

Tropical and Millennial Vampires: an Amateur and Exploitation Film (*Sangre Cubana*)

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Abstract

An emergent panorama of audiovisual amateurism redefines Cuban cinema's representational and political boundaries. This article focuses on the amateur and exploitation film *Sangre cubana* (*Cuban Blood*) (Edgardo Pérez, 2018) as part of that panorama. It sheds light on an area virtually unstudied by Cuban cinema scholarship, which typically focuses on canonical films and authors and professional independent cinema. The article analyzes the features of *Sangre cubana* as an example of exploitation and trash cinema. It explores the aesthetic and conceptual implications of choosing the figure of the vampire as the protagonist. Examining the tropicalization of this figure and the gothic genre carried out by *Sangre cubana*, the article addresses the film as an example of global gothic and explores the strategies used by the film to rewrite the legacy of *Vampiros en La Habana* (*Vampires in Havana*) (Juan Padrón, 1985). It argues that *Sangre cubana* symbolically manages the anxieties and crises of the Cuban millennial generation by focusing on the monstrous and liminal figure of the vampire. *Sangre cubana* tropicalizes the figure of the vampire and uses this tropicalization as a tool of social criticism. It also comments on the stigmatization of dissidence, otherness, and the verticalism of power utilizing the vampire narrative.

Key Words: *Sangre cubana*, amateur cinema, exploitation cinema, vampire, tropicalization.

A group of young residents on the outskirts of Havana (in the municipality of Marianao) decided to join forces to bring one of the projects they most dreamed of doing together to life: a film about vampires. With hardly any resources, and after many setbacks, they finished *Sangre cubana (Cuban Blood)* (2018) (henceforth *Sangre*). The film tells the story of several vampires in the insular tropics who are torn between their survival or their disappearance, marked by the internal struggles of the vampire clan and the scarcities of the place where they live. The film was recorded by the young amateurs using a small Canon Pro camera and edited on a PC. The dialogues had to be re-recorded in a home studio (because the camera had no sound quality), and unsophisticated animation sequences (made with Macromedia Flash Player) were used to replace scenes of actors who left the project before it was finished – a setback that its director did not foresee at the beginning of filming.

The leading promoter of this project was Edgardo Pérez, a Primary Education graduate who also sold DVDs as a form of self-employment while making the film. Pérez acted, edited, handled special effects, and wrote the script. He approached one of the main distributors of the Paquete Semanal (Weekly Package) with a copy of the movie to include in it (the distributor charged him 3 CUC, approximately \$3). The Paquete is an ensemble of about one terabyte of audiovisual material compiled by a small group of people, distributed through flash drives and external hard drives to the rest of the island by a larger group of people, and consumed by a large percentage of the population. Its price varies between \$1 and \$5. It is tolerated by the government, although it is technically neither legal nor illegal. In this way began the journey of *Sangre*, which would eventually get its premiere at the Ludwig Foundation in Havana.

There is an extensive corpus of valuable books that have recently studied the so-called independent, alternative, new Cuban cinema, such as Juan A. García Borrero's *Rehenes de la sombra* (2002); Ann Marie Stock's *On Location in Cuba* (2009); Dunja Fehimović's *National Identity in 21st-Century Cuban Cinema* (2018); Laura-Zoë Humphreys' *Fidel Between the Lines* (2019); Dean L. Reyes' *El gobierno de mañana* (2020), and Ángel Pérez's *Burlar el cerco* (2022). This article sheds light on an area virtually unstudied by the Cuban cinema scholarship, which has typically focused on canonical films and authors or professional independent cinema. *Sangre* is part of an emergent panorama of audiovisual amateurism that redefines Cuban cinema's representational and political boundaries. This panorama is the result, among other factors, of the changes in the dynamics of creation, production, and distribution generated by more democratic access to technologies and the democratization of cultural consumption caused by the phenomenon of the Paquete.

The first section of the article addresses the characteristics of the Paquete, which has been studied extensively to date, and the new media ecology it has created. It also briefly describes the features of the emergent Cuban audiovisual amateurism and places *Sangre* in the broader panorama of both independent and institutional Cuban cinema. The following section places *Sangre* within the Cubaexploitation category, which I have been using in previous articles (Dorta, "Cubaexploitation"; "Narcos"), and addresses the features of the film as an example of exploitation and trash cinema. The third section introduces more details about the plot of *Sangre* that are pertinent to its analysis and explores the aesthetic and conceptual implications of choosing the figure of the vampire as protagonist. The later sections focus on the tropicalization of this figure and the gothic genre carried out by *Sangre* and address the film as an example of globalgothic. The final section analyzes the strategies used by the film to rewrite the symbolic and ideological legacy of *Vampiros en La Habana (Vampires in Havana)* (Juan Padrón, 1985).

This article argues that *Sangre* challenges the hegemony of Cuban cinema and its representation models as an exploitation narrative. It further poses that the young amateur filmmakers appropriate the vampire as a "cultural persona" (Edberg). In this way, these young millennials chose to use the figure of the vampire to project their own anxieties amid intense transformations of their social context and identities. The film symbolically manages the anxieties and crises of the Cuban millennial generation by focusing on the monstrous and liminal figure of the vampire, but does so in a playful and occasionally parodic way, while dialoguing with the national context.

El Paquete Semanal: new media ecology, authorship, and amateurism

The audiovisual consumption landscape in Cuba has changed drastically since the early 2000s due to the Paquete Semanal (Weekly Package). This way of distributing and consuming audiovisual material has notably diversified the content that Cubans can access. Most of the Paquete's materials (series, films, telenovelas, documentaries, reality shows, etc.) originate in international media conglomerates, mainly from the US, but there is also a significant domestic presence. Examples of the audiovisual materials that Cubans can find in the Paquete include, to name a few, popular series such as *Westworld* (2016-2022) and *Stranger Things* (2016), Turkish telenovelas like *Hercai* (2019-2021) and *The Magnificent Century* (2011-2014), and current blockbusters such as *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) and *Jurassic World Dominion* (2022).

