

# Out of the Shadows: 'New' Peruvian Cinema, National Identity and Political Violence<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In May 1980, just as the Peruvian nation returned officially to democracy after twelve years of military rule, a splinter group of the national pro-Chinese Communist Party, *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path), broke into a polling station in the region of Ayacucho and destroyed the ballot boxes there. This subversive act marked the onset of two decades of violent struggle, a 'dirty war' that persisted through three presidencies (Belaúnde, García, Fujimori), including the capture of leader Abimael Guzmán in 1992, and a legacy of corruption and repression throughout the 1990s. As Robin Kirk remarked in his introduction to Gustavo Gorriti's seminal text on the history of this insurrection, the military forces were considered to be just as brutal in their retaliation: 'The Shining Path sowed only misery for Peruvians. In that task, it received timely and energetic aid from the army, which tilled with matching fervour' (xiv). The politically-motivated violence of this period left more than 60,000 victims dead or disappeared, and a devastated country on the verge of socio-political and economic collapse. Very few citizens were left unscarred by the events, and in the final report from the public enquiry established through a nationwide Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, every Peruvian was urged to take some responsibility for the national recovery. According to Pilar Coll (59), the authors of that report even claimed that many in power had failed in their duty to protect all citizens by turning a blind eye to discriminatory excesses on all sides of the conflict.

Film-makers based in Peru largely avoided dealing with the topic of political conflict during the first half of the 1980s, but from around 1986 (arguably

1 This article is part of a broader project on violence and identities in Peruvian fiction cinema, with specific reference to the interplay between the Shining Path conflict and national film policy.

starting with the release of *El Malabrigo* by Alberto Durant), the violence and its aftermath became an ongoing and ever-present theme for a diverse range of film-makers. As critic Emilio Bustamente has confirmed: 'From the mid-1980s onwards [...] there were many national productions that focused on the violence of the Shining Path, directly or indirectly' (2012).<sup>2</sup> Two early examples stand out as bold explorations of the complex impact of the conflict between on the inhabitants of rural communities. One of these, *La Boca del Lobo/The Lion's Den* (Francisco Lombardi, 1988) investigated the motives and actions of soldiers on the Andean front line, while another, *La Vida es una Sola/You Only Live Once* (Marianne Eyde 1993) focused on the experiences of an Andean community caught between Sendero rebels and the Armed Forces. Both works were mired in controversy and served to highlight the courage of the film-makers in attempting to bring the conflict to the attention of those not directly affected (both within Peru and beyond) at the time of their release.<sup>3</sup> Other feature films, such as *Ni con Dios ni con el Diablo/Neither with God nor the Devil* (Nilo Pereira 1991), *Alias La Gringa/AKA 'La Gringa'* (Alberto Durant 1991), *Reportaje a la Muerte/Report on Death* (Danny Gavidia 1994) and *Coraje/Courage* (Alberto Durant 1998), direct their attention towards the effects of the violence on the country's capital. Meanwhile, a range of responses came from short film-makers and videographers, in fiction, experimental and documentary form, based in various parts of a country deeply divided by its experience of the conflict.<sup>4</sup>

A lean period followed in terms of cinema production generally in Peru, in part due to shifts in government policy towards funding. Nevertheless, it is significant in terms of framing any sense of the national for cinema in Peru that three low-budget films that explored the impact of the Sendero years on

- 2 This assertion by Bustamente was written as a blog post in response to a provocative claim made by journalist/editor Martha Meier in an article about culture and violence published at the time of the twentieth anniversary of the capture of Shining Path leader Abimael Guzmán. She wrote that Peruvian cinema had largely neglected the topic of political violence, accusing an elite group of 'left-leaning' film-makers based in Lima of dealing with the issue sporadically and superficially, for their own ends, and praised a new generation of film-makers for tackling the theme.
- 3 This controversy is explored in more detail in: "Political Violence, Cinematic Representation and Peruvian National Identity." *National Identity and Political Violence in Latin America*. Editors. Will Fowler and Peter Lambert. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 131–148.
- 4 The additional titles, as listed by Bustamente in his response to Meier mentioned above, include: *Juliana* (1989) by the Chaski Group, *Caídos del cielo/Fallen from the Sky* (1990) and *Sin Compasión/No Compassion* (1994) by Francisco J. Lombardi, *Anda, corre, vuela/Walk, Run, Fly* (1995) by Augusto Tamayo, *Bajo la piel/Under the Skin* (1996) by Francisco J. Lombardi. Short films on the topic include: *Una pequeña Mirada/A Glance* (1992) by Danny Gavidia, *Enigma de Santos* (1992) by Edgardo Guerra, *La misma carne, la misma sangre/The Same Flesh, the Same Blood* (1992) and *Kentishani y Shaavaja* (1995) by Aldo Salvini.

