

Undead: VHS and Technological Life Cycles

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Released in America in November 1975, consumer-grade video cassette recorders (VCRs) and their attendant videotape cassettes inarguably altered the relationship between media industries, consumers, and film cultures. Whether viewers were early adopters of Sony's Betamax system in the mid-1970s or laggards acquiring a VCR after JVC's videocassette VHS format had won out over numerous competitors, they were all part of a revolutionary shift in the locus of film consumption. During this time, the movie theater, once the sole proprietor of mainstream movie experiences for the vast majority of Americans, was no longer the arbiter of movie access. Neither, in turn, was broadcast television, where viewers began watching older movies in the 1950s and newer releases in the 1960s. Instead, new focal points of movie accessibility and culture emerged, including the video rental shop and, eventually, large retailers.

The first studio to embrace the home video apparatus was 20th Century Fox in 1977 when Andre Blay of Magnetic Video struck a deal with the studio to release fifty licensed films at the cost of \$6,000 per title.¹ To give a sense of the explosive growth of the US home video market, in 1980, domestic theatrical box office receipts were \$1.2 billion and home video revenues were \$280 million, 29.6 percent and 7 percent of industry revenue respectively. By 1990, box office receipts sat at \$2.1 billion and 15.9 percent of revenue while home video exploded to \$5.1 billion and 38.6 percent of revenue.² Clearly, home video had reached an inflection point. However by

2006, ten years later, Hollywood studios had abandoned the VHS format;³ the final VCR had been manufactured.⁴

Such would appear to be the end of the story for the revolutionary videocassette. However, the past decade has seen the rise of a VHS revival, both the physical object and the medium's aesthetic. Boutique retailers like Mondo, Gorgon Video, Bleeding Skull Video, and Horror Boobs are distributing new pressings of exploitation cinema on VHS, while Roku channels like B-Movie TV, B-Zone, and Betamax TV are dedicated to B-movies and their hazy, washed-out video aesthetic defined by video moiré, stretched imagery at the edge of the frame, white dots (dropout), noise bars, shaky framing, and muted audio.⁵ This integration of VHS aesthetics and culture is part of a larger trend in global media culture, what new media scholar Laura U. Marks has termed "analog nostalgia," a yearning for the imperfections of analog media in a world saturated with high-definition digital imagery.⁶ Analog nostalgia manifests across media and platforms. It can be heard in lo-fi musical movements that deliberately degrade digital recordings to imbue a sense of sonic and material decay reminiscent of cassette tapes.

Alternative comedy programming from studios like Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim's Absolutely Productions frequently add VHS scanlines, muddy audio, and blurry imagery designed to mimic home movies recorded on a consumer-grade camcorder via digital post-production suites. Movies like *V/H/S* (dir. Adam Wingard et al., US, 2012) adopt a found-footage aesthetic to tell a tale of horror, where the "dead" technology in an unknown man's house ultimately leads to the demise of those who consume it. Left for dead, the zombie technology refuses to accept its fate. Importantly, however, analog nostalgia is not a rejection of the digital; instead, it is an embrace of digital remediation of analog aesthetics, re-invigorating the medium via "aesthetic de-familiarization" by purposeful audio-video degradation.⁷

Traditional understandings of the technological life-cycle (TLC) suggest that once a technology has reached its "death" in a capitalist marketplace, it emerges in a new form, partially as a result of planned obsolescence, partially as a natural result of the ebbs and flows of technological development.⁸ However, there is a lacuna in this theory that does not account for the re-emergence of "dead" media and the consumer motivations behind it. I take this problem in TLC theory and use the analog nostalgia of VHS revival as my object of study to answer the question of how resurgent technologies/media can be explained. I argue that the recent resurgence and reimagining of the

VHS aesthetic can be attributed to nostalgia and the emergence and maturation of new forms of digital distribution.

