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Author
Wilken, Rowan

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Video Stores, Media Technologies, and Memory

Rowan Wilken

This paper seeks to establish what is at stake in the widespread closures of Australian video stores if we conceive of these stores as an important if undervalued dispersed media archive. This question is pursued, firstly, by outlining a series of contemporary debates concerning digital remembering, and then, secondly, tentatively testing their applicability for an examination of video stores as media archive. Digital memory debates argue that the present age is characterized by unfettered remembering without forgetting. The central contention of this paper is that the framing of these debates is complicated by a context like the video store that exists at the crossover point of old and new media, and which evidences a complex dynamic of simultaneous archival production and destruction, remembering and forgetting.

Blockbuster Video store up for lease in the outer suburb of Eltham, Melbourne, Australia. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Digital Memory Debates

Over the course of the past decade, a considerable and growing body of academic scholarship explores concerns associated with the rise of digital memory. A prominent contributor to this literature is the American political scientist, Viktor Mayer-Schönberger. According to Mayer-Schönberger, "with widespread digitization, more and more information is being translated in a common binary code." Such is the voraciousness of this process of translation, he argues, that, when coupled with increasingly cheap digital storage capabilities, "the human demand for more comprehensive digital memory will continue to rise" to the extent that the result will be "a world that is set to remember, and that has little incentive to forget."[1] Much of Mayer-Schönberger's work is concerned with documenting what he sees as the potentially—indeed likely and already evident—deleterious personal and wider cultural impacts of a rise of digital remembering and a corresponding "demise of forgetting."

Mayer-Schönberger is not alone in offering a critique of digital memory retention. A number of other critics have expressed similar concerns about "the social implications of a lack of institutional forgetfulness."[2] For instance, in an essay on mobile media technologies and memory, Nicola Green suggests that, "through memory-making practices prompted by mobile media technologies, the new memory of the collective [digital] archive further intersects in uneasy ways with those practices that are not only collective but explicitly institutional in nature, organizational in origin, and increasingly automated."[3] Much of this work pivots around the following issues: privacy (what it means when personal information is both retained and circulated), access and control (who has access to and control of data and how it is to be used), and retention (what is at stake when data, which is often personal, remains accessible or retrievable over long periods, perhaps indefinitely).

In response to these issues, especially the relentless accrual of digital memory, a recurrent theme in the scholarship in this field is the repeated call for the embrace of an "ethics of forgetting." For example, writing on life-log software applications that record our every moment, Dodge and Kitchin argue that "the drive to create technologies that 'store and manage a lifetime's worth of everything' … should always be complemented by forgetting."[4] Blanchette and Johnson go even further, suggesting that forgetfulness is "a social good, not just an individual good."[5]

Having sketched the general contours of these digital memory debates, I want to turn to tentatively test their applicability for an examination of video stores as a form of media archive. In making this translation, there is one important caveat that needs to be made: while privacy and control of personal data are crucial issues in digital memory debates, they are not a key focus here for the simple reason that these issues do not hold the same level of concern in relation to video stores (despite the fact that video store franchisees often hold quite detailed demographic and financial information about their customer-subscribers) as they do in the everyday context of much wider computer and Internet use. Rather, what is of principle interest in this paper is the question of how these debates are framed.

Thus, with the above qualification notwithstanding, when considered in the context of the video store as media archive, I see at least three difficulties with the framing of digital memory debates. First is the extent to which these debates are structured so firmly in polar-oppositional terms: with

remembering on the one hand, versus forgetting on the other. As Niall Lucy explains, such binary oppositional pairings produce "the myth of a privileged [or neglected] term by producing the myth of an absolutely opposing term."[6] It *is* a myth, because with each apparent "oppositional" pairing, not only does one term (e.g., remembering) permit the very possibility of the other term (forgetting), but this possibility comes about because each term *contains* the other, contains elements of this difference.[7] Thus, while commentators acknowledge the need for archival forgetting, they do not seem to acknowledge the extent to which remembering and forgetting operate in tandem and simultaneously. This is particularly problematic with respect to archives, which, as Jacques Derrida argues, follow a double logic of "archive fever," according to which the archive *simultaneously* produces and destroys, synthesises and disperses, recollects and forgets, retrieves *and* loses.[8]

