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Citation: Sexton, Jamie (2015) Creeping decay: cult soundtracks, residual media, and digital technologies. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 13 (1). pp. 12-30. ISSN 1740-0309

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2014.985024>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2014.985024>>

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## Creeping decay: cult soundtracks, residual media, and digital technologies

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This paper explores the recent resurgence in the collecting of cult film soundtracks, in particular films stemming from the late 1960s to the early 1980s and often linked to horror and other modes of exploitation cinema. I consider this phenomenon as an important component of cult film fandom, but one which has largely been overlooked in cult cinema research because it is often considered as belonging to popular music, as opposed to film, research. As films can become cultified in many different ways and across different media, I look into how areas of music culture can both be inspired by, as well as influence, aspects of film culture. The paper also addresses the importance of ‘residual’ technologies within cult film/music cultures, noting in particular the preference for vinyl records as well as VHS tapes in certain cult fan communities, and explores the appeal that such ‘old media’ retain within an increasingly digital mediascape.

**Keywords:** analogue and digital technologies; cult film; cult soundtracks; residual media

While the majority of studies into media and technological change tend to focus on how new technologies enable new creative methods and possibilities, or contribute to novel modes of distribution and reception, there is a body of work that seeks to understand how new technologies reframe and impact upon both older technologies and older media content, often termed ‘residual media’ (Acland 2007; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2014, 85–112). Notable work within film studies exploring residual media includes Egan (2007) on VHS collectors; Hilderbrand (2009) on videotape and bootleg aesthetics; and Klinger (2006), who, while focusing on newer formats and technologies, looks at how these repackage and ‘resurrect’ older content. In this paper I am interested in examining how both old media formats and content can take on renewed meanings within a digital age, in particular how their status can become enhanced within cult communities. I should note, however, that technology is not considered here as determining the processes that I study, but is rather posited as facilitating modes of interaction and production that are very much social.

The soundtrack enthusiasm and collecting I scrutinise is primarily focused on music and film fans who are affiliated with independent culture. This entails

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consideration of cross-media content, as I want to think about how films can influence music and vice versa. Surprisingly, whilst much scholarship has explored sound and music within films, there has not been a great deal of research around how these two media forms influence each other outside of industrial considerations.<sup>1</sup> One of the few exceptions here is K.J. Donnelly's (2005) final chapter in his *Spectre of Sound*, which looks at topics such as music inspired by film soundtracks, film influencing imagery in pop music (such as sleeve art or music videos), and musicians sampling films. We could add to such examples: lyrics referring to, or appropriated from, films and references to films being mentioned by artists within interviews or, as sometimes happens, being listed in liner notes. Donnelly (2005) argues that a possible reason behind a lack of research into these interactions is the fact that music is often considered as an *additional element* to films:

Many commentators have only dealt with pop and cinema on the level of 'addition', noting the insertion of pop songs into films, whereas perhaps we should begin to conceive the situation more on the level of genetic fusion. (166)

While he focuses on how film has inspired music, Donnelly (2005) also notes how 'the influence has by no means been all one way' (151). Through focusing on soundtrack collecting and reissues within independent music cultures, I also wish to trace how film and music can inform and influence each other. Like Barbara Klinger in this special issue, I seek to 'analyze the association between cult texts and sound and to put cult cinema studies and sound studies into conversation', though I focus here on the musical soundtrack, not radio plays. The film soundtrack is an obvious area where film and music cultures overlap in that the soundtrack is part of a film, but it also extends beyond the film if released as a separate audio recording. In this paper I will look more deeply into some of these overlaps: firstly, looking into how films can accrue cult values through circulating across different areas of music culture; secondly, by thinking about similarities between segments of cult film and music cultures; and thirdly, by considering how such developments can feed back into filmmaking. Through analysing these overlaps I want to stress how music cultures can act as important sites in which films circulate and are engaged with, and which contribute to values surrounding both older film content and 'residual' media technologies.

### **Cult soundtracks**

There has been a striking rise of interest in cult soundtrack recordings over the past decade or so amongst both record and film fans, in particular soundtracks which stem from a number of exploitation or more obscure art films made between the 1960s and early 1980s; many of these films are relatively obscure and the genre predominantly drawn from is the horror film. Soundtrack collecting is certainly not new, but interest in cult soundtracks has intensified in recent years. Cult soundtracks are now being released frequently and a number of

independent record companies have emerged to cater to the increasing demand for such material, including labels totally devoted to soundtracks such as the horror-oriented labels Death Waltz (UK, formed in 2011) and One Way Static (Belgium, formed in 2012), or archive-based labels releasing a substantial output of soundtrack material such as Finders Keepers (UK, formed in 2005). Soundtracks released by these three labels alone include – though are not limited to – the following (soundtrack artist in parentheses): *All the Colors of the Dark* (Bruno Nicolai), *Assault on Precinct 13* (John Carpenter), *Cannibal Ferox* (Roberto Donati), *The Case of the Bloody Iris* (Bruno Nicolai), *City of the Living Dead* (Fabio Frizzi), *Fascination* (Philippe D'Aram), *Hardware* (Simon Boswell), *Last House on the Left* (David Hess), *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* (Giuliano Sorgini), *Marquis de Sade* (Bruno Nicolai), *Ms. 45* (Joe Delia), *Possession* (Andrzej Korzyński), *Requiem for a Vampire* (Pierre Raph), *They Live* (John Carpenter), *Twins of Evil* (Harry Robinson), *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (Luboš Fišer), and *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (Fabio Frizzi).

