

The Death and Life of the Back Room

Peter Alilunas

Near my home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a dead video store haunts a busy street. Construction workers fill the space now, preparing it for another tenant. Just off the same road, a few miles away in the city of Ypsilanti, a different scene plays out at another video store. While not necessarily busy, a steady flow of traffic enters, which was also the pattern at the dead location before its closure. Video Hut, an independent, locally owned, single-store business, has operated continuously since 1983, moving a few blocks from a previous location in 1987. The dead store was a Hollywood Video, along with six other locations in the area. Movie Gallery, Inc., which owned the Hollywood Video and Movie Gallery video store chains, is no more.

The primary difference between these stores is also the one usually ignored by scholars in their discussions of home video. Inside Video Hut, to the side of the counter through a pair of swinging doors, sits a large back room full of adult films, some on VHS, but most on DVD. Such titles were never even a possibility at the Hollywood Video. Like its corporate rival Blockbuster (also now in bankruptcy protection), and their successors Netflix and Redbox, Hollywood Video did not offer adult titles.¹ At the Video Hut, it thrives. Most of the traffic I have observed during various visits goes directly to the back room—a conjecture confirmed by owner Mark Johnson, who readily admits that the back room keeps the store in business. In fact, the store offers

Media Fields Journal no. 1 (2010)

minimal catalogue titles, focusing primarily on new (and recent) releases and the back room for the majority of its revenues. Ultimately, the importance of adult video to this store might best be seen in terms of floor space: the back room occupies a significant portion of floor space, and its inventory, according to Johnson, makes up at least 20 percent of the overall store stock.



As scholars continue to re-examine the history, cultural importance, and remaining life of video stores, the beginning of the industry is starting to resemble its impending end, much as Video Hut's floor plan, customer interests, and insistence on carrying (and profiting from) adult video hearkens back to the birth of the video rental industry. Curiously, then, despite the apparent corporate success of the video rental chains in erasing its existence, adult video might once again be a primary economic engine in the rental industry. As Johnson admits, the back room has carried his business through two recessions, and remains the epicenter of his profits even as his competitors have closed. That situation is not new; in fact, back

rooms like the one at Video Hut have an integral (if mostly untold) place in the history of home video. Before Fox opened part of its catalogue to Andre Blay's Magnetic Video in 1978, thus initiating Hollywood's gold rush into home video, adult film already had claim to the territory.



Art Morowitz's Video Shack in Manhattan made its entry into the world in the lobby of an adult movie theater in 1978, and hard-core videos made up much of the early stock when it relocated to a nearby storefront as the first retail store for video in the United States.² After rental storefronts began appearing around the country, early estimates put adult videos at as much as 50 percent of total rentals before Hollywood began steadily releasing titles on the new medium, and even after the industry stabilized and the mainstream studios solidified their presence, the genre accounted for nearly 15 percent of the average store's profits.³ By 1987, annual adult video rentals surpassed 100 million, and by 2000 the adult video industry produced an estimated 10,000 new titles every year.⁴ Now, as online distribution has emerged as the

primary means of connecting producers to consumers, new challenges face the rental business model—as do unexpected solutions. Johnson claims that the influx of illegal downloading of adult films has led to creative marketing by producers seeking to re-capitalize on the rental model, resulting in new and innovative marketing strategies that have helped bring back rental customers.

Those customers have, to varying degrees, always been a mainstay of Video Hut's business. Imagine the average adult in the Ann Arbor area in 1983, two years after manufacturers first dropped VCR prices in 1981, a move which spurred a 69 percent increase in sales.⁵ Perhaps they had been to the adult bookstores in Ann Arbor, or to the adult theaters in Detroit, but if they had purchased a VCR they had also opened new avenues for privacy. If they chose to browse the new Video Hut's back corner (it would not become a separate room until the move in 1987) they could expect to find a small selection of "classic" adult films from the 1970s, many of which, like *Deep Throat* (dir. Gerard Damiano, 1972) and *Behind the Green Door* (dir. Artie Mitchell and Jim Mitchell, 1972), had long since entered popular discourse. These sorts of films had been transferred to videotape, and distributed by companies like Caballero Video, Video-X-Pix, Essex Video, Cal Vista, and VCX. Not until 1986 would video overtake celluloid as the primary production medium, but small companies were experimenting with video much earlier.⁶ They could also find myriad queer titles, which Video Hut has always carried, creating a space where the mediated depictions of sexuality extended well beyond the heteronormative—a critical, overlooked aspect of the social function of the back room. Johnson agrees, suggesting that Video Hut is friendly to "all walks of life," and that his staff regularly encounters people with a wide variety of interests. The store does not limit its adult purchases based on sexuality, nor does it hold a political stance on those issues. Instead, Johnson tells his staff to maintain a positive attitude toward the *customers'* interests.

