# Zombies in Cuba (with Bianka Ballina)

[opening music]

00:21 **Juan Llamas-Rodriguez**: Welcome to the Global Media Cultures Podcast. I am your host, Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Today we are discussing zombies, transnational co-productions, and Cuban cinema. Our guest is Bianka Ballina. She is currently a Visiting Lecturer and Fellow in the Department of Film, Media, and Theater at Mount Holyoke College. Her research interests include media globalization and its effects on the Global South, Latin American and Latinx media cultures, migrant and transborder media and gender studies. Her dissertation, titled "Vital Exports: Mediating Cuban Solidarity and Global South Imaginaries," explores media's role in the discourses and practices of Cuban internationalism and South-South solidarity since the Cold War. She served as coordinating editor of the *Media Fields Journal*, and co-edited the journal's issue on media and migration. Her work has been published in the journals *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas*, *Spectator*, and the forthcoming edited collection *Media in the Americas*. Bianka, welcome to the Global Media Cultures Podcast.

01:30 **Bianka Ballina**: Hi, Juan. Thank you for having me.

01:33 **JLR**: I wanna start by asking you, how did you get to focus on these particular research interests? What is it that appealed to you, and why is it an important area to study?

01:42 **BB**: Well, my personal interest in particularly South-South solidarity stems from my experience growing up in Nicaragua. Nicaragua was the recipient of Cuban solidarity for a very long time, or participated in solidarity exchanges with Cuba for a very long time since the 1970s. And particularly while I was growing up, the significance of Cuban doctors and Cuban educational opportunities, was something I had noticed for a very long time. But as I began studying media history, I realized that Cuba also had a significant role in the establishment of a Nicaraguan Film Institute, and also in the creation of film-making opportunities around many of the countries where it also had a military and civilian presence. So, that really informed my interest in finding out more about the ways in which this image of Cuba as a space for its South-South

solidarity has been constructed throughout time and how it has changed as different historical moments dictate different needs for Global South states.

03:09 **JLR**: Today, we're discussing your article, "*Juan of the Dead*: Anxious Consumption and Zombie Cinema in Cuba," which was published in the journal *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas*, volume 14, in 2017. Can you give us a brief history of this particular essay? When you began working on it? How did the original... The ideas for the project originate, and then how did they change in the process of researching and writing?

03:37 **BB**: I began working on this article in the spring of 2014, as I was completing the coursework for my PhD at UC Santa Barbara. I had seen the film before, during its theatrical run in Cuba actually. So, it was... That experience of having seen the film in a Cuban theater with a Cuban audience had been very significant to me. In large part, if anybody is familiar with the film viewing practices in Cuba, or they are very, very different from what we normally do in the US, which is you go in, you sit quietly and maybe eat your popcorn, and that's as much as you do. But in Cuba, really, audiences in fact talk back to the screen constantly, and the theater becomes a social space that reacts to the film and interacts with the film. And I think at some point while I was there, somebody answered their phone, their cell phone, and took a 10-minute long conversation with whoever was calling.

04:49 **BB**: So, that experience, I think, also informed my understanding of the audience dynamics with the film. Because I was then able to re-watch the film, I think, in the fall of 2013, when Alejandro Brugués, the director, came to UC Santa Barbara. And so I had the experience of seeing that in a more academic setting with a mostly US audience, and then be able to watch a post-screening interview with the director that really changed the way I understood the film and informed my analysis of the different modes of address in this particular text. Before, I had worked on this one specifically, my master's research when I was doing my MA in Latin American Studies at Tulane, had been on what you call “cine joven” or young cinema in Cuba.

05:53 **BB**: This explosion of independent film-making by young Cuban graduates from a lot of the art schools, including the Cuban International Film and Television School in San Antonio de los Baños, which has students from all over Latin America, including the US, and as well as Africa and Asia. And so I had been focusing on their work and how they had been transforming the Cuban cinematic landscape during the early... During the 2000s, more than anything. But especially as part of the transformations

that came in the '90s with the Special Period and the crisis that came about in Cuba, which we will talk about later. And so that, I think, had also... That knowing that history really informed my understanding of this film in particular, not just as a Cuban film, but as a Cuban film that is part of a particular generational dynamic, and it's situated in a particular industrial history as well.