While a variety of different composers and films from different nations are represented in the recent spate of reissues, Italian horror cinema tends to be the most admired within such circles. There is also huge interest in Goblin and Ennio Morricone amongst cult collectors, which is apparent in criticism and discussions. These artists have also seen a number of their works reissued on vinyl more recently by Italian specialist labels such as AMS, Cinevox, and Dagored Records (and which can be purchased through specialist international retailers), and include Goblin's scores for *Contamination*, *Deep Red*, *Patrick*, *Suspiria*, *Zombi*, and Morricone's scores for *The Bird With the Crystal Plumage*, *Forbidden Photos of a Lady Above Suspicion*, *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*, and *Cold Eyes of Fear* (performed by the Gruppo d'Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza<sup>2</sup>).

Specialist reissue labels are symptomatic of a broader, often less 'official', interest in cult soundtracks evident in activities such as: blogs and forums devoted to cult soundtracks; second-hand purchasing of long out-of-print soundtracks; uploading of soundtracks onto streaming sites such as YouTube; soundtrack-devoted radio shows and podcasts; and the sharing of soundtracks through peer-to-peer applications. The rise in such soundtrack collecting should itself be connected to cult film fandom more generally; though there are undoubtedly many people who consume cult soundtracks who do not have a concomitant interest in cinema, a large number of such soundtrack enthusiasts are also film fans.

Technological change has, of course, impacted more broadly on cult film viewing and enthusiasm. A particularly significant development has been the increased availability of films, especially films which were once difficult to view. Home viewing platforms – first the VCR and then DVD and Blu-ray players – were crucial here in that each format saw an increased amount of film content spill onto the market. Networked technologies have further contributed to the availability of such films, and have led to a rise in the informal distribution of

films:<sup>3</sup> streaming video sites such as YouTube now host a huge array of films, including a number of cult and exploitation titles, whilst specialist sharing sites such as Cinemageddon and Karagaarga also enable the sharing of titles, some of which have never been officially released (Smith 2011; Lucas 2009).

Although many cultists have embraced new technologies, there exists a marked enthusiasm for older technologies and practices within sectors of cult fandom. This is evident, for example, amongst those who nostalgically celebrate grindhouse cinema (Church 2011, 22–25), or fans who are committed to collecting ‘video nasties’ on VHS tapes (Egan 2007, 154–182). Many cult soundtrack devotees also display a marked preference for purchasing vinyl editions over other formats. This isn’t the case for everyone, obviously: soundtracks are often produced in different formats, most commonly as digital downloads, CDs, and vinyl. Yet a preference for vinyl is common amongst both independent companies releasing soundtracks and those who regularly purchase them. This is noticeable in soundtrack-dedicated forums, where discussions of vinyl feature prominently. Death Waltz’s forum ‘Spin the Blackest Circles’ (run in conjunction with US archive label, Light in the Attic), for example, was set up to facilitate discussion amongst soundtrack collectors and vinyl fans, and includes sections about storing vinyl and recommending turntables alongside threads devoted to record labels, cult films, and film-related art.

The preference for vinyl amongst many soundtrack enthusiasts should itself be linked to a broader resurgence of vinyl within the recording industry. By the late 1980s it looked as though the life of the vinyl format was nearing its end: a huge industry commitment to the digital compact disc (which included limiting the production of vinyl records and refusing retailers their option of returning unsold vinyl stock) led to CDs outstripping vinyl sales for the first time in 1988, after which sales of vinyl declined (Shuker 2010, 60–61). Despite prognostications heralding the death of the format, vinyl was not rendered obsolete; by the mid-1990s sales of the format had started to rise, albeit gradually. Following the widespread adoption of MP3 and associated virtual digital formats, vinyl sales continued to grow and by the mid-2000s a ‘vinyl revival’ was being mentioned frequently by journalists. While the vinyl market still only makes up a small percentage of total recorded music purchases, sales of the format have been on the increase since 2000, with the majority of sales through independent retailers.<sup>4</sup> It is within the independent sector of the industry that vinyl has become particularly important again: most independent record shops have increased their vinyl stock over the past few years and this has been stimulated further by Record Store Day (RSD) (Anonymous 2014). RSD started in 2008 as an attempt by independent record stores and recording artists to celebrate the physical record store (which was declining rapidly). By issuing limited edition physical music – the majority of which is vinyl – at participating stores, RSD has become a prominent symbol of the recent resurgence of the vinyl format.

The soundtrack enthusiasts and collectors included in this analysis are also often committed to independent music. As already mentioned, a number of labels

releasing cult soundtracks are independent, while many fans are committed to buying from independent stores, either online or physical. The head of Death Waltz recordings, Spencer Hickman, is not only a key figure in organising RSD in the UK but has previously been a manager at Rough Trade's East London shop (Rough Trade is one of the most iconic independent record labels and shops within the UK). As such, there are strong connections between independent music cultures and a preference for vinyl. These connections point to how vinyl devotion is sometimes considered an alternative to mainstream tendencies, persisting as it has done against a background of corporate-backed strategies to consign the format to history. Yochim and Biddinger (2008, 184) have argued how vinyl is now 'positioned as a mass produced good that can be imagined as valuable in ways often reserved for rare, unique or individually produced goods', while John Davis (2007) has written:

The decline of vinyl records as a popular music format was shaped by music labels, retailers, and consumer electronic companies, but this activity did not render vinyl records obsolete for everyone. A group of vinyl aficionados evolved for whom the format is more than a medium for music consumption. These vinyl record vinylphiles are best understood as a group of medium-specific collectors for whom the format's evolving significance motivates ongoing acquisition and possession. (225)

As Roy Shuker (2010, 65–71) has outlined, there are a number of other reasons why people prefer vinyl over other formats, and why it is still the preferred format amongst music collectors, which include: *nostalgia and memory* (many collectors growing up playing vinyl have remained dedicated to the format, whose appeal is frequently intertwined with personal memory); *authenticity and aura* (many collectors stressing that if a record was first issued on vinyl then this is the authentic means by which to play it, while rare and original pressings can take on a particular aura); *physicality* (older collectors in particular stressing how the tactile nature of playing the record is particularly satisfying); and *packaging* (the appeal of the record cover as a piece of artwork and the importance of liner notes). Many of these qualities have been further emphasised in an age of digital downloads and streaming: in particular, the appeals of physicality and packaging become heightened when contrasted with the virtual file and its lack of these properties. One other important factor not mentioned by Shuker but which is commonly expressed by vinyl enthusiasts is *sound quality*: some vinylphiles argue the format has a warmer, fuller sound than digital formats (this is a much-disputed issue, however, and is certainly not shared by all listeners).

While the persistence of vinyl can be attributed to a stubborn refusal amongst a die-hard generation to abandon the format, it is now finding new devotees from a generation raised on digital. Younger vinyl devotees also provide similar reasons for their preferences, claiming that the format has a fuller sound than compressed MP3 files, expressing how they enjoy collecting and 'hunting' for records, and perceiving the format as exuding an aura of 'cool' (Guttenberg 2012). Vinyl's status as a hip, retro-format is of particular importance to younger

enthusiasts. The packaging of records is particularly important – hence the rise of LP frames sold in music shops which parade the album cover as a piece of art – sometimes to the neglect of actually playing them. The expense of turntables and associated equipment needed to get the best sound out of the format – such as an amplifier and speakers – has even led to some younger people buying records without actually having the means to play them: an ICM report concluded that 26% of young people (18–24) did not listen to the vinyl that they brought (Fyles 2014). This reflects how vinyl has accrued new values within a predominantly digital culture and, for some, has become a ‘special, almost sacred object’ (Davis 2007, 225).

Another retro-trend within independent music cultures is the revival of the audio cassette. Once generally looked down upon for its sound qualities (particularly prone to wow and flutter), though prized for its utilitarian functions (recording music to swap, making mixtapes, playing music on the move), the format looked to be heading for obsolescence when major retailers stopped selling cassettes in 2007 because of dwindling sales. Yet the format attracts a niche group of devotees and there have been a number of independent releases on audio cassette in limited editions. Many independent soundtracks have also been issued on cassette and these are sometimes packaged in a way that draws attention to their retro status: Finders Keepers, for example, occasionally produce limited edition soundtracks in clamshell cases (including Andrzej Korzynski’s score for Zulawski’s *Possession*, and Philippe D’Aram’s score for Rollin’s *Fascination* paired with Pierre Raph’s score for Rollin’s *Requiem for a Vampire* on one cassette). The clamshell cases evoke the predominant mode of VHS packaging and therefore connect with the world of cult video collecting. Many of the reasons behind VHS collecting are also similar in kind to those informing vinyl enthusiasm: in particular, the importance of VHS linking to memory, both personal and cultural; interest in the format as an aesthetic object, with artwork being a much-discussed topic on VHS collecting forums; and a concern with rarity, exclusivity, and the idea of authenticity (Egan 2007, 154–171). VHS collecting, however, is more akin to audio cassette than vinyl enthusiasm: now many new music releases are issued on vinyl, whereas audio and video cassettes are more niche in appeal and are usually pressed in limited editions.

This indicates that there is a strong retro-impulse within such circles, a tendency which would adhere to music journalist Simon Reynolds’ (2011) argument that digital technologies have contributed, oxymoronicly, to a growing addiction to the past.<sup>5</sup> He argues that recording technologies are the main facilitators of a retro sensibility, because they have afforded people the opportunities to pore over recorded artefacts so as to mimic prominent styles with greater precision. With digital, networked technologies, such archival documentation has massively increased, leading Reynolds to bemoan what he perceives as the past increasingly flooding the present. In particular, as someone who has been/is invested in independent music culture, he is appalled at how retro

has now started to dominate ‘hipsterdom’ (a word that is often synonymous with indie cultures, though generally used in a derogatory manner):

The very people who you would once have expected to produce (as artists) or champion (as consumers) the non-traditional and the groundbreaking – *that’s* the group who are most addicted to the past. In demographic terms, it’s the exact same cutting-edge class, but instead of being pioneers and innovators, they’ve switched roles to become curators and archivists. The avant-garde is now the arriere-garde. (Reynolds 2011, xix–xx)

Yet, as I hope to demonstrate in the remainder of this paper, there are a number of connections between music archivists and producers within contemporary independent music cultures and it seems unwise – particularly in the current age – to draw any firm distinctions between the two roles, particularly as many people combine the two functions.