These sorts of details about the many back rooms across the United States, a critical part of home video history, remain for the most part buried or lost. In fact, basic histories of adult film, in terms of production, distribution, and exhibition, are missing not only in pornography studies, but receive virtually no significant mention in general film histories.⁷ Ironically, then, the academic temptation to avoid adult film as part of cinema history seems to position sexually explicit material as an unmentionable object, placed, as Walter

Kendrick argues, in a “secret museum” closed off from public view and discussion.⁸ Nearly all the scholarship on home video, home viewing spaces, and convergence makes only limited mention of adult film (and usually in as much of a hurry as possible), and much new media scholarship now seems to be following the same trend.⁹ As home video histories continue to grow as a site of academic inquiry (as this journal issue attests), adult film’s critical role in that narrative is in danger of being ignored or relegated to passing mentions, which has unfortunately been the precedent so far.

One of the earliest efforts to examine the home video industry, Manuel Alvarado’s *Video World-Wide*, for example, gives only the slightest attention to adult film.¹⁰ This is particularly disappointing since it is otherwise comprehensive in collecting an impressive amount of data about the production, distribution, and reception of home video. Roy Arnes, in his early theorization of home video, avoids the topic entirely.¹¹ James Lardner’s history offers one paragraph.¹² Megumi Komiya and Barry Litman also present one paragraph, with the standard narrative of initial popularity followed by decreased interest as access opened to more mainstream titles.¹³ Frederick Wasser’s seminal analysis of the rise of the VCR and Hollywood’s subsequent response also follows the pattern. “Pornography was historically important to the emergence of home video,” he argues, yet offers only a few pages to support the claim.¹⁴ While Wasser acknowledges, for example, that “X-rated material... created the infrastructure for video distribution,” he makes only cursory effort to go into any real detail or map the history of such a powerful statement.¹⁵ Recent calls for more research on home video history often completely avoid adult film, in effect erasing what little mention has been made.¹⁶ Some recent work, such as Joshua Greenberg’s *From Betamax to Blockbuster*, integrates adult video more seamlessly into the narrative, demonstrating a hopeful model for future research.¹⁷ Given that stores such as Video Hut integrate the back room into their business models, such an approach seems to be a logical research choice.

Part of the problem may stem from the lack of familiar and established research protocols. The field of adult film history lacks, for the most part, established archives, journals, dedicated conferences, and departments with experienced faculty. Scholars often must turn to work outside academia to piece together the history, or pull from a variety of cross-referenced discourses to interrogate the past. As Schaefer identifies, “insider” accounts,

anecdotal approaches, very loose ethnographies, oral histories, or superficial overviews tend to comprise much of the work on adult film history.¹⁸ Details often lack citation or supporting evidence, and can lead down twisting paths of factual confirmation, or, worse, transmit inaccurate information. Often scholars must rely upon adult film industry itself for historical research, a situation which can present more verification problems and sometimes a lack of access. Despite this, pockets of evidence do exist, and gathering them is a necessity if adequate excavations of such histories are to occur. For example, adult film director and historian Jim Holliday's essay on the history of the industry has been included in a major porn studies anthology.¹⁹ Early viewers' guides to adult video provide similar examples, which contain invaluable production data and historical snapshots of the industry.²⁰ Ultimately, for scholars to write this history, the notion of the archive itself will have to expand, and conventional archives will have to consider why they have not gathered evidence—industrial, cultural, and otherwise—that could assist in that project.

There is more to the problem, however, than institutional constraints. As Schaefer argues, "It is the task of scholars and archivists working together to emphasize that one does not have to approve of, be an apologist for, or a champion of adult movies to recognize that they are a part of our culture and that they represent a legitimate area of scholarly interest."²¹ Historians, in particular, have been reluctant to focus on or even incorporate adult film into larger research, perhaps for similar reasons. Those that have taken on the topic, such as Schaefer, Justin Wyatt, and Jon Lewis, have added critical layers from a variety of perspectives to the broader understanding of the past.²² Home video history seems in particular need of such work.