Andean communities were produced during the final years of the twentieth century by Pablo Ortega Matute, a director based in the very region where the violence began, who has operated without the state support for production, distribution or exhibition of his projects that his contemporaries enjoyed.<sup>5</sup> For most, though, the late 1990s represented a hiatus during which less politically provocative and more overtly crowd-pleasing genres such as comedy, historical drama and melodrama were preferred, and cinematic responses to the politically motivated violence were largely avoided.<sup>6</sup>

In September 2012, on the twentieth anniversary of the capture of Shining Path leader Abimael Guzmán, journalist for *El Dominical* Martha Meier published a provocative article about cinema and political violence in Peru, lamenting what she considered to have been a lack of rigorous portrayals of the conflict on the big screen from the likes of 'old guard' directors Lombardi and Durant. She accused them of elitism and anti-authoritarianism and took the opportunity to praise those she considered to represent a new generation of film-makers who were sufficiently brave and independent from ideologically motivated state funding to tackle the theme of Sendero in their debut films in far more probing ways than their predecessors. While her article is highly problematic in that it ignores the achievements of those who made significant films about the conflict at the height of the violence, placing themselves at considerable risk, it does provide an opportunity to explore afresh the 'new' ways of reflecting back upon and re-imagin[ing] that conflict in the works of a generation of film-makers who came-of-age amidst intense political and social turmoil.

Indeed, by the time that the two films to be discussed in more detail were released in 2003/4, the political violence had been at an end for over a decade. Yet during that time, and especially during the remainder of the Fujimori regime, open debate about the methods and consequences of such a difficult and painful era in Peru's history had been limited. What few films were produced and funded through national schemes during the second half of the 1990s engaged only indirectly with the topic of the Shining Path, if at all. The only real exception was Durant's biopic *Coraje* (1998), which dramatically reconstructed the last events in the life of a woman who stood up to the rebels, which nevertheless focused on the final period in the life of an

5 The three films by Ortega Matute are: *Dios tarda pero no olvida/God is late but never forgets* (1997), *Dios tarda pero no olvida II* (1999), and *Sangre inocente/Innocent Blood* (2000). *Mártires del periodismo: Uchuraccay/Martyrs of Journalism* (1999) by Luis E. Berrocal should also be recorded here.

6 It should be noted that some of the films made during this lean period, such as Augusto Tamayo's *El Bien Esquivo* (2001), set in the context of conflict with forces from Spain in the seventeenth century, dealt obliquely with the topic of political violence but avoided adding any overt contemporary references.

iconic, extraordinary individual rather than on a complex social reality. In the meantime, concerted efforts were made to develop work in other genres, such as comedy and horror, and to emphasise issues of broader interest to contemporary Peruvian reality such as consumerism, the mass media, and the role of women in Peruvian society.<sup>7</sup>

And yet, many of these films did continue to deal with questions of violence and uncertainty regarding identity, albeit in broader terms, keeping the debate alive. Indeed, Lombardi's other most popular and critically acclaimed films of the 1990s, *Without Compassion* (1994) and *Under the Skin* (1996), dealt with the *Sendero* topic through allegory, raising questions about the possibility of a close relationship between violence and Peruvian identity more fundamentally. In 2001, established director Augusto Tamayo San Román released his long-awaited period drama, *The Good Bastard*, set shortly after the Spanish conquest amidst the violence and political turbulence of the seventeenth century, another important defining moment for Peruvian national identity. Its focus was on the traumatic encounter of two worlds, the processes of religious syncretism, and the personal ambition and self-determination of two outcasts who confront intolerance and prejudice. It was, therefore, another nationally-produced film (that is to say, supported by government-funded schemes) that explored the very themes of nationhood, violence and identity in Peru.