07:06 **JLR**: Right. So the article focuses mostly on *Juan of the Dead*, right? *Juan de los Muertos*. And you note it comes in a particular moment in the 2010s, which is following the changes in the '90s, and then the changes in the early 2000s. Can you give us a brief overview of what Cuban cinema looks like in these years? And you mentioned the significance of the Special Period, and that sort of impact and the ramifications of that for film-making in the two decades after.

07:42 **BB**: Yes. Well, the Special Period, for those who don't know, is what... Really, the full term that was coined by Fidel Castro was the “Special Period in Times of Peace.” And it was used to talk about the deep crisis that came about with the fall of the Soviet Bloc, when Cuba lost its main economic partner. If the Special Period... There is some debate about how long it lasted. Some people say it ended in the 2000s. Others believe that the Special Period continues today. But really, with the crisis, what came about was a deep and widespread moment of economic transformation in the island, that meant the need to find new economic partnerships and new sources of foreign currency.

08:41 **BB**: You also have to keep in mind that during this whole time, the US had maintained an embargo, a very detrimental and very serious embargo on Cuba, that affected really their ability to get even the most basic resources like food. And particularly, in the cinema landscape, it meant that the Cuban Film Institute, which had since the 1960s been the main source of cinematic production in Cuba and had really control over the industry and produced some of the classics of Latin American cinema that we know today, saw itself completely unable to produce anything. Lacking in the most... Like fuel to get to a set where you might wanna film something.

09:39 **BB**: And that also meant that young filmmakers who had graduated from all of these art programs that continued to exist in Cuba, and which a lot of people in Latin America, for example, don't have access to, and so you don't have as many trained and highly trained professionals in some of these countries, were not able to find a space within the ICAIC, the Cuban Film Institute. So they had to find ways of making films outside of the institute. And digital technologies made it possible to do it. Even

with the very, very limited digital technologies that are available in Cuba, there was still a possibility that they were able to use in the process of making their own films, and doing so without the restraints of the state institute.

10:40 **JLR**: So as you point out, it's a moment that becomes a crisis. So the main state-run center can't produce films anymore in the ways that it used to, or at the capacity that it used to, but there's still all this talent that wants to produce films. And so they turned to other forms of production outside of the official, let's say, institutions, while still being mindful of the state restrictions in terms of content or in terms of the kinds of things that they can be talking about. Digital media helps in some ways, both because these films circulate, as you mentioned, through portable drives and so on and so forth. But also, in terms of the kinds of films that they were making, one of the things that's interesting is a lot of them are genre films. They turn to genre tropes or very popular genres to tell their stories. So, what was the usefulness of using genre or turning to genre films for these filmmakers?

11:48 **BB**: I think in part, it allowed a way of separating themselves from this previous generation of Cuban filmmakers and revolutionary Cuban filmmakers that had rejected genre tropes and genre cinema in general, and had tried to create a particular version of a national cinema. And so, it both enabled them to create their own identity as young filmmakers in a younger generation in this country, but also made evident for them and to everybody the connections that Cuba had maintained to the outside world, even in a context where we're always imagining Cuba as this isolated space.

12:44 **BB**: And so I think a big part of that, and why the interest in *Juan of the Dead* in the international media was so significant is because the way the film, and many of these films, are able to mobilize some of these tropes about Cuba itself. So it's not just a way of using genre tropes in the form of a particular genre text to send a message, but also to be savvy about what international audiences might expect from a Cuban film and then use that as a hook that then allows for a more complex representation of the island and a more multi-layered representation of the island as well.

13:41 **JLR**: Can we talk a little bit about the zombie and why that matters to all of these issues? You gave us a brief overview of where the zombie figure comes from, and it's changed significantly throughout the many decades of film history, but what are some of the key aspects that you note in how the zombie has been taken up and why it's helpful to think through the sort of issues that you bring up with *Juan de los Muertos*?

14:11 **BB**: Yeah, well, the zombie as we know it today, the typical bodies that don't have control or don't really have a mind and want to eat brains or human flesh, was really... This monster was really created by George Romero in the '60s and '70s. And it was a combination of the figure of the zombie as it had been adapted in early cinema, or early sound cinema in particular, from the Haitian voodoo tradition, and the ghoul, which was really the figure that ate and consumed human flesh. Usually, though, the ghoul would be in a graveyard, it would consume already dead bodies. For Romero, the zombie's cannibalism becomes a way of mediating the anxieties around capitalism and consumerism.

