

Institution: Northumbria University at Newcastle		
Unit of Assessment: 32 (Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory)		
Title of case study: Beyond a cult-following: Informing the content and programming of genre-film festivals, as well as improving their reputation and long-term financial sustainability		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2011 – 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Russ Hunter	Senior Lecturer	09/2010 - present
Steven Jones	Senior Lecturer	03/2010 - present
Jamie Sexton	Senior Lecturer	03/2010 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Jan 2017 – April 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>There has been a recent expansion in genre-film festivals across Europe that focus on horror, sci-fi, and fantasy. Yet despite their growing economic importance as cultural attractions, these events are often forced to operate within tight financial constraints, largely due to the popular misconceptions of funders and mainstream audiences regarding the 'cult' subject matter. Working with three leading European genre-film festivals, Northumbria University's research informed new educational programming which transformed the profile, reputation, and financial sustainability of Kurja Polt in Slovenia, Offscreen in Belgium, and Abertoir in Wales. The festival-tailored, comprehensive educational activities increased genre-film fan engagement and attendance, attracted expert speakers, and enabled the festivals to promote professional validation for genre-film artists and genre film culture more broadly. Kurja Polt has become one of the fastest growing and most significant international film festivals in Slovenia and is regarded as an exemplar of good practice.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Genre and cult cinema are notoriously difficult to define. Historically prodigious production levels and varied geographical origins have meant drawing boundaries around what counts as cult- or genre-film is a complex, fluid, and ephemeral process. Combined with the nature of the subject matter that genre-film typically explores, this complexity has led to accusations of creative irrelevance among funding bodies and film professionals [R1]. In response, research undertaken by the 'Moving Image, Popular Media and Culture' Research Group at Northumbria, has demonstrated the cultural, political, and social value of genre-cinema and the important function of genre-film festivals in sharing those insights with the public at large.</p> <p>From 2011 to 2018, research by Dr Russ Hunter, Dr Steven Jones, and Dr Jamie Sexton provided new historical and contextual analyses of the horror and fantasy genre and cult film, whilst also addressing how manifestations of popular culture in cinema can be understood to have cinematic, cultural, and socio-historical significance [R1-R5]. Sexton's contribution to <i>Cult Cinema</i> (2011), a co-edited monograph with Ernest Mathijs (University of British Columbia), examined theories and historical developments of cult cinema, as well as its often-problematic reception [R1]. Similarly, Jones' research explored and critiqued the tendency to use emotive labels in relation to specific types of extreme film genres, including labels of a pornographic or extremely violent nature [R2]. Hunter's exploration of Italian horror stressed that ostensibly generic forms of cinema can allude to, and reflect upon, significant socio-historical events, such as specific environmental concerns [R3-R5]. Such findings are meaningful for the Italian genre-film scene, and that of its European counterparts, as they illuminate the socio-political value of an industry that, despite a dedicated albeit small fan-base, is routinely under-appreciated and consequently under-funded.</p>		

Insights gained from [R1-R5] informed Hunter's decision to conduct research into the genre-film festival sector itself. Through this work, Hunter demonstrated that the growth of identity-based festivals has led to an ongoing reappraisal of their significance [R6]. Furthermore, he uncovered specific differences between the programming imperatives of genre-film festivals and other festivals [R6]. Whilst there are several examples of large, well-funded genre-film festivals in Europe, for the most part they operate on small budgets that restrict the breadth of their offering and impact upon the wider cultural scene. Hunter's 2018 study examined the economic sustainability of film festivals and how the nature of genre-film fandom affects festival programming and film circulation, as well as audience identities and engagement. The findings indicated that genre audiences are particularly receptive to 'added value', in terms of supplementary festival activity and content that present genre-films not simply as entertainment but as creative works that deserve critical analysis, attention, and wider acknowledgement as creative outputs [R6].