New audiovisual materials have been created in Cuba for distribution and consumption through the Paquete. *Sangre* is an example of this type of audiovisual material. The Paquete has been well analyzed by various scholars recently (Armenteros and Calviño; De Ferrari; Farrell, "Piracy"; Fowler; Humphreys, "Copying", "Utopia"). It is an essential component of Cuba's hybrid online-offline digital media environment (Henken) and Cuba's media ecosystem (Humphreys, "Utopia" 249).

The Paquete's content is determined by different factors, among them, the self-censorship to which those who create it (the so-called "providers") subject themselves, excluding pornography or political content that is explicitly against Cuban government (Humphreys, "Utopia" 250). For this reason, and because those who compile and sell the materials strive to satisfy the consumer's needs, the Paquete is a highly curated (De Ferrari 11) compilation that is shaped primarily by demands in the final stages of distribution at the neighborhood level, where the consumers can personalize the content they purchase. The contents of the Paquete do not coincide with what current Cuban legislation recommends citizens consume but rather reflect what citizens prefer to consume (Concepción Llanes and Oller Alonso 51).

Young people (between 16 and 30 years old) make up a large percentage of the Paquete's consumers. In general, they do not identify with the image of themselves promoted by state television. They prefer to interact with the Paquete rather than with traditional media (cinema and television) because it offers more cultural options and greater consumption flexibility (Concepción Llanes 160). Young Cubans have been increasingly exposed to values shared through globally produced audiovisual materials, which are, in many cases, different from the ones promoted by the state. Nevertheless, it should be noted that those values do not only come from foreign materials but are also promoted by domestic content, such as *Sangre*. We should not forget that Cuban content is in high demand among the Paquete's consumers (Concepción Llanes 345). *Sangre* has benefited from that popularity in its distribution, in addition to being available on platforms like YouTube.

The Paquete and films like *Sangre* are part of what Paloma Duong calls the "Cuban post-socialist mediascape" in which "nation-state and transnational markets, the Communist Party and global finance, meet

informal and hybrid economies mediated by local digital cultures" (307). In this new media ecology, says Duong, Cubans have become producers of images of themselves that go beyond those created by state media and a foreign view that has traditionally exoticized them. *Sangre* is proof of that self-empowerment in taking on "[the] authorship and ownership of one's own image, individual and collective" (Duong 310).

Hector Amaya argues that the relationship between the nation-state and citizens is a relationship of "authorship," the latter defined "as ownership of action that establishes legal responsibility and legitimate authority" (508). Through this relationship, "the nation-state authors citizens," grants them authorial status, in the sense of agency and legality, and "shapes media that authors the discursive ground for the subject positions that we identify with citizenship." Thus, Cuban amateur films could be seen as unauthorized by the State but legitimized by their creators and by the consumers of the Paquete. They would establish an alternative cultural citizenship based on their enjoyment and identification with the imaginary of the films.

Amateur Cuban filmmakers create projects without state sponsorship thanks to their access to production and distribution technologies. This independence empowers them. Significantly, these projects contradict the view that such empowerment would lead to "authentic" stories (in identity terms) and the production of testimonial reality. Instead, Cuban amateur filmmakers have produced non-emancipatory or redemptorist narratives. Therefore, they are not aligned with the institutional desire to represent subjectivities saved from moral corruption or captured according to certain ethical paradigms.¹ The state policy's sponsorship of "cinema of amateurs" in the 1980s has been transformed into non-professional, individual and communal initiatives for producing visual narratives without institutional support.

Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes and Susan Aasman (2) state that amateur audiovisual production has become a crucial feature of our lives in the 21st century because it has reshaped the media landscape and the borders between the private and the public sphere. This has created an "amateur media culture" and an "amateurized media universe" (3), in which *Sangre* fits. This film is also part of an emergent panorama of Cuban audiovisual amateurism, along with other films distributed through the Paquete. Film critic Dean L. Reyes ("Cine cubano") speaks of a "spontaneous Cuban cinema" when he refers to several examples of amateur films in Cuba.² These do not pretend to emulate the institutional cinema or gain legitimacy but use cinema to entertain themselves, states Reyes. We observe group identity politics and imaginaries from communities that need to self-represent in these movies. As a result, a popular culture emerges that does not fit into the discourses that supposedly represent the imaginaries of the country.

In his article "The Amateur Connection: una provocación," Reyes reviews some of these productions. This amateur cinema is created independently of the official institutions and their production, distribution, and exhibition systems. It is a parallel audiovisual field, as Reyes states, that questions the vertical administration of culture in Cuba and "widens the thematic field of traditional cinema, proposes aesthetic routes that capture the nuances of our epochal sensibility, fosters new creative practices, and appeals to audiences that have deserted film and television as they have been known for decades."

1. In a previous article (Dorta, "Narcos"), I studied the amateur film *Corazón cubano* (2014), about a group of drug traffickers in Havana, also distributed through the Paquete, as an example of dystopian empowerment.

2. All translations, unless otherwise specified, are mine.

The amateur films in the Paquete, such as *Sangre*, move away from the visual narratives standardized by professional Cuban cinema (independent or institutional) to propose other narratives strongly linked to the so-called "entertainment fandom," which is supported by "groups who are strongly motivated to produce and circulate media materials as part of their ongoing social interactions" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 29) and who, on many occasions, seek to create alternative identities to those prescribed for them by social norms. These groups produce their version of particular genres or works, as in the case of the young amateurs of *Sangre* and their recreation of the vampire narratives. *Sangre* can be considered a product of what Henry Jenkins refers to as "participatory culture," describing the social interactions and culture produced within fan communities, which deploy "media production and distribution to serve their collective interests" (qtd. in Jenkins, Ford and Green 2).

The audiovisual landscape in Cuba is distinguished by the progressive move away from "icaicentrism" (García Borrero, "Notas" 19) – that is, a focus on the Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Industry (ICAIC) as a center for legitimization and film production. That decentralization, along with access to technology and new production and distribution channels, has contributed to the development of an alternative or independent cinema that challenges traditional themes and narrative structures, while also presenting characters and formulas absent in traditional domestic cinema. Originating outside of institutions, amateur movies like *Sangre* share these innovations with the cinema created by these new filmmakers. Both independent/alternative and amateur filmmakers are similarly dependent on digital literacy, inexpensive digital technologies, and alternative distribution to share their work (Farrell, "Slightly independent" 167). Nevertheless, unlike professional alternative or independent cinema, the works of amateur filmmakers are not "submerged" (García Borrero, *Rehenes* 13) but are consumed by domestic audiences and benefit from a circulation system like the Paquete, in addition to being available on platforms like YouTube.

