**Video Script**

**Lecture 33 – Video**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

Today we’re talking about a revolution in media: the technological, industrial, and cultural revolution that was the advent of video, and the proliferation of the video store.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for this lecture.

**Herbert**

Today, I’ll be drawing really heavily from this book, Dr. Daniel Herbert’s *Videoland*, which analyzes how movie culture was changed by video technology and video stores. **[ANIMATION]** In this book, Herbert asks why video stores succeeded in the 1980s. What factors allowed for the rapid spread of video rental businesses across the entire country?

Well, he finds that four key factors set the stage for that success. **[ANIMATION]** The first is the normalization of domestic consumption of movies, or movie-watching at home. **[ANIMATION x 2]** Factors two and three are kind of related. They’re both technological inventions. The first is the invention of a small, portable medium for film, and the second is a play/record system for the home. These two factors together change “the technical infrastructure for movie exhibition on a mass scale.” By that, he means technology shifts exhibition from a solely theatrical practice to one that can happen in many locations, including homes. Anywhere with a VCR can become a site of movie exhibition: a living room, a classroom, my family’s beat-up Econoline van in which we built a wooden holder for one of those tiny TV/VCR combos so we could drive my parents bananas blasting the heart-ripping scene from *Temple of Doom* on long car trips…etc.

**[ANIMATION x 2]** The fourth factor is the normalization of retail stores that are devoted to cultural goods. This is not disconnected from the rise of the shopping mall and the materialism of 1980s culture—both of which we touched on briefly at the end of the New Hollywood lecture.

Let’s look at each of these factors in detail.

**One**

Okay, factor number one: the normalization of domestic consumption of movies.

**Late night logos**

It’s true that the spread of television in the 1950s irreparably damaged the movie theater business. Remember, we talked about this in the early TV lectures. As people moved out to the suburbs and bought televisions for every room of those new suburban homes, they didn’t see such a need to travel to movie theaters as frequently as they once did. Moviegoing hit a peak just after the war and then declined permanently.

The unexpected effect of television is that even as it decimated the theater business from its former highs, it actually *increased* movie consumption as a whole. How’s that possible?

Well, in 1961, NBC’s *Saturday Night at the Movies* debuted. They licensed old Hollywood films and rebroadcast them once a week. This turned out to be hugely popular programming. The studios find a new stream of revenue from television licensing, and audiences were happy to be able to see old films again. There hadn’t been whole lot of ways to relive your favorite films up until this point.

ABC began a movie night in 1964, CBS began a movie night in 1965, and stations add afternoon movies and late movies too. **[ANIMATION]** Ultimately, across the decade, movies grew from just two hours of weekly primetime programming to over 16 hours, on average. By 1972, movies accounted for over a quarter of all primetime TV programming.

**Baby Jane**

By way of example, please allow me to discuss a kooky film I just adore, called *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* If you’ve never seen it, it’s a campy thriller classic from 1962 about these two sisters. Jane, played to terrifying effect by Bette Davis (on the left) is a former vaudeville star, and Blanche, played by Joan Crawford (on the right) is a former studio-era movie star who was paralyzed in an accident. Jane has a drinking problem and is a little bit loony-tunes and basically holds her sister hostage in their home.

**Crawford watching TV**

I bring it up both to recommend it if you need a delightful, wacky watch and to highlight this early scene. The film was made in 1962, just around the time networks were going in on rebroadcasting old Hollywood films. *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* in fact dramatizes this exact technological shift; Blanche begins getting fan mail again from people who are seeing her films on television for the first time in decades. In this scene, she’s in fact watching herself on TV…

**Television**

…and the film uses footage from a real 1934 movie that Crawford (the actress) starred in called *Sadie McKee.* The new availability of these old films to audiences, and people’s appreciation for them, is in fact what reignites Jane’s jealousy and stirs up the resentment between the two sisters.

**Gifs**

…and hijinks ensue.

**HBO**

Okay, but anyway, back to business. There are some drawbacks to watching films on network television that I’m sure you could come up with if I forced you to pause the lecture. They’re edited for content and time and they’re filled with commercials, in addition to the usual drawbacks of television, like the small screen.

But two things happen in 1977 that change movie-watching at home. HBO and the VCR hit the market at virtually the same time. HBO, in fact stands for Home Box Office—the idea was that your couch was as good as a ticket to a film! Both HBO and the VCR normalize the idea of seeing uncut, uninterrupted films at home.

