

## **Días De Santiago: A Look into the Chaotic World of Mental Anguish, Violence, and Corrupted Youth**

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*Días de Santiago*. (2004). Dir.: Josué Méndez. 81 minutes

The 2004 Peruvian film, *Días de Santiago* displays the narrative of a young man battling with post-traumatic stress disorder induced by years of serving in the Peruvian military during the Conflicto de Cenepa. Displaced and struggling to reenter urban society in Lima, Peru, the protagonist Santiago rapidly falls down a path of violence and destruction while managing to meet other symbolic representations of Lima youth during his mental destruction. Director Josué Méndez establishes a film that is embedded with multiple critiques of Peruvian society that include views on gender roles, corruption, and mental health issues that overall captures the collective theme of isolated youth in Lima. Through Méndez's intricate storytelling techniques that parallel Santiago's increasingly disturbed state of mind, he incorporates the use of continuity cuts, subjective camera, and the 180 degree rule to project a thrilling story of a life without control. The collaboration of director Josué Méndez and cinematographer Juan Durán allows for standard cinematography techniques to be rendered in creative ways that align with Santiago's perspective and overall story. The use of subjective camera angles in the film allows the audience into Santiago's point of view to fully capture his thoughts, actions, and physical surroundings. Subjective camera entails incorporating the camera in a way that showcases a character's perspective. The fluctuation of where the camera is facing, whether it is focused high, low, close, or far parallel the certain character in focus's point of view. While Santiago is depicted as the main character throughout *Días de Santiago*, the camera often mirrors where and what Santiago is viewing. Additionally, when the subjective camera is actively showing the audience

what Santiago is looking at, the camera generally contrasts an object or person in his focus against a busy background or vast landscape, adhering to the film's original notion of isolation specifically in youth. This contrast that is enhanced by the subjective camera use provokes images of loneliness and feelings of isolation through the lens of Santiago.

Another cinematography technique that Juan Durán instills within *Días de Santiago* is the 180 degree rule. Durán highlights his mastery of this skill during the many scenes that are shot when Santiago is having a conversation with others which is known as a two shot scene. The 180 degree rule is essential when shooting in order to keep consistency of perspective within the frame. During the 180 degree rule, the camera positions itself to not cross an invisible line. If the camera did happen to cross that line, the result would eventually disorient the audience and create a sense of confusion about the characters' perspective. Throughout the many two shot scenes within the film where Santiago is engaging with another character, the cinematographer is consistent with this rule even during fast pace scenes. Continuity cuts are also useful to the flow and narrative of the film. Continuity cuts are described as cuts that create a fluid and seamless transitional narrative. The original term "cuts" is an editing technique that combines two shots together. The incorporation of continuity cuts in *Días de Santiago* projects a story that is fluid and easy to watch, yet it also allows for the manipulation of pace and reality as well. With the narrative moving along in an established fluid motion where one scene directly follows the next action, the director is then able to speed up the pace of the movie little by little without completely confusing the audience or hindering the narrative. The flow of *Días de Santiago* moves at a day by day time frame, yet the pace increasingly becomes more hectic and fast which induces feelings of anxiety within the audience. Because continuity cuts manage to set the visual flow of scenes at a consistent pace, the director then manipulates the audience and rapidly increases the actions during the scenes which provokes underlying feelings of

anxiety that are embedded in the film as it progresses. With the use of continuity cuts, the director is also able to perplex the audience and provoke them to question what is reality from Santiago's perspective and what is not. Since the overall flow between cuts operates in a continuous sequence, the element of psychosis that is added near the end of the film works to juxtapose reality and Santiago's paranoia. The audience is introduced to a narrative that includes continuity cuts which establish a thorough consecutive movement of plot, then as Santiago begins to project more signs of paranoia and outbursts in public, they are left to question what is real and what is not. If the film had been established with a surplus of jump cuts or a different style of moving the narrative along, the audience would have predisposed ideas regarding the chances of the suspension of reality but since there is nothing unusual to the flow of the film the audience is left to wonder what is going on near the climax of the film. Even though Santiago's actions are all real, they are projected in a way that leaves the audience to interpret what they believe is happening in reality or what is a result of Santiago's eventual psychosis. The layering of all these cinematic elements including subjective camera, the 180 degree rule, and the use subjective camera all allow for the film to succeed visually and technically.