### **Soundtrack-inspired production and cultism**

The soundtrack turn evident in independent music cultures doesn’t merely involve reissuing older soundtracks, it also feeds into music production. Independent artists such as Broadcast, Demdike Stare, Mater Suspiria Vision, Moon Wiring Club (MWC), Umberto, VHS Head, and acts releasing through Ghost Box records, to name a mere handful of examples, have all explicitly engaged with elements of cult cinema, and many of these acts are collectors of film and/or film soundtracks. Out of these named acts, Broadcast are a little older than the others: more song-oriented and drawing from a wide pool of filmic influences, they are nevertheless important to consider because they predate and then overlap with the newer bunch of cult film-inspired acts. Broadcast were a band who were into collecting a diverse range of records, including soundtracks, and whose output often referred to films: most notably, their 2003 album *Ha-Ha Sound* was heavily influenced, both lyrically and musically, by Jaromil Jireš’s 1970 cult Czech New Wave film *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (lyrics often refer to the film, while melodic fragments from the film soundtrack are also appropriated). Broadcast’s singer Trish Keenan then wrote liner notes for the reissue of the film soundtrack by Finders Keepers in 2006, highlighting the concrete connections that often exist between reissue labels and music artists. Broadcast’s fascination with cinema led to them creating the soundtrack to Peter Strickland’s *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012), a film I will discuss later.

Demdike Stare, Mater Suspiria Vision, and Umberto are acts whose most obvious filmic influence stems from the horror genre. As such, the sounds that they produce are often atmospheric and dark: the two former artists use samples but often manipulate them beyond recognisability and integrate them with newly produced textures into rather dense, miasmic sonic atmospheres. Demdike Stare and Mater Suspiria Vision both tend to manipulate samples so that they are difficult to recognise, utilising technologies to transmogrify sources into ghostly echoes of their former states. Mater Suspiria Vision have even attempted to

record in locations which tap into the spirit of horror/cult cinema: for their 2013 album *Hollywood Necronomicon* they recorded at locations such as Mulholland Drive, the house in which Sharon Tate was murdered, and a ‘an ancient area of Germany where Kenneth Anger once filmed *Lucifer Rising*’.<sup>6</sup> Demdike Stare deliberately combine the new and old through fusing freshly produced digital sounds and samples from worn vinyl records. They are another act who have concrete connections to independent soundtrack labels: Sean Canty – one half of Demdike Stare – previously worked for Finders Keepers and the act also collaborated with Finders Keepers’ Andy Votel under the name Slant Azimuth, who released an album on Votel’s spin-off label Pre-Cert. The name of this spin-off label of course references video collecting while technical aspects of video recording inspired not only the titles of tracks (such as ‘Helical Scan’) but also the name of the act (which stems from slant azimuth, a recording method maximising how much video can fit onto a tape). Umberto is a slightly different proposition in that his music more fully channels specific horror soundtracks, in particular synth-based late 1970s/early 1980s horror tracks by celebrated soundtrack artists such as John Carpenter, Goblin, and Fabio Frizzi.

Other acts mentioned, including VHS Head, MWC, as well as selected artists from the Ghost Box label, also engage with horror and exploitation cinema, though not quite in such a sustained fashion as the above artists: horror influences here, for example, are often intermixed with a number of other inspirations (for more on Ghost Box, see Sexton 2012). The sounds used for Adrian Blacow’s VHS Head are largely culled from VHS tapes that Blacow has personally collected. Rather than being dominated by eerie, dread-infused sounds, VHS Head’s music tends to source from a wide range of films and chops these into lively, stuttering rhythms. While the music itself does not overtly evoke horror in the manner that the above artists do, the genre nonetheless does infuse Blacow’s output. He has said, for example, that he does not focus on a specific genre but that his tape collection is weighted towards horror and science fiction (Bell 2011); while titles such as ‘Franco Zoom to Nowhere’, ‘Guinea Pig’, and ‘DPP 39’ (all from *Trademark Ribbons of Gold*) make overt connections with exploitation cinema. MWC (aka Ian Hodgson) produces music linked to a fictional village, Clinkswell, a steampunk-inspired, anachronistic melange that taps into a spirit of British eccentricity. While MWC does create a ghostly, spooky vibe through titles and sounds, these are tempered by frequent use of quirky, percussive beats. MWC also uses a number of film samples, often incorporating dialogue snippets, in particular drawing on a range of obscure British cult film (and television), including oddities such as *Mumsy, Nanny, Sonny & Girly* (Francis, 1970).

Many of the artists mentioned above also incorporate film clips into their live performances and/or videos. While the visuals used for such purposes are not solely drawn from cinema, film content – particularly horror-related – does appear quite regularly. Such use of film images demonstrates how cinema is an important component of many of these artists’ overall identity, and attests to an increasing convergence between music and cinema in areas of music culture.

Visuals themselves are important to many musical acts within a live performance, and this has become particularly marked in electronic music; when music-makers produce sounds on physically static machines, moving images can provide a sense of movement, dynamism, and spectacle.

One area where cinema and music cultures most obviously converge is at live events which combine music and films. This is something that has increased in recent times: it's now common for film festivals to incorporate live music and DJ sets into schedules and for music festivals to include film screenings. More directly related to this paper, the label Finders Keepers also arranges occasional film and music nights, entitled 'Hocus Focus', in which many of the films they have released soundtracks to are screened – sometimes in double bills – in a programme that also features DJs playing music, including soundtrack selections. In my own home city, Newcastle, a seasonal event titled 'Unearthing Forgotten Horrors' features a day of horror-inspired music, screenings, and talks. Such events not only highlight the close connections between music and film culture, they raise awareness of such films and enable some people to see them for the first time.