Broadly, TLC theory is concerned with technological evolution within an industrial framework; it embraces a cyclical model whereby technological discontinuities (e.g., innovations that upend normal price and performance metrics) catalyze a sequence of rapid growth and development. The period of innovation is capped when a dominant design is adopted by the industry and consumers, ushering in a period of smaller changes before a new product or development begins the cycle anew.⁹ TLC theory has been unevenly articulated across disciplines, employing different nomenclature and studied for different ends.¹⁰ The purpose of this article is not to develop a unifying theory of TLC. Instead, I am proposing the addition of a fifth stage: revival. That the dominant fields of TLC theorization are closely associated with business and administrative sciences is a factor in this notable absence, where underlying assumptions about the significance of such research are based in managerial decision-making trends, financial value, and distribution of research and development resources. In other words, once a technology has been eclipsed by a new discontinuity in the market, it is no longer of interest. However, I believe the field of media studies is fertile ground to further theorize lifecycles of technologies, particularly in the subdisciplines of reception and fan studies.

By inserting a revival stage into the circular theory of TLC, I will be taking the videocassette as my object of inquiry. While many use “video” as shorthand for this medium/technology, I will be using VHS for two reasons. First, video is a term that has multiple meanings, ranging from a specific type of art to a general term used to describe moving images that are not on celluloid film. Second and more importantly, VHS was the dominant format of the videocassette era and, thus, is more culturally specific than the generic videocassette. In examining the VHS revival, I will be following Sean Cubitt’s analysis of video culture, which understands the technology as more than just a technology: as sets of relations, practices, and possibilities within and around videocassettes.¹¹

My interests lie in the value that consumers derive from so-called “obsolete” technologies, drawing from Ruth Schwartz Cowan’s work on the “consumption junction,” whereby the attitudes of consumers are taken to be of equal importance to those of producers, retailers, and manufacturers when it comes to understanding the evolution of technologies. As she

contends, the consumption junction is the time and place of people purchasing the technology, where diffusion occurs, with consumer purchasing decisions taking into account a number of factors unrelated to the concerns of producers.¹² Thus, understanding the value that a technology or medium has for consumers can indicate why it, rather than its competitors, proliferates (or, in this case, rises from its grave, as do the zombies of so many horror films housed on VHS). In other words, why VHS and not Laserdisc, SelectaVision, or 16mm film?

The most prominent catalyst for the revival of VHS as a cultural object is nostalgia. Nostalgia has been theorized across disciplines in myriad ways; I deploy nostalgia in the context of the continuity of personal identity. Janelle L. Wilson has formulated hypotheses of nostalgia that understand it as interpersonal expression of self and as a way to idealize one's past.¹³ As a form of identity management, analog nostalgia allows consumers to create ingroups and outgroups; those who love and appreciate "obsolete" media and those who do not. For instance, music revivalists regularly reject modern innovations like digital production (or electric instruments for older revivalists) as a way to separate themselves from mainstream culture.¹⁴

For VHS, the analog nostalgia involves both physical and aesthetic manifestations. For many acolytes of VHS culture, owning a significant collection of cassettes is an important component of identity maintenance, with Charles Tashiro arguing that personal tape collections reveal individual idiosyncrasies and reflect one's taste, both to oneself and to one's peers.¹⁵ Artwork and creative packaging are also valuable components of the VHS, as they both address the potential viewer and identify the VHS's content.¹⁶ Similarly, for non-fan groups like immigrants, finding and owning older, rare tapes from their home culture turns the tapes from the mundane to "rare, unique, and precious objects," especially because these tapes are direct material and cultural connections to a homeland that is often inaccessible in their new surroundings.¹⁷ VHS collecting was not limited to pre-recorded films, either, as there were a multitude of viewers who recorded a wide variety of television content to build personal libraries (and archives). For example, Vanderbilt University has collected recordings of nightly news programs since the late 1960s, while activist Marion Stokes recorded over seventy thousand tapes of US television beginning in the late 1970s. The physical cassette, then, is representative of the permanence of identity and of access for many collectors.