This essay focuses on two debut works that were released within a few months of each other and which offer quite different modes of representation. Taken together, they demonstrate both a continuation with and rupture from their cinematic predecessors as far as thematic and stylistic aspects are concerned. The first, *Paper Dove* (Fabrizio Aguilar, 2003), uses the point of view of a young boy to explore the trauma suffered by an Andean village located at the epicentre of the violence, and was the third most popular film at Peru's box office in the year of its release. The second, *Days of Santiago* (Josué Méndez, 2004), offers an intimate portrayal of a young 'veteran' of armed conflict as he tries to return to family and civilian life in Lima. Having garnered awards at Festivals around the world, *Days of Santiago* went on to enjoy commercial success on domestic screens during the final months of 2004. This article, then, sets out a critical analysis of the cinematic treatment of the violence of terror as imagined via two significant films, and reflects upon their critical and commercial reception in Peru and beyond. It seeks to refute the accusation of neglect by film-makers from some journalists by highlighting the ongoing importance of the period, its events and consequences for cinema in and of

7 For example, Lombardi's *Captain Pantoja and the Special Services*, (1998); Eyde's *The Bait*, (1998); Aldo Salvini's *Lost Bullet*, (2001); and Alvaro Velarde's *Destiny has no Favourites* (2003).

Peru. Moreover, it explores the extent to which individual films and cinema as a collective practice play a key role in harnessing the potential for testimony and recognition of cultural difference. The close analytical focus on the two debut productions by Aguilar and Méndez pays particular attention to the ideological vision and the visual style of both works. An attempt is made to identify the continuities with and breaks from their cinematic predecessors, in particular the growing emphasis on the individual as opposed to the collective. In the final analysis, I argue that fiction cinema continues to play an influential role in shaping a sense of collective identity in nations such as Peru that are in the process of 'crystallization', and that have suffered recent trauma. I contend that so-called national films (supported to a certain degree by the State) have the potency to offer diverse representations of important events of national concern which draw attention to the fractured and fragmented nature of such experiences, emphasising ongoing social division at every level.

### **National Cinemas, National Identities: The Case of Peru**

The complex relationship between national cinema and national identity has been extensively debated within the discipline of Film Studies in particular, but also more widely between and amongst academic specialists in, for example, Sociology, Cultural Studies and Political Theory, as well as by filmmakers themselves in terms of its impact on funding and policy matters in particular. During the 2004 Festival of Latin American Film in Lima at which the two films under scrutiny in this article received their national premiere, the guest of honour was the acclaimed Brazilian director Walter Salles, whose internationally-renowned body of work has been responsible for [re]framing perceptions of Brazil. At that event he asserted that, for him, '[c]inema is, above all, the capacity to hold up a mirror to society' (cited by Servat 3). But, what sort of society was he referring to? And how might we make this sort of statement more meaningful when it comes to engaging with representations of societies that are in a constant state of flux and reinvention? Moreover, do such representations contribute in any way to the crystallisation of a shared sense of national identity/identities? These are some of the questions that also need to be addressed here if we are to begin to understand the role cinema might play at times of national crisis, such as the one experienced by Peru in the 1980s and 1990s.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been increasing and more overt acknowledgement by film scholars generally of tensions that exist between the desire felt by some for a national cinema to contribute to the creation of a coherent sense of a unified nation, one that embraces 'a shared culture,

shared memories of a constructed past' (Hayward in Hjort and Mackenzie 90) and the growing realisation, not only of the impossibility of such a goal, but also of the need for a 'national' culture to respond to the diversity of experiences that exist within any single nation. British cinema specialist Andrew Higson, for example, has suggested that until quite recently the ideological approach to national cinema studies tended to focus on 'the role that cinema has played in shaping and maintaining the idea of a [...] nation', and admits that he was himself 'perhaps at times rather too ready to find British films presenting an image of a coherent, unified, consensual nation' (in Ashby and Higson 35). Instead he, like many other leading scholars working in this area, has turned his attention increasingly to 'those perspectives that call attention to cultural diversity' (35).<sup>8</sup>

Indeed those perspectives become especially pertinent when exploring the representations of a nation as historically and culturally diverse as Peru, which has cultural diversity, or *mestizaje* at its very core. As a result of a complex history that has seen national borders change, and a range of different peoples (pre-Inca communities, the Inca empire, Spanish conquistadores, economic migrants from Africa, Japan, China, and so on) take part in the gradual formation and evolution of a fragile nation-state, there exist 'enormous hierarchies of race, gender, class, etc.' (Fuller cited by Castro and Paredes 8). Moreover, like so many subjects of postcolonial nations, Peruvians are generally [if problematically] identified as belonging to distinct social groups: here, 'the white colonials, the indigenous colonized, and the African and Asian immigrant-workers' (Fuller 9). Racism and other forms of discrimination are still rarely discussed; moreover, it is suggested that '[me]stizaje, while it appears to erase origins and primordial categories of race and culture, actually continually reconstructs them' (Wade 356), complicating the picture still further. The complex nature of this historical multiculturalism has to be borne in mind by any investigation of films that deal with such potent 'national' concerns, especially given that they have been supported by state resources.