To further project the instability that Santiago's mind possesses, director Josué Méndez also implements the use of black and white in every frame from Santiago's perspective. Whenever there is a shot from the viewpoint of Santiago, the usual color that is in the film jumps to cuts in black and white. The notion of the black and white perspective stylishly and strategically represent Santiago's militaristic way of thinking that he is trapped in while also displaying his worsening disconnect with reality. The black and white shots constantly remind the audience that the way in which Santiago views the world now after war is distinctly different than the way others do. Méndez isolates this idea by juxtaposing the reality we know in color to Santiago's life and mind which lacks control through the medium of color.

The underlying theme focusing on youth in Lima, Peru throughout *Días de Santiago* alludes to a connection among the characters regarding the symbolic representation of isolated and lost youth. This notion is executed throughout the film by the character Santiago himself and the various people he knows or encounters. The audience is first introduced to Santiago's immediate family. The film purposely inserts his brother, his brother's girlfriend, and Santiago's little sister as representations of youth operating at different stages in life. Director José Méndez chooses to focus on those certain members of his families to have the most interactions with Santiago in order to subtly highlight their symbolic importance. Throughout the film, Santiago's mother and father do have scenes with Santiago but are not as relevant as the scenes he shares with his siblings and his brother's girlfriend. His brother acts as an abuser verbally and physically towards his girlfriend while his girlfriend is desperate to flee this relationship and eventually tries to use Santiago as her way out. Multiple times throughout the film they are seen fighting and arguing seeming to always be in conflict with one another. The brother's girlfriend is also conveyed in the film as manipulating and attracted to high risk situations. Both her and Santiago's brother portray an image of Lima's youth as troubled and doomed for the future. Santiago's younger sister also is portrayed as a victim of rape and harassment by her own father throughout the film. This disturbing finding during the climax of the film serves to contrast her identity by being the youngest of the family, to experiencing possibly the worst abuse in the entire film. The erratic and abusive behavior that Santiago's brother, his girlfriend and Santiago's younger sister are subject to constantly foreshadows that trouble is ahead. Their purpose is intended to parallel their impending sense of doom with Lima's troubled future. The next notion of youth that the audience experiences is Santiago himself and his former military friends. The bond that he and his friends share is the inability to adjust back into civil society after becoming accustomed to the lifestyle of war. The traumatic experiences they faced and the horrors they committed changes their

overall psyche. One of the first few scenes of the film during the first Act entails one of Santiago's closest disabled friend from the military who chooses to hang himself. This collective group of young men is shown clearly struggling to adjust back to life after their time in the military. Santiago's friends try to persuade him to join them in a bank robbery as their solution for not being able to find adequate jobs upon the arrival back from the military. Santiago can't agree to an event of such that induces such high feelings of stress as the military did. Yet, his friends view this type of nature as all they know now. Santiago's friends eventually fail and are identified for the bank robbery, which alludes to desperate and failed population of young men who served to fight at the Peruvian borders. The theme of war is inherently masculine, which makes the group of Santiago and his friends a representation of male youth in Lima. With the notion of war just used as a masculine metaphor, the film depicts the state of young men in Lima, Peru as symbolically struggling to find purpose and control. Juxtaposing the group of young males in this film, the director includes a group of young women. Contrary to the young group of Santiago and his friends, the girls operate in the urban city while the males are shot by the beach or in vast landscapes of Peru. The film incorporates the group of girls as a way to insert comments on gender roles within Lima. The depiction of young women in the city is portrayed as progressive and takes on a reversal of normal gender roles and dynamics. The girls that Santiago meets during his taxi driving treat Santiago as an object. Traditionally, men impose objectification on women. The girls are sexually liberated as well and feel free to drink alcohol and abuse drugs as they please. However, their carefree attitude and pleasure seeking lifestyle does not bring forth feelings of happiness and stability throughout the film, but rather provoke feelings of disconnect and lack of control. The group of girls are inserted to also add the disconnected and lost image of youth within Lima society. *Días de Santiago* exists within the realm of Third Cinema due to its symbolic analysis of Lima's corrupted youth and the lifelong repercussions that war inflicts on the human psyche. Third