15:12 **BB**: So really, consumption becomes a very literal... Or eating others becomes a very literal way to talk about the ways in which capitalist structures enable us to consume one another. It's interesting, I think, that it's doing that by then consuming a figure that came from the Caribbean and manipulating it in different ways. To me, was, I think, one of the most interesting parts of this is to trace back the history of the zombie to its place in Haitian voodoo, where it was really a way of mediating and thinking about anxieties around slavery. The zombie was a figure whose part of their soul had been taken by the voodoo or a zombie master, and then made to work forever.

16:19 **BB**: So it was the thread of slavery continuing even after death, oftentimes. And it becomes a popular figure in the US around the time of the American occupation in Haiti, between 1915 and 1934, when William Seabrook published a book, *The Magic Island*. And that became very popular throughout the US, but also generated some of the first adaptations of the zombie in early cinema, in films like *White Zombie*, or *I Walked with a Zombie*, or *Ouanga*. All of which present the threat of zombification as being enacted on... Especially white women.

17:17 **BB**: So it was about the barbaric threat of the Other, particularly a male Other, that then tries to take the purity of the white woman, and really exemplifies this colonial relationship. I think today, really, the zombie is more about its viral threats and it's about an outbreak narrative, which I think that at the current moment is probably going to lead to new iterations of that narrative. Because the trend you had seen up until now was a domestication of the zombie outbreak, where eventually, science triumphs over this unknown catastrophe and there is some way of bringing reason and the rationality of science back into order. Which, I don't know if that's necessarily gonna be the case anymore, and it certainly was not the case before.

18:26 **JLR**: Yeah. As you point out, the zombie in all these different iterations always comes to represent or to embody, if you will, different sorts of anxieties. Whether it's anxieties over slavery, anxieties over the colonized Other, anxieties over the post-war prosperity and over-consumption, and then anxieties over contagion and virus spread. Thinking about questions like terrorist warfare and all these others. And now, I'm assuming we might have a new iteration which will be about pandemics, the spread of pandemics, in some way. So on the one hand, the zombie is very much embodying all these different anxieties; on the other hand, it is a figure that keeps getting re-appropriated or rearticulated for the different moments.

19:19 **JLR**: So if it starts in Haitian voodoo, it then gets taken up by American cinema. In some way, it becomes this international figure, so a lot of other national genre cinemas are taking up the zombie and producing their own version. And then in Cuba, for example, being one of those examples, right? So the figure itself is being very much re-appropriated, which... And you get to this in some ways, in thinking not only about the zombie, but just the use of genre and the kinds of things that *Juan de los Muertos* is doing. And so you use this term, the “cosmopolitics of re-appropriation,” as a way to think through these things. Could you explain what this concept means to you and why it's an important dynamic to think about or to write about?

20:09 **BB**: Yeah. Well, in this particular case, I really wanted to use the term to think about and refer to the complexity of a cinematic production that relies specifically on Spanish financing to mediate the contemporary Cuban context. And it does that by bringing the figure of the zombie back to the Caribbean, but without returning it to its original iteration. So this is a post-Romero zombie that it's used here to symbolize the effects of communism and expose the global isolation rather than capitalism and global interconnectedness. I think, in general, the concept makes more sense when you think about it in terms of a broader history of the global politics of extraction and the way that these material and cultural resources have been extracted from places like the Caribbean for centuries.

21:11 **BB**: So the kind of re-appropriation that I'm thinking about here, it's not a straightforward one, where you take back what was previously extracted from your home or was previously taken from you, and then you reject the people who took it, but more about finding ways to use those very systems of extraction to work for you. And being able to enter them in a way that benefits those that have usually been at the bad end of this relationship, to put that simplistically. Or the ones from whom the resources had been extracted. And remaining cognizant, at least to some degree, of

the limitations, I think, and the requirements of this process of entrance into systems of consumption.