### **Mythical Childhood: *Paloma de Papel/Paper Dove* (Fabrizio Aguilar, 2003)**

*Paloma de Papel/Paper Dove* was the first film for ten years to have been produced in Peru, with the support of national funding schemes, to take the political violence between the *Shining Path* and the military as its explicit subject matter.

8 Indeed, Higson, along with Caroline Pauwels and Ib Bondebjerg, has now established a pan-European project exploring the tensions and possibilities of the way cinema and TV engenders a sense of commonality and diversity of European identity: <http://mecetes.co.uk/>

It was also Peru's Oscar entry in 2004 and one of the biggest local hits in recent years in terms of box office receipts, thus rubber-stamping its status as a 'national' film for government, critics and audiences alike. Its genesis was also rooted in events that combined the personal with the national. In an interview given at the time of the film's screening at the Havana Festival of Latin American Cinema (2004), the young director explained that his debut feature was based on reports he heard on national TV about the *Sendero* violence while a young boy himself. He further confirmed that for him it was really important 'to tell stories that [were] linked to [his] country and its problems' (7).

Despite that sense of local specificity, this is a film that works on several levels. Here, perennial themes help to 'bring into focus subject matter that resonates across historical and cultural boundaries', alongside those topical themes that 'arise within, and remain relevant to, a highly specific historical or cultural formation' (Hjort 106). While the most prevalent topical theme of *Paper Dove* is clearly the effect of political violence on a 'typical' Andean community, and on its children in particular, its main perennial concern is to some extent shared with Méndez's film – both are coming-of-age tales recounted from the point of view of a young man at a time of personal, political and social crisis. But here the similarities end. *Paper Dove* is set in the rural Andes, while *Days of Santiago* is based in the interstitial metropolitan spaces of Lima. Twelve year old Juan (Antonio Callirgos) of *Paper Dove* is presented as an unwitting victim of political violence – abducted by insurgents, witness of his mother's brutal death – whose story represents hundreds of children who suffered a similar fate and whose future appears to offer some hope for redemption. Meanwhile the titular Santiago finds his world falling apart when he leaves the armed forces, and faces a hopeless, uncertain future with neither friends nor family who understand his dilemma. Furthermore, approach to form in each film differs dramatically: Aguilar tells a dark story, yet fills his scenes with visual and aural motifs that are nostalgically resonant of the sentimentality of childhood (the paper dove, bells, toys), and creates an ultimately reassuring outcome for protagonists and viewers. By comparison, the approach by Méndez is raw, intense and fragmented, conveying the psychological trauma of its protagonist in a way that has led the film to be favourably compared with Scorsese's own ground-breaking *Taxi Driver* (1973), especially with its disruptive viewing experience and disturbing denouement.

Set amid the towering Andean mountains of Peru during the 1980s, *Paper Dove* invites its audience to consider the life of its protagonist, Juan, as tranquil and secure, with a deceptively slow-paced first act that focuses on Juan's everyday life as a child. Despite this veil of serenity, certain small events and images signal that the film's narrative is situated within a site of conflict. Indeed, viewers who are more knowledgeable about the specific local

circumstances depicted should quickly recognise that Juan's village is located in the emergency zone identified by the military during the civil war, where community leaders were forced to organise autonomous peasant patrols to protect themselves. When the conflict reaches his village and affects his own family, Juan is abruptly obliged to confront an adult world of loss, betrayal and violence. He is consistently abused by his stepfather Fermín (Aristóteles Picho) and is in the end betrayed by him to the *Shining Path* rebels who force him into a traumatic process of 're-education'. He is renamed 'Cirilio' and forced to learn the skills of warcraft, as well as basic *Shining Path* philosophy. Juan is distinguished from many of the other captured children in that he remains unswervingly intent on escape and does not assimilate into the group. Tragically, he is then caught in the crossfire of a ferocious battle between *Sendero* and armed forces when the rebels attack his village. His beloved mother is killed and he is imprisoned. The film's narrative ends as he returns to the village several years later, resigned to rebuilding his life amongst the ruins that now lay there. The final image closes as he embraces his two, now grown-up friends in the spot where they were forced to part years before.