cinema serves as an objection to the typical Hollywood model for filmmaking and uses film as a vessel to express critiques with societal and political issues. The social climate of Lima, Peru in this film acts as the perfect backdrop for a Third Cinema film. By using this style of cinema, the director is able to achieve a layered film in which many problems regarding society are symbolically and directly addressed. The two scenes that are filled with underlying analysis of the effects of living with post-traumatic stress disorder after war in *Días de Santiago* are the bar scene and the climax scene leading up to the end of the film. The bar scene takes place in the club that the group of girls that Santiago drives like to attend. While there, Santiago finally musters up the confidence to dance on the dancefloor. While he is dancing, he is depicted walking up to a girl and asking her to dance. This scene is narrated by Santiago's inner monologue giving step by step instruction on how to talk to the girl. The scene then, begins to loop and the audience realizes that Santiago is not actually proceeding with these thoughts, but is just making lists over and over in his head of how to talk to her. The line of thinking that Santiago expresses during this scene mirrors a military mindset where everything is executed in a specific list. The looping of the scenes inflicts an uncomfortable feeling of being stuck in a situation. Here in this scene, we are able to witness the lingering effects that the military still inflicts on Santiago's mind and can examine that the way Santiago thinks is not normal. This line of thinking introduces us to the notion of how excruciating it must be to be in such a state of mind as Santiago is where he is constantly making lists and creating steps for every action which later become more prevalent as he becomes more and more unhinged and eventually ends up in a psychotic state. Overall, this scene is the foundation for the deep look into Santiago's state of mind which allows the audience to understand the social element of understanding someone living with the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The final prevalent scene throughout the film is the climax of Santiago's violent and chaotic psychotic state. During one of the last few scenes of the film, Santiago threatens to shoot his brother,

then points his gun at his father once it is insinuated that the father has just raped his daughter. The director uses the climax of this scene to overwhelm the audience with violence and chaos to parallel the corrupted society in Lima. If Santiago symbolically represents Peru as a whole and the people around him represent corrupted and lost populations of youth in Lima, he is literally surrounded in this scene by overwhelming trouble. The image of Santiago being surrounded by corruption and not being able to outweigh who to shoot while being in distress himself allude to the overall notion of hopelessness and impending doom for the society of Lima. His ability to not decide who to shoot also parallels the inability to fix societal social issues within the Peru. Most of the characters are young in this film to portray the layers of trouble that Lima will continue to face even in the future. *Días de Santiago* uncovers the societal problems of Lima that exist through the lens of Santiago, who is dealing with his own mental problems. Nathan Lee of the *New York Times* writes about this notion in the film by stating, “Written and directed by Josue Mendez, ‘Dias de Santiago’ his first film, zeros in on the disconnect between Santiago’s sense of entitlement and the unforgiving realities of life in contemporary Lima” (Lee,1). The film contextualizes the society of Lima by using the character of Santiago as vessel to communicate this as well as highlight his own personal issues. The societal issues surrounding Lima, also directly correlate with the use of military. Discussing how the effects of military violence in Peru has bled into their society, Eduardo Gonzalez-Cueva author of “Conscription and Violence in Peru” states, “All these situations of daily inequality and abuse revolve around the institution of compulsory military service, which-in its original liberal formulation-is ideally an experience of republican equality” (Cueva, 89). Asserting the connection to societal inequality and violence to the Peruvian military, we can see the inverse relationship that is displayed throughout the film of Santiago’s violent past in the military, his current violent mental state, and the violent nature of his surrounding society. Through skilled camera work and writing, director Josué Méndez creates a

thrilling symbolic critique of life in Lima through the lens of war torn Santiago. *Días de Santiago* offers a nuanced look into the aftermath of war in an individual and their mental anguish along with deterioration of a corrupted youth population, which makes coming back from war closer to go to hell than returning home.

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