The second problematic aspect of these debates is the lack of attention paid to medium specificity and the characteristics and limits of particular media technologies. Blanchette and Johnson make the observation that in an analogue era, archival institutions dealt with memory/forgetfulness primarily "as a matter of physical facilities"—that is, as an issue pertaining to such things as "the availability of storage space, the budget for file cabinets, etc." In contrast, they argue that in the digital age, with lower costs and greater ease of access, "the shift to an electronic medium [has] changed the default position from one of forgetfulness to one of memory."[9] One effect of this line of argument is that it downplays the need to recognize that material considerations are still vitally important in the digital age, with e-mail and computer shared drive storage space, data download limits, computer hard drive storage capacity, and so on, all influencing what we are able to retain (or not), for how long, and so on. Further to this, I would suggest that critical attention needs to be extended to include questions of media specificity and the "physical facilities" of particular media formats and technologies and associated forms of "forgetting," both for analogue and digital media (e.g., memory loss due to mechanical breakdown or the entanglement and tearing of magnetic tape in the case of VHS cassettes, or through unreadability due to surface scratching in the case of DVDs).[10]

In light of both of the above points, the third difficulty with the aforementioned media memory debates is that they are complicated when the issue of memory is examined in relation to hybrid "media fields" or "sites" [11] such as the video store (and others, such as institutional and commercial

photocopy centers[12]), which have, over the course of their history, operated as a kind of liminal space somewhere between the analogue and the digital, and where, in many instances, older technologies have co-existed and overlapped with, before ultimately giving way to, newer technologies (VHS → DVD → HD DVD → Blu-Ray, etc.). In such liminal contexts, it is difficult to assert the ascendency of remembering over forgetting as the two tend to operate in ways that are mutually implicative.

In what follows, I wish to develop these points by considering the video store as a form of mixed analogue/digital archive, one which operates according to double archival logic that involves simultaneous production *and* destruction, recollection *and* forgetting.

The Video Store as Archive

The operation and significance of the video store as archive became clear to me during research I conducted in Melbourne, Australia, in the mid-1990s on American teen movies of the 1980s. The video store as archival location is significant for a number of reasons, not least because it touches on the issue of the uneasy place that teen cinema holds in respect to wider popular culture. While teen films are often considered to be firmly anchored within twentieth-century American popular culture, this is not necessarily the case, especially in Australia. As the Australian film critic Adrian Martin points out, with the exception of a handful of critically and commercially successful directors (notably John Hughes, Amy Heckerling, and Martha Coolidge), on the whole teen movies are perhaps more accurately characterized as an instance of "unpopular culture" (or "minor cinema," in the sense of being "marginal or subversive") insofar as the vast majority of studio-produced teen cinema output during the 1980s tended to go straight to video.[13] Thus, by the 1990s, Australian video store collections of American teen movies formed an invaluable archive (running parallel to the Australian video store's other main archival collections at that time: Hollywood blockbusters and "adult" cinema) of what has been more recently termed "bad cinema."[14] Labelling teen movies as such is by no means to denigrate them; rather, it serves to identify these films as a significant (if pilloried) area of film production with a substantial cult following. It also situates them within an emergent area of academic film scholarship which seeks to make sense of the

particular cultural economies and significances associated with "bad" cinematic forms that are "subterranean, surprising, half hidden from the glare of official culture."[15]

The above access and aesthetic issues are also inevitably tied to the larger cultural and political economies of the US film industry.[16] The fact that these teen movies were produced predominantly for the video market is significant in that it placed teen movies and the video stores that stocked them at the heart of seismic industry upheavals affecting film sales and distribution during the 1980s which were characterised by strong initial Hollywood resistance to and then later enthusiastic embrace of video "rentailing." The marked industry turn-around in attitude was driven by the lucrative nature of two categories of tape sales: high-priced items intended for rentailers, and lower-priced or "sell-through" tapes targeted at consumers.[17] By the early 1990s, this combined VHS market was worth $13.8 billion to the US film industry and formed "the main revenue stream for Hollywood, surpassing earnings from the theatrical box office and all television windows."[18] Thus, while teen movies did not necessarily enjoy initial box office success, they enjoyed a much longer international commercial life generating income for the studios via the video rental market well after their production—a "long tail" evident in the fact that I was writing on these films and watching them on VHS in Australia in the mid-to-late 1990s, at least a full decade or more after their US release. And yet, with the waning fortunes of the VHS format, within the space of only a few years, the video store I most frequented over the course of my research, just a short walk from my university campus in the Melbourne, Australia suburb of Hawthorn, progressively discarded their aging stock of VHS tapes and replenished their collection with an almost entirely new library of DVDs, precious few of which included the same teen movie titles. One archive was lost; another was formed.