Aguilar acknowledged that his film has much in common with a children's fairytale in terms of its structure, with a conventional story arc that sets up quite clear binary oppositions to distinguish the 'heros' from the 'villains' at the start, which are then disrupted, and finally resolved to conform to established social norms. Indeed, as critic Federico de Cárdenas has suggested, this approach may best be appreciated by focusing on what happens to the boy as he is dragged away from his idyllic reality 'and submerged in a nightmare full of monsters and violence' (42). The 'ogre' [monster] in this case is represented by the alcoholic, treacherous stepfather (Fermín), set up in direct contrast to the kindly, paternal 'magician' character of the Old Man [El Viejo] (played by Eduardo Cesti), the village blacksmith. A complication of this oppositional structure of 'ogre versus magician' is provoked by the portrayal of individual members of the *Shining Path* group, especially of its political leader Wilmer (Sergio Galliani) who, although undoubtedly brutal, is presented as a complex figure. The viewer is invited, via scenes that dwell upon Wilmer's explanations to Juan to why he has been taken, to try to understand what has led Wilmer to act as he does, to appreciate why he [and others like him] might be willing to deliver himself completely to the/a revolutionary cause (Portocarrero and Komadina 22). It was exactly this sort of attempt to convey a sense of clarification and rationalisation, if not justification, of that which was and still is considered 'monstrous' (and socially damaging) to most, that led Aguilar's predecessor Marianne Eyde to experience such harsh critiques with her picture of *Shining Path* rebels in 1993. Aguilar admitted that he suffered similar self-doubts about how to present this aspect and experienced similar,



if less sustained, criticism for giving exposure, however limited, to the *Shining Path* ideology. In another interview, this time at the screening of his film at the annual Festival at Mar del Plata, he conceded that:

It's difficult to satisfy everyone. I didn't intend to make any of the characters seem evil, although eventually it's impossible not to take sides. Nor did I want to create stereotypes ... This was definitely my main challenge: to try to humanise the killers, those people who killed others; who believed in terror; who used bombs. (Madedo and Fanelli 2)

He further admits in the same interview that, for him, it was difficult but important to represent the *Shining Path* as a group of people who, despite their terrifying ideology of social destruction, had families, lovers, people they cared about and who cared for them. He does this by highlighting the love shared by two sisters involved in the insurgency, and setting their tragic story up in parallel to the familial loss suffered by Juan when his own mother is massacred. Some critics have accepted this approach as being entirely in line with the director's self-confessed 'totalitarian, humane and moral world view'; others criticised him for offering such a sympathetic view of the rebels; others further attacked him for displaying 'right-wing, even fascist, sympathies' (2004a: 2), because he chose not to include any critical representation or discussion of the role of the military.

*Paper Dove* clearly aims at eliciting sympathy for the plight of young Juan, whose tragic story is the focus of the narrative, but it also provokes controversy by urging its audience to consider the ideological commitments that inspire the actions of terrorists such as Wilmer for whom the Party is all. As suggested above, some critics protested that this child's-eye view of such a complex ideology was naively, perhaps even dangerously, limited. Pablo Rojas, for example, writing in *Butaca San Marquina*, the cinema journal produced by the Cultural Centre of the University of San Marcos where many specialists in Peruvian political theory are based, asserted that Aguilar's first feature 'reveals a lack of understanding of the universe represented in his film [...] like those *indigenista* writers who produced work based on one summer visit to the mountains' (9). Peruvian film critic and academic Ricardo Bedoya likewise claimed that the rather sentimental evocation of an Andean idyll, suggested through a touristic emphasis on the beauty of the environment, results in establishing an admiring, deferential gaze that disregards the roughness of such a reality – the gaze of an outsider who learnt of this world through TV reports. In his critique, Bedoya asserts that this was exactly the approach often described as 'that superficial field of study of Indian culture, with its sentimental roots, dazzled by the blue sky, the behaviour of the peasants and the green countryside' (4). The film's attitude further offended Rojas –

and no doubt many of its viewers – for its decision not to use the Quechua language which would have been spoken by Juan’s community and, arguably more importantly, for its failure to acknowledge that such communities were rarely the idyllic environments portrayed in this film. On the contrary, they were deeply impoverished and rife with internal antagonisms and conflicts of interest which were exploited by *Shining Path* leaders when recruiting villagers to join their cause.

