

MEDIA FIELDS

J O U R N A L

EVERYTHING IS TERRIBLE!

An Interview with Future Schlock

Jeff Scheible



In work I have been doing on video rental stores, I have been exploring where videos go after video stores close, looking at instances of what I am referring to as media “redistribution.” This research was inspired by the unusual story of the afterlives of the videos at Kim’s Video in New York City, where I worked briefly as a video manager. In 2009, the 55,000 titles at the store’s famous

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East Village branch, Mondo Kim's, ended up traveling across the Atlantic to a small Sicilian town, Salemi, where they have been an integral part of a large-scale cultural revitalization project.

Pursuing this question in various contexts has led me to understand the video store not as a closed chapter in histories of media industries that precedes success stories of "new media" industries, but as an institution associated with specific cultural practices and values, and as a physical space filled with material objects that don't simply vanish when a store is no longer able to provide rental services. Videos often have surprising new trajectories after stores close—not only in different continents as with Kim's, but in homes, in post-consumer spaces, in art galleries, and online. One compelling instance of "redistribution" takes place in a popular blog, called Everything Is Terrible! This website curates a new clip of edited found VHS footage every day. Usually unintentionally humorous, these clips featuring bad acting or special "special effects" from media pasts—whether from forgotten movies, public-access television, or homemade instructional videos. Countless links to their videos circulate virally everyday. The site has been covered in *Gawker*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Onion*, NPR, MTV, and they have toured the country, sharing their work at sold-out screenings in a variety of movie theaters. Maryjean Ballner, who gained Internet fame with their "So Your Cat Wants a Massage?" post, recently appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman*.

Everything Is Terrible! includes a diverse cast of subcultural characters, such as Commodore Gilgamesh, Ghoul Skool, and Future Schlock. I had the opportunity to ask Future Schlock some questions about the roles video stores play in their work, featured below.

Jeff: First off, what is Everything Is Terrible!? Is it a blog, a collective, an attitude towards life?

Future Schlock: All three! There are seven of us who all contribute to the Terrible, we have a blog arm to our empire (as well as a live act), and our motto collectively is "If everything is Terrible, then nothing is," which someone told us once was like a Zen koan. We felt pretty good about that.

**Who participates in Everything Is Terrible!? Where did you all meet?
How did you decide to join forces?**

Well, there are seven of us, and we all knew each other previously since we all spent time in Athens, Ohio, mostly in film/telecommunications school at Ohio University. We all collected found footage tapes that we shared with each other (it was a very esoteric interest at the time); some of the guys had done film and comedy projects together. I and another member had worked together on the "Future Schlock" series, which the other guys had seen and liked, so when the idea for the website got started we were asked to join/contribute/whatever.

How do you find material? And are there any kinds of rules and principles you adhere to that give your project structure or a specific aesthetic? For example, you only work with VHS, right?

We are 98 percent VHS sourced. Occasionally we use something more recent from a shitty DVD (there are a lot of throwaway DVD titles nowadays), but the vast majority is VHS. The VHS comes mostly from thrift stores, obviously. Sometimes we use video store going-out-of-business sales or library sales. The absolute rule is no embedding videos "found" on YouTube. We consider the recut of the source material, your interpretation of it through editing, to be the "creative" part of the project so that's why the rule is so strict. You have to edit it and upload it yourself.

Please tell us specifically about the roles that video rental stores play in your work. What percentage of the videos you post would you estimate come from videos you find at video stores?

It used to be more. Recently even the megachain video stores are going out of business and I am pretty sure the mom and pop stores are almost completely gone. The number of video store closing sales has dropped off in the past year and we don't see them increasing again, which is sad. When we do find one we get really excited; sometimes these folks are just too stubborn to quit and have immaculate collections of VHS from the late 1970's onward. But that's because they are stubborn and hang onto things. Once I spent a solid hour in LA trying to get an old Russian man to sell his VHS for less than \$10 each. He insisted that people rented them but I finally got him down to \$5.

Man, he had some great tapes. The best stores for our purposes are not run by people who really love movies, by the way; those folks tend to curate their collections. The best ones are people who blindly bought everything on the market the year they opened the store and every profitable year after that. And haven't sold anything since because they refuse to believe that VHS is dead.

What are your personal experiences with video stores? What stores in particular have been important in your work and lives? I understand that at least one of you (Future Schlock) has worked at some.

Yup, I begged and pleaded my way into a video store job in college (a very desirable job in our small college town) and acquired a lot of my early VHS collection there. Now I also work part time in an artsy "specialty" video store in Chicago. It's nice because I can indulge my retail geekdom and arty pretensions at the same time.

A media scholar, Will Straw, has likened the Internet to a video store, saying that it is "about abundance, but it is also about the inertial movements that bring commodities and images together into clusters and networks whose solidity decides their cultural and symbolic weight."¹ In other words, both the video store and the Internet are sites filled with tons of videos that are collected into "clusters"—whether sorted by genres in the space of the store or maybe gathered by a blogger interested in a certain issue. Given your work both at video stores and online, have you ever considered affinities between these two different types of "space"?

Our site in particular is similar to a video store, since the database of posts has grown so large now we have dozens and dozens of tagged categories for browsing. The project in general is (partially) meant to be an archive of the esoteric and ephemeral and I think people understand that—we often hear people say the first time they saw the site, they were on it all day/night. However, on most blogs I would say that the experience is a lot more curated than the average video store. Videos appear on the main page of a blog and are then buried, and viewers check often for updates, resulting in an experience that is less like a huge store and more like a constantly rotating

employee recommendations shelf, the recommendations being whatever has struck the blogger's fancy recently.

How would you relate the work that you do (online, touring) to the current trend of video store closures? Are you picking up where closed stores left off? Are you keeping them alive?

If anything, we're like vultures picking at the corpses of recently deceased mom-and-pop video store closings everywhere. But when they're all gone we will sort of be carrying on their legacy, in a much more curated way.

Finally, could you share with us a favorite terrible post or two taken from a video you acquired at a video store, and perhaps recount the history of finding it/them?

Yup, when I worked at a small chain called Premiere Video in college I obtained two of my all-time favorite tapes when they were pulled from the shelves, *Baby Huey's Easter Adventure* (<http://www.vimeo.com/16858107>) and *The Killing of Satan* (<http://www.everythingisterrible.com/2010/04/killing-of-satan.html>)!

Notes

- 1 Will Straw, "Embedded Memories," *Residual Media*, ed. Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 14.

Jeff Scheible is a Ph.D. candidate in UCSB's Department of Film and Media Studies, completing a dissertation entitled "Media after New Media." He is Managing Editor of *Camera Obscura*, a founding co-editor of *Media Fields Journal*, and a former video manager of Kim's Mediapolis in New York City.