Soundtrack releases, soundtrack-inspired musical acts, and combined film and music nights can all, in different ways, be considered ways in which films can become reframed and cultified. It has been argued, for example, that cultists have contributed to altering the status of many of the films that they have enthused about, which has led some of these films to move from a broadly 'low' cultural position to a higher cultural position. David Andrews (2013) has labelled films that take such a trajectory 'cult-art movies':

Cult-art movies clearly exist, as certified by the fact that movies in so many low forms [...] have functioned as high art within the subcultures that have grown up around them. When made, circulated, and praised with flair, these cult-art movies have even generated a qualified status outside their original subcultures. (112)

Andrews doesn't address storage media, but in an article exploring the changing status of Italian horror, Guins (2005) has argued how storage media was important to its gradual change of status (the films he discusses are mostly from the 1960s to the early 1980s, a corpus of films which are particularly valued by cultists). He argues that VHS enabled more American viewers to see such films, but the ways in which they were released reflected their low cultural position: often in shoddy packaging with little information, poorly dubbed, and heavily edited. Assessing the US release of Argento's *The Hatchet Murders*, he notes that it is even difficult to discern Argento's name on the package, whereas today he is considered an important auteur and the film itself – more commonly known as *Deep Red* – is now considered a classic by many (at least within cult circles). In contrast, many of these films received a more reverential treatment when issued on DVD: more care was put into packaging and presentation; prints were often carefully restored; there was an emphasis on the director as auteur; and films often included subtitles (sometimes with options to watch dubbed or

subtitled versions). He thus argues that DVD has remediated the Italian horror film as an art-object:

The Italian horror film on DVD is not the same film, and does not command the same set of meanings, as it did when first released on video-cassette. Its status has shifted. A set of meanings has been refashioned through DVD technology and the aesthetics of its new design. (Guins 2005, 27)

While Guins is correct in pointing out the increasing respect afforded to many of these films (and this would also apply to a number of other exploitation films from the period) – which has now arguably been extended with the emergence of Blu-ray – his explanation exaggerates the role that home viewing technologies have played in this process. It is true that technologies have played an important role, but technology alone is not responsible for such a shift in status: cultists themselves have also been crucial, particularly through using these new technologies to promote their objects of affection (for example, many cultists were involved in independent companies releasing such films on both VHS and DVD). This is a point that has been discussed by Hutchings (2003, 130), who notes how the more auteur-based DVD packaging of Argento's films resulted from his significant fan following. Guins' marginalisation of the social in his account also results in a slight simplification: he argues that in the VHS era such films were not treated as art, whilst in the age of the DVD they were, but this overlooks how the cultural elevation of these films has been a more gradual process than such an argument implies. There *were* many cultists in the VHS era, for example, who approached such films as art, but framing films in this manner was more marginal then than it is today because cultism itself has grown.

In Britain, for example, a number of fanzines emerged in the 1980s devoted to exploitation cinema and some of these did engage seriously with such films. Such approaches were evident in fanzines such as *Shock Xpress* (1985–90) and *Eyeball* (1989–98). *Eyeball*, for example, covered more established art house fare and less respectable filmmaking with equal seriousness, an approach outlined in Stephen Thrower's (2003) introduction to an *Eyeball* collection:

*Eyeball* was the magazine most likely to juxtapose Jean-Luc Godard and Joe D'Amato, taking the supposed highs and lows of (principally European) cinema culture and interlacing them. [...] The art film lover usually sneers at the 'crudities' of exploitation, and likewise the gorehound usually scoffs at the 'pretensions' of so-called art cinema. (6)

If cultist challenges to the low status of much exploitation cinema in the 1980s and 1990s prefigured the 'remediation' of such flicks as 'cult-art movies', then overlapping interest in music and cult cinema was also evident at this stage. The editor of *Eyeball*, Stephen Thrower, is also heavily involved in underground music culture as well as film culture, having played with influential noise band Skullflower and the experimental electronic act Coil. He has continued to be a member of another electronic duo, Cyclobe, since 1999, and has also composed film scores (he scored the Pakistani Zombie film *Zibahkhana* [2007] and

contributed music to Ben Wheatley's *Down Terrace* [2009]). Stefan Jaworzyn, editor of *Shock Xpress*, is also a musician and was a founding member of Skullflower and a member of other noise bands, including Whitehouse. Spencer Hickman – founder of the aforementioned Death Waltz records – previously published a film fanzine (*Psychotic Reaction*) and also organised a film festival in the early 1990s ('Nothing Shocking'), while there was a significant interest in soundtracks amongst many post-punk/industrial musical artists. Alan Splet and David Lynch's soundtrack to Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) proved to be particularly influential in this regard and was cited by many involved in underground, noise-oriented music as influential; also important was Wayne Bell and Tobe Hooper's soundtrack to Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), which remains unreleased but has continued to circulate in bootleg form. The previously mentioned Coil, meanwhile, would create an eventually rejected soundtrack to *Hellraiser*, and produce soundtracks for Derek Jarman (*The Angelic Conversation* [1987] and *Blue* [1993]); while their remix of Nine Inch Nails' 'Closer' was used in the title sequence for *Se7en* (Fincher, 1995). These prior cultist attachments to films and soundtracks, involving cross-media interactions between film and music, demonstrate how the trends surveyed in this paper are an extension of previous activities and interests, constituting a shifting continuum as opposed to a rupture; Stephen Thrower, for example, continues to be involved in film and music production, and film criticism, and now regularly writes liner notes for Death Waltz soundtrack releases.