In its defence, there are moments when the film offers some detailed analysis of the specific context. For example, Wilmer’s attempts to explain *Shining Path* ideology to Juan do address the form of Maoism on which their manifesto was based. Reference is made, for example, to the need to make the struggle of naked class interests palpable and to reject the urban, modern and ‘westernized’ sector of society. But it falls short of acknowledging the harsh socio-economic circumstances of the Andean communities which enabled *Shining Path* to flourish in these areas, and in particular to the persistent ethnic and cultural divisions that characterize Peru. *Shining Path* even relied, in its early days, on this misconception of its aims of liberating the passive, oppressed peasants in its efforts to secure international support. While it is undoubtedly true that the Andean section of Peruvian society suffered a great deal from marginalisation, racism and unfair business practices on the part of the Lima authorities, many have argued that the actual aims of the insurgents were far less altruistic. As one observer explains, *Shining Path* leaders were fully cognizant of the fact that:

The peasant represented the new revolutionary man, freed from western and bourgeois values. In the Peruvian context, where traditional Andean culture with strong pre-Hispanic elements still existed among the peasantry, a close identification of peasant identity with revolutionary identity necessarily implied that Andean culture took on an important role in Sendero’s conceptualisation of class. (Mauceri 128)

Furthermore, *Shining Path* leaders were well aware of how best to promote their anti-urban and anti-Western cause amongst these Andean communities, projecting an alternative vision of Peru’s identity while reaffirming the importance of the indigenous, the mestizo, the peasant, and the poor. This vision may not have reflected fully the fragmented reality of Peruvian society but it did have a powerful appeal amongst the marginalised popular classes that remained estranged from the dominant Hispanic, urban elite.

Clearly Aguilar’s film does not address all this complexity. Yet it could be argued that the film did at least offer the chance for this significant period of Peru’s history, with the way it has profoundly affected and shaped its sense of identity both internally and externally, to be brought to the attention of

a domestic and international audience in an accessible narrative and visual form. More broadly, it signifies a refusal on the part of its film-maker to let such a chapter of national history be forgotten and acts as a reminder of a nation's recent past. Internally or intra-nationally, deep social fissures and unjust hierarchies are exposed. *Paper Dove* gave its Quechua-Andean viewers an opportunity to see a small part of their experience dramatised on screen, even if someone else (Aguilar, a Hispanic urban Peruvian) is speaking for them. While proponents of the kind of 'identity politics' discussed by Shohat and Stam might have trouble accepting that the disempowered are not speaking for themselves in that they did not take part in the making of this film, the attempts made by Aguilar to affiliate and empathise with his marginalised compatriots, to 'represent their interests' (344) have been applauded by others.

On an international stage, this film will have introduced a number of people to a part of the world and its socio-political reality which is rarely debated within the global mass media. Although some would argue that such a film serves only to exoticize other cultures, there always exists the possibility, however limited, for 'a structuring of filmic identification across social, political and cultural situations, through strongly perceived or dimly felt affinities of social perception or historical experience' (351). For some, the film appears to have worked on the most fundamentally perennial level – that is, it demonstrates that 'in reality, we're all human beings, whatever our ideological beliefs' (Morillo Cano 20). Indeed, the director's efforts were acknowledged in August 2004 with a prize from the Peruvian section of Amnesty International for bringing violations against human rights in Peru to the attention of audiences worldwide. The fragile image of the paper dove that forms both the title and the recurring visual motif of the film thus became intrinsically linked to a similarly fragile peace on a national scale.

### **Fragmented Visions: *Días de Santiago***

Méndez's film strikes a far less optimistic note about humanity, contemporary Peruvian reality, or the future for young people within it, especially for those who were in some way caught up in a series of conflicts (*Shining Path*, border disputes with Ecuador, anti-drugs struggles) that have been largely forgotten or ignored. The perennial concern here is the familiar theme of a war veteran's difficult return home, given a topical twist by setting this return amidst a distinctive Peruvian urban backdrop. While *Paper Dove* articulates the utopic aspects of a childhood that is abruptly interrupted, *Days of Santiago* focuses on the dystopic aftermath. Brought into the academic and