**2&3**

Factors 2 and 3 are, again, kind of related, so we’ll talk about these together. It has to do with technology. In the 1970s, we see the invention of small, portable, ownable films in the form of video cassettes, and we see the proliferation of video playback and recording machines for the home.

**VHS/Betamax**

There were a number of experiments in home recording and playback, but in the 1970s, two formats came to market. There was Sony’s Betamax format, and there was the VHS format. Both Betamax and VHS were introduced to the market as time-shifting devices—meaning, their selling point was the idea that, for the first time, you could use them to bend television’s schedule to your preferences. You could tape something and watch it later on. This is the same way TIVO or DVR was sold to users—that was just a digital version of a VCR.

The difference between VHS and Betamax was the quality of the recording and the length of the tapes. Betamax recorded higher resolution tapes, but they were only an hour long. VHS recorded lower-resolution tapes, but they were longer. I’ve asked you to watch a very short commercial for each format in this module, and as you do, pay attention to how the VHS commercial emphasizes time. Their longer tape format could record a whole film or—crucially—a whole football game. VHS’s success over Betamax is often attributed to this football factor.

**VHS 1**

Once the market tips toward the VHS/VCR format over Betamax, the technology spreads very quickly across the country (so it was a very expensive technology when it first came out). 1.9 million households had a VCR in 1980, and often it cost upwards of $1,000. By 1982, the cost came down to between $400 and $700, just in time for the holiday shopping season. By 1986, the cost is reduced again to $200 to $300. And the combined effect of that reduction in price and the popularity of home movie watching was that by 1990, 64.5 million households owned a VCR.

**Tape 2**

So, while Betamax was slightly first to market and it made higher quality recordings, VHS eventually won out due to a combination of factors. There’s the length of the tapes. There’s also the fact that Hollywood bought into VHS and began licensing their films widely in that format, meaning the VHS selection became more attractive than the Betamax selection. And there’s also pornography. This is a contested point in media history—people don’t agree to what extent that this is a causal factor. But it’s true that the pornography industry chose VHS as its format early on, and even if it’s not the singular reason that Betamax lost, it certainly doesn’t hurt.

**Pornography theater**

And generally, VHS revolutionizes the pornography industry, tipping it from predominantly public exhibition in dedicated theaters like these, in the old Times Square in New York City, to predominantly *private* exhibition, within the home. This is a practice that is so engrained now it’s hard to imagine that theaters were once virtually the only way for most people to view pornography (aside from static images in magazines). We’ll return to pornography in a second, but for now, let’s move on to…

**4**

…factor four, or the proliferation of retail stores for cultural goods.

**B. Dalton**

Of course, there have been booksellers for as long as there have been books. But as shopping centers and malls arose from the 1970s onward, mass merchant chains like Barnes and Noble, Borders, and B. Dalton opened myriad branches across the country and integrated media browsing and buying into the larger recreational shopping experience. Put another way, you didn’t have to go to a specialty store anymore to get a book. You could go to the mall, try on some jeans, buy a pretzel, get an Orange Julius, see your friends, and pick up a book or a magazine at one of these chains.

**Camelot**

It’s not just bookstores, either. You get chain music stores like Camelot, which was founded in 1956 but became a real mall brand in the mall era. I lived just down a road from a shopping mall and this store wasn’t just a place to buy records—it was the center of my preteen and teenage life! I vividly remember my friend down the block collecting a bag of change so he could buy Korn’s *Life is Peachy* cassette at our Camelot and them being very displeased when he paid mostly in nickels.

**Tape World**

There were other stores too, like Tape World, Strawberries, Coconuts, Record Town, and so forth. But my point is that as malls made shopping for varied consumer goods a recreational activity, cultural goods sellers within malls more tightly integrated shopping for media into people’s everyday lives.

**Magnetic Video**

So, all of these four factors set the stage for the video store.

**[ANIMATION]** The Magnetic Video Corporation in Royal Oak, Michigan, was the first to license Hollywood films and produce them on video cassette beginning in 1977. They did both Betamax and VHS. And while this seems obvious now—we just release everything that comes out on DVD or Blu-ray—how would you choose which films to license if the home video market was new and you had a limited budget? Would you pick classics? Kids’ movies? Genre films? Really recent stuff? Hard to find films that people might not be able to see on television? Would you just go all in on pornography?

