor and co-writer Manfred Becker, camera assistant Robin Lupita Bain, sound recordist Jesús Sánchez Padilla and sound designer Velcrow Rip-

per, whose work lives up to his name). These people know exactly when to take time out for an immaculate shot of a butterfly landing on a leaf in the jungle; or a close-up of a fire-eater, performing amid traffic in Mexico City; or a montage of soldiers passing in review on Independence Day, their heads snapping upward again and again and again. These filmmakers know when to add a voiceover commentary, as they do on the occasion of Commander Ramona's rally in Mexico City's central plaza. (You see a tiny, impoverished woman in a red dress and black ski mask, her body weakened by cancer. Standing at the microphone, she struggles syllable by syllable to recite a speech translated for her into the foreign language of Spanish. Wild's comment: The Zapatistas chose to present a brutally honest self-portrait.) And the filmmakers know when to let their material speak for itself.

When the peace talks broke down, Wild captured an exchange between her fellow journalists and the Zapatistas' famously clever spokesman, Subcommander Marcos. Asked on camera what would happen next, he snapped, "I have no fucking idea. Excuse me for using the word 'idea.'" A tantalizing glimpse of a real mind at work. But Wild herself was not able to secure an interview—not until the evening when Marcos rode in out of nowhere (she says) and told her she could start filming.

A portion of this interview comes at the end of *A Place Called Chiapas*—right where you'd expect to find a culminating statement. Having secured this footage, Wild had the good sense to present it without fuss. You hear her, off-camera, ask Marcos why he came to Chiapas. Then, very simply, you see him puff on his celebrated pipe and roll out an answer several paragraphs long. I will not attempt to summarize his response. It's enough to say that the subject of his speech is not political ideology but the presence of death—a death unlike the grand abstraction it had been for him in Mexico City. After he'd spent a few years in Chiapas, he says, he found that death began to shrink because of its daily matter-of-factness. Now it's like someone he sits with at the dinner table.

Always alert to images, Marcos chose the Day of the Dead to appear before the camera and make this speech, as if it were a position statement. In a closing title, Wild adds a statement of her own. In December 1997, she records, the Peace and Justice paramilitaries murdered forty-five people in that village she'd documented in the north: ten men, twenty-one women, fourteen children. We're still in Reality.

NOVEMBER 22, 1998 Jefferson's Family • Patricia J. Williams 52.75 US/\$7.75 CANADA

The Nation.

the village VOICE FREE

A Place Called Chiapas

Directed by Nettie Wild

Has there ever been a more media-friendly revolution than the Zapatista uprising? Nettie Wild's Chiapas journal contains shots of rebel Web sites—launched soon after the guerrillas' spectacular 1994 New Year's Day revolt—and captures a droll *Marie Claire* photo shoot, in which the gun-toting philosopher-subcomandante Marcos poses against the southern Mexico hills.

Paramilitary

thugs threaten to kill Wild's crew—but off-camera. Marcos refuses an interview with the cryptic words "She knows why."

As it turns out, though, Wild's film coalesces around the unseen. Far from the media crush, she joins a lonely jungle trek of indigenous villagers determined to reclaim their homes from the paramilitary; arriving at their village, the group is attacked—as soon as Wild turns her camera off.

This memorable, frightening episode—blank moments above all—drives home how much remains out of view, even in "the first postmodern revolution." Eventually, the pipe-smoking cult of personality does sit for a session of jungle existentialism, but it's to Wild's great credit that by then the villagers' struggle—the human dimension behind the war of symbols—seems just as absorbing.

—ANDREW HSIAO

Time Out New York

Critics' picks

A Place Called Chiapas

(Film Forum) Canadian filmmaker Nettie Wild examines Mexico's Zapatista rebellion in a fascinating documentary.

Time Out New York

November 5–12, 1998

A Place Called Chiapas

Dir. Nettie Wild. 1998. N/R. 90mins. Documentary.

Poor Mexico—so far from God, so close to the United States." It's an oft-quoted aphorism south of the border, and one that seemed more relevant than ever when, in response to the passage of NAFTA, the Zapatista National Liberation Army seized five villages and 500 ranches in the state of Chiapas on January 1, 1994. The Zapatistas claimed that the treaty was "a death sentence for the Indian peoples of Mexico." And as Canadian filmmaker Nettie Wild reveals in her fascinating documentary, a flood of cheap U.S. corn did indeed arrive in NAFTA's wake, stripping 1.6 million campesinos of their livelihood. *Chiapas* examines the uprising and uses the event to show how the Internet and the global media can help the disenfranchised perform an end run around a repressive system.