22:19 **JLR**: Right. And you note that this happens both through the level of the film, the level of the text in the... Taking back the zombie, is not about taking back the zombie to the Haitian voodoo version of it, but adapting it from the current iteration. But it also occurs at the level of production, in the case of Cuban cinema and the dependence on Spanish investments for these kinds of co-productions. *Juan de los Muertos* is very much embedded in that, but also speaks back to that. So, could you talk to us a little bit about what, in your analysis, what does thinking about *Juan de los Muertos* get us to understand about transnational co-productions or how Cuban filmmakers now are responding to that political economic reality of film-making?

23:16 **BB**: I think that any understanding of the co-production dynamics arising from this film is important, by the fact that it is a co-production with Spain. And we need to understand the history of Spanish-Cuban co-productions in the '90s and early 2000s, in order to see how this film is both deploying some of these stereotypes and rebelling against some of them. It wouldn't have been very easy for them to return to a more traditional or original zombie figure and make this about Santería or about an Afro-Cuban religious tradition, and that's where that zombie comes from. But then that might have also spoken to other kinds of stereotypes that were very prevalent in some of these early co-produced films, not just with Spain, but with a lot of other European countries.

24:20 **BB**: But it doesn't fully reject the stereotypes that have been co-produced about Cuba, in particular, that stereotype of Cuba as a space of decay, as a decaying vestige of socialism, an island that's stuck in time. It's something that the film certainly manipulates to attract international audiences, and then also uses to make a nod to those local audiences about, not just their daily reality, but an understanding of, "This is what foreigners are expecting to see from a Cuban film." So there are these multiple levels of address and interaction there that I think is significant and is a big part of the nature of co-productions today.

25:13 **JLR**: Yeah, it's almost like it's doing this double-speak simultaneously, right?

25:17 **BB**: Yeah.

25:18 **JLR**: It's, for the foreigners, it's playing into these stereotypes so that they'll watch it and be like, "Yeah, this is what I expected from a Cuban film to come." For the locals, it's saying, "Look, this is how foreigners look at us," and then just laugh about it, in some ways.

25:34 **BB**: So I think, yeah, ultimately... Or to think of what I am saying about co-productions. Because it's to think about them more as processes rather than products, right? So even that a single text is... Derives meaning from history in a particular tradition of film-making, but also is co-produced over and over at different moments of address. So in terms of meaning, it is not a singular product.

26:10 **JLR**: Yeah. So can we talk a little bit about where you see this happening in the film or in different moments in the story? I'm thinking, the one that strikes me the most is that seeing where they go to the hotel, and there's all these Spanish tourists who have clearly just come to Cuba to have sex, and hire sex workers for very cheap, and then just running down the stairs. So it's very much commenting on that imaginary of Cuba as a place where you go for sex tourism, in some way, and then playing that up. But what are some other moments that you see where it's doing that sort of double-speaking to the local audience, but also nodding to that international audience?

26:55 **BB**: Yeah. And when you talk about scenes like that, I think you also have to consider that those big hotels... Those big Cuban hotels are all managed by Spanish companies. So it's also at the very level of the ownership of resources in a socialist nation and who gets to benefit from the opening of Cuban tourism, or Cuba in general, and the Cuban economy. There are certain complexities that the film is pointing to, even as it is drawing, it benefits and it's being... It's possible because of this opening. I think the humor is really one of the most significant parts of this address. Most of the jokes, I think, are funny to international audiences but then have a different layer of meaning for a Cuban viewer.

28:00 **BB**: The running gag of the state TV newscast, or even the use of an old American car as a makeshift raft that will eventually take one's family and friends out of Cuba, these are all grounded and very real experiences for Cuban audiences. And so they gather new meaning in this context as well, but I think the way we understand them outside of Cuba is often based on just these stereotypical views that don't fully understand the experience upon which these images are based. And there are even things, moments of exposition, that are only fully comprehensible to Cuban viewers. So at the very beginning, when we meet Juan and Lazaro and they're fishing in a raft in the

sea, that doesn't really mean much to foreign audiences. But to Cuban audiences, they know that this is an illegal activity.

29:20 **BB**: We're talking about an island where it is illegal for their citizens to go out into the sea and fish, in large part because during the 1994 rafter crisis, fishing boats were some of the main vehicles that were used by people to leave the island. But also, nowadays, it's because seafood is such an important part of the tourism industry that the state needs to control it. And so, yes, people still go out and fish and then often sell those, whatever they catch in the black market, but they are risking jail time while doing this. So the extent of the transgression, I don't think is very evident, unless you know that.

