

DEAD VIDEO STORES OF THE MID-ATLANTIC

A REGIONAL SURVEY, 1981-1999





HORROR

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For years, independent video stores served as informal cultural archives scattered throughout towns, suburbs, and forgotten commercial corridors across the Mid-Atlantic. Long before streaming platforms and algorithmic recommendation systems flattened access into sameness, these stores reflected the personalities of the people who operated them and the communities that sustained them. Shelves were shaped by local taste, regional circulation networks, personal obsessions, damaged inventory, bootleg recordings, and the strange accidental histories of magnetic media itself. Many of these stores vanished quietly. In most cases, little documentation remains beyond fading membership cards, newspaper classifieds, handwritten rental stickers, and the memories of former customers.

As part of Settle For It Records' ongoing interest in cultural preservation and regional archival work, this zine attempts to document a small selection of independent video stores that operated throughout Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, and Pennsylvania during the VHS era. Research for this project drew not only from surviving digital records, but from local library collections, municipal property archives, trade publications, microfilm newspaper repositories, estate sale materials, public-access television logs, and interviews with former employees, customers, projectionists, and late-night broadcast technicians. In several cases, available records were incomplete, contradictory, or missing entirely.

What emerged repeatedly during the course of this research was the sense that many of these stores were connected in ways not immediately visible from the surviving historical record. Similar inventory markings, recurring distributors, unexplained transfers of media collections, and strangely fragmented corporate documentation appeared across multiple unrelated businesses separated by geography and time. Most likely, these are simply the kinds of inconsistencies that naturally accumulate around obsolete media formats and poorly preserved local histories. Still, certain details persisted often enough to merit inclusion here, even if no satisfactory explanation remains available.



SILVER SPRING, MD 1981-1998

Specialty: Horror, punk films, and cult cinema

Night Owl Video operated for nearly two decades out of a narrow corner unit near the intersection of Georgia Avenue and Wayne Avenue in downtown Silver Spring. Opened in late 1981, the store quickly distinguished itself from more conventional regional rental shops through its late-night hours, extensive cult film inventory, and close association with the area's underground music and public-access television scenes.

The store was owned by Arthur "Art" Melnick, a former electronics repair technician whose interest in exploitation cinema and imported horror reportedly began while servicing projection equipment for several now-defunct drive-in theaters across Maryland and Virginia. Under Melnick's ownership, Night Owl developed a reputation as one of the few places in the region where customers could reliably find Italian horror films, punk documentaries, industrial music videos, bootleg concert tapes, experimental animation, and obscure direct-to-video releases unavailable through mainstream distributors. The clientele reflected this specialization. Former patrons consistently describe Night Owl as a gathering place for local musicians, overnight radio DJs, horror fans, Montgomery College students, and employees from nearby record stores and comic shops.

The store remained open until midnight most weekdays and until 2 AM on weekends, with several customers recalling that the best inventory often appeared "after normal business hours." The interior was dimly lit and densely packed, with black-painted shelving and handwritten category markers mounted on fluorescent posterboard. A small television suspended behind the front counter reportedly played a continuous loop of horror trailers, local band performances, and public-access recordings compiled by Melnick himself. Several surviving membership cards advertised the store slogan: "OPEN LATE BECAUSE SOME MOVIES SHOULD NOT BE WATCHED IN DAYLIGHT."

By the late 1980s, rumors circulated regarding after-hours screenings allegedly held in a rear room behind the horror section. Though no occupancy permit or secondary screening license was ever listed for the property, former customers describe invitation-only gatherings involving imported films, local video art, and recordings copied from late-night UHF broadcasts. Accounts vary considerably, though several attendees recalled that audience members were discouraged from discussing the screenings publicly.

One recurring local rumor claimed that regional horror host Count Jackula filmed at least one promotional segment or lost commercial inside the store sometime around 1987. No verified footage has surfaced, though an unlabeled VHS tape discovered at a Maryland estate sale in 2004 reportedly contained several seconds of grainy footage matching the store interior before abruptly cutting to static.

Night Owl Video experienced increasing financial difficulties during the mid-1990s as larger rental chains expanded into Montgomery County. However, regular customers insist the store remained active and relatively busy well into 1997.

Around this same period, employees reported unusual disruptions involving inventory records, mislabeled tapes, and repeated deliveries of duplicate films without accompanying invoices.

In early 1998, liquidation proceedings were reportedly initiated following lease disputes and unpaid vendor accounts. Before the process concluded, Art Melnick disappeared entirely from public record. No formal missing person report appears to have been filed, and business correspondence related to the closure abruptly ceased.

Unusually, the store's inventory was never publicly auctioned.

Former neighboring tenants later claimed that the tapes, shelving, and televisions were removed overnight by unidentified contractors using unmarked trucks. One witness recalled several pallets of videocassettes bearing small circular "OMS" inventory stickers, though the meaning of the initials remains unclear.

The storefront later became a cell phone retailer. Little physical evidence of Night Owl Video survives beyond scattered advertisements, faded membership cards, and occasional references in regional music zines from the early 1990s.