### Soundtrack cinema

The extension of interest in cult films from the recent past has also fed into film production. An example of such cult-influenced productions is a category of films sometimes dubbed 'neo-giallo', and which includes films such *Amer* (Cattet and Forzoni, 2009), *Masks* (Marschall, 2011), *Berberian Sound Studio* (Strickland, 2012), *Sonno Profondo* (Onetti, 2013), *The Strange Color of Your Body's Tears* (Cattet and Forzoni, 2013), and *Tulpa* (Zampaglione 2012). *Berberian Sound Studio* in particular concerns me here as it relates so crucially to the film and music overlaps that I have been discussing. Firstly, the film is directed by Peter Strickland, who already has connections to experimental music as a member of the Sonic Catering Band, who produce soundscapes from recordings of food preparation. Secondly, Strickland himself has stated how the soundtracks of giallo films fascinated him and were the main factors leading to his interest in the films (Lucca 2013; Strickland 2013). Thirdly, the setting of the film in a sound studio signals the importance of the sonic, whilst the analogue nature of the sound studio foregrounds its retro-dimensions via *mise-en-scène*. Fourthly, the film connects to soundtrack enthusiasm through Broadcast's musical soundtrack and a fictional credit sequence designed by Julian House (of Ghost Box records); in this sense it is a film inspired by film music (and sound) featuring music inspired by film. Broadcast's soundtrack itself is once again an attempt to produce music that

echoes the texture of 1970s Italian horror soundtracks, and it does so by incorporating the eclectic range that typified many of these soundtracks: from the opening theme to the film-within-a-film *The Equestrian Vortex*, which in particular evokes Bruno Nicolai, to more dissonant slabs of electronic sound and concrète-style arrangements. Like other recent neo-gialli – *Masks* being a notable example – *Berberian Sound Studio* also draws on more occult variations of Italian horror: Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) is, in particular, a key reference point for some of these neo-gialli.<sup>7</sup> *Masks*, for example, could be considered a partial reworking of *Suspiria*, while *Berberian Sound Studio* also alludes to this film through the occult content of the film-within-a-film and its soundtrack, in particular its emphasis on the human voice as a terrifying and spooky force evokes Goblin's score for *Suspiria* (while also making reference to American avant-garde singer Cathy Berberian).

*Berberian Sound Studio* is a meta-film in that it is a film about filmmaking, though unlike the majority of reflexive films it concerns itself with soundtrack production (following in the line of films such as *Blow Out* [De Palma, 1981]). The reflexive nature of the film – alongside other elements such as its style and the existing status of Strickland – position it as an art film, though its engagement with horror cinema also complicates this as it is a genre that has been associated with 'low culture' historically (even though this broad status may be changing). The film can be considered a type of 'art-horror' film, as discussed by Hawkins (2000), who analyses slippages and overlaps between art, horror, and the avant-garde. *Berberian Sound Studio*'s art film credentials are emphasised by the fact that it distances us from the film-within-the-film, *The Equestrian Vortex*, so that it is not merely a *reproduction* of vintage Italian exploitation but a *commentary* on it. As such, the film chimes with broader views towards Italian exploitation horror that appreciate such films from an artistic perspective. For example, the actual focus on the soundtrack points towards an aspect of Italian gialli (and associated horror) that has been praised and which has contributed to its rising artistic status. The film also contains some stylised, abstract sequences – particularly when Gilderoy suffers mental disintegration – and a complex narrative (which led to many discussions and debates on the Web). Abstract, stylised sequences, complex narratives and soundtracks are three components that have been particularly celebrated by enthusiasts of these films and have helped to elevate their artistic status.<sup>8</sup> Yet not only does *Berberian Sound Studio* help to foreground these elements and further celebrate them, it also contains content that could be construed as disavowing features associated with these films that have proven more problematic to some audiences. The most notable of these are accusations of misogyny that have often been levelled at a number of gialli and other Italian horror films of this era: some of these films have been perceived as revelling in the suffering of female victims and lingering over their deaths in detail. This disavowal is evident in that we do not – bar the brief title sequence – see the film-within-a-film, *The Equestrian Vortex*, and through the ways in which this film-within-a-film is heard and discussed. While Strickland invites us to marvel

at the artistry behind the sounds of this film, he also partially distances us from *The Equestrian Vortex* because we experience its unpleasantness through the subjectivity of Gilderoy himself; in particular, the gruesome sounding scene involving the insertion of a red hot poker into a female vagina causes him great anguish. The director, Santini, attempts to defend this through emphasising how such things happened and that it is his 'duty' to show it, but this character is not depicted sympathetically: he is egotistical, abusive, misogynistic, and as such his pontificating comes across as increasingly disingenuous.

While *Berberian Sound Studio* draws on Italian horror and this was often mentioned in reviews, it was not generally dismissed as a form of retro-oriented pastiche (even if retro elements of the film – particularly the analogue studio – were noted by many critics). The film wasn't engaged in mimicking Italian exploitation horror cinema but instead reflects on such traditions through centring on the making of the film's soundtrack. Strickland's existing status also may have contributed to its generally favourable critical reception: his previous debut feature *Katalin Varga* (2009) was critically well received in a manner that stressed its artistic status and perhaps this acted to frame *Berberian Sound Studio* as an art film for many (whilst its engagement with cult Italian horror film may have attracted viewers who would not have been drawn to *Katalin Varga*).