30:07 **JLR**: Right. And it's something that... It introduces the character immediately as like, It tells us something about him, that he engages in this illegal fishing, which then makes sense why he would just develop this business of, "We kill your zombies for you." But it's something that if we didn't know how illegal fishing is for a regular citizen, we wouldn't catch it right away, right?

30:32 **BB**: Yeah, yeah. There is... And a lot of scholarship about Cuba and since the Special Period mentions this attitude of *resolver*, or make do, which really prevails in Cuba. And I think this is part of what the film is hinting at, but *resolver* extends to even sex work. And the significant... And the role of Vladi as the jinetero, this guy who's flirting with foreigners, foreign women who are visiting the country and engaging in the very... A relationship with the terms of exploitation are very confusing. That is really a big part of that attitude as well. And so this sense of a certain erosion of morality that has been necessary in order to survive this crisis.

31:27 **JLR**: Right, right. So a lot of how this is happening, a lot of how the film is commenting on both the state of the island and the foreign perceptions of it, is through comedy, right? So it's a zombie comedy, essentially. And you point this out in a number of scenes. So, what do you find are the advantages and the drawbacks of the film, or just Cuban film in general, of using comedy as a way to comment on the nation-state and the government, let's say?

32:03 **BB**: Humor is really a critical strategy of survival in Cuba in the midst of, not just the crisis, but the kinds of control that the state exercises in everyday life. And so, part of why the comedy is so effective here is because it is being taken from Cuban culture and from Cuban everyday life around the island. And so, I think that is something that's

significant to really understand the way in which audiences in Cuba may see this film as portraying their way of life on a daily basis, in a way that is not necessarily done by other films, other Cuban films even.

33:00 **BB**: There is a tradition that this film is drawing from, to use humor as a way of passing a critique through, I don't wanna say necessarily the censors, but you still have to get your film approved to be shown in Cuban cinemas, right? So, comedy becomes an easy way of taking away some of the seriousness of the critique while still packing a punch. I'm a bit more reluctant to make claims about the drawbacks of comedy as an instrument of state critique, but what I will say is that the same cultural awareness that makes that comedy an effective tool to make those critiques in the film, it's used to justify, sometimes, some of the more problematic aspects, so particularly the homophobic tones of the film.

34:05 **BB**: And this was something that actually Brugués himself brought up during the screening, the post-screening Q&A at UC Santa Barbara in 2013. So without even being asked a question, he brought up the fact that some people have criticized him for his portrayal of some of the characters. Particularly La China, who was the flamboyant, effeminate gay character that seems to be there only to make clear how desirable Juan is to, not just heterosexual women, but all... Oh, and apparently also lesbians and gay men. So it's just this... To really stress Juan's virility, I guess. And then to become the butt of the joke in a lot of these moments. So a lot of the comedy comes from her bodily performance, but then also the violence that the film enacts on her.

35:16 **JLR**: Right.

35:18 **BB**: And so his argument, or Brugués's argument, was that, "Well, this is just Cuban humor, and in fact, Jazz Vilá, who is the actor who portrays La China, encouraged me to add certain gags, to really take the character further and all this." Which is not necessarily a great excuse. But then, I think it reveals then that sense of how the local can become, a local idiosyncrasy, can become a way of justifying or, really, counteracting a critique that comes from outside. There's no mention of all the other homophobic moments in the film, including our second introduction to Juan, which is him telling a little boy that his father is a sodomite.

36:19 **JLR**: Right. Can you think of other examples of contemporary Cuban films, whether they're genre films or not genre films, that you think are more interesting or more compelling in the treatment of contemporary gender and sexual norms?

36:36 **BB**: There are quite a few. I think it's hard not to think of a film that's less problematic in these terms. But I think if we're thinking particularly about homoerotic relations and homosexuality, there have been several films in the past few years, and particularly, I don't wanna say an explosion, but a new wave of queer cinema in Cuba. I'm thinking about films like *Verde Verde* by Enrique Pineda Barnet, or *Chamaco* by Juan Carlos Cremata, that really think differently about homosexuality and homoeroticism, but at the same time, often adhere to the trope of enacting violence on the gay body, and ultimately, having that body meet a violent end. Which I think is important in this context, though, because you have then the ability for a gay filmmaker to reflect the kind of violence that Cuban society often inflicts upon gay people, gay men in particular.