Led by the charismatic and mysterious Subcomandante Marcos, who uses the Web to issue manifestos, the Zapatistas have spent much of the past four-plus

years in a state of cease-fire with the Mexican army, a situation that is convincingly presented as evidence of their good intentions. "This wasn't about spilling blood or seizing power—it was about wishing to be heard," says Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, who has served as an intermediary between the Zapatistas and the government. But while Zapatista sympathizers are shown as the victims of brutal persecution by paramilitary groups, Wild readily offers opposing views. One of the most fascinating moments is an interview with a bourgeois family who lost their farm to the Zapatistas and consider themselves victims of Marcos's formidable PR skills.

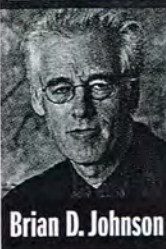
Early on, Wild tells us that *The New York Times* has described the Zapatista uprising as "the first postmodern revolution," a claim that's colorfully illustrated with footage of a Zapatista gathering organized for the media and sympathizers: An all-Zapatista band in ski masks plays for those assembled while Super Barrio—a real-life "superhero" who serves as a spokesman for Mexico's poor—works the crowd. As Marcos himself says of Chiapas, "I've been here 12 years, and I'm barely starting to understand." (Now playing; see Index for venues.)—*Andrew Johnston*



Masked men and disco kings

Documentaries cover rebels, writers and DJs

FILM



Brian D. Johnson

One film tracks down a guerrilla leader in the Mexican jungle. Another looks up a literary legend in the Moroccan desert. A third follows celebrity disc jockeys in dance clubs around the world. *A Place Called Chiapas*, *Let It Come Down: The*

Life of Paul Bowles and *Hang the DJ* are three adventurous Canadian documentaries premiering at this week's Toronto International Film Festival (Sept. 10 to 19). And though radically different in subject and style, each attempts a kind of seductive anthropology, exploring unknown terrain with an inquisitive eye and a partisan devotion.

A Place Called Chiapas (airing Sept. 22 at 8 p.m. on CBC) is Vancouver film-maker Nettie Wild's third foray to the front lines of revolution. After *A Rustling of Leaves* (1990), which took her into the bush with Philippine guerrillas, and *Blockade* (1993), which documented the fight for native land rights in British Columbia, her new film goes behind the scenes of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico. Wild, 46, says it was her hardest, most hazardous shoot so far. Mexican crew members received death threats from paramilitary vigilantes. And a key character in her story, the Zapatista military leader known only as Subcommandante Marcos, proved maddeningly elusive.

Wild shows up in Chiapas with her camera in 1996, in the middle of a nervous ceasefire. It has been three years since the indigenous Zapatista uprising took over five towns and 500 ranches, prompting the government to encircle the area with 30,000 troops. And in this "country of borders within borders," narrates Wild, there is "a hidden war." Much of the film focuses on a group of refugees afraid to go home—

some of the 2,000 peasants who have been driven from their villages by a paramilitary group supporting the government and the landowners. And when Wild's own crew was threatened, she told *Maclean's*, "that's when we realized we were making a film about fear."

It unfolds as the story of a stalemate, which poses a problem—much of the drama seems to be waiting in the wings, off-camera. But, as Wild points out, "you can't be sitting in a village where people's lives are on the line, looking at your watch and saying 'Could the revolution please hop to it, I've got a production schedule.'"

Marcos remains an enigma. Unlike most of his followers, he is not a Mayan peasant from Chiapas. He is a pipe-smoking intellectual who tells stories and spouts poetry, a masked figure on horseback who appears unannounced out of the jungle. Zapatista as Zorro. Striking poses for a French fashion magazine, and commanding his own Web site, he is the media-savvy leader of what *The New York Times* called "the world's first postmodern revolution." But after Wild throws him a tough question at a news conference, Marcos gives her the cold shoulder. When he finally does show up for an interview, materializing like a shadow in the night on Mexico's Day of the Dead, he keeps a coy distance. "How long have you been in Chiapas?" he asks Wild. "Eight months," she says. Replies Marcos: "I've been here 12 years and I'm barely starting to understand."



THE VANCOUVER SUN

Beautifully balanced look at Mexico's Chiapas rebels

A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS

A documentary by Nettie Wild.
Parental Guidance. ★★★★★

PETER BIRNIE
VANCOUVER SUN

The floodwaters now ravaging Chiapas in southern Mexico will recede and a million people will return to rebuild their homes. But they're likely to find that an outpouring of aid from Mexico City comes with some strings attached.

In Mexico, where Christmas a couple of years ago prompted the utterance "merry crisis and a happy new peso," a battle for the hearts and minds of the people of Chiapas that bordered on military confrontation between the government and Zapatista rebels may now be settled by a sudden flood of aid. As Nettie Wild discovered in eight months of filming *A Place Called Chiapas*, modern warfare is often a low-level conflict involving bribery, threats and the electronic propaganda dispenser known as the Internet.