The aesthetic of VHS is arguably the biggest nostalgia marker and draw for the technology, and its “limitations” have been known for decades. When defining the VHS aesthetic, special attention must be paid to its “low-quality” audio and video characteristics, which are valued by VHS acolytes. Describing low-budget video productions, Sean Cubitt compiles a list of audio/visual characteristics of VHS: comet-tails, flares, saturated color, poorly mixed sound, never discrete and always in a state of becoming due to the interlacing properties of video;¹⁸ to wit, videocassettes have a contrast ratio of 40:1 compared to film’s 130:1.¹⁹ Laura U. Marks views this incompleteness as erotic, as the viewer can never see the totality of the image through the grainy, harshly contrasted image, forcing us to mentally fill in the blanks.²⁰ Furthermore, intricately imbricated with the VHS aesthetic’s analog nostalgia is the B-movie content beloved by current collectors. B-movies, less a genre than a mode of production, eschew the prestige productions of major studios and instead seek to entertain audiences in whatever ways possible.²¹ With lower production values, horror films, cheap actioners, and erotic thrillers lent themselves to the medium and have come to define its aesthetic for contemporary fans; with increasingly high definition digital formats, there has been an uptick in interest in the analog aesthetic, interest that has been (paradoxically) facilitated by digital distribution.

Digital distribution refers to any form of distribution that relies on the Internet to disseminate its content, including digital retailers like Amazon; video-on-demand services like Netflix, Shudder, and Hulu; boutique digital “channels” devoted to VHS-era content housed on connected device platforms like Roku, Apple TV, and Amazon Fire TV Stick; video platforms like YouTube and Vimeo; and peer-to-peer filesharing networks that allow users to easily share hard-to-find content with one another. Each of these categories of distribution offers something for viewers and VHS revivalism, most notably in terms of access, but also by offering an alternative frame through which to engage with and consume movies. In particular, boutique channels like B-Movie TV and B-Zone function as portals through which to interact with a wide variety of content that is subsumed under the larger umbrella of analog nostalgia. Briefly summarized, these channels are independently run by fans of exploitation cinema and other forms of “low culture,” airing mostly films from the 1970s through the 1990s, but also bootleg music concerts, theatrical trailers, and TV rips of defunct semi-professional sports like Major Indoor Lacrosse League and United States Football League. Put together into a daily schedule like legacy television, these channels are an always-on venue for VHS and VHS-adjacent content.



Figure 1. *Shock 'Em Dead* (dir. Mark Freed, USA, 1991).

Writing about independent web television production, Aymar Jean Christian has articulated how the small-scale conditions of digital distribution forced innovation by emphasizing the importance of responding to demands of fans.²² Similarly, channels like B-Zone have taken the affordances of their digital platforms to interact with viewers in ways that build community and loyalty. For example, the channel's three month anniversary occurred in May 2020; B-Zone celebrated by populating that day's schedule entirely with viewer requests, including *Italian Spiderman* (dir. Alrugo Entertainment, Australia, 2007), a spoof on Italian and Turkish knockoff films of the 1970s and 1980s; *Shock 'Em Dead* (dir. Mark Freed, US, 1991), a direct-to-video thriller starring Traci Lords; and *The Boogens* (dir. James Conway, US, 1981), a creature feature. Recently, their Facebook following has grown to four hundred ninety-three people that regularly comment on the daily updates provided by the channel's operator, while viewership has grown week over week.



Figure 2. *The Boogens* (dir. James L. Conway, 1981)

Authorized digital distribution is not the only avenue sustaining a renewed interest in VHS aesthetics; peer-to-peer filesharing networks facilitate the circulation of both mainstream and, more likely, hard-to-find texts. Invite-only BitTorrent trackers like *Cinemageddon* organize themselves around “trash” media, movies, television programming, and ancillary media that are adjudged to be of low quality, obscure, and otherwise marginalized; a simple rule of thumb for acceptable movies is they must have fewer than three thousand ratings on IMDB. Not coincidentally, the era that aligns best with these conditions runs from the 1970s to the 1990s, coeval with VHS. Home video’s financial windfall for the film industry led to a bloom of independent film production, and many of these new production and distribution companies traded in genre cinema of limited interest to the wider public;²³ firms like Vestron, New World, Action International, and PM Entertainment exemplify this low-budget, high volume approach.