critical discourse of 'post-conflict cinema', *Days of Santiago* in many ways both underscores and disrupts the link between cinema, memory and trauma on a national scale.<sup>9</sup> As the scholar Maria Chiara D'Argenio has suggested, this film tackles 'the traces of war within the historical political contexts of Peru's [...] post-conflict period' (2), and emphasises the painful impossibility of forgetting traumatic events. Santiago, the protagonist, cannot forget the horrors of conflict he has both committed and witnessed, and his wheelchair-bound former comrade Coco (Erick García) is so consumed with physical and psychological pain that he decides to kill himself. And yet, as shown by Santiago's encounters with others throughout Lima as he searches for work, life for the rest of urban Peruvian society has moved on, the conflicts have largely been forgotten and priorities are different. These characters, representative of society more broadly, exemplify (and problematise) Anthony Smith's notion that 'the importance of national amnesia and getting one's own history wrong (is essential) for the maintenance of national solidarity' (cited by Hayward in Hjort and Mackenzie 90).

*Days of Santiago* tracks the thwarted attempts at reintegration into civilian life of a young ex-combatant. Santiago has requested release from service as a Marine in a bid to change his life. But the situation he finds outside the army is difficult: neither state nor society shows any understanding of the experiences he has been through nor the predicament in which he now finds himself. Back in Lima, he lacks the resources to study and finds it impossible to secure employment. His relationship with his wife falls apart and his parental home has become hellishly dysfunctional. He finds it impossible to connect with others; his paranoia increases and a tragic outcome seems likely.

The series of encounters experienced by Santiago on his return to the city that had been his home only three years before is in many ways illustrative of another of Hjort's paradigms on thematisations of nationhood. It further highlights the diversity of social experience to be found within not only one nation but indeed within one city. Hjort puts forward the notion that film-makers who opt for an 'intercultural approach' – and here we could extend that to mean an intra-cultural approach – use 'contrastive cultural elements to foreground and direct attention toward specifically national elements' (113). The key 'cultural elements' deployed by Méndez in this regard are conveyed via his protagonists, with the greatest contrast

9 This term has featured increasingly in cinema studies over the last decade as reflections on the relationship between cinema, conflict and its social and political aftermath have been investigated, and its ethical dimensions better understood. Many of these discussions were brought together at a conference in Lisbon, December 2011: *(Post-)Conflict Cinema: Remembering Out-breaks and In-tensions* at the Catholic University of Portugal.

being set up between the intense, hyper-disciplined Santiago, emphasising his military background and commitment to a collective mission, and his lazy, self-serving brother, who signifies an entirely individualised experience with little regard for conventional morality or social concerns. Another set of contrasts, again centred around Santiago and his attempts at friendship with a group of young women from a more privileged and educated background, draws attention to class difference within the nation. Through the strategies of contrast and disruption, Méndez offers a vision of Santiago as a dystopian icon who 'represents a disappointed and betrayed generation that lost its youth and returned to fight once again for survival against a society with no memory' (2004b). Picking up on D'Argenio's argument about the construction of monsters in (post)-conflict cinema from Latin America, Santiago becomes doubly monstrous, first through participating in a series of brutal armed struggles and then again, on his return, through his struggles to resume life as a citizen.

At the time of its domestic premiere at what was then considered to be the main national film festival in Lima, *Days of Santiago* was described by critics as a 'powerful social testimony', a statement on what life is like for many young people in Lima at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and a reminder of events that have shaped Peru's image of itself but which are in danger of being forgotten (Bula 1).

Aguilar's film style was described as conservative and his approach to the representation of conflict was largely mimetic; Méndez, however, opted for a more hauntingly distinctive cinematographic approach to storytelling, using a jump-cut editing style, hand-held camera, and confusing switches between black and white and colour to evoke and emphasise the intense nervousness and inner turmoil of his main character. He took an expressionistic approach to the use of sound, using little music but experimenting with the creative possibilities of direct, diegetic sounds. These were designed to 'highlight the immediacy and heighten the reality of the moment, because it seems that with every take, a little piece of reality is shown, a certain dynamism of sound is felt' (Bula 1). As Kaplan has suggested, those individuals who suffered any catastrophe directly 'may only recall the past directly or dimly because of the blockage to cognition' (106), and their delayed, fragmented memories tend to re-emerge as repeated and apparently irrational behaviours, intrusive cinations, persistent nightmares. These cognitive impulses are what Méndez conveys through his portrayal of the distress of his main character.