Part of that need comes from the research opportunities still available for scholars, opportunities that fade away with every store death. Dan Herbert's essay in this journal issue illustrates the availability of vast pockets of independent video stores across different regions of the United States, many of which were the only place in town for people to access pornography. That is precisely the situation with Video Hut: residents of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti must otherwise travel toward Chicago or Detroit to find adult material. As such, Video Hut serves what some might call a vital community need, or what others have decried as a community problem. Johnson describes the periodic mailings he receives from local religious groups, and the action by the city

zoning board to put some of his competitors out of business over technicalities, a fate which he has as of yet avoided. These regulatory moments, both cultural and legislative, are also a crucial, overlooked part of home video history. With each store death, more potential evidence disappears. Yet the back room can live on in home video histories, provided its complicated, contentious, and layered past—and present—are included.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of why Blockbuster refused to carry adult video, see Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 147.
- 2 Tony Schwartz, "The TV Pornography Boom," *The New York Times*, 13 September 1981, 120.
- 3 Paul Cahill, "The United States and Canada," in *Video World-Wide: An International Study*, ed. Manuel Alvarado (Paris: Unesco, 1988), 149.
- 4 Chuck Kleinhans, "The Change from Film to Video Pornography: Implications for Analysis," in *Pornography: Film and Culture*, ed. Peter Lehman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 156-157; "Wall Street Meets Pornography," *The New York Times*, 23 October 2000.
- 5 Eugene Marlow and Eugene Secunda, *Shifting Time and Space: The Story of Videotape* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 22.
- 6 VCA Pictures and Caballero (the two largest production houses at the time) began shooting primarily on videotape rather than celluloid in 1986, initiating an industry-wide technological shift. Lawrence Cohn, "Pornmakers Surface in the Mainstream," *Variety*, March 9, 1988, 3, 26.
- 7 Eric Schaefer, "Dirty Little Secrets: Scholars, Archivists, and Dirty Movies," *The Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2005), 88.
- 8 Walter M. Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), 2-5.
- 9 For just one prominent example, see Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
- 10 Manuel Alvarado, *Video World-Wide: An International Study* (Paris: Unesco, 1988).
- 11 Roy Armes, *On Video* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

- 12 James Lardner, *Fast Forward: Hollywood, the Japanese, and the Onslaught of the VCR* (New York: Norton, 1987).
- 13 Megumi Komiya and Barry Litman, "The Economics of the Prerecorded Videocassette Industry," in *Social & Cultural Aspects of VCR Use*, ed. Julia R. Dobrow (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990), 36.
- 14 Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*, 94.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 16 For example, Charles R. Acland offers a persuasive call for more research on home video yet makes no reference whatsoever to adult film. In fact, he makes special mention of early video enthusiasts purchasing children's tapes and workout videos but, inexplicably, does not mention adult titles alongside them despite their historical importance alongside those genres. See Charles R. Acland, "The Last Days of Home Video," *Flowtv.org*, <http://flowtv.org/?p=4555> (accessed 24 November 2009).
- 17 Joshua M. Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008).
- 18 Schaefer, "Dirty Little Secrets," 86.
This collection of literature is too large to list completely here, but there are a few noteworthy examples: William Rostler, *Contemporary Erotic Cinema* (New York: Penthouse/Ballantine, 1973); Kenneth Turan and Stephen F. Zito, *Sinema* (New York: Praeger, 1974); Luke Ford, *A History of X: 100 Years of Sex in Film* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999); Legs McNeil, Jennifer Osborne, and Peter Pavia, *The Other Hollywood: The Uncensored Oral History of the Porn Film Industry* (New York: Regan Books, 2005); David Jennings, *Skinflicks: The Inside Story of the X-Rated Video Industry* (Bloomington, IN: 1st Books, 2000).
- 19 Jim Holliday, "A History of Modern Pornographic Film and Video," in *Porn 101: Eroticism, Pornography, and the First Amendment*, ed. James Elias (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1999).
- 20 Two important early examples: Robert H. Rimmer, *The X-Rated Videotape Guide* (New York: Arlington House Publishers, 1984); Keith L. Justice, *Adult Video Index '84* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1984).
- 21 Schaefer, "Dirty Little Secrets," 94.
- 22 Eric Schaefer, "Gauging a Revolution: 16mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 3-26; Justin Wyatt, "The Stigma of X: Adult Cinema and the Institution of the MPAA Ratings System," in *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, ed. Matthew Bernstein (Piscataway, NJ:

Rutgers University Press, 1999), 238-63; Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

Peter Alilunas is a doctoral candidate in the Screen Arts & Cultures department at the University of Michigan. His dissertation research is on the socio-historical transition of adult film from celluloid to videotape.