None of the other films which have been bracketed in the 'neo-gialli' category are influenced by the soundtrack in the same way as *Berberian Sound Studio*, but the emergence of such films does work to further reframe the giallo films which they draw upon. Many of these films also evidence careful attention to the sounds associated with the original giallo cycle. The soundtracks for *Masks* (created by Sebastian Levermann and Nils Weise) and *Sonno Profondo* (Luciano Onetti), for example, are firm homages to giallo scores, while Cattet and Forzoni have used a range of music from original giallo films within their movies (from composers including Ennio Morricone, Bruno Nicolai, and Stelvio Cipriani). These films also draw on a number of other features epitomising many giallo films, including careful attention to visual style, abstract sequences, heavy use of facial close-ups, roving point-of-view shots, convoluted narratives, and the inclusion of giallo-related iconography (in particular, the gloved hand wielding a razor blade). Cattet and Forzoni's films take the abstraction of the giallo film to a particularly heightened level through fetishising many of these notable features and lingering on them; and while their films do make use of narrative, the narrative structure of their films is more complex and difficult to decipher than many of the original narrative films, so that it seems almost redundant at times. In *Amer* and, to an even greater degree, *The Strange Color of Your Bodies Tears*, elements of the giallo that most resemble features of art cinema are extracted and stretched out across repetitious sequences. This process is like an aesthetic counterpart to the cultist appreciation of such films as art films: in both situations, attention is drawn to once-neglected works in a manner that heightens their reputation through alignment with more intellectually respectable works. Many exploitation films from the 1960s to the 1980s – Italian horror film modes in particular – are now

more respectable than they once were because of the cultism that has developed around them, detectable not merely in film collecting, criticism, and curating, but also film production and related cultural processes such as music production and other aspects of music culture covered in this paper. The increasing acceptance of the giallo as an artistically valid mode of cinema is reflected in events such as Anthology Film Archives' 'Giallo Fever!', held in September 2012.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, there is still some resistance towards this mode of cinema becoming unproblematically assimilated into an artistic canon: even the text overview of the 'Giallo Fever!' season on the Anthology Film Archives' website appears somewhat hesitant in appreciating these films, mentioning the 'kitsch aesthetics' typical of the cycle (while nevertheless praising the music as representing 'some of the most innovative scores ever created'). This would support Andrews' (2013, 108) contention that 'cult-art' films often occupy a *quasi-legitimate* position: partially accepted as art films but rarely entirely embraced by its institutions.

Yet, whilst Andrews' flexible approach to art and cult categories applies to many of the films embraced by soundtrack enthusiasts, it doesn't quite fully apply to all of the films as some of them were arguably 'art films' when they were released, while others may have slipped between 'art' and 'cult' categories at the very same time amongst different communities. *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* and *Possession* are films which would seem to exemplify such ambiguous positions. Andrews (2013, 31), however, ultimately closes down fluidity between these two spheres at any point in time through stressing how they tend to circulate within different channels (for example, screening at a legitimate art house festival such as Cannes as against a genre festival). This overlooks how films can circulate across different channels and be taken up amongst different communities at the same time. In discussing a cover story of *Sight and Sound* devoted to 'The Mad, the Bad, and the Dangerous: 50 Visionary Filmmakers', he notes that two 'cult filmmakers' (Dario Argento and Alejandro Jodorowsky) are listed amongst three 'establishment filmmakers' (Catherine Breillat, Werner Herzog, and David Lynch) and argues that this indicates how the status of the former filmmakers is starting to change and become more legitimate (listed as they are in a magazine that is firmly positioned as belonging to 'art cinema'). While I agree that Argento and Jodorowsky have become more legitimate over the years, there is still an attempt to pin down directors here into either 'art' or 'cult', with any slippages occurring through time. Yet a director such as David Lynch is hardly a straightforward 'art film' director; while he is known as such, he is also generally regarded as a cult director and considering his following emerged on the midnight movie circuit, his cult status arguably preceded his reputation within art cinema circles. He seems to embody, though, a figure who is appreciated amongst different communities and we should be aware that other directors can be considered both art and cult filmmakers at the same time.

## **Conclusion**

The growth of soundtrack interest and its connections to other components of both film and music culture demonstrates how cross-media processes are important considerations in tracking how cult credentials accrue around particular films, and in examining how audiences engage with media. As Schrøder (2011) has argued, a cross-media perspective is becoming increasingly necessary to studying media audiences because people engage with different forms of media in everyday life. Transmedia research, which very broadly seeks to trace the dispersal of content across media platforms, is another method that goes beyond isolated media analysis (see Jenkins 2008). The approach I have taken in this paper does not really belong to either of these traditions, however. While consideration of cultist enthusiasms and responses does connect to audience research, my focus has not been limited to such concerns; and where transmedia research explores the structured ways in which specific content can be interwoven across different media, my study is concerned with how media traces can feed into other media as sources of inspiration and in the process act as cultifying nodes. While I have only explored interactions between two broad media forms in this paper, I hope to have at least demonstrated through this how film cultivation processes take place not merely within film culture but amongst other different media cultures, all of which are interconnected.

