

Interview with Rick Prelinger

By Sophie Cook, Beatriz Bartolomé Herrera and Papagena Robbins

Rick Prelinger wears many hats: he is an archivist and an activist, a writer and a filmmaker; he has preserved the eccentricities and banalities of American cultural heritage and projected them back to the world via both Open Access digital repositories and carefully curated programs of ephemeral and orphaned films. He is perhaps best known as the founder of the Prelinger Archives, a collection of about 60,000 industrial, advertising, educational, and amateur films, which encourage and facilitate not only preservation, but *appropriation* by allowing free access, downloading and reuse of its materials. Prelinger founded the archive in 1982 in New York, and the original collection was acquired by the Library of Congress in 2002. As a board member of the Internet Archive, he has made over 6,000 of these films available for free online. He also co-founded an appropriation-friendly workshop, the Prelinger Library, with Megan Shaw Prelinger, in San Francisco in 2004. The library houses an unusual collection of 19th and 20th century American vintage ephemera, periodicals, maps, and books; and—along with the Prelinger Archives—it has become an important research and reference center for those interested in vernacular American history. His passion as a collector has led to the production of several archival compilation films, including 2004's *Panorama Ephemera* and 2013's *No More Road Trips?*, as well as several multi-part film programs—*Lost Landscapes of San Francisco* (2006-2015), *Lost Landscapes of Detroit* (2010-2012), *Yesterday and Tomorrow in Detroit* (2014 and 2015), *Lost Landscapes of Oakland* (2014), and the forthcoming, *Lost Landscapes of Los Angeles* (2015).

Prelinger has been a tireless advocate of open access practices, fighting to make cultural and intellectual property universally and freely available to the public, and (with Brewster Kahle and Internet Archive) helped to organize the Open Content Alliance. For this special issue Sophie Cook, Beatriz Bartolomé Herrera, and Papagena Robbins reached Prelinger virtually to talk about his work, bridging the distance between

Montreal, Quebec, and Santa Cruz, California, where he currently works as an Associate Professor of Film and Digital Media at the University of California.

Sophie Cook, Beatriz Bartolomé Herrera & Papagena Robbins: How did you get started in collecting moving image materials and ephemera? What did you do before? What ideas influenced you in the early 1980s when you started your collection?

Rick Prelinger: Even in childhood I was interested in the physicality of film. In seventh grade I projected *The Mouse that Roared* (1959) for a benefit in the school gym. The film broke, and I grabbed a foot or so of the damaged 16mm Technicolor print. The tiny images fascinated me -- each bright and saturated, differing by a miniscule degree from the one preceding it, bordered by the sharp squiggles of the soundtrack. The next year we all wrote short plays in English class. Mine was called "Acetate." Its setting was a movie shoot piloted by an autocratic director (even then, I knew directors were control freaks), who alienated cast and crew as snafus piled up and the production got out of hand. As the film and the play ended in a huge explosion, a crewmember addressed the audience. "They used nitrate film. They should have used acetate." I wasn't especially interested in movie production, but somewhere I'd heard about the flammability of nitrate film and written a play about it.

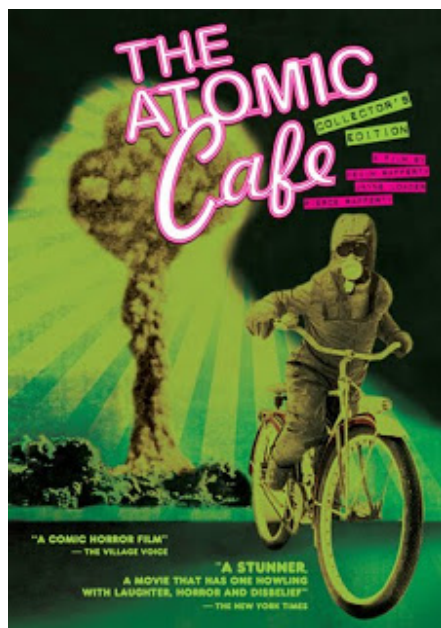
And as a college student I'd go to the local office of Audio Brandon Films, a distributor of 16mm documentary, art and international films, and ask for scrap footage cut out of rental prints. I used some material for found footage films I made and gave the rest to friends.