Conclusion

This brings me back, in closing, to the double logic of archives and archival technologies, where production and destruction, accumulation and loss occur simultaneously. What we see in the above brief examination of the video store as archive is a complex interplay of consumer-, industry-, and technology-driven remembering and forgetting.[19] Of course, despite the

apparent disappearing presence of the video store in Australia, it is true that many older film titles (including teen movies) have subsequently been digitized and are now available online via various digital repositories and distribution channels. In light of this, for video stores, especially those in urban areas in Australia where broadband Internet access is more likely, the writing would indeed appear to be on the wall. As one critic notes, in 2008 "there were claims that, for the first time, global revenues from all forms of digital media usage (broadband downloading and streaming, terrestrial or cable video-on-demand and mobile media platforms) exceeded the combined takings of cinema box-office and 'packaged media' (DVD) sales."[20] On the one hand, such statements could be taken as further support of digital memory arguments about ever-increasing and unchecked digital retention. On the other hand, there is a need to recognize that the digitization of older titles and digital distribution channels do nothing to lessen the twin effects of archival remembering and forgetting for the simple reason that new archival technologies disperse as well as synthesize knowledge.[21] This poses a whole other set of challenges, including the fact that, in the face of such digital proliferation and dispersal, the audience-consumer takes over the mantle from the video store operator-attendant of being "an activist of access."[22]

Notes

1 Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 91.

2 Jean-François Blanchette and Deborah G. Johnson, "Data Retention and the Panoptic Society: The Social Benefits of Forgetfulness," *The Information Society* 18 (2002): 35.

3 Nicola Green, "Mobility, Memory, and Identity," in *Mobile Technologies: From Telecommunications to Media*, ed. Gerard Goggin and Larissa Hjorth (New York: Routledge, 2009), 275. See also José Van Dijk, "From Shoebox to Performative Agent: The Computer as Personal Memory Machine," *New Media & Society* 7 (2005): 311-332; and José Van Dijk, "Digital Photography: Communication, Identity, Memory," *Visual Communication* 7 (2008): 57-76.

4   Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin, "'Outlines of a World Coming into Existence': Pervasive Computing and the Ethics of Forgetting," *Environment and Planning B* 34 (2007): 441.

5   Blanchette and Johnson, "Data Retention and the Panoptic Society," 35. See also Mayer-Schönberger, *Delete*, 169-195.

6   Niall Lucy, *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 99.

7   Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 351-370.

8   Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

9   Blanchette and Johnson, 34.

10 Also illustrative of such "physical facilities" of forgetting in relation to digital media is signal compression and audio and temporal masking used by MP3 encoders in order "to save more dataspace." Jonathan Sterne, "The MP3 as Cultural Artifact," *New Media & Society* 8 (2006): 835.

11 John Frow and Meaghan Morris, "Introduction," in *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. John Frow and Meaghan Morris (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1993), xv.

12 Rowan Wilken, "The Practice and 'Pathologies' of Photocopying," *antiTHESIS* 17 (2007): 126-143.

13 Adrian Martin, "Mon Cas," *Cinema Papers* no. 89 (August 1992): 45, 48.

14 Julia Vassilieva and Claire Perkins, eds., "B for Bad Cinema," special issue, *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique* no. 18 (December 2009), http://www.colloquy.monash.edu.au/issue018/ (accessed July 29, 2010).

15 Martin, "Mon Cas," 48.

16 Not to mention being also tied to the complex position of the exhibition and distribution sectors of the Australian film industry vis-à-vis the broader US film industry; see Deb Verhoeven, "Film, Video, DVD and

Online Delivery," in *The Media & Communications in Australia*, 3rd ed., ed. Stuart Cunningham and Graeme Turner (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2010), 133-154.

17 Paul McDonald, *Video and DVD Industries* (London: BFI, 2007).

18 McDonald, *Video and DVD Industries*, 109.

19 For detailed discussion, see Joshua M. Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008); Bruce C. Klopfenstein, "The Diffusion of the VCR in the United States," in *The VCR Age: Home Video and Mass Communication*, ed. Mark R. Levy (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989) 21-39; Paul B. Lindstrom, "Home Video: The Consumer Impact," in Levy, *The VCR Age*, 40-49; S. B. Luitjens and A. M. A. Rijckaert, "The History of Consumer Magnetic Video Tape Recording, From a Rarity to a Mass Product," *Journal of Magnetism and Magnetic Materials*, 193 (1999): 17-23; Eugene Marlow and Eugene Secunda, *Shifting Time and Space: The Story of Videotape* (New York: Praeger, 1991); McDonald, *Video and DVD Industries*; Christine Ogan, "The Worldwide Cultural and Economic Impact of Video," in Levy, *The VCR Age*, 230-251; and Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

20 Verhoeven, "Film, Video, DVD and Online Delivery," 151.

21 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 12, 18.

22 Tetsuo Kogawa, "Video: The Access Medium," in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 51-60.

Rowan Wilken is Lecturer in Media, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. He is author of a number of articles that examine the relationship between place and media. He is currently completing a book entitled *Teletechnologies, Place & Community* (Routledge, forthcoming) and is also currently co-editing (with Gerard Goggin) a collection entitled *Mobile Technology & Place* (Routledge, forthcoming).