



Días de Santiago
Dir. Josué Méndez
Perú, 2004. 83 min

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The Editing Approach
A Lens into the Influence of the Military
in Josué Méndez's *Días de Santiago*

In Josué Méndez's 2004 film *Días de Santiago*, he presents the spectator with a protagonist who is emotionally and psychologically consumed with a militaristic mentality. Santiago, a veteran from the Peruvian Cenepa Conflict with Ecuador in 1995, enters back into civilian life as a shadow and a mere shell of who he once was. Even though he is free from his soldier obligations, his mind is still filled with military strategies and codes of behavior. From his desire for constant control to his method of approaching women, he cannot escape or break away from the army conscience. Based on a Third Cinema perspective, Méndez is able to depict the significance of the military on Santiago's life through his style of editing. Through his use of cuts, shifts in film color and the use of voice-over, the director reflects how the military state of mind holds the reins to Santiago's actions, ultimately alluding to the contemporary plight of Peruvian youth.

Firstly, Méndez demonstrates the relentless role of military ideals in Santiago's brain through his use of specific cuts. The director refrains from utilizing the typical Classical Hollywood style of continuity cuts and match cuts that take the viewer "seamlessly and logically from one sequence or scene to another" (Hayward 95). Rather, Méndez makes sure to echo Santiago's present mentality which has been distorted by his war experiences by incorporating jump cuts. The jump cuts are visible when Santiago is speaking to his new love interest, Sandra, in his car. The camera seems to cut abruptly from what Santiago is discussing, which happens to be about his soldier expeditions, to Sandra's reaction to his story. The function of a jump cut is to give the "impression of fragmentation" and this is



exactly what Méndez is trying to mirror to the audience (Hayward 229). By utilizing a form of editing that involves jump cuts, he is able to reveal the fragmentation and crumbling of Santiago's psyche. Santiago's war experiences have damaged and twisted his perception of the social world. These particular cuts operate as a visual representation of how Santiago's thoughts work: they are rattled little pieces that shift suddenly without warning. In the same scene, this is visible when he immediately snaps and hits Sandra. Since he is no longer able to control the rapidness and altering of his mind, he can also no longer manage his physical actions. His inclination towards violence is clearly linked to his military background because he dealt with "live or die" or "kill or be killed" situations. Unfortunately, this military principle to resort to brutality impedes Santiago's ability to create meaningful relationships with those around him, specifically with women. Essentially, Santiago's violent reactions and outburst connect with Méndez's editing. At times, the sequence of shots comes at the spectator aggressively and forcefully, much like how Santiago operates internally. These shots and cuts are ultimately prime examples for the viewers to recognize how even the military tendency towards belligerence transcends into Santiago's inner thoughts. Thus, the influence of military behavior is observable in Méndez's employment of jump cuts.

Another aspect of editing that exposes the importance of the military in Santiago's life is the change from black and white scenes to color scenes. Predominantly visible in the beginning of the film, the shifting from black and white to lively color scenes reveal Santiago's initial reintroduction to the world he once was a part of. But a closer look seems to disclose how the alteration between these two color lenses unveils Santiago's apprehension and sense of comfort with these two worlds. For example, at the start of the film, the black and whites scenes are dominant when he is in the city. The use of black and white appears to allude to the notion that Santiago is uncomfortable and in a foreign realm. The grainy nature of the black and white film adds to the tone of the scenes as it gives off an air of the city's grittiness and potential danger. It is within these mono-colored sequences that the power of his military sensibilities comes out. While he is in the city, Santiago becomes more edgy, alert and



cautious. His eyes are wide-open and he is constantly looking around, making a link to his impending paranoia. During the black and white scenes, Santiago begins to discuss the military code he was taught to adopt. He talks about the necessity and value of control, how one must always be aware of “an enemy’s attack”. At this moment, it is clear that Santiago has not left this form of military action behind him or back at the military post. He is bringing this obsessive behavior home with him. Hence, the military world is involved in his everyday surroundings. He cannot separate his military conduct from the mode of behavior one has in civilian life. As for the color scenes, these images seem to relay Santiago’s comfort zone and places/people he deems trustworthy. Mainly, Santiago’s family appears in color and not much else as the outside world comes to be regarded by him as the enemy. The outer world and city to Santiago function as a battlefield in which he must be on guard at all times. This area contains obstacles and barriers much like the battleground he is use to. Thus, the visual tone of the scenes are an indicator to how Santiago divides these dissimilar regions; the city (a danger zone) and the rural village (home), which is greatly similar to how those in the military distinguish particular areas during military war strategy. Therefore, the editing of varying colors of film serves as another example of how military practices still make an appearance in Santiago’s newly civilian life.

Lastly, the utilization of the voice-over throughout the film shows how the lessons from the military never leave his current psyche. Méndez applies Santiago’s own voice as the voiceover to reveal to the audience more effectively Santiago’s inner feelings and thoughts about his experiences in the city. The viewer feels incredibly connected to Santiago because he or she can hear and understand his emotions and his irrational nature. They are able to personally witness how he has fallen victim to his military training since it affects and shapes every decision he makes from then on. For example, the excessiveness of his military training is perceivable when he is inside the dance club preparing to ask a girl to dance. His voice-over goes through an entire strategy and discussion about the gravity and need for



order. He claims how someone must layout all possible avenues, execute those routes mentally and fundamentally choose the option with the proper result. This technique and systematic way of decision-making greatly parallels the style in which the military develops war strategies. Therefore, the voice-over works as an intimate way for the spectator to gain a deeper understanding of Santiago's mentality as well as his endless allegiance to the military way of doing things. The voice-over "positions the audience close to our hero and the frustration, anger and tragedy of the situation" (Amauta). This filmic procedure creates sympathy for Santiago and his inability to shake away the impact of the military in his life. It allows for the viewer to fully acknowledge how Santiago is forever shackled and a casualty of military ideals. In the end, the military mindset still holds the reins in Santiago's life and it is an issue he will live with for all his life.

Eventually, it goes without saying that Méndez's editing in this film and his focus on the theme of military ideal sheds some light onto the influence of the military on contemporary Peruvian youth. For this reason, this cinematic work can be recognized as part of Third Cinema and automatically part of Third World Cinema since it concentrates on the issues of Peru. By using unique editing skills to signal the significance of the military, Méndez embodies the concept of Third Cinema in that he encourages the viewer of this film style to "critically confront their own reality through an audiovisual analysis and recognize, in the portrayal of others' struggles, circumstances and aspirations that relate to their own" (*Third Cinema*). That is to say that, Santiago is a model and figure of the Peruvian youth and their experiences. Santiago is like all Peruvians and Peruvians are all like Santiago. Much of the reason why this can be argued is because "historically, the military has played an important role in Peru. Coups have been a feature of Peru's history and intermittently disturbed civilian constitution government" (Foreign & Commonwealth Office). Consequently, due to this hostile political climate, the Peruvian youth and Santiago both suffer from a psychological imbalance. The people of this generation face instability in the framework of their political and economic world, ultimately leading to the youth's increasing emotional insecurity. This sense of



immobility and futility is seen in the film's last and generally emblematic shot in which Santiago holds a gun to his head, pulling the trigger over and over again although it has no bullets. Like the Peruvian youth of today, Santiago is aware of his failure and powerlessness to escape the dominance of the military, which is what this scene sets out to prove. Thus, Santiago's attempt to flee the influence of the Peruvian military is something shared by his fellow Peruvian comrades. Overall, Méndez's critical goal is to draw a line of comparison with the main character of *Días de Santiago* and today's Peruvian youth with regards to the omnipotent presence of the military.

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