As a young person I was mesmerized by the historical documentaries on television. I tried not to miss CBS's *Twentieth Century with Walter Cronkite*, though almost all the episodes were about wars and disasters. The raw footage and the theatricality of the newsreels and documentaries from which the series drew was fascinating, and I resented the editor's hand; I wanted to see the source material in its entirety. When I

fled New England to attend UC Berkeley, I quickly discovered the Pacific Film Archive, and within a few months was caught up in the classic cinephilia syndrome characteristic of the early 1970s: taking film classes, reading film history and theory, watching three or four films a day and keeping a detailed record of what I saw and thought. For a time everything I thought seemed to filter through a cinematic prism. While the 1970s ferment in film studies didn't focus on archives, my mentor Bertrand Augst (a professor of comparative literature whose interests had shifted to cinema) taught me to think of films not as seamlessly knit, self-contained narratives but as loose assemblies of semiautonomous segments. This may well have created the preconditions for my thinking of films as spines on which images and sounds hang, waiting for reuse.

But I had gone to college too early, and needed to catch up with life. So I dropped out and became a typesetter, working on advertising, mail order catalogs and the occasional book. Ultimately I returned to college, participated in film and cultural theory study groups, got swept up in the punk movement, and almost graduated.

I moved to New York City in 1980, hoping to work as a crewmember in feature film production. This effort was unsuccessful, but as it turned out my housemates were working on an archival documentary called *The Atomic Café* (1982). One of a number of significant non-narrated documentaries of the late 1970s and early 1980s that may have influenced the postmodern turn in nonfiction film, it achieved great success, and after its release the producer Norman Lear funded Pierce Rafferty and Obie Benz to make a film entitled *Heavy Petting* (1989), an archival documentary on sexuality and romance in the post-World War II period. I was hired as Director of Research, supervising 16 film researchers who plumbed archives all over North America. My particular field of interest was the films produced to construct well-behaved, patriotic, consuming and compliant subjects after World War II, and I compiled a list of hundreds of possible sources where these films might be. After some time the film went into turnaround and work ceased, but I continued to track down films for what had become my own collection.

Figure 1 *The Atomic Café*

My collecting at that time was somnambulistic rather than mission-driven. The mixture of didacticism, evidence and emotional power embodied in these films convinced me they were important to collect, but it took me a few years to develop a communicable rationale for this project. Learning that many of these films were rare or no longer extant, and realizing that there were only two or three others collecting educational and sponsored film material also contributed to my sense of urgency. In 1986 I was introduced to Bob Stein, co-founder of The Voyager Company, a pioneering interactive multimedia producer that invented, among other things, the Laserdisc supplement (which became the DVD supplement). Conversations with Bob helped me realize that I was really practicing public history, and our talks ultimately led to the production of fifteen interactive anthologies of films and collateral material in Laserdisc and CD-ROM formats. In 1987 I started doing public screenings and image-based lectures around the US and elsewhere, and public reaction also helped me elaborate my perspectives on the importance of these films.

Film gave way to videotape during a long moment of platform transition in the 1980s. Actually this transition is still in process in the archival space, but it's forked: both film

and videotape are now giving way to files, and a mad orgy of digitization and reformatting that, despite the assurances of custodians, may one day lead to the disposal of many original materials is currently in progress. Film's first wave of obsolescence beginning roughly in the early 1980s freed up release prints, preprint materials, outtakes, original elements, and I was quite often given what I asked for.

The combination of these three activities—sleuthing, vernacular public history practice and media transition—coalesced into collecting on a fast and massive scale. By the early 1990s the collection totaled over 100,000 items (including some 60,000 edited films), and by the time of its acquisition by the Library of Congress there were over 200,000 distinct cans/reels in the archives.

SC, BBH & PR: The Library of Congress acquired a significant part of your ephemeral film collection in 2002. How did this move affect the public perception and value of the Prelinger film collection? What role have institutional archives played in the preservation and distribution of ephemeral films? Have institutional archives adapted well to the current economies of digital distribution and sharing?