Cubaxploitation: *Sangre cubana* as trash and exploitation cinema

In previous articles, I have used the term *Cubaxploitation* to encompass several Cuban discourses, narratives, visualities, aesthetics, sensibilities, and artistic politics of representation marked by exploitation. I place *Sangre* within the boundaries of this category, which is related to three conceptual frames from which it takes some of its more defining features: exploitation, cult, and trash cinema. Although exploitation cinema, cult cinema, and trash cinema are not interchangeable classifications, on many occasions, they overlap conceptually. It is not the goal of this article to define these conceptual frames in depth, yet I will highlight what they have in common and what is relevant to analyze *Sangre*.³

As Guy Barefoot argues, trash cinema has sometimes been understood as a particular subgenre or form of exploitation cinema that emerged in the 1970s (7). The term "trash cinema" can be applied to *Sangre* as an amateur movie not as a judgment of its value but as a label that allows us to explore further how it invokes "bad taste, violence, kitsch, camp, and sexual explicitness" (I. Q. Hunter, qtd. in Barefoot 15). Trash cinema could also be seen as part of the umbrella category of cult cinema (Barefoot 14). Linda Williams (qtd. in Barefoot 20) has linked trash cinema to "body genres" ("melodrama, horror, low comedy, pornography") that want to generate a physical rather than an intellectual response in viewers. Guy Barefoot expands the term to include "films that make effective or distinctive use of limited resources, films with

3. In previous articles (Dorta, "Cubaxploitation"; "Narcos"), I defined exploitation, cult, and trash cinema in more detail. I also compared the category *Cubaxploitation* with that of *Latsploitation* introduced by Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney in the same volume (see Dorta, "Cubaxploitation" 151-152).

aspirations far beyond their resources or achievement, and films that embrace a trash aesthetic" (108), as is the case of *Sangre*.

Sangre follows one of the guiding principles of exploitation/cult/trash cinema: the "forbidden spectacle" that works as their "organizing sensibility" (Schaefer 5). This spectacle fascinates spectators and elicits an affective response (76). The film exploits vampire narratives' gore and violent side with its blood-spattered scenes of conversion from human to vampire form. It also incorporates other moments where violence appears intrinsic to both the vampire group's internal wars and their extermination by anti-vampire hunters. As a trash, cult, and exploitation object, *Sangre* embraces explicit violence so that its content and style trigger ideas of impurity or danger (Mathijs and Mendik 3-4). It exposes and capitalizes on cultural sensibilities while simultaneously destabilizing the boundaries between good and bad taste (9).

The spectators are frequently reminded that they are watching a film, whether through its spectacular dimension or the disruptions in the narrative continuum, as Eric Schaefer argues about exploitation films (80). In the case of *Sangre*, it is a low-budget spectacularity due to material shortages and technical inadequacies, which contributes to the outrageous and bizarre features of *Sangre's* plot. In this way, *Sangre* displays the exhibitionist tendencies of the so-called "cinema of attractions" that are at the heart of exploitation cinema, according to Schaefer (77). It is a type of cinema that attracts the viewer's attention through an "exhibitionistic confrontation rather than diegetic absorption" (Tom Gunning qtd. in Schaefer 78). The spectacle in exploitation films tends to disrupt the cause-and-effect chain of the traditional narrative, which overrides the story's coherence (80, 340).

Sangre also shows the double edge of exploitation cinema, according to which movies turn into cautionary tales that warn of certain dangers or risks of pursuing individual pleasure, which could lead to disaster, but also highlight negative and dangerous acts through the spectacular (Schaefer 15, 341). This is relevant to *Sangre's* narrative, which highlights the dangers of becoming a vampire through the identity conflicts of its protagonist William: the dehumanization of the vampire, who kills his victims to survive, becomes linked to the benefits of immortality.

The Paquete's amateur movies, specifically *Sangre*, have not reached cult status in terms of their "long-lasting public presence," in the words of Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (11). However, certain emerging practices could be seen as the beginnings of a potential alternative canonization (Mathijs and Mendik 8) and examples of a lively communal following (11), as expressed by the testimonies of those who saw *Sangre* (residents of Marianao, students, consumers of the Paquete, etc.) in the documentary *Sangre cubana. Vampiros a lo cubano (Cuban Blood. Vampires Cuban Style)* (Edgardo Pérez, 2018), which tells the story of the film's creation and its popularity. Both the director and the actors of *Sangre*, who are fans of vampire films, and the audience that reacted positively to the film, take advantage of "performative spectatorship" as a means of constructing cinema through their own devotion to particular films. This kind of spectatorship is also a means of establishing individual identity and a sense of community (Ian Holney, qtd. in Barefoot 3).

One brand common to trash and cult films is "badness," whether aesthetic or moral. Such films are "valued for their 'ineptness' or poor cinematic achievement," positioning them opposite the norm or mainstream and giving them a status of "otherness" (Mathijs and Mendik 2). In terms of their transgressions, these films' competency lies in their ability to transgress the barriers of good and bad, or obliterate them, by challenging the conventions of filmmaking (2), such as the

narrative coherence, which turns the films into chaotic and outlandish stories. On many occasions, this chaotic character is due to narrative and stylistic loose ends – scenes that show signs of forcing inclusion, violating continuity, or disrespecting narrative cohesion (3), like the interspersed stories in *Sangre*: the short story on the death of Midas's family, the vampire slayer, and the one of Dorian's death, the head of the vampire clan, which are animated sequences with Macromedia Flash Player.

Trash, cult, and exploitation movies attach themselves to "devalued" genres and subgenres (according to the conservative perspective) and generally play with their conventions through parody, irony, or exaggeration. This is the case of *Sangre*, which playfully dialogues with the vampire narratives, contextualizing them within the particularities of the Cuban social context. In this way, the film becomes a highly intertextual narrative due to the inclusion of references to other movies (such as *Vampiros en La Habana*) and reflections on myths and cultural archetypes (Mathijs and Mendik 3), like the figure of the vampire.

