

David Lerner

Book Review: Daniel Herbert, *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store*

University of California Press, 2014.
\$29.95 (paperback)



For a generation of media scholars under the age of forty, it is impossible to imagine a media landscape that was not marked by the abundance of titles made available in video stores. Although the business model only fully developed in the early 1980s, video stores quickly became a conspicuous part of the geographic landscape and the dominant site for social interaction with media content. Phrases like “I’ll wait for it on video” epitomize the extent to which video stores and videotapes pervade our collective experience of film beyond its theatrical exhibition. And yet, only a generation later, the video store is disappearing rapidly, to the point that many undergraduates (and surely those younger) have likely never set foot in one. Daniel Herbert’s *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store* provides a thorough historical analysis of the industrial, social, and cultural function of the video store, and precisely the ways in which the video store shaped (and continues to shape) the media landscape.

Herbert acknowledges that, for many scholars and filmmakers (himself included), the video store

was a meaningful site for cinephilia, film education, and the accrual of cultural capital. But the book does not wax nostalgic for what we’ve lost as the last video stores close their doors. Instead, Herbert argues that the video store is positioned more accurately as a site for a different kind of education, a place in which consumers were, for the first time, “trained” to interact with media in new ways, asserting that “[v]ideo stores taught us to shop for movies.”¹ Despite the moribund status of the video store, its influence persists as part of a larger transformation from film culture and the ephemerality of theatrical experiences to “video culture” and the ubiquity and disposability of media.²

While there are a number of important books that deal with video as a medium (including Lucas Hilderbrand’s work on video and copyright, *Inherent Vice*, and Caetlin Benson-Allott’s exploration of video spectatorship, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*) the emphasis of *Videoland* is uniquely on the *store* aspect of the video store, not the *video*.³ The book is divided into three sections, each with two chapters: the first section historicizes the

role of video in the media industry and offers a cultural geography of the video store through its architecture and classification strategies; the second uses interviews and fieldwork to examine specific video stores, including both urban and small-town locations; the third explores ancillary businesses that emerged coterminously with video stores, including video distribution networks and the video guidebook industry.

Among its varied contributions, *Videoland* expands the boundaries of media industry studies, examining entrepreneurs and companies that are not readily identified as media industry players. The video store relied on successful Hollywood titles from its earliest iterations – Andre Blay, the man largely credited with inventing the home video business model, used a film’s theatrical success as the foremost metric by which he licensed titles from the studios. However, the studios were anxious about the new medium, and, as a result, many of the entrepreneurs who pioneered the video rental model were not industry insiders. Herbert argues that this diversity among the population of video store owners constitutes a larger shift in the media industry toward decentralization and democratization.⁴ For Herbert, even the business model of Blockbuster Video, the chain of mega-stores most commonly associated with the corporatization of the video rental industry, affirms these broader changes in the dispersal of the media industry. Blockbuster’s national expansion was propelled by Wayne Huizenga, whose background was in waste management, not the media industry, and its geographic spread across the country localized and individualized movie culture.

Herbert finds further evidence to support his analysis of the media industry’s development into a flexible, and often anonymous, national network through his industrial histories outside the brick-and-mortar video store. Chapter 5, on the distributors and wholesalers that served as middlemen between the studios and video stores, draws a distinction between companies responsible for “large-scale” distribution of major Hollywood titles, and companies whose distribution is “restricted” to independent, foreign, and arthouse titles. While the “restricted” distribution companies, such as Kino Lorber and Zeitgeist Films, were headquartered in New York, the large-scale

companies maintained their headquarters outside of traditional media and cultural capitals. Herbert writes that the large-scale distributors “dispersed cinematic distribution at the same time that they carved out an industry niche, analogous to the way in which video stores across the country dispersed movie culture out of the theater and into the retail landscape as well as the living room.”⁵ The large-scale efforts of these companies also disseminate particular values about the movies themselves, emphasizing new Hollywood releases, a wealth of copies over a breadth of titles, and an overarching assumption that movies were no different than any other disposable commodity. Rentrak, a company with very little public visibility or industry fanfare, is singled out as a particularly powerful large-scale distribution company – its innovative “revenue-sharing” system allowed independent video stores to acquire large numbers of the most desirable new titles cheaply, but the end result was to further devalue these tapes as soon as the new release window closed.⁶