To be sure, the video format has always been transnational, with diasporic communities around the globe relying on local retailers importing legitimate or bootleg copies of movies to maintain a connection to their homeland. In fact, that geographical distance was often made manifest in the material decay of the cassettes, as many of those bootleg tapes were taped from another tape which may have been duplicated itself, leading to distorted imagery and audio and, perhaps, the re-emergence of a Benjamin-esque aura.²⁴ Digital distribution networks augment the already existing

transnational element of VHS by removing many of the barriers that exist for physical media transportation.

Beyond offering access to a large library of VHS-era films, private BitTorrent sites also remediate existing cultural and communal practices of VHS tape traders, including reciprocity, developing quality standards, offering social sustenance, and pedagogical opportunities.²⁵ Furthermore, many of the files on the site are versions of media that are not of HD quality, instead maintaining the washed out, blurry, CRT-ready images that characterize the VHS aesthetic. Lucas Hilderbrand writes of the aura that dubs of obscure videocassettes contain, characterizing the analog duplication of the text as creating a new aura that “sensuously suggests the personal interventions that made the copy possible.”²⁶ While I am speaking of digital files and not analog cassettes, I believe the principle still applies, as they preserve the traces of analog-ness that define personal video recording; this is readily apparent on any TV rip (content that was recorded from a television signal).

Nostalgia for older technologies is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the tradition of romanticizing the old in the face of the new can be traced at least as far back as the nineteenth century Romantic movement, which valued “tradition, community, and subjectivity” as a reaction to the industrial modernity tenets of the scientific method, exactitude, and reason.²⁷ With the rise of digital formats, a space has opened up for media collectors and fans to reflect on what was missing in their past media, as well as what value that media offered them. In an era of increasing amounts of visual information presented within media, there is an allure for the inexact, interlaced image of magnetic tape. Facilitated by analog nostalgia and the rise of digital distribution networks (both authorized and otherwise), the VHS revival is exemplary of the lacuna in existing theorization of the technological lifecycle. Rather than a never-ending cycle of technological progress, scholars should consider the model as multi-directional. While some technologies fade away, others remain, re-invigorated by social, cultural, intellectual, pedagogical, and personal needs and desires. As this brief study of VHS’s revival has demonstrated, media studies has much to offer the study of TLC, particularly when looking backward.

Notes

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- 2 Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 92.
- 3 Geoff Boucher, "VHS Era is Winding Down," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 December 2008, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-dec-22-et-vhs-tapes22-story.html.
- 4 Brittany Hodak, "RIP VHS: World's Last VCR Will Be Made This Month," *Forbes*, 23 July 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/brittanyhodak/2016/07/23/rip-vhs-worlds-last-vcr-to-be-made-this-month.
- 5 Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 15.
- 6 Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 152.
- 7 Dominik Schrey, "Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation," in *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, ed. Katharina Niemeyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 34.
- 8 For further discussion of TLC, see Margaret Taylor and Andrew Taylor, "The Technology Lifecycle: Conceptualization and Managerial Implications," *International Journal of Production Economics* 140 (2012): 541–553 and Jeongeun Byun, Tae-Eung Sung, and Hyun-Woo Park, "Technological Innovation Strategy: How Do Technology Life Cycles Change by Technological Area," *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management* 30, no. 1 (2018): 98–112.
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- 10 Taylor and Taylor, "The Technology Lifecycle," 541.
- 11 Sean Cubitt, *Timeshift: On Video Culture*, (London: Comedia, 1991), 1.
- 12 Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The Consumption Junction: A Proposal for Research Strategies in the Sociology of Technology," in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*, eds. Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 263.
- 13 Janelle L. Wilson, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 19.
- 14 Tamara E. Livingston, "Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory," *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 1 (1999): 69.
- 15 Charles Tashiro, "The Contradictions of Video Collecting," *Film Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1996): 11–18.
- 16 Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 48.
- 17 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 172.
- 18 Cubitt, *Timeshift*, 139–142.
- 19 Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 47.
- 20 Marks, *Touch*, 11–13.
- 21 Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes*, 6.
- 22 Aymar Jean Christian, *Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 163.
- 23 Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*, 117–121.
- 24 Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 24.
- 25 Mike Van Esler, "More Than Movies: Social Formations in Informal Networks of Media Sharing," (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2017).

26 Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 176.

27 *Ibid.*, 62.

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