Together, these research insights informed ongoing work by the Northumbria team with genre-film festivals across Europe, particularly those that give specific attention to the horror genre – Offscreen (Brussels, Belgium), Abertoir (Aberystwyth, Wales), and, in particular, Kurja Polt (Ljubljana, Slovenia). At a time when critics have been arguing that festivals in general are unsustainable, these collaborations enabled the festival stakeholders to better understand the dynamics of their sustainability and the commercial necessity of developing rigorous, supplementary educational activities, informed by critical film analysis, to attract larger audiences and open up new sources of funding.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1. Jamie Sexton, and Mathijs, E.* (eds) *Cult Cinema: An Introduction*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) ISBN: 9781405173735. Available on request

R2. Steve Jones (2016) "'Extreme' Porn? The implications of a label' *Porn Studies* 3:295-307 <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1196011>

R3. Russ Hunter 'Nightmare cities: Italian horror cinema and environmental discourses' in Hunt, L., Lockyer, S. and Williamson, M. (eds) *Screening the Undead: Vampires and Zombies in Film and Television* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013) ISBN: 9781848859241. Available on request

R4. Russ Hunter 'Preferisco l'inferno: Early Italian horror cinema' in Baschiera, S. and Hunter, R. (eds) *Italian Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) 15-29 ISBN: 9781474419680. Available on request

R5. Russ Hunter (2017) 'I have a picture of the Monster!': Il mostro di Frankenstein and the search for Italian horror cinema' *Journal of Italian of Cinema and Media Studies* 5 (2):159-172 https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms.5.2.159_1

R6. Russ Hunter 'Genre Film Festivals and Rethinking the Definition of "The Festival Film"' in Jenkins, T. (ed) *International Film Festivals: Contemporary Cultures and History Beyond Venice and Cannes* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018) ISBN: 9781788310901. Available on request

*External collaborators: E. Mathijs, University of British Columbia

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Northumbria's research led directly to the creation of new festival-tailored educational programming that has enhanced the practices, profile, and financial sustainability of three leading, European genre-film festivals, specifically those that give particular attention to exploring and promoting the horror genre. This work allowed the festival management teams to better promote genre-film culture (including transforming one festival, Kurja Polt, into one of the

most significant international film festivals in Slovenia), and provided genre-film artists (directors, screenwriters) with a new sense of professional validation and recognition.

1) Improved provision, profile, and financial sustainability of genre-film festivals

1.1 Kurja Polt - Slovenia

Slovenia has a nascent film culture in terms of film education [E1]. The task of broadening film knowledge has largely fallen to genre-film festivals. As Maša Peče (Programme Director, Kurja Polt) points out, it is a challenge for organisations that operate on limited budgets and who often *'live in the shadow'* of more traditional, mainstream cinema [E1]. Established in 2014 and based in Ljubljana, Kurja Polt (Slovenian for 'goosebumps'), is an annually-held horror film festival, run in collaboration with the Slovenian Cinematheque (the national film museum and member of the International Federation of Film Archives). Research from Northumbria directly led to the creation of new, festival-tailored educational programming and since 2017, Kurja Polt *'has emerged as the only festival in Slovenia that draws upon and actively involves esteemed academic [including from Northumbria]/industry experts in film theory'* [E1]. The successful developments resulting from the research collaboration, have been praised by the state funding body (Slovenian Film Centre), by prominent municipal institutions such as Kinodvor (one of the largest in Slovenia, that serves a dual role as the country's principal film festival hub and a major film educational centre), and festival attendees themselves [E1].

As Peče confirmed, *'the contribution of the Northumbria team has been so important [providing] ...key insights that shaped our strategy with regards to how we pitch/promote ourselves, and the type of activities we offer'* [E1]. The research gave the festival team a better *'understanding of the centrality of ancillary events for genre fans'*, that led to new educational activities including the first *'Cult Film Conference'* in 2017 [E1]. As Peče outlined, the conference *'has continued every year since as an embedded element of our programme, raising our international profile and attracting a growing number of experts from across the globe'* [E1]. For example, during his attendance at Kurja Polt in 2019, Markus Keuschnigg (Artistic Director of Austrian Film Festival SLASH), stated that *'we [the wider genre-film scene] should do more of this – serious, theoretically driven talks'* [E1].

