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MEDIA FIELDS

J O U R N A L

Home, Home (Video) on the Range Reflections on Small-Town Video Stores in 2010

Daniel Herbert

I drove 5,252 miles over three weeks in July 2010 as part of my research into independently owned, small-town video rental stores in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains.¹ I traveled through Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Montana, and Wyoming, but not in that order. I looked at approximately seventy stores that were in operation, spotted Redbox kiosks in many places, and stumbled upon about a dozen stores that were out of business, most of which were Movie Gallery stores, which had recently declared bankruptcy.



This picture of a dead video store in Cozad, Nebraska, represents what I feared most when I set out: that there was no longer any such thing as a small-town video rental store. (Even my reflection in the window seemed to have symbolic importance; I would never penetrate these stores, discover their histories, and instead I would be left with a mirage of my own desire to resurrect them, standing firmly outside of their sun-bleached wreckage; a writer of obituaries at best). And although this store proved to be the exception rather than the rule, I did nevertheless find that the independently owned, small-town video rental store doesn't really exist—as such. When looking at these stores, the primary issue I faced was that of diversity. Although I heard a remarkable consistency of insights and concerns about the video business from each of my interview subjects, and although one might presume that small-town video stores share similar histories, objectives, and contemporary challenges, it was the differences among them—and within them—that turned out to be their most striking and definitive

characteristic. Three forms of diversity became most apparent during the trip: the social diversity of the stores' clientele as defined by the interview subjects, the diversity of the stores' relation to their specific locations, and the diversity of revenue streams that many of the stores cultivated and drew from.

When you ask a video store owner or employee what they like best about their job, one of the most common answers is "the people." (This is as true in major cities as it is in small towns). Working the counter at these shops appears to provide a pleasurable stream of ever-changing browsers, customers, and loiterers. The workers recommend movies, listen and react to offered opinions, and engage their patrons in an exchange of thoughts and fancies.

What do they talk about? "Anything and everything," said one video store manager, and this sentiment was shared by many of her colleagues. When prompted, however, they have difficulty defining in precise terms what "everything" is, but certain topics do recur: families, illnesses, deaths, local politics, and high school sports, among others. At least five of the store owners I spoke with likened their jobs to being a bartender—one of them actually *had* been a bartender—to the extent that video customers, like bar patrons, divulge all sorts of personal information. "I have heard it all," said one owner, while another remarked, "I have heard things I did not want to know. People tell me about their sex lives!"

It is thus tempting to claim that the small-town video store serves as an important node in the social network of their towns, where all sorts of knowledge gets stored and disseminated. And in some ways this appears to be true, especially in cases where the store is run by the original owner and/or has been in business for more than ten years; here, the fleeting, casual conversations with customers accumulate an importance over time, an intimacy borne of repetition. Some store owners and workers are quite confident about their connection to the larger "community," while a handful of others overtly reject any such notion. ("There is no such thing as 'community,'" said an owner in the mountains of Colorado, "only individual successes and individual failures." When I asked him about his community, in

fact, he asserted that I “must be a liberal.”)



Nevertheless, nearly all the video workers I spoke with self-identified in very clear terms that they are a “small-town” store in a “small town.” First and foremost, this means that they are *not* in a city; it is a definition by opposition. They are not “fast paced.” They don’t have all “those problems.” In these towns, I regularly heard, “everyone knows everyone.” “Customers aren’t just customers,” said a store owner, “they are our neighbors, our friends.” Unlike in large cities, said a Wyoming woman, you can walk around her town and people will wave at you; it is the kind of place “where you walk into the grocery store and the manager comes up and shakes your hand and says, ‘I haven’t seen you in a couple of days. What’s up?’”

More often than not, then, the self-identification as being “small town” functioned as a claim *not* to be alienated, a claim to be *connected*. But a sense

of belonging always requires a sense of identity, and identity is as defined by difference as it is by similarity. Yet video workers rarely address, even implicitly, the social stratifications that define their world. In fact, a preponderance of video workers claimed that they served “all types” of people, a “diverse” population. On some occasions, however, some workers were vocal about the social profile of their customers. A store owner in Idaho said that “it is more middle income” people who rent at the store. He also said, “We have a large Spanish-speaking population, and I really like that.” A woman in Kansas, who moved from a town in which she felt welcome to a town where she did not, said “My husband has a theory about that. He thinks that [this town] was started by ranchers, while [the town we previously lived in] was started by farmers.” A worker at a store in Wyoming, which sits on the edge of an Indian reservation, discussed the fact that they served a community that “operates mostly on a poverty level.” Alternatively, she said that a store just twenty miles away, in what was locally referred to as a “tree-hugger town,” served a different clientele. While one could certainly compare the demographics and labor histories of these towns, what seems more interesting is the way in which these people define and experience social difference.