My analysis and the reaction of the Paquete-consuming public are all based on an interpretation protocol that Jeffrey Sconce calls "paracinema" (101). This aesthetic attitude assesses the types of "trash cinema" explicitly rejected or ignored by the legitimized film culture, and all manifestations of exploitation cinema. Paracinema celebrates the "failures" and "distortions" caused by material scarcity or technical ineptitudes; it values the stylistic deviations and anomalies born from failure when trying to obey the prevalent codes of cinematic representation (Sconce 111-112). Paracinema appreciates defective special effects, histrionic or unconvincing acting, anachronisms, and lack of plausibility. These are all manifestations of an excess that enable a defamiliarized and ironic perception of the exploitation, trash, and cult object (112, 113). Along with this ironic perception, a paracinematic critical sensibility values the "radical potential of material poverty and technical ineptitude" (Barefoot 17) peculiar to an amateur film such as *Sangre*.

A raving plot with millennial vampires: monstrosity and otherness as political categories

At some point in 2018, the Paquete's consumers discovered a new file in the folder labeled "Cuban films." *Sangre* was distributed in this way and presented with a promotional poster that highlighted some of its most outstanding features: a film with many people involved, all of them amateur; marked by humor; conceived as a rewriting of a classic Cuban film and made using very few resources, but with the eagerness of young cinema lovers. The poster said:

Sangre cubana is a movie full of characters and humor. It is a tribute to the classic cartoon J. Padrón's *Vampiros en La Habana*. A work achieved by young amateurs with just a camera, a PC and the damn urge to make cinema. (qtd. in Eimil Reigosa).

Sangre thus became the first Cuban film with vampires of flesh and bone (Eimil Reigosa).

In a previous article (Dorta, "Narcos"), I analyzed *Corazón cubano* (*Cuban Heart*) (Maikel Liyuen Valdés, 2014), another amateur and exploitation film made by fans of narco cinema, mostly young Black reparteros⁴ and reggaeton artists of the Jesús María neighborhood in Havana, which is marked by inequality and lack of access to basic resources. Unlike this film, *Sangre* was made by young college students, although both groups of creators share a lack of academic training in cinema. *Sangre's* director and actors live in the outskirts of Havana

4. The inhabitants of the repartos, Havana's peripheric and poorest neighborhoods, are called reparteros.

(Marianao), in which inequality is racialized much like the Jesús María neighborhood, but in a less concentrated way. The budget they had to make the film was almost non-existent compared to that of *Corazón cubano*, which had a relatively small group of amateur actors. For its part, more than 40 actors appear at *Sangre* (among protagonists, extras, and secondary characters) (Eimil Reigosa), which is commendable for an amateur product made with scarce resources.

The simplicity of *Corazón cubano's* plot (two gangs vie for the control and profits from drug trafficking in a neighborhood in Old Havana) contrasts with that of *Sangre*, full of characters and plot twists. *Sangre's* story can be summed up as follows: Lester and William are good friends. The former suspects that the latter is gay because he does not have a girlfriend. However, William meets Elizabeth, who turns out to be a vampire and turns him on their first night of sex. William awakens as a vampire with an emo, Goth appearance. From this moment on, the story focuses partly on the identity conflicts of William, who does not want to be a vampire, as well as the internal struggles of the group of vampires, due to the authoritarian nature of Dorian. He is the first Cuban vampire who frequently travels to Transylvania to communicate with Dracula. A group of vampire hunters (including Midas) wants to exterminate Dorian.

Although this storyline follows many of the topics of other narratives about vampires, such as the identity conflicts of the protagonist or the fight between humans and vampires (good vs. evil), *Sangre* introduces some variations that give the story a delirious character, typical of some exploitation narratives. Cuban vampires are resistant to the sun because they take the vitamin complex Polivit. There is an antidote to stop being a vampire: the pru oriental. In a previous life, the vampire Elizabeth (who was born in 1864) was William's lover and his slave on a plantation, but he died under the orders of Antonio Maceo and Máximo Gómez in the 19th-century war of independence. After 120 years of searching, Elizabeth finds William in the 21st century.

Dorian, the head of the Cuban vampires, is on a mission to ensure that The Red Night takes place: a phenomenon that vampires have used in other places to increase their population on a large scale, but this is the first time that it could happen in Cuba. The mass conversion of those attending the Rolling Stones concert in Havana into vampires will occur specifically when the group is playing "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," a song composed by Dracula himself, who donated it to the rockers, according to *Sangre's* outrageous narrative. The notes of the Rolling Stones' song will cause an orgy of blood. The mission of the vampire hunter Midas and other renegade vampires is to prevent this catastrophic event. Mick Jagger is kidnapped by some of these vampires and other human boys to convince him not to have the Red Night: one of the most far-fetched moments in SC since the amateur actor who plays Jagger does not even resemble the singer.

Sangre's characters are not psychologically complex (although there is intent to make the protagonist William more profound, with his identity conflicts and his renunciation of being a vampire). Its special effects are of dubious quality; they are part of the film's low-budget spectacularity. Its verisimilitude patterns are capricious and bizarre. The performances of the amateur actors are mostly unconvincing. These non-diegetic elements of exploitation and trash films are positively valued for a paracinematic sensibility (Sconce 113). They are manifestations of the excess typical of exploitation and trash objects: it is what interrupts the illusionist aesthetic. It makes the audience aware of the non-diegetic aspects of the image. The excess manifests itself in the "film's failure to conform to historically delimited codes of verisimilitude;" it "calls attention to the text as a cultural and sociological document" (Sconce 113).