The cultural activities I have surveyed in this paper are also pertinent to questions about storage and preservation within a digital age. In one sense these trends are symptomatic of an age in which access to cultural works has expanded rapidly. Will Straw has discussed this issue in relation to film culture, arguing that successive storage media have led to a spatialisation of film culture. Before the advent of the VCR, he argues that film culture was more temporally oriented: previously films were displaced at public theatres in the form of chronological succession; while re-runs and television transmissions of films could temporarily revive such artefacts, the linear sequence of films displacing other films at public theatres remained dominant. While this still occurs, of course, storage media complicate this idea of linear succession:

It is not simply that, in their durability, new media artifacts pile up and, in so doing, increase the dense overlaying of all the artifacts available at any one time. It is also that [...] the circuits of reference that bind one artifact to another reverse chronologies or cross sequences of development in a way that muddies any sense of historical time. Processes of obsolescence, through which artifacts might regularly disappear, so that novelty within the cultural field might be perceptible, have been slowed. (Straw 2007, 11)

The increased muddying of linear time and piling up of media enables people to access historical artefacts to an unprecedented extent. Yet while storage media increases the density of media content available at any one time, it doesn't – as many have hyperbolically predicted – lead to an age in which ephemerality becomes a thing of the past. Jonathan Sterne – discussing digital audio

recording – has countered what he terms a ‘fantasy’ of presuming that we can reach a stage in which all recordings will be preserved. He points to the instability of digital recordings due to issues such as lack of durability, the need to preserve particular hardware and software to read files preserved in specific formats, and the costs of duplication and backup. These issues and other considerations mean that official archiving of media content has become particularly complex and costly, and that ‘most digital recordings will be lost, damaged, unplayable’ (Sterne 2009, 65), a view echoed by John Campopiano (2014) in his discussion of archiving and digital media.

The cult film and soundtrack enthusiasts I have looked at contribute to the production and distribution of archival content at both official and unofficial levels, yet most of the activities they engage in are not archival in the true sense of the term; rather, they are activities that contribute to the emergence of an ‘accidental archive’ (Burgess and Green 2009, 87). Taking heed of Sterne’s arguments concerning preservation, we should be wary of claiming that these activities will necessarily preserve works which are valued. It is the case, however, that these cultists work to bring particular works into greater visibility, making use of digital technologies to circulate materials and information which also feed into creative practices. Their use of digital, networked media enables them to partake in what Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2014) have termed the ‘spreadability’ of media, in which ‘material spreads’ and ‘gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms’ (27). Such processes arguably heighten the different ways in which cultification of films can occur within and across different forms of media beyond the confines of ‘film culture’. Music cultures are an area in which film material gets ‘spread’, a process undoubtedly heightened through digital technologies, which allow for easy replication and distribution. If digital technologies are utilised within the independent music cultures that I have surveyed here it is also the case that they are not generally valued as much as analogue technologies, which are considered qualitatively superior in these circles. If digital technologies are valued for their use value (more mobile, more ‘spreadable’ and accessible), then analogue technologies, like the ‘vintage’ film content that is revalued by these cultures, also attain a cultish aura, prized for their almost sacred nature.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/K005111/1].

### **Notes**

1. Sinker (1995) has written about the influence of film on pop music, thinking about the idea of cinematic music in reasonable detail, while there has also been a good deal of

research on industrial connections between the film and music industries (for an example of the latter, see Smith 1998).

2. The Gruppo d'Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza was an experimental, improvisatory group founded by Franco Evangelisti. Morricone was a member of the group and played trumpet.
3. For more on the importance of informal film distribution, see Lobato (2012).
4. They are still undoubtedly a niche concern, though they constitute an increasingly substantial niche. Accurate figures on sales are often difficult to calculate and there are varying estimates on such sales in different countries. In the UK, sales have risen from an estimated 234,000 in 2010 to 780,000 in 2013, which was around a 100% increase from 2012 sales. Figures provided by the British Phonographic Industry (<http://www.bpi.co.uk>). Many other countries have seen similar rises in vinyl sales.
5. While Reynolds is primarily discussing music, this also to an extent applies to the world of cinema as well.
6. This information is stated on the release information for the record: <http://mater.suspriavision.bandcamp.com/album/hollywood-necronomicon>
7. Strickland has claimed that the film-within-a-film, *The Equestrian Vortex*, was chiefly inspired by *Suspria* and Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* (1960).
8. Narrative complexity was more traditionally received by critics in such films as incoherence, but has been a component that has allowed viewers to praise such films as diverting from mainstream narrative conventions and imbuing these films with psychedelic qualities. Discussing the critical reception of Dario Argento, Russ Hunter (2010, 66) has argued that in the 1980s his films were seen as artistically stylish to an extent, but still often dismissed for their lack of coherence. Key to dismissing such lack of coherence here was the broader standing of Argento and horror cinema, which was often positioned as trashy and inconsequential. Yet this would gradually change, and in 1992, Hunt (2000, 328) was arguing how Argento's films 'embody features of the art film as described by David Bordwell'.
9. 'Film Screenings Series: Giallo Fever!', *Anthology Film Archives*, [http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/film\\_screenings/series/39659](http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/film_screenings/series/39659). The 'Giallo Fever!' season was organised by giallo fans – Alessio Giorgetti, Yunsun Chae, and Alessio Grana – who wanted to screen giallo films in New York, and who funded it through a Kickstarter campaign. Operating under the name of Malastrana Film Series, they are now dedicated to 'promoting Italian and European genre films in the U.S. and beyond'. They have also organised a special screening of *Suspria* at the Anthology Film Archives to coincide with Goblin's first ever performance in New York on 8 October 2013, and have most recently programmed a series on Italian poliziotteschi and crime films – The Italian Connection – at the Anthology Film Archives in June 2014. For more information on the Malastrana Film Series, see their website at <http://malastranafilmseries.startlogic.com>

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