RP: The Library of Congress acquisition was a great legitimization event for the Prelinger film collection, and confirmed the combined efforts of many others to move ephemeral film material from the cultural periphery towards the center. Within a few years after our collection came to the Library, they also acquired the majority of film holdings from the American Archives of the Factual Film at Iowa State University, including some unique material; and the large, diverse collection of ephemeral films, television programs, TV news and broadcast advertising assembled by J. Fred MacDonald between the 1970s and early 2000s. In combination with other collections already at the Library, these materials contributed to growing a critical mass of material for researchers, scholars, producers and (hopefully at some future time) online users.

While the Library's acquisition is of immense symbolic importance, I believe our decision to make thousands of films available freely online through Internet Archive has more

dramatically affected the public perception of the collection's value. Since Internet Archive respects user privacy by not retaining logs, I can only offer approximate metrics, but I'm confident there have been over 100 million downloads and views through Internet Archive and other sites that mirror our films, and an uncountable number of derivative works in many media. The Library of Congress has not been in a position to afford greater access to their moving image collections through mass digitization, though I believe it will be in the future. I hope that it will ultimately become a major distribution node for orphaned and public domain films.

Outside of a few distinguished efforts, and I speak principally of the National Film Preservation Foundation in the US, institutional archives have not yet led in this area. The National Film Preservation Foundation has enabled the preservation of over 2,223 "historically and culturally significant films", many of which fall under the rubric of ephemeral film. Reading the National Film Preservation Foundation's list of preserved titles is at once highly gratifying and a bit of a tease. There is relatively little public access to most titles; you can't download most of them to project at home or school, and you can't grab the footage to reuse in your own work. While I believe this situation will likely evolve as generational succession and friendlier technologies bring about greater openness within the contributing archives, each film on the list brings to mind countless others as yet unpreserved. Perhaps we'll see a broad-based campaign to digitize orphaned and out-of-copyright works (to say nothing of in-copyright works with little or no commercial value) and make them fully accessible online, but I doubt such a project is happening any time soon.

Innovation tends to happen most dramatically not at the center, but at the periphery. Regional archives, specialized collections and private collectors are typically nimbler, more imaginative and less constrained than major national-level institutions. In the field of ephemeral films, smaller entities have done the most to propagate these documents in the world. They are much less wary of the digital turn and often hold less strict constructionist views on copyright. I'm sure major institutions will come closer to opening up their holdings, but I have no idea what the context of archival openness will

be in years to come. It is hard to predict in what direction copyright law and everyday copyright practice will evolve; there are indications both of Draconian tightening (see the drafts of the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership treaty) and relative loosening (see the series of publications on Best Practices in Fair Use published by American University). We may be moving towards an online distribution ecosystem that is more heavily based on permissions mediated through electronic enclosure, and in such a framework we don't know what archival openness may mean.

To speak of the evolving public perceptions and value of the Prelinger collection is to describe a process not unlike what has occurred with cult and genre film and television. Over time, our materials have transitioned from oddity status to cultural materials of recognized value in what constitutes a kind of move from the cultural periphery closer to its center. I sometimes speak of the growing public, scholarly and archival acceptance of ephemeral films as a kind of gentrification. I've previously advanced one provisional, if schematic summary of the trajectories of this "gentrifying" process:

1. The 1976 (U.S.) Copyright Act, taking effect on 1 January 1978, dramatically increases public consciousness of copyright and the public domain. Producers and artists begin to plumb repositories for collectible and usable public domain films (1978-present);
2. Films of evidentiary value emerge as cultish alternatives to conventionally accepted cinema genres (1970s-1980s) and are included in such films as *The Atomic Café* (1982);
3. Underground fans and scouts delight in the recontextualization (and détournement) of works once produced to persuade along very specific lines; films and clips appear on USA Network's *Night Flight* (1981-88), on Nickelodeon and within MTV's on-air promos (ca. 1981-ca. 1987);
4. Ephemeral films make their way into the stock footage market; a handful of stock footage companies (Archive Films, Streamline Film Archives, Prelinger Archives, MacDonald & Associates) take on task of collecting and disseminating them (1979-present);