Sangre confronts the thematic hegemony of Cuban cinema and its representation models, which have been mostly based on realist esthetics (Fehimović 250; Pérez, *Burlar* 145; Reyes, *El gobierno* 198). The film exhibits its referential variety: mainstream cinema, the pop world, Cuban popular culture, and narratives about vampires (Pérez, "Mentes"). Unrepeatable moments of what Jeffrey Sconce calls "badtruth" proliferate in the film. The "badtruth" provides a defamiliarized point of view by combining "the transcendently weird and the catastrophically awful" (112). The "bad," "a nodal point of paracinematic style," becomes a tool that is "aesthetically defamiliarizing and politically invigorating" (12). Those moments include, among many others, a spider witch hanging from trees on a Havana street who possesses the only existing antidote to kill Dorian and Chinese-made lanterns that shoot ultraviolet rays to destroy vampires (*Sangre* 1:40:00 and 0:49:52)

Moments of social criticism questioning the Cuban political reality coexist in *Sangre* along with the "badtruth" and the excess, and are sometimes indistinguishable from the latter. There are non-emphatic and non-didactic comments on evangelical religions, Cuban medical missions abroad, homophobia, medicine shortages, alcoholism, and nostalgia for Soviet culture.

The young amateurs of *Sangre* chose the vampire to represent their cinematic personas among an extensive repertoire of possible incarnations, which can be justified by its symbolic productivity and conceptual implications for the film's imaginary. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (7) argues, any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part, the monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, and sexual. Political or ideological difference especially is a catalyst to monstrous representation (8). In this way, *Sangre's* young vampires are strongly marked by alterity and difference as distinctive traits of any monstrous entity. This decision opens up a powerful horizon in representation and symbolic developments since the monsters are "secondary bodies through which the possibilities of other genders, other sexual practices, and other social customs can be explored" (Cohen 18). Specifically, the vampire as a metaphor operates as a "catch-all for representations of distance from cultural norms" (Campbell 100). Its liminal nature "renders it available as a metaphorical figure for the representation of otherness" (100).

Foreignness and disruptive energy are represented through the vampire. As Erik Butler (3) argues, the vampire threatens a series of homologous social units: the individual, the community member, and the state and embodies the possibility of spreading chaos (11). It also represents the undisciplined forces of desire that exist outside of cultural networks of socialization (Weinstock n.p.). By becoming vampires, William and Elizabeth begin to break the rules of socialization and endanger the stability of the community in *Sangre*. "Since you were bitten, you became a threat to the whole world; you should be tied up," Midas, the vampire slayer, tells William.

The vampire becomes a political category, referring to ambition of indeterminate proportions that stands to remake the world in ways that victims cannot even imagine. The Red Night in *Sangre* and the threat of a massive conversion of humans into vampires is a variation of this uncontrolled power, which is opposed by the vampire slayers and some vampires who reject Dorian's despotism. Dorian coordinates the nefarious event together with the Rolling Stones.

One feature of vampire films is significant in assessing the meanings that this monstrous figure acquires in *Sangre*. According to Jeffrey Weinstock (n.p.), these films unusually emphasize the topic of geographic and transnational mobility. The space inhabited by the

vampire is a smooth space in which thought overcomes distance and movement is unimpeded by either material obstacles or national boundaries. Stacey Abbot (217) argues that a “quest for spatial liberation and freedom of movement” drives the vampire and that this “spatial liberation extends across the globe and undermines national boundaries or identities” in the twenty-first century.

The strong presence in contemporary Cuban literature and art of various tropes about immobility, confinement, and no escape due to natural and, above all, political circumstances, contrasts with the choice to use the vampire as the protagonist of *Sangre*.⁵ Such a choice is a gesture that aims at reimagining those dystopian tropes through the symbolization of other alternatives, such as the absence of temporal or spatial borders and unfettered mobility. Those who hunt vampires face this freedom of movement at a disadvantage, as they are subject to physical and temporal laws and regulations imposed by governments. Instead, the vampiric motion reflects the desire to transcend the limitations of time and place and become something other (Weinstock n.p.).

The young millennial vampires of *Sangre* proliferate by being infected by others that bite them. They form a community of others that must be eliminated because it threatens the stability of the unconverted and because they need blood to continue 'unliving.' The vampire slayer Midas embodies the figure of the law and the restoration of violated order; he calls vampires "beasts" and is dedicated to curbing their proliferation. However, the opposition between vampire slayers and monstrous entities is not the only source of conflict. Within the group of vampires, schisms occur, due to Dorian's despotism, a figure of power who must authorize the "conversions" of the new vampires. He is the only one who has direct communication with Dracula when he travels to Transylvania. Elizabeth disobeys Dorian by turning William into a vampire without the boss's authorization. Hence a strong opposition arises between the couple William-Elizabeth and Dorian. These variations on the struggle for power and community stability broaden *Sangre's* thematic arc, thus including allegorical comments on the risks of difference and the stigmatization of dissidence; the imposition of false community unity and homogeneity among equals, and criticism of the verticalism of power: all of these are frequent topics in Cuban art and literature that are explicitly or metaphorically political.

Part of my analysis of *Corazón cubano*, the film mentioned previously, is based on the use of Mark Edberg's concept of "cultural persona." I argued in my article that the Cuban *reparteros* created a projection of the narco's cultural persona to performatively demonstrate their fantasies of social climbing, consumption, and possession of material goods within an environment of economic marginalization (Dorta, "Narcos" 155). Edberg's concept is relevant to understanding the choice of the vampire by *Sangre's* young amateurs, although with different values from those of the *reparteros* and the narcos. The vampire has become a culturally-constructed and flexible representation disseminated over time; a polysemic symbol that has been widely appropriated beyond the figure's geospatial and cultural roots (Edberg 110-111, 123).

The vampire is the cultural persona chosen by *Sangre's* young millennials to project their anxieties amid deep identity and social transformations, which include key events necessary to understanding Cuban society in the first decade of the 2000s, such as Barack Obama's visit to the country (2016); Fidel Castro's death (2016), or the Rolling Stones concert in Havana (2016), to mention just a few. *Sangre* symbolically manages the crises of the Cuban millennial generation taking advantage of the monstrous and liminal figure of the vampire's potential. In this way, young amateurs continue a long tradition of dialogue with the vampiric cultural persona, in which this persona

5. As Désirée Díaz (254; 275) argues, the analogy between the island of Cuba and prison is present in all periods of Cuban literature. The “symbol of insular geography as a space of oppression” has been used by several generations and ideological groups as a symbol of the conditions of political oppression, the struggle for freedom, and insular pathos” (255). Several scholars have studied the literary and cultural representations of the experience of confinement and imprisonment that marked Cuban society during the 20th century. See Cuesta (143-160), Díaz (239-278), Marturano, Rivera-Rivera (91-140), and Saumell.

mirrors a changing world and the subject's anxieties about shifting identities: the vampire becomes an object onto which general anxiety can be displaced (Butler 12-13). At the same time, this dialogue features adaptations of the vampire as a cultural persona within the Cuban context through several strategies. *Sangre's* millennial vampires become overdetermined bodies that condense culturally specific anxieties and desires into one super-saturated form (Weinstock n.p.). When the vampiric archetype is inserted into a particular cultural context and is also "sexualised, technologised, and othered," what emerges is a "supercharged, overdetermined surplus of meaning," a "symbolic supertext operating on multiple levels simultaneously" (Weinstock n.p.).