Video workers primarily chit-chat with their customers about movies, of course, but in doing so, they correlate social difference and media consumption. This process is often unrecognized by the video workers themselves. Despite the stereotype of the know-it-all video clerk proffered in media depictions, most small-town video store owners and employees are not film buffs; it is a business like many others and/or the store serves as a second job that helps make ends meet. Many video workers actually say they have no time to watch movies because they are too busy. Instead of recommending titles based on their personal tastes, then, the video workers make their suggestions based on their knowledge of the rental history of the person before them and/or as a calculated synthesis of the feedback they’ve received from other customers. In this, they centralize a network of tastes and values, spanning across a social field, and focus this knowledge into *one* suggestion for *one* renter. In Bourdieu’s language, these workers, in these interactions, transfer accumulated social capital into cultural capital, turning their social interactions into concrete assertions of taste and value.²



At other times, workers are more explicit about the relations between taste and social identity:

“Old timers” rent VHS in Colorado.

“Students” rent movies for class projects in Iowa.

“A lot of the older customers and school teachers will rent the artsy stuff” in Idaho.

“The trashier people rent the horror section, or anything that looks like crap” in Idaho.

“You’d be surprised” by the types of people who watch pornography in Kansas.

“The family [movies] rent best” in a Nebraska store.

... and so on.

The social diversity of these communities, real, perceived, or imagined, is in part defined by the geography of the stores themselves. Whereas video stores in urban and suburban areas may serve as either “neighborhood” or “destination” stores, based on their selection as well as their proximity to major thoroughfares, small-town video rental stores have a different and highly varied “locality.”

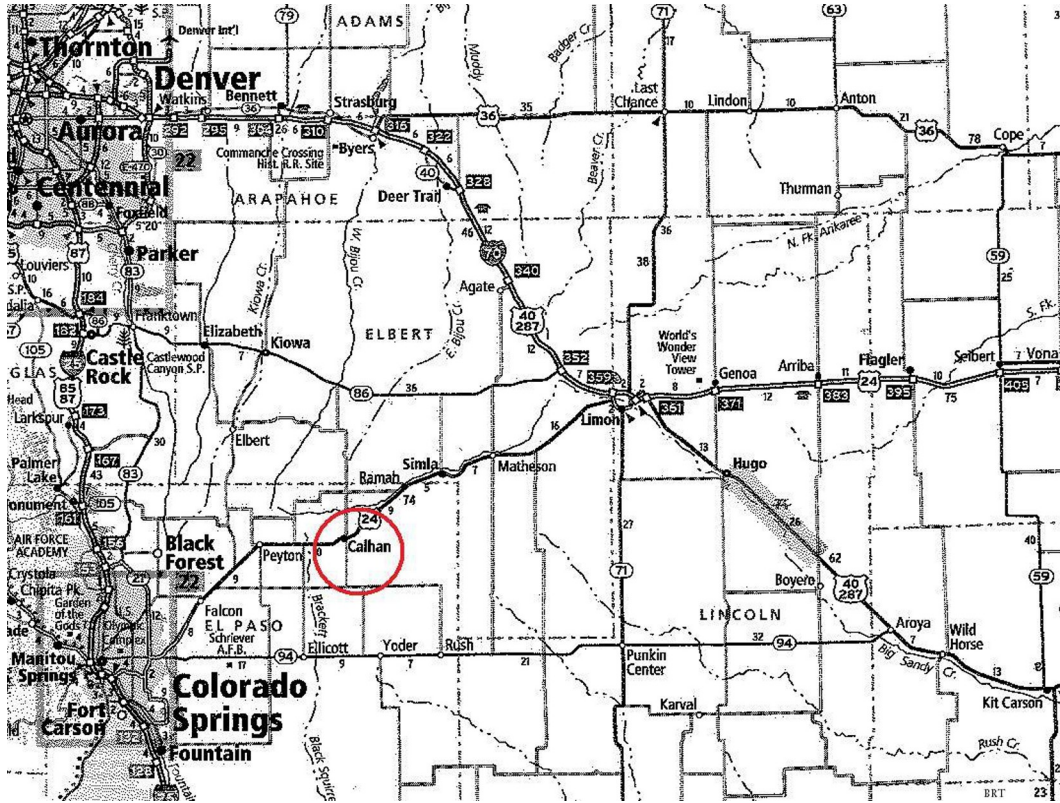
In the photo below, near the edge of the horizon is a cluster of trees. This is the town of Calhan, Colorado.