A Place Called Chiapas is well worth seeing in its one-week run on the big screen (it also airs next Tuesday at 8 p.m. on CBC-TV). As Wild tries to sort through the tangle of issues and opinions sprouting on all sides, she and cinematographer Kirk Tougas capture

some striking images of the struggle.

There are poetic scenes in the misty mountains and aggressive ones shot at a military parade in Mexico City's central square, or *zocalo*. The camera captures a bizarre exchange between rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos and giggling girls in search of an autograph, and it sits in on the sad remnants of a ranch family brought down by a rebel seizure of farmland.

Most striking of all is a clearly dangerous trip with villagers back to the homes they abandoned — as Wild reveals in a voiceover, they were attacked as soon as the camera was switched off. Much of *A Place Called Chiapas* is filled with such tension.

Velcrow Ripper's sound design, with assistance from Mexico's Jesús Sánchez Padilla, complements the images so beautifully that this is the rare sort of documentary that also stands as a work of filmic art. Best of all, its tendency toward a sympathetic portrayal of the leftists is tempered by a balanced realization that even the mighty, media-savvy Marcos has his flaws.

As Wild notes at one point, his favourite book is *Don Quixote*, about a man "who can't distinguish reality from what's inside his head."

At the Fifth Avenue Cinemas.

FRIDAY

11

• Continued from page 67

swer to Taxi Driver. Fresh out of jail and trying to live in the mind-numbing northern city of Lille, the butcher explodes and leaves his pregnant, emasculating girlfriend and her shrewish mother. With three bullets and a gun he returns to Paris, where his alienation, frustration and resentment steep in a pot that can only blow. What's remarkable is the believability of the portrait and the sympathy we feel for this humiliated tradesman whose rant of a monologue also serves to illuminate a whole social phenomenon.

— PE

SATURDAY

12

A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS

D: Netty Wild. Canada. PC. 90 mins. Saturday, September 12, noon VARSITY; Sunday, September 13, 10 am CUMBERLAND Rating: **NNNN**

When it first claimed worldwide attention, the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico's Chiapas state offered one of the last unblemished images of revolution. Here was a righteous uprising, led by a smart, uncompromising, masked leader known to most only by his pipe and

his Internet site. Wild (A Rustling Of Leaves: Inside The Philippine Revolution) follows the EZLN and its leader, subcomandante Marcos, over eight months as they engage in small- and large-scale struggles with the Mexican army and government. She films from the trenches of this communications war, but takes time to lay out the context for the conflict. As importantly, Wild locates her own position as a First World comrade/observer, and underlines Canada's complicity in the NAFTA-bred new Mexico. First-rate, engaged filmmaking.

— CB

PING PONG BATH STATION

D: Gen Yamakawa w/ Keiko Matsuzaka, Riho Makise. Japan. NBOJ. 110 mins. Saturday, September 12, 12:30 pm UPTOWN; Friday, September 18, 6:30 pm UPTOWN Rating: **NNN**

Created by some of the same folks who were behind last year's international hit Shall We Dance?, this formulaic film might be called Shall We Play Ping Pong? Sonoko is a middle-aged housewife who takes the advice of a callous young radio host and leaves her unappreciative family, only to find herself at the same hot-springs resort she visited 20 years earlier with her husband. There she meets some odd characters, and succeeds in reviving the townspeople's interest in ping pong, a game that soon becomes a symbol for marital longevity and commitment. Despite some odd shifts in

tone and focus, the film has a sentimental Mother's Day message — we love our hardworking moms even if we don't know how to show it. Cloying yet hard to resist.

— GS

TOUCH OF EVIL

D: Orson Welles w/ Welles, Charlton Heston, Janet Leigh, Akim Tamiroff. US. SPEC. 113 mins. Saturday, September 12, 3:30 pm UPTOWN Rating: **NNNN**



This is a version slightly recut to match up with an extensive memo Welles filed with Universal when they started recutting the film after unsatisfactory previews. The single most important change removes the credits from the opening crane shot, a 3-minute, 25-second extravaganza that is spiritual father to the recent jaw-droppers that DePalma has taken to putting in his films. The editing is a little more coherent and some scenes work slightly better in the new version, but it remains a grandly extravagant exclamation point to the rococo excesses of late film noir. It's hard to find any film that can match its berserk bit-part casting — an uncredited Joseph Cotten cameo, Marlene Dietrich as a black-haired fortune teller, Dennis Weaver, eyes bugging at the thought of Janet Leigh in a motel room, Mercedes McCambridge as a biker chick — or any film that so deftly uses this much dark visual grandeur to cover its large narrative holes.

• Continued on next page



A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS

Subcomandante Marcos leads Zapatista revolutionaries.