Tropicalization and globalgothic

The vampire archetype as a symbolic supertext works on multiple levels in *Sangre*, and the young amateurs in the film engage with this archetype in different ways. They use strategies such as the tropicalization of the vampire and the thematization of the dual nature of globalization, taking the gothic genre as a reference.

Sangre symbolically relocates the vampiric trope in the Cuban context, incorporating elements specific to this context, and updates the traits of the trope as they have been canonized in other cultural contexts. This relocation channels local content and conflicts, which are made visible through their framing in the vampire narrative. In this way, the film appropriates representational models of the gothic genre, which are adapted to an amateur, exploitation, and trash production, complemented with native elements. In such cases, the canonized Gothic models are transformed with comic features that divert the effect of terror and sublimity towards cheap and sometimes parodic narratives, which trivializes the transcendence of Gothic (Moraña 339-340). *Sangre* dialogues in this way with an extensive corpus of texts and visual narratives, which, according to Inés Ordiz and Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno (7), engage with the Gothic in several forms, such as transposition, tropicalization, appropriation, and parody, while examining local issues.

One of the mechanisms through which *Sangre* engages with vampire narratives is the so-called tropicalization. Justin D. Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos (2) define it as

a process of troping and infusing a particular space, place, region or nation with an assortment of qualities, metaphors, ideas, and principles that are disseminated and maintained through literary texts, historical narratives, film, and media. (2)

This process aims to reverse the fixation of the southern Other through definitions and stereotypes by resisting the externally driven discourses of exoticization (2). This is relevant for the Cuban context and its real and symbolic subjects, represented through an exotic gaze that prefixes their developments according to political, racial, or gender stereotypes. *Sangre's* tropicalization of the vampire is a strategy of de-exoticization and authorship of the image of the young amateurs who make the film.

For his part, Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez (*Selva* n.p.) addresses the tropicalization of Gothic as a mechanism that recycles and transforms that genre in Latin America, putting characters and themes out of place to enhance their artificiality, dynamics of construction and enunciation of otherness. According to the author, this enables the enunciation of what "cannot be talked about," which depends on each context. In this way, the gothic genre is honored and parodied to exercise social criticism. The transposition of gothic characters and situations to tropical settings absorbs their powers of representation (*Selva* n.p.). Both homage and mockery of the Gothic are intertwined in the

tropicalization. As in the case of *Sangre*, the vampires are presented as transformed but recognizable beings, despite the marks left on them by the mechanism that tropicalized them (*Selva* n.p.). For the transformation of the vampiric figure to be more visible, its tropicalization still makes it possible to recognize some conventions of the Gothic genre, such as the figure's behavior. However, these already appear strongly marked by the new representational context.

A scene from *Sangre* (0:16:31-0:20:05) exposes some of the variations that the film introduces as part of the tropicalization of Gothic. Marcos is Elizabeth's vampire "brother" who was also turned by Dorian (hence this vampiric kinship). He suddenly shows up at William's house to answer all of his questions. William is perplexed and tormented after being turned into a vampire. Marcos' speech in this pedagogical scene has a dual audience: William and the film's viewers, who must be educated about what it means to be a Cuban vampire. *Sangre* fulfills, in this way, some characteristics of all vampire films, according to Jeffrey Weinstock (n.p.). Vampire films are always about defining the vampire, which is a necessary preliminary to destroying it. Similarly, vampire movies always define themselves in relation to previous cinematic representations of vampires. They often are quite explicit about the revisions to the mythology they are making, argues Weinstock (n.p.).

These characteristics of vampire films turn us viewers into "textual vampire nomads", who are always watching many vampire movies simultaneously, comparing the old and the new representations,

recognizing the extent to which the new portrayal conforms to or diverges from the sedimented conventions of the vampire cinema and looking for the seemingly inevitable winks to the audience at the moments that a new vampire film metatextually acknowledges itself as participating in and revising an established tradition. (Weinstock n.p.)

The challenge for filmmakers, including young Cuban amateurs, is to tell a familiar story differently. This objective is explicitly manifested in contemporary vampire films through their metatextual awareness.

At one point in the conversation between William and Marcos, the latter asks the former if he has watched *Vampiros en la Habana*. The intradiegetic objective of the question is to make William understand that Polivit is the equivalent of "vampisol," the formula that allowed vampires in Cuba to expose themselves to the sun in Padrón's film.

In the tropicalized gothic universe of *Sangre*, vampires can expose themselves to the sun because they take Polivit, a vitamin complex. This advantage is not without problems because the vitamin is frequently in short supply in pharmacies, as William comments, as has been the reality. Polivit was first supplied to the population in Cuba in the 1990s, amid the food crisis of the Special Period, which caused a severe nutritional deficit and diseases related to it. The multivitamin supplement cannot be consumed regularly today due to the scarcity that William's character alludes to.

He also has doubts about the fact that he has seen himself reflected in the mirror. The character contrasts his cultural knowledge of vampire narratives with the unusualness of that reflection. Marcos explains that Cuban vampires have "evolved" from "ancient vampires," which allows them to see themselves in mirrors. The reason for this is not explained. *Sangre* exhibits its confidence in the plausibility of its tropicalized vampiric universe. The film also introduces a term to explain the length of time William was asleep before waking up as a vampire. Marcos explains that the "sueño de muerte" (dream of death) takes place between the death of the human and his awakening as a non-living creature. Also, William must give up sleep as part of his new condition.