The expanded festival programme was also very well received by the creative artists whose work the festival showcases. The professional validation that Kurja Polt is able to provide is one of its main achievements [E1]. As an example, genre-film director Monica Stambrini, was invited by Kurja Polt to attend as guest of honour in 2018, but despite longstanding experience in the field, Stambrini explained how she was still *'apprehensive'* about presenting her work due to concerns over whether a festival audience would be able to contextualise it (because of the graphic and violent nature of its content). She confirmed, however, that *'what made a considerable impact upon [her] decision, ultimately, to attend the festival ... was the presence of the cult film conference'* [E2]. Having been directed towards Jones' research, which explored the problems of presumptive film labelling (presented at Kurja Polt in 2017), she recognised how Jones' insights were *'prescient for my own work ...[and] that the festival was the right environment for my work'* [E2].

The expanded programme had a *'critical and manifold'* impact on the sustainability of Kurja Polt, contributing *'to a 20% increase in festival attendance since 2016 with close to 1,400 attending the most recent festival in 2019'* [E1]. Peče emphasised that these are *'enviable statistics especially when viewed in context'* [E1]. Slovenia is a small country with only 2,000,000 inhabitants. Moreover, specialized genre-film festivals always attract audiences that are smaller compared with mainstream cinema events [E1]. Kurja Polt confirmed *'[we are] extremely pleased with our growing audience share, which in large part is thanks to our close involvement with Northumbria'* [E1].

The success of Kurja Polt's research-driven content, had a *'huge impact'* on its ability to attract state funding, *'the esteem with which we are now held by our state financier ...in large part because of the unique academic underpinning we are able [to] offer'* [E1]. Kurja Polt confirm that *'we were awarded a 38% increase in funding from the annual Film Festival Tender in 2017, [a*

further increase of] 38% in funding from the tender in 2018, and [a] 163% [increase] in 2019. In actual funding amounts we have gone from EUR6,500 to EUR31,000 [2016-2019]' [E1]. As with the attendance figures, Peče reiterated that although these numbers may seem modest, *'the change for us has been massive as it has enabled us to take important steps towards expanding the festival scope'* [E1]. One result was that since 2018, the organisation has been able to pay festival staffers rather than employing them purely on a volunteer basis, *'in this industry that is almost unheard of and importantly allows us to retain volunteers ...and help them to develop more specialist skills within the organisation ... [these are] crucial changes for us as a festival organiser'* [E1].

1.2 Offscreen - Belgium

The research-informed content created for Kurja Polt led to similar positive developments with Offscreen – established in 2008. This annual festival, based in Brussels, gives particular attention to undistributed and rarely screened films, attracting approximately 7,000 visitors each year. Dirk Van Extergem (Director of Offscreen), described how Northumbria's research was *'invaluable ...[providing] critical insights into the history and complexity of genre-film, including the changing nature of audience engagement with this type of media content'* [E3]. Offscreen confirmed how *'those insights have enabled us to both position the festival in a way that has helped to meet key aims of Offscreen, support our funding applications, and attract guests in an entirely different manner than we previously could'* [E3]. As with Kurja Polt, the research led to the development of new festival-tailored educational activities at Offscreen that were *'more comprehensive than [they] have ever been able to provide before'* [E3]. Offscreen noted how *'at a time of austerity and arts cuts in Belgium, [the research-led change] has meant that we have been able to sustain our budget levels beyond what they would normally be and funders have made clear that the educational offering is a key part of this'* [E3].