**[ANIMATION]** Well, owner Andrey Blay’s strategy was to pick the top-grossing fifty films from a list of available titles given to him by 20th Century Fox. This cemented from very early on the relationship between blockbusters and VHS.

**[ANIMATION]** So, Blay sold tapes directly to consumers and also provided them wholesale to electronics retailers for sale to their customers. And these tapes were *pricey*. They went for between $50 and $70 per tape. And in the beginning, he made retailers who took his tapes sign an agreement that they wouldn’t rent them out, knowing that a robust rental market would undercut his profits.

**Other Influences**

And yet, video stores popped up anyway as more producers of video tapes were established.

Studios were willing to go along with licensing their films for home video purchases, but they were pretty opposed to rental businesses at first. From their perspective, video stores were taking this potentially very lucrative new revenue stream and cutting it to just a fraction of what it would be if everyone had to buy their own copy of a film. Video stores, on the other hand, fought back on the grounds of copyright law, and what’s known as the “first sale doctrine.”

**First Sale**

First sale doctrine says that the copyright holder retains the rights to the work within a commodity, like a video tape, but it doesn’t maintain a right to the commodity itself. So, I pulled this example out of my real-life VHS drawer. **[ANIMATION]** My old video store, Captain Video, could legally sell me this used copy of *Tank Girl*. That’s their right after purchasing the tape. And now that I own it, it’s my right to sell it to you—although, you’ll pry my VHS copy of *Tank Girl* from my cold, dead hands.

What purchasing this video doesn’t give Captain Video or me the right to do is exhibit the film publicly, or produce *Tank Girl* merchandise, etc. I can’t sell *Tank Girl*, the intellectual property. I can only buy and sell this video cassette.

**Other Influences**

So, because Hollywood was generally opposed to the rental market, video stores tended to be run by non-industry insiders. These were just small entrepreneurs who saw an opportunity to open a storefront business. That makes video stores a lot like nickelodeons—they’re local, mom-and-pop businesses popped up to combat the prohibitively high cost of owning a video cassette. This grassroots nature of the video rental store business means that, up until the advent of the internet, it’s one of the more democratic branches of the media industries.

Another major influence on the video rental business was Disney. They used to rerelease their own films in theaters every 7-10 years, and they made millions each time they did. Given this robust second-run market of their own making, they were particularly resistant to VHS and the video rental model. Throughout the late 1970s and the early 1980s, as VHS grew more popular, Disney had a stated policy that it would *never* release its titles for purchase. That changed in 1985, with *Pinocchio*.

**Pinocchio**

Their home video version cost $79.95, and despite that high price (they said it included a “rental surcharge”) the *Chicago Tribune* trumpeted its release. “Now it can all be had and held on videotape,” they said, “warm and lustrous and bursting with Technicolor. In the cricket’s song, “When You Wish Upon a Star,” he sings that fate, being kind, can grant people “the sweet fulfillment of their secret longings.” For thousands and maybe millions of people, the home video release of *Pinocchio* will do just that. It is sweet fulfillment indeed.” So, as you can see, there’s an emotionality to this reporting—there’s something nostalgic and magical about being able to own a piece of your childhood all of a sudden.

**Disney**

So, in 1994, Disney managed to sell 17 million copies of its first VHS release of *Snow White* in just three weeks, based on its “vault” model of manufactured scarcity. I don’t know if these commercials were still on the air when many of you were young, but my childhood was blanketed with urgent, ticking-clock Disney advertisements insisting that their videos would only be available for a short time. You had to *run out* and buy them *right now* so you can own them before they’re *gone in the vault forever!* Act now before we drop Cinderella in the *Silence of the Lambs* basement and throw away the key! Here’s one of those commercials. **[PLAY CLIP.]**

And now I suppose we call that vault Disney+, and they all lived happily ever after.

**Pornography**

Finally, pornography is a big influence on video stores.

**Screen**

Chain videostores like Blockbuster did not carry pornography, which made it a lucrative market for independent stores. Some were dedicated wholly to adult films, but in regular mom and pop video rental businesses, adult films were divided off by a curtain or a screen from the rest of the store. Pornography shelves were highly categorized and specific, and the section was clean and well-lit like the rest of the video store. Access to pornography in the same place where you rented non-pornographic materials provided many customers with a less alienating experience than going to a public pornography theater or to a sex shop to rent or buy these videos.