From this meeting with Marcos, in which William resists even taking blood, the latter begins a desperate search for something that will allow him to return to being human. He rejects the inhumanity of vampires and their dependence on blood, which leads them to murder innocent humans. William goes to a library, hoping to find a book that will help him. He pulls from a shelf a copy of *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* (1924), the epic poem that Vladimir Mayakovsky dedicated to the Russian revolutionary. William looks at the book for a few seconds while parodic martial music plays. Abruptly he rejects it and returns it to the shelf. The Soviet archive is no longer a source of knowledge; its place is reduced to the decorative inactivity of a library shelf (0:16:31-0:20:05). This contrasts with the "pervasive presence" of "the spectre of Marx and Marxism" throughout both Juan Padrón's *Vampiros en La Habana* (1985) and its sequel *Más vampiros en La Habana* (2003), which Fehimović identifies in "Pepe's anti-totalitarian struggles, his uncle's internationalist, socialist desire to distribute Vampisol around the world for free, and the community of vampires invoked by "Radio Vampiro Internacional"" (Fehimović 55).

In this search, William meets Isidro, a vampire of Asian descent who offers him pru, a fermented drink extracted from the root of the Bejuco Ubí plant (princess vine or seasonvine), which is very popular in the East of Cuba. Its origin is traced back to the 1800s, the period after Haitian Revolution, when French settlers migrated to eastern Cuba, bringing with them their customs and traditions, including oriental pru. The drink has been believed to possess antihypertensive, stomachic, depurative, and diuretic properties. *Sangre* changes the irreversibility of the vampiric condition by introducing the oriental pru as the antidote to that condition, according to its tropicalization of the vampire narratives' tropes. The choice of pru as an antidote for vampirism in *Sangre* could be due to the perception of this drink as one with excellent medicinal properties, making it suitable for reversing this condition. According to oral tradition passed down by Haitians living in Cuba, the pru gave enslaved people the strength to complete hard farming tasks by lifting their spirits and healing their illnesses. *Sangre* would reproduce this vision by introducing pru as an antidote since it would allow millennial vampires not to be dependent on human blood to survive. In addition, the homemade preparation of this drink and its relatively easy acquisition would help make it an antidote at hand.

Sangre is an example of a dynamic of appropriations and reattributions of meaning that Glennis Byron (6) calls "globalgothic," through which gothic tropes and narratives travel with the movement of people and the flow of cultural production, becoming dislocated from specific regions or places while at the same time connecting with new narratives. What characterizes globalgothic is its dual response to globalization: the exploitation of what it enables and produces combined with the frequent demonization of its processes (5). In this way, the combination of the responses enacts two codependent mechanisms: "gothic is globalized –reproduced, consumed, recycled– and globalization is gothicked –made monstrous, spectral, vampiric" (5). *Sangre* takes its representation strategies and the distinctive features of its plot from this codependency. The Cuban amateur filmmakers recycle vampire tropes globalized by multiple narratives and the figure of the vampire as a cultural persona while addressing globalization as a monstrous incarnation.

These young people create an entertainment fandom narrative fueled by their preferences for vampire stories. Thus, the products made available through globalization are eagerly appropriated. Still, at the same time, they are exploited to articulate the processes of globalization as monstrous, spectral, and cannibalistic: they become objects of anxiety and suspicion (Byron 5). Globalization "becomes a gothic manifestation, a material and psychic invasion, a force of contamination and dominance" (5). All vampires in *Sangre* could

embody these gothic manifestations of globalization, but the symbolic force of globalgothic is concentrated in the Rolling Stones.

The main event that mobilizes the film's action is Red Night. The despotic vampire Dorian has traveled to Transylvania to coordinate the event with Dracula and ensure its success. The visit of the Rolling Stones to Havana is imagined as a psychic invasion that will conquer the minds of those attending their concert and turn them into vampires, to increase the vampire population on a large scale. The event "has never happened here in Cuba, but times are changing," says the vampire hunter Midas. This is an allusion to Cuba's openness to global products of cultural consumption and to the country's place in that global imaginary. The end of *Sangre* stages the massive transformation into vampires of those attending the Rolling Stones concert: a monster, the result of a low-budget spectacularity, bites everyone who listens to "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," which turned into a lethal vector of vampiric contagion (*Sangre* 1:46:39-1:46:56).

What could be celebrated as a benefit and opening to new symbolic horizons is imagined within the dynamics of globalgothic: the exploitation of the transnational flows to give form to anxieties attendant upon the processes of globalization (Byron 5). In the case of *Sangre*, these anxieties refer to issues such as the stability of local or national identities and cultures or the impact of transnational capitalism on Cuban social, political, and cultural life. Young Cuban millennial amateurs project their anxieties about their identities and futures onto the figure of the vampire. In a range of globalized products and cultural personas, the vampire allows these anxieties to be embodied as a haunting and liminal figure of disturbance. The symbol of a globalized cultural product, the Rolling Stones, is gothicked as a vampiric figure that invades young Cubans' minds and converts them into vampires. A combination of attraction and dread marks the representation of the musicians in *Sangre*. They are the vector of changes and new experiences but also of an uncontrolled contagion. The exposure to their influence and dominance leads to a massive conversion with unforeseeable consequences.

Dialogues with *Vampiros en La Habana*

Sangre is a film with high levels of intertextuality, not only because of its tropicalization of the vampire and its dialogue with the Gothic as a genre, but also because of its relationship with one of the most popular films of Cuban cinema, *Vampiros en La Habana* (*Vampires in Havana*) (henceforth *Vampiros*) by Juan Padrón (1985), Cuba's first feature-length animation (Fehimović 43).⁶

In the aforementioned conversation between William and Marcos, the relationship between *Sangre* and *Vampiros* becomes explicit when Marcos asks the recently converted William if he remembers Padrón's film, as William will better understand the power of the Polivit (which allows Cuban vampires to expose themselves to the sun) if he remembers that the Vampisol fulfilled a similar function in *Vampiros*. The film becomes for SC a blueprint for designing a vampiric narrative that is simultaneously innovative and indebted to previous representations. *Sangre* acknowledges itself as a revisionist narrative while remaining aware of its metatextual nature.