It is conventional wisdom that the video store is a dying business model, yet, as *Videoland* documents, there are a number of companies with origins in the video store era that are thriving (including Rentrak). It is noteworthy though that the failures of video stores feel pervasive, exacerbated by the physical blight of empty and abandoned stores, while the successes remain largely hidden from view. In chapter 6 on the video guidebook industry, Herbert identifies Rovi Corporation as a salient example of the invisibility of the most powerful forces in the video (and post-video) industry. Rovi was originally founded as an information protection company, working on behalf of the studios to protect them from video and DVD duplication. Now in the information management business, Rovi has expanded its interests into metadata and is responsible for the various digital interfaces and windows through which we shop for media in the home. As Herbert argues, this positions Rovi, a relatively anonymous company with origins in the video industry, as a key player that “facilitated Hollywood’s efforts at ‘media convergence’ by providing control and connectivity mechanisms that allowed content to spread and be accessed.”⁷ Herbert suggests that the demise of the video store and the triumph of video culture are two

VIDEOLAND BOOK REVIEW

sides of the same coin, writing, “If the video store had normalized the idea that Americans could shop for movies as material commodities in retail spaces [...] then they also anticipated and facilitated the apparent media abundance and ubiquity of video shopping encountered in so many other places in the 2000s.”⁸

In addition to the contributions *Videoland* offers to discourses in media industry studies, the book also provides important documentation of the actual stores and social interactions that constitute the American video store experience. Herbert provides a taxonomy of video stores, distinguishing between three different divisions – corporate, corporate-model independent, and specialty stores – and arguing that the differences between these types are less related to industrial ownership than are determined by the use of space and classification strategies.⁹ As Herbert argues, the spatial logic of a video store’s organization reflects its cultural logic – the ways we move through a video store suggest the values of the movies themselves. For instance, in chapter 3, which examines some of the most revered video stores in the country (stores referred to as “video capitals”), the classifications evince a quirky and idiosyncratic sense of organization informed by the cinephilia of the stores’ staffs and patrons. These sites resist the sense of video’s equivalence with other disposable commodities and imbue it instead with cultural significance and artistic value. The economic imperative of these stores is seemingly secondary to their owners’ “sense of mission and faith that their stores are sites of alternative culture.”¹⁰ The stores also demonstrate a regional sensibility, partnering with other community institutions that confer cultural capital, including local universities and film festivals.

This emphasis on the regional is further explored in chapter 4, on small-town video stores, with research drawn largely from Herbert’s ethnographic fieldwork. In his interviews with the owners and employees of these stores, which

are often far-removed from the nearest major city, Herbert finds an unexpected heterogeneity, with each store evincing a unique local sensibility. Many of the stores function as hybrid spaces, renting videos while also supplementing that revenue stream with other business ventures, from tanning salons to fishing gear. However, Herbert reminds us that these far-flung stores too are participants in the media industry, with the owners and clerks coming to “embody movie culture” in their towns by combining regional knowledge with Hollywood knowledge.¹¹

This ethnography of American video stores is important work, not least because it may not be long before they have all disappeared. But on a personal level, *Videoland* most resonates in its cultural geography and treatment of the spatial and social practices enacted in the video store. Like Herbert, I spent several years working at a video store, and many of my fondest memories include video store experiences as both customer and clerk. The detailed descriptions of seemingly banal elements of the video store, from the drop box to the checkout counter, serve a poetic function. In merging the physical and architectural characteristics of the store with one’s own memories of video store experience, *Videoland* transforms the video store into not only a place to rent videos but a space to imagine cinematic possibilities. Although Herbert does not specifically identify his analysis as a poetics of the video store, these passages clearly constitute what Gaston Bachelard calls “eulogized space,” here using the video store as a site “to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love.”¹² Herbert avoids framing his account as a lamentation for the video store, but his work evinces an affection that is unmistakable. In juxtaposing media industry studies with a specific eye toward Americana and regionalism, *Videoland* offers a loving tribute to the video store as a significant space in media history.

David Lerner is an Assistant Professor of Film, Television, and Media Arts at Fairfield University. His research examines exploitation film aesthetics, the low-budget American film industry, and the relationships between political economy, culture, and taste.

Notes

- 1 Daniel Herbert, *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 3.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 118.
- 3 Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
- 4 Herbert, *Videoland*, 21.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 160.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 165.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 12 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Beacon, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), xxxv.