**Taste**

So, we’ve looked at the factors that allowed video stores to flourish, and looked a little bit at how the video rental business worked. But what effect did video stores have on movie culture and movie audiences?

In his book, Daniel Herbert argues that video stores construct and reflect certain tastes. **[ANIMATION]** This is reflected in the organization of the store, for example. A store organized by new releases, with blockbusters up at the front, signals a different clientele than one organized by director. The latter seems like it’s courting film snobs, right? Not everyone knows the director of a film they want to see off the top of their heads.

Video stores also reflected regional or community specificity and tastes. In your reading for this lecture, I’ve asked you to read just a very short news article about a video store in Dallas that served as an archive of rare Black film.

Most videos stores, though, mixed highbrow and lowbrow film interests, and that was new. If you think about our previous lectures on film exhibition, we’ve discussed how there were whole different theaters for different kinds of films: arthouse theaters vs. mainstream theaters. If you wanted to see an Agnes Varda film, you’d go to a different place than where you’d watch *Die Hard*. But putting rentable versions of those titles together under one roof kind of leveled the playing field. It also helped drive the popularity of certain cult films, because folks who were passionate about film had access to niche, weird, campy, or previously hard to find titles.

Finally, video store employees served as both gatekeepers and taste makers. Their picks led customers to new things and drew them away from others, creating a sense of what was cool, good, and worthwhile. I’ve included in this lecture a link to an optional watch, if you’ve got Hulu. There’s an old episode of *Seinfeld* that addresses exactly this theme of the video store clerk picks.

**Fonda**

The advent of video also ushered in new video-specific genres, as the straight-to-video market opened up film production to more people. Those new forms included the exercise video, for example. In the 1980s, Jane Fonda and Richard Simmons were synonymous with the workout tape. And this kind of content makes sense for the video format, right? It’s content specifically for people to watch at home, that’s never had to take into account a theatrical release.

**Cult**

Issuing cult film favorites on VHS—like John Waters films, or the ridiculous and wonderful *Warriors*—took midnight movie culture out of the theater and brought it right into the living room. You no longer had to go to a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and learn the customs of audience participation to watch it.

**Ultimate Impact**

So, at the end of the day, what’s so important about videos and video stores? For the most part, we don’t use VHS anymore. Nor do most of us travel to a physical location to borrow a film when we want to watch something. Why is video worth thinking about?

Well, I think they do have a lasting legacy.

First, video made film *endlessly* rewatchable. Before VHS, the average person only had access to their favorite films in a theater, or *maybe* in a rare television rebroadcast. Video significantly changed how we watched, appreciated, and knew our favorite films. You could own what you love. You could watch it a thousand times. You could know every frame, every line, every song, every look on every actor’s face.

Second, video killed the second-run theater market, for the most part. Why pay to see an old movie in a theater when you can just own it?

Third, video gave Hollywood a new stream of revenue. And while VHS didn’t remain the technology of choice for home viewing forever, the existence of the home video market caused a number of changes the movie business. It shortened theatrical runs significantly—why keep a film in theaters forever when you could charge two or three times the ticket price for a VHS copy? That window just keeps collapsing, too. Theater runs have only grown shorter, followed more quickly by DVD/Blu-ray, and streaming releases. In some cases, theatrical and home viewing windows have totally collapsed, with same-day theatrical and VOD release of films.

Finally, video created allowed the average film lover to become a film collector. You could cultivate a big library of films that you can own and rewatch, all based on your personal taste.

And the question of ownership is where I’d like to leave things today, because it’s an issue raised by home video that you can consider in your everyday life, and as you move forward from this class. Home video made it a possibility to own a film, but as more of us shift to buying digital copies of things instead of physical ones, ownership becomes questionable. Can you ever really *own* a file you buy through Amazon, or iTunes? There was a story about a year ago of a media studies professor who’d bought copies of a couple of films through iTunes, only to find them gone from his library one day. When he reached out to customer service, he found that Apple had lost the rights to Canadian distribution of those films and pulled them from people’s libraries, and he was offered a credit instead. But that implies that the film was only ever rented from Apple, not *bought*. Does digital film distribution impinge on some of our rights as consumers, like true ownership or the right of first sale?