5. Historians and social scientists (before cinema and media scholars) begin to work with these materials (mid-1980s);
6. I publish Laserdiscs and CD-ROM anthologies (1986-97);
7. Ephemeral films conditionally embraced by cinema scholars as legitimate research objects after much delay (early 1990s);
8. Dismissal of “representational transparency” as an attribute of ephemeral films gives way to more functional and representational analyses of “how they work” (ca. 2000-present);
9. Highly-curated DVD releases occur (AV Geeks, National Film Preservation Foundation, Other Cinema) (1990s)
10. Orphan Film Symposium legitimizes these and other genres (1999-present);
11. NYU Cinema Studies class on sponsored films (2007), taught by Anna McCarthy and Dan Streible;
12. Today: these formerly cultish and “counter-hegemonic” films become privileged objects of study; over 400,000 itching to be analyzed; new research careers await outside the overcrowded fields of fiction film and television. The Canadian Educational, Sponsored, and Industrial Film Archive, a research group led by Concordia's Charles Acland, begins to build its database in the 2010s (see <http://www.screenculture.org/cesif/>); similar efforts are under discussion in the United States.

SC, BBH & PR: You mentioned in an interview with Katie Bennett that since relocating from New York to San Francisco, you’ve moved from collecting mostly industrial and advertising films to collecting personal films and home movies. Why this switch? As a filmmaker who appropriates and re-uses home movies, what is it like to work with footage that, more often than not, was not meant to be seen by anyone outside a small circle of family and friends?

RP: I mostly “termed out” on educational and sponsored films after the Library of Congress acquisition in 2002, three years after I moved to San Francisco. While I still find many of them fascinating, and while I still collect sponsored films of special merit

(e.g., films produced by AT&T/Bell System; electronics and technology companies; silent-era advertising and industrial films; 35mm prints of sponsored films) I found myself focusing on amateur and home movies by the middle of the first decade of the new century. Since 2006 I've collected an estimated 13,000 home movies, all on film. (My bias towards film shouldn't be read as a judgment on or dismissal of home video; it's just that collecting video requires collecting equipment and committing to constant reformatting and migration, something I don't have the bandwidth or budget to do.) The home movie collection is quite dynamic and encompasses a broad breadth of experience as documented by North American vernacular filmmakers.

Why home movies? I am often asked this question, and find I can only answer it provisionally. Home movies embody many dramatic and fascinating contradictions. They are ubiquitous and were produced in great numbers, but almost every home movie exists as a single unique copy; no two are alike. They are infinitely repetitive, but infinitely variable as well. They're rich in evidentiary data, constituting detailed documentation of the contours, events and design of everyday life, but they are all too often poorly made and photographed. They are full of often agonizingly explicit detail, but frequently enigmatic. Premeditation and chance often collide. But above all they are unpredictable, surprising, full of warmth (and distance) and, I think, far tastier and more actionable than their feature counterparts.

I am trying to assemble as complete a picture as possible of daily life, culture, industry and ceremony in the 20th century. Home movies afford an ethnographic documentation opportunity of great import, and I aim to create a large collection and will do my best to assure its survival. While home movies have been popular with artists, documentary makers and collagists and while their vernacular is now an accepted component of the familiar representational landscape, we are only beginning to understand how they work, how they produce meaning, what they can and cannot record, and how we might use them.

While home movies were generally not made to be shown publicly, I frequently show them to large audiences. For me the importance of staging encounters between contemporary audiences and personal historical materials outweighs theoretical considerations of privacy, especially when the events shown in the films do not seem terribly private. This is no doubt presumption on my part, and in order to live with what I do I have often made decisions not to share certain films online, include them in public screenings or make them part of my films. Some choices are fairly obvious, others more subtle. Families or lovers sometimes shoot one another in intimate (not necessarily sexually explicit) contexts, and some images seem too private to share. In a few instances I have felt that certain films are most properly exhibited within and to communities associated with them before they're injected into the scrum of the Internet.

