

MEDIA FIELDS

J O U R N A L

Video Stores Introduction

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Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Media Fields Journal*!

This new online journal represents the latest development in a research initiative launched in UCSB's Department of Film and Media Studies in 2007. The goal of *Media Fields* is to provide a forum focused on the critical study of media and space, where we can dynamically present and openly debate the latest work from established and emerging scholars and practitioners. Each issue will have a theme—whether it is a topic of contemporary relevance; an exploration of a particular concept, media form, genre, or practice; or, as in this issue, a specific media space: the video rental store.

We were compelled to focus on the space of the video store in this issue because it is a “media field” that at once allows for the kind of tangible, site-specific fieldwork that is at the heart of *Media Fields* and, at the same time, is a site where a range of important issues intersect: “new” media's consequences for “old” media; uses, developments, and failures of media technologies; the cultivation of knowledge about cinema and television; global media distribution; piracy and the law; the circulation of pornography; configurations of cultural communities; relations between public and private space; and contemporary media reception.

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The theme of this issue has also proven to be timely. Since early 2010, when we began planning this issue, video stores have been increasingly in the news, most frequently in response to their widespread closures. After closing one-third of their sites in February, Movie Gallery, which operated Hollywood Video and Game Crazy franchises too, announced they were liquidating stores this October. Blockbuster's official declaration of bankruptcy one month earlier led *Newsweek* and *The Wall Street Journal* to run features signaling the end of an era, titled, respectively, "The Rise and Fall of Blockbuster" and "Fade-Out Nears for Video Stores." Our favorite response has been *The Onion's* recreation of a historical Blockbuster video store in the "time before the internet." Indeed, once the story reaches the level of parody, we know it has penetrated cultural consciousness. This issue confronts but also complicates the familiar narrative of disappearing stores, treating it as an important opportunity to reflect on their histories, legacies, and futures.

To date, relatively little work has been published on the significant roles that video rental stores have played in shaping media histories, cultures, and industries. Frederick Wasser's *Veni, Vidi, Video* and Joshua Greenberg's *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* are two important exceptions.¹ Wasser, whose new essay, "The Long Tail of the Video Store," we include in this issue, has provided a detailed account of the powerful roles that stores have played in shaping—and sustaining—the film industry throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century. Greenberg, writing from a history-of-technology perspective, charts how the neighborhood video store, which he reads as a "consumption junction," was central in making home video and the VCR meaningful domestic technologies. In a range of works by other scholars, the video store is less centrally the object of study but its presence is deeply felt, as in Lucas Hilderbrand's work on cinephilia and Brian Larkin's work on piracy infrastructures in Nigeria.² Many of the essays included here engage directly and indirectly with this work, and we are thankful to all four of these authors for generously engaging with us as this issue took shape. Their diverse and richly textured scholarship is suggestive of how much more research on video stores remains to be explored.

Our editorial aim in assembling this issue has been to bring together a variety of perspectives on the video store as a site of media study. Contributors include anthropologists, artists, film scholars, experts in communication

technologies, former and current video store employees, bloggers, and more. Methods are equally diverse: observational and cartographic, theoretical and historical. Many pieces draw on current research projects in the US, though some explore the role video stores play in other media cultures: in Australia, Canada, Fiji, France, and the Republic of Congo.

As such, we hope that one of the strengths of this issue lies in its effort to account for the significance of the video store in a global context. In part, this involves looking beyond the site of the “rental store” itself, mapping multiple routes of video circulation and exchange, official and unofficial.

Neither Blockbuster nor Quentin Tarantino’s video shop has been the cultural norm in many places. Scholars like Larkin, Hilderbrand, Ravi Sundaram, and Pang Laikwan have illustrated that local video distribution takes many distinct forms in the US, Nigeria, India and China.³ In many locations, for instance, the era of video rental never arrived and piracy provided the primary mode of accessing regional and global moving images. Even during the heyday of the video store in bustling cities in the US and Europe, large marginalized populations had to improvise their own distribution infrastructures to see films in their own languages. Importantly, ambulant vendors and fixed shops selling pirated VCDs and DVDs operate in many locations, providing access to global film and television and the take-home experience that have defined video stores elsewhere—though pirated discs need not be returned. Beyond piracy, too, we might look at how failed and successful rental schemes, alternative models of distribution and property, and digital video rental transform our understandings of video industries, technologies, and practices outside the “video store” that predominates in English language representations.

While we hope to push the parameters of current debates about video stores, this issue makes no claims to be comprehensive. In assembling work, we found ourselves particularly drawn to projects that incorporate site-specific methodologies. Several contributors develop their analyses using interviews, on-site photography or video, and attention to spatial layout. These critical methods provide needed data and anecdotes, opening up perspectives that counter prevailing discourses about store closures.

This issue, we are happy to say, is not about the “death” of video stores.

Rather, it is about thriving and transforming cultures, new business models, afterlives of objects and spaces. It poses new questions for cinema and media studies about problems of historiography, forcing us to consider the need to attend critically to distribution alongside the paradigms associated with production and reception that have dominated the field over the course of its history. Works presented and discussed here also suggest ways in which stores can become spaces for artistic reflection and creative exchange, encouraging us to imagine new ways of inhabiting space and relating to media objects. Indeed, this issue strives to suggest the possibilities of this journal's subtitle, "Critical Explorations in Media and Space," juxtaposing pieces that push beyond popular discourses about the contemporary media landscape.



Film studies goes to the video store. The Santa Monica, CA-based Vidiots celebrated its 25th anniversary in November

2010. In the store's annex, employees host free weekly screenings, conversations with special guests, and film studies classes for the local community.

Notes

- 1 Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Joshua Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008).
- 2 Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 3 Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Pang Laikwan, *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia: Copyright, Piracy, and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

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