Owing partly to its more confrontational approach to the codes of film language, challenging its viewer to make sense of the stylistic and narrative ruptures, *Days of Santiago* was more warmly praised by those critics in Peru who have been consistently keen to encourage stylistic innovations from

their colleagues in film production. It achieved recognition and awards at festivals worldwide, including a writing residency in Paris for the director as a result of the film's screening at Cannes 2004. It was also welcomed by domestic audiences, for whom it offered another more haunting vision of an otherwise marginalised aspect of their everyday life; in particular the 'disjointed fragments' (Portocarrero and Jorge Komadina 12) of contemporary urban reality that can lead to the very type of isolation and alienation experienced by people like Santiago. Moreover, as D'Argenio has pointed out, '[t]hrough the trope of the monster and the aesthetics of rupture [... this film not only creates] an audience of witnesses, but give[s] the audience a degree of agency, and responsibility, towards the investigation of the events' (11).

In an interview conducted by this author in December 2004, Méndez was quick to point out that it was more important than ever for Peruvian (and Latin American) film-makers to write stories that were likely to appeal beyond national borders as well as resonating with domestic audiences, and to incorporate events and characters that are both believable and comprehensible to audiences in various parts of the world.<sup>10</sup> He likewise acknowledged the need to retain a sense of national or local specificity in his films. He seemed keenly aware of the ethical burden placed upon him by audiences and critics – as one of the very few Peruvian film-makers to enjoy national and international success – to tell stories that are relevant and do justice to his country.<sup>11</sup> However, he pragmatically affirmed that 'a Peruvian film is never going to recoup even a tiny proportion of its costs if it relies solely on a national audience, bearing in mind that US movies dominate the market, that cinema-going remains expensive for all but the upper and upper-middle classes and that there are still very few cinemas in the country' (Méndez). For

10 For a full discussion of this interview and of the transnational aspects, including funding and production, of Méndez's work, see Barrow (2013), 'Transnational film financing and contemporary Peruvian cinema: The case of Josué Méndez'.

11 There is one further issue here that disrupts the question of diversity on national terms: casting. It has been noted by critics that white urban Limeños were cast for many of the leading roles in both films, acting as insurgents in *Paper Dove* (such as the character Carmen played by leading TV and film actress Tatiana Astengo) and as veterans in *Days of Santiago*. The commercial imperatives of these choices are hard to ignore although domestic audiences and some producers, especially those based outside Lima, would undoubtedly find this further evidence of the stranglehold of the centre over periphery at all levels in Peruvian cinema. Even the appearance of the late veteran actor Aristóteles Picho (from Huancayo in the central highlands) in *Paper Dove* might have felt awkward given his role as the wicked stepfather. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that Aguilar used so-called '*naturales*' (amateurs) for the children, casting from over 400 youngsters from all walks of life. Eleven-year-old Antonio Callirgos, who clinched the main role of Juan, was found in an orphanage on the outskirts of Lima. See Richards (2011, 88–89) for further details of casting approaches used by the director of this film.

this reason amongst others, many directors working in Peru, including the two whose debut features have been discussed here, have turned to transnational co-production opportunities with, for example, Spanish and German companies, international festivals and regional funding initiatives, such as the Hispanic project *Ibermedia*, in an effort to bring their stories to the screen. Aguilar, however, is clear that the State still has a role to play in supporting, if no longer protecting, its national cinema activity. For him, echoing the thoughts of many of his cinematic predecessors, the power of cinema should be harnessed to provoke debate and understanding about issues of local and national concern that might otherwise remain unknown or misunderstood, in order that a sense of collective identity might crystallize. Cinema might thus still have a role to play in terms of contributing towards the raising of awareness of diverse cultures, functioning to a certain extent as a significant 'cultural articulation of a nation' (Hayward x). The inherent tension between the desire to recount stories with a local resonance and the commercial need to make those stories appeal beyond local boundaries is compounded by the need for a relatively small nation (cinematically speaking) such as Peru to recognise its own historical and cultural heterogeneity and to reflect upon traumas of the recent past. Together, *Paper Dove* and *Days of Santiago*, with their diverse representations of the devastating effects of political violence on individuals and communities, would seem to go some way towards fulfilling these goals. Echoing Kaplan's suggestion that the need for a discussion about building and rebuilding a nation that has been traumatised remains ongoing, it is hopefully apparent that cinema, as with all forms of mediated culture, helps us to 'translate the trauma into a language of acceptance while deliberately keeping the wound open' (147) so we do not forget.

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