Wider programming has *'frequently been influenced'* by the research, as for example the thematic strand developed for the 2018 festival, based on Hunter's exploration of the Italian zombie genre [E3]. Offscreen confirmed that *'we can go broader and do more profoundly thematic programming ... [to] give more and more context to the festival'* [E3]. The *'research-led framework'*, in turn, enabled Offscreen to project a more serious tone, helping it to attract guest speakers from the genre-film industry (directors, screen writers etc). The new integrated academic components provided a signal that Offscreen *'is a place that values their [industry speakers'] contribution to cinema ...a means of letting them see they are being taken seriously ...as valued filmmakers'* [E3].

1.3 Abertoir - Wales

Gaz Bailey (Director of Abertoir International Horror Festival), noted how the team from Northumbria, in particular Hunter's *'expertise in horror cinema'*, provided *'valuable research-led (but accessible) content for use at our festival'* [E4]. In common with Kurja Polt and Offscreen festivals, these contributions were singled out *'as being responsible for directly helping us to achieve the goals of our funders in providing significant informative material to the audiences [and have] ...been instrumental in keeping the festival going strong into currently its 15th year'* [E4]. They confirmed that *'crucially, our principal funders Ffilm Cymru and Film Hub Wales, have stressed through their support that the educational provision we developed with Dr Hunter...has been crucial to how they view and seek to fund our festival'* [E4].

Supporting a broader aim shared by other festivals in the field, Abertoir promotes recognition of genre-film and those who work in it, to *'make them feel valued'* [E4]. Abertoir pointed to how Hunter's research helped them work towards this goal:

'our special guests each year are figures who are beloved by the fan community we serve, but who [often] have had little critical success ... people like composer Fabio Frizzi and director Sergio Martino, who have felt much more validated professionally as a result of being made aware of Dr Hunter's research (touching as it does upon films in which they were professionally involved)' [E4].

2) Advancing popular engagement with, and recognition of, genre-film in Slovenia

The municipal funder Kinodvor confirmed that genre-film was often a marginalised subject for festival circuits, but from 2017 the research from Northumbria has resulted in an '*absolutely unique and pioneering*' cultural attraction, and '*one of the fastest growing, as well as one of the most significant international film festivals in the country*' [E5]. Kinodvor explained that the new educational elements allowed it '*to more clearly justify our support for a genre cinema festival*', citing the use of Hunter's research by Kurja Polt and the demonstrable value of the new programming additions developed by the Northumbria team [E5].

Kinodvor explained the contribution that Kurja Polt has made to the Slovenian cultural sector, how the festival is now considered '*the most important "Cinephile Heaven" in Slovenia - something that has been augmented and deepened by ...the work of Dr Hunter and his colleagues*' [E5]. This new status is reflected in the media coverage of the festival each year, including interviews with the research team by the state news broadcaster [E6]. Furthermore, Kinodvor described how the collaboration with Northumbria has seen Kurja Polt become '*the only festival in Slovenia that still continuously, consciously, and prominently asks itself what a film festival can, or should, still be today. I only hope that every festival in Slovenia would come, see, enjoy, and - above all - learn from Kurja Polt*' [E5].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Ref.	Source of corroboration	Link to claimed impact
E1	Testimonial, Masa Pece (Kurja Polt Genre Film Festival Director)	Confirms the programming restructure at Kurja Polt, with resulting benefits to profile and financial sustainability
E2	Testimonial, Monica Stambrini (Genre-Film Director)	Confirms that the research informed the validation of work of creative artists
E3	Testimonial, Dirk Van Extergem (Director of Offscreen Film Festival)	Confirms the programming restructure at Offscreen, with resulting benefits to profile, financial sustainability, and validating work of creative artists
E4	Testimonial, Gaz Bailey (Abertoir Horror Festival)	Confirms the programming restructure at Abertoir, with resulting benefits to profile, financial sustainability, and validating work of creative artists
E5	Testimonial, Koen Van Daele (Assistant Director and Head of Programmes, Kinodvor)	Confirms the raised profile of, and increased funding to, Kurja Polt, and improved engagement with film culture in Slovenia
E6	Collated national radio and TV coverage (Slovenia)	Research helped to increase public discussion of genre-film in Slovenia