

## Left Behind Jeff Scheible

Variations of the phrase “to leave behind” have circulated widely through popular culture and media this past decade, from U2’s multiple Grammy-winning “return-to-form” 2000 album *All That You Can’t Leave Behind* to 2001’s controversial “No Child Left Behind Act.” In between, there were countless reruns of *Seinfeld*’s “Chicken Roaster” episode, in which George explains his strategy of pulling a “leave-behind”—an excuse to see a girl he likes one more time by leaving something behind at her place.

What does it mean to “leave behind”? How might it be configured as a framework to study media? I propose understanding “left behind”—alongside “convergence,” “flow,” “remediation,” “proliferation,” “obsolescence,” and so forth—as a set of one of many possible discourses that refers to how we can talk about various changes taking place in the contemporary media landscape. A good place to begin a discussion of discursive features is with words, which have different shades of meaning for each of us.

For example, we’re probably inclined to conflate “left behind” media with “old” media. While the two have commonalities, I would caution against such a conflation. We might be tempted to make this substitution because we have a predominantly *time-based* conceptualization of media. By time-based, I mean debates about ways of studying and categorizing media temporally: old versus new, modern versus postmodern and more; the influence of the “historical turn” in cinema and media studies; the legacy the Deleuzian time-image leaves on how we understand the philosophical significance of moving images; and relations between these three modes of temporal thinking.

Interestingly, the language of “left behind,” while it includes the temporality of the past tense, is actually *spatial*.

*Left* is its own spatial direction, etymologically related to “worthlessness.” As the past tense of “leave,” left’s negative connotations remain. We leave that which isn’t worthy of coming along, or a place we’re “over.” *Behind*, a preposition, also carries a sense of spatiality: “In a place whence those to whom the reference is made have departed” (*OED*). As an indicator of direction, *left behind* is necessarily and fundamentally *relational*. Something must be left behind somewhere. Someone must leave behind something. When we discover space behind—think of the “man behind the curtain” in *The Wizard of Oz* or *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*—we change how we understand what came before. To discover what’s “behind” is to recast our sense of what there is in the first place.

Consider a three-part series *The New York Times* is currently featuring, called “What Is Left Behind.” The paper introduces it online (“paper” itself a “left behind” metaphor for the *Times* in this context), as examining “America’s legacy in Iraq.” The first article reports on the state of electricity in Iraq, notoriously inefficient long before America’s invasion. As America has spent billions of dollars on electricity in the “rebuilding” of Iraq, improvements in the quality and consistency of electricity supply are viewed as a

measure of the US's progress in bringing "democracy" to the nation. This article uses stories about "electricity thieves" and interviews with Iraq's deputy minister of electricity to register the unresolved tensions and ambivalence that remain as the US "leaves behind" Iraq.

Studying "left behind" media is politically "left," too, in its counter-capitalistic impulses. It resists dominant follow-the-money paradigms. It is of course important for media scholars to understand how capital works and how it shapes media industries and cultures, but it is also important to critically supplement this knowledge with attention to "lacunae," "traces," gaps, and so forth—as many theorists have argued in other contexts. Left behind doesn't follow the flow of capital. It opens up multiple trajectories, shaping a framework that enables us to study configurations otherwise excluded in media history, theory, and criticism.

I will give an example from my work. Since 2005, video rental stores have been closing rapidly due to a confluence of factors. Rather than studying "causes" of these closures, which risks reinforcing "new media" industries' political agendas, I instead argue that we can learn a lot about contemporary media distribution—and culture, history, and aesthetics more generally—by asking where a store's videos go when it closes. I examine a range of case studies of what I refer to as processes of *redistribution*, demonstrating that videos and, equally importantly, video store cultures, have surprising new afterlives and trajectories—online, in homes, in art galleries, and in post-consumer spaces.

My favorite story is probably about New York's Kim's Video, where I used to work, whose prized collection of 55,000 videos ended up traveling across the Atlantic to Salemi, a small town in Sicily, where the videos are now the center of a large-scale cultural revitalization project, after an earthquake destroyed the town. Various projects with the videos are currently being negotiated: projecting the videos in a "Neverending Festival," subtitling, VHS conversion, and online streaming.