Both *Sangre* and *Vampiros* adapt European and North American vampire narratives and create new representations linked to the peculiarities of the Cuban context. In both films, the Cuban vampires destabilize the conventions of the gothic genre but, at the same time, remain recognizable within those conventions. In the case of Padrón's film, its protagonist Joseph (Pepito) represents a new breed of mestizo vampires, who resist the sun thanks to the consumption of Vampisol, a special formula created by his uncle Von Dracula. The Vampisol is

6. Juan Padrón directed *Más vampiros en La Habana* (*More Vampires in Havana*) in 2003, and is considered to be "the first explicitly identified "sequel" in Cuban cinematic history" (Fehimović 43). Dunja Fehimović extensively analyzes *Vampiros* and *Más vampiros en La Habana* in her discussion of national identity in twenty-first-century Cuban film. In the present article, I focus on *Sangre* and its relationship with *Vampiros* because their intertextual links are stronger than those that might be established between *Sangre* and *Más vampiros en La Habana*.

coveted by groups of vampires from Europe and the United States, who want to take the formula from Von Dracula, so they move to Havana to start a war for its possession. In *Sangre*, the Polivit vitamin that allows Cuban vampires to expose themselves to the sun is not the product of the ingenuity of a scientist. Instead, the State provides it to the general population, from which the vampires take advantage, but for this same reason, the vitamin is scarce in the country. The consumption of the vitamin complex becomes a question of individual survival. It is a product like so many others that are scarce in the daily consumption of Cubans. Foreign powers do not covet it the same as in *Vampiros*, so its quest is not epic. In this sense, the didactic, "patriotic use of history" by Padrón in both *Vampiros* and *Más vampiros en La Habana* incorporates the films' plots "into a Cuban narrative of nationalist, anti-totalitarian lucha" (Fehimović 56). Pepe's and his friends' resistance against fascists, Fulgencio Batista, and Gerardo Machado, contrasts with the lacking air of heroism displayed by the protagonists in *Sangre*.

Pepito is not aware of his vampiric condition in Padrón's film. He is a musician in an orchestra and fights against the tyranny of Gerardo Machado.⁷ His uncle makes him aware that he is a vampire, and, with this awakening, the duty to protect the Vampisol and prevent foreign vampires from taking over the formula emerges. Pepito assumes a heroic role; he fights evil in all its manifestations and is faithful to the filial bonds that bind him to his beloved and the political cause that he defends. He is fully a friend, a patriot, and a heterosexual (Reyes, "El etnocentrismo"). He is a multifaceted Cuban macho who combines equal parts of hedonism and fulfillment of duty in his personality. Pepito's heroism in *Vampiros* is radically transformed with William, *Sangre's* protagonist, an emo-style millennial in perpetual identity crisis who doesn't want to be a vampire and projects himself from non-heroic withdrawal and non-belonging.

As Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez (*The Migration* 28) states, vampirism in Padrón's film is a metaphor "for economic exploitation, drainage of natural resources, as well as racial and class anxieties." This metaphor works as a continuation of the exploitation of early European colonizers, bloodsuckers of the material resources and the islands' inhabitants (*The Migration* 31). The extractivist metaphor of *Vampiros* is part of a highly ideological plot, in which themes such as colonization, the ridicule of the other dominating foreigner, and the resistance to domination profoundly mark the tropicalization of Gothic and vampire narratives. For its part, *Sangre* transforms the extractivist trope of *Vampiros* into one about contagion, multiplication, and contamination, according to its approach to globalization as a gothic, monstrous, and spectral manifestation. The Rolling Stones embody this trope in the film because they are responsible for the vampire conversion of their concertgoers. At the end of *Sangre*, a monster bites the listeners of "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" at the climax of the Red Night, consummating the mass contagion and continuity of the vampiric race in Cuba. The film leaves no room for resistance to this lethal event, no matter how much the vampire slayers and some vampires have tried to prevent it throughout the entire plot.

This closure contrasts with the ending of *Vampiros*, in which Pepito defeats the evil colonizing vampires and altruistically discloses the Vampisol formula. The character redeems himself ethically with this liberating gesture, opposing the European vampires who want to exploit the product and the Americans who want to destroy it (Eljaiek-Rodríguez, *The Migration* 28). Padrón's film proposes, through characters like Pepito, what Dean Luis Reyes ("El etnocentrismo") calls a "soft ethnocentrism," which celebrates the authentic fullness of one's own, confronting the control of the forces that seek to subjugate those characters and systematically devaluing the authority of the colonizers.

7. Gerardo Machado's government lasted between 1925 and 1933.

The relationship of *Sangre's* characters to these dominating forces (particularized in the Rolling Stones as super vampires) is more ambiguous. It is a relationship that mixes fascination and fear. It sees in these forces the vectors of a contagion whose developments are unpredictable since they will potentially destabilize the certainties of identity, otherness, the limits of inside and outside, and the meaning of the local and the global.

New blood for Cuban amateur cinema: the productive crisis of millennial vampires

Sangre tropicalizes the figure of the vampire and uses this tropicalization as a tool of social criticism. The film is also an example of the dynamics of globalgothic. It recycles globalized vampiric tropes and the cultural persona of the vampire while addressing globalization as a monstrous and gothic manifestation (as embodied in the Rolling Stones). *Sangre's* metatextual awareness takes form in the dialogues it establishes with the film *Vampiros en La Habana*. The amateur movie rewrites the symbolic and ideological legacy of *Vampiros* transforming its extractivist trope into a trope of contamination and contagion. In addition, the protagonist of *Sangre* (William) reverses the heroic profile of the protagonist of *Vampiros* (Pepito) by becoming a millennial in identity crisis who refuses to be a vampire. *Sangre* has invigorated the audiovisual panorama of Cuban amateur cinema with its freshness and aesthetic and narrative choices. Its young director and actors made an exploitation and trash film that satisfied fans' desires for vampire movies. At the same time, it symbolically staged the anxieties of a generation placed amid profound transformations. As a monstrous and liminal figure and as a cultural persona, the vampire perfectly mirrors these young people's personal and social universe, an ever-changing and uncertain environment. *Sangre cubana* playfully addresses these circumstances and comments on the stigmatization of dissidence, otherness, and the verticalism of power using the vampire narrative.

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