This is the interior of Norm's Video, in Calhan.

The store has been in business since 1983, a project that Norm's wife proposed to supplement their income from his main business operating an auto-mechanic shop fifty miles away in Elizabeth. Norm grew up on his parents' cattle ranch, six miles outside of Calhan, which had been homesteaded in 1883—one hundred years before the store opened. The store sits half a block off of Main Street, otherwise known as US Route 24, which goes westward toward Colorado Springs and cuts eastward across the plains toward Interstate 70, into Kansas. Some of the nearest towns are Peyton, ten miles away, and Rush, twenty-five miles away.



All of these towns have populations under one thousand. Norm's Video draws customers from all of these communities, making it a local store where "locality" covers a vast and sparsely populated region. The geography here is as determined by the location of people as it is by landscape through which the "blue highways" extend.

The geography of other stores is complicated by a flow of people passing through these towns. In the Rocky Mountains, this primarily consists of tourists—"migrant leisure." A store in Breckenridge, Colorado, for instance, had an extensive selection of art-house and foreign-language movies, which the owner said were rented by upper-class Americans and international visitors who came to town for skiing and other recreational activities. Perhaps more surprising was Pocatello, Idaho, which one might assume has a relatively homogenous population; yet, due to the presence of Idaho State University, and due to the large number of international students at this

school, the local video store there gets a substantial number of renters from outside the United States, many of whom rent foreign-language films. One store in eastern Colorado actually *facilitated* the mobility of people by selling Greyhound Bus tickets and serving as the bus station. Here is a research problem, then, if not a concrete observation: how to calculate “the local,” particularly in relation to local video stores, when “the local” is defined by internal flux and shifting outer edges?³

This last example raises the third kind of diversity that characterized so much of what I saw. In addition to renting movies and selling bus tickets, this store in Colorado made much of its money by selling Lotto tickets. Although most of its floorspace was devoted to DVD cases, this was not its defining economic feature. Was it a video store at all, really? If such a hybrid enterprise cannot be called a “video rental store,” then the western United States actually has very few video stores. Instead, there are cafés in Wyoming that also rent heavy machinery.



There are laundromats in Idaho where laundry customers are welcome to grab a movie from the selection and watch it while they wait for their clothes to dry. Perhaps they will get an espresso as well.



In Colorado, one might rent a movie after bowling with the family.



As I crossed the Great Plains and bounced through the Rocky Mountains, I came to town after town that supposedly had two video stores in operation. What I found instead was that one, which had solely done video rental, had closed down, while the surviving store had a diversified revenue base. Artificial tanning. Second-hand kids' clothes. Yarn and fabric. Guns, groceries, and raft rentals. Not much need for deconstruction; the owners and managers of these small-town stores had deconstructed themselves and made themselves internally different in advance of interpretation. My "alterity" was their economic necessity.

The point is simple, so simple it threatens to slip into unimportance due to its apparent truth: in this moment, when the corporate video chains are going bankrupt and/or radically downsizing, and after Redbox kiosks appear everywhere already, there is increasingly no such thing as the independently-owned video store. Many stores do more than video, and in

fact devote increasing space and energy to these other ventures. Many stores have closed. Many are for sale. I had one owner try and sell me his store five times within the span of five minutes. “\$30,000 and you can have it all—lock, stock, and barrel,” he said. I felt like a mortician when I told him I already had a job, a good job, and that I was doing my job at that very moment.

Just as “cinema” never really went away following the advent of home video, but rather got dispersed and transformed, so too is home video undergoing transition. On more than one occasion, I bid farewell to a store owner by saying, “Good luck with whatever you do next. Good luck with your transition.” One philosophically minded owner in Colorado pressed me quite hard about my project, its goals, and my methods. I admitted that it was difficult to make generalizations about a cultural phenomenon based on such a short time of observation, and moreover, that it was hard to take a snapshot of something that is changing. “You don’t have to tell me,” she said. “I’m living it.”

Notes

- 1 This research is part of a larger project about the history, theory, and practices of video culture in the United States. This research trip was funded by a Faculty Research Grant from the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan.
- 2 Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 243.
- 3 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 5.

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