38:05 **BB**: However, this isn't done necessarily from a space of state critique. So not enough films that I can think of have really thought about the ways that the state itself has repressed queer people, and gay men in particular, many of whom had been sent to camps during the '70s. And this is a kind of drama and a problem that reappeared recently because the daughter of the man who had created these camps, had then been recorded, and she works at the Cuban Television Institute, she had been recorded during some kind of general briefing talking about the need for masculine voices in order to really transmit the message of the state and how all these *voces amaneradas*, so it's like effeminate voices, really create an ideological confusion. So that is something, I think, that really needs to be addressed more. And I think there is also a way in which foreign filmmakers are coming to Cuba to try to explore queer culture in the island in different ways, and that's something to... I think that needs more attention.

39:34 **JLR**: Have you built on this work since its publication, or some of the ideas that you were exploring and thinking about *Juan de los Muertos* or contemporary Cuban genre cinema, have you built on that since then?

39:51 **BB**: Not about this particular film, but part of what I'm doing some work on right now and have done a little bit of research before is really the... Another kind of recurring trope in a lot of these co-produced films, which is the image of the child and this return to an idyllic Cuban past, whether it is... It's the pre-revolutionary past at

different stages. It could be José Martí as a young kid in the colonial independence period, or really just that moment right before the revolution in films like *La Edad De La Peseta*, and how that really creates a different kind of appeal, a nostalgic appeal that speaks really to international audiences on the basis of just the appeal of this child figure, but also to a sense of a less complicated past, embracing a lot of the complexities of that moment.

40:58 **JLR**: I guess we talked a little bit about this in terms of the pandemic and the shifting ideas of the zombie. Has there been any other recent developments, either in Cuban cinema, in the world, or in your research, that have now added or complemented your initial arguments of peace?

41:16 **BB**: Yes. There... In Cuba, in particular, there has been a lot of activity around regulating the work of independent producers. Recently, with the passing of a new Cuban constitution, a new cinema law was enacted, and really, a number of laws that regulate artistic and cultural production on the island. And part of the issue here was a demand initially by independent producers to have an actual legal status. 'Cause a lot of these independent companies, like for example, 5ta Avenida, which made *Juan of the Dead*, had been operating for years, but did not have actual legal standing 'cause Cuban law did not allow for independent producers to exist. So, taking that demand, then with these new cinema law, what happened was really, or what has become evident, is an attempt to extend the control of the state over these kinds of productions.

42:35 **BB**: And there has been a significant attack on independent producers, including the producers at 5ta Avenida in Cuba. So, that has been quite a significant development. There have been a lot of banned films and growing allegations of state repression against filmmakers. I think one of the more recent ones was the film *Santa y Andrés*, which has been banned from being shown in Cuban theaters. But many other filmmakers on the island have experienced considerable repression, including things like this police barging in on private screenings of their work and stopping that, or them being... Or anyone who collaborates with these filmmakers being interrogated by police, and really, a challenge to their ability to work.

43:34 **JLR**: Right. It seems like it's a cyclical, sort of coming back with the state to try and take control of that again.

43:42 **BB**: Yes, which I think really would change how I would approach this film or analysis of any other film, 'cause part of my initial interest in talking about *Juan of the Dead* was the way in which so much of the international coverage about the film had been focusing on the fact that this kind of critique is even possible, like how is this not being repressed? And so, part of my frustration was that the sense of, well, there has been critique before, it's not necessarily always repressed. But I think this then complicates some of those historical trajectories, for sure.

[music]

44:40 **JLR**: Bianka, thank you for joining us.

44:43 **BB**: Thank you for having me.

[closing credits music]

40:45 **JLR**: This episode of the Global Media Cultures podcast was produced by me, and edited by Alan Yu. Opening music by Podington Bear. Closing credits music by cloud mouth. This project is supported in part by the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication at the University of Texas at Dallas.

The Global Media Cultures podcast introduces media scholarship about the world to the world. I'm Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Thank you for listening.