Issues of privilege and respect for cultural and spiritual sensitivities also arise. In my 2013 film *No More Road Trips?*, I chose not to include images of Native people (or possibly white people dressed in Native-derived costumes) performing dances and ceremonies for public viewing, as has happened throughout the Western United States subsequent to the displacement and extermination of Native populations. While such images are part of the historical tourism experience, I didn't feel as if this aspect of the experience was mine to document, especially if I were to use offensive or insulting images. Similarly, I chose not to include racially stereotypical footage of African Americans that had been shot by white people. I felt that these images were also insensitive and insulting, that most audiences were already familiar with them, and that I did not have standing to use them even in a deconstructive or critical manner. Instead I included a title at the end of the film welcoming collaboration with Native or African American artists or scholars who might seek to work with them.

To position oneself as a filmmaker is to assert certain privileges, and it's important to consider what privileges are embedded in the reuse of images created by others, whether inside or outside of a market context.

Figure 2 *No More Road Trips?*

SC, BBH & PR: By asking your audience to "be the soundtrack" in the spirit of "the Elizabethan Theatre, a boxing match, or question time at the House of Commons," you have chosen a unique strategy for engaging your spectators in your *Lost Landscapes* (2006-present) and *No More Road Trips?* (2013) live archival screening events. Because much of what you present on-screen at these events is silent home movie footage, audiences have ample opportunity to participate. How does the invocation of these particular modes of interactive spectatorship influence the way your audience experiences the archival material? How does it influence the way they experience history?

RP: Many experiences have come together into my decision to turn film screenings into participatory events. I first did an audience-participation screening in 1991, in Britton, South Dakota, where I showed Ivan Besse's films of the town in 1938-39 to an audience (many of whom appeared in the films as children) in the theater where they first were shown days after being shot. I'd been at screenings where spectators played an active role and talked back to the screen, notably in downtown Brooklyn and Times Square, but vocal engagement wasn't something one expected from senior audiences in heartland America, especially when I hadn't solicited it. In this case localism was the critical link: rediscovery and recognition of familiar places and faces, and the presence in the audience of people who appeared in the films or their kin. In fact my current ten-year-long run of "interactive" events took the lead from the audience for my first *Lost Landscapes* show in San Francisco in December 2006, when viewers responded more volubly than I would ever have imagined. This event was originally planned as a

"passive" screening, and in fact my partner Megan had selected music to run in the background. Led by a noisy group of local historians, the audience spoke often and loudly, and I realized that the event had found its own form. It turned into an annual screening with a ceremonial character (I describe it as the "new Nutcracker"), and as the audiences expanded from 90 to 1400 people, hearing the audience's voices seemed ever more important.



Figure 3 *Lost Landscapes of San Francisco*

There are some obvious conclusions. The attraction of these shows recalls the allure of rephotography, the juxtaposition of views of the same place made at different times. Both the pleasurable shock of dissociation occasioned by the defamiliarization of a known scene and the memory triggers of places previously lived in draw in audiences. Change in scale, though infrequently discussed, is also key to a form of spectatorship that diverges from normal moviegoing. When you take a film made for projection in a fairly close domestic environment, such as a living room, and enlarge it to the scale of a large theater, new details engage viewers who might otherwise not notice them. I contend that the scale change enables viewers to assume new roles, such as ethnographers concerned with deciphering kinship relations, kinesics (in the manner, let's say, of Ray Birdwhistell's 1969 film *Microcultural Incidents at Ten Zoos*) and configurations of material culture; cultural geographers investigating the organization of human-inhabited landscapes, the appearance and workings of cities, towns and rural areas; even critical gender and race theorists. The evidence expands from peripheral

content to core topic, and spectators take on new responsibilities. History trades its traditional academic rarefication for evidence-based populism, though audiences tend not to tackle complex or divisive topics while assembled for a screening.

I tried to influence *No More Road Trips?* audiences to address big ideas: to muse and comment on the question of changing mobilities, "peak travel" and the obsolescence of the mythical road trip as a route towards self-discovery and personal reemergence. I also hoped to testify to the historical condition that the road trip was not the same experience for everyone: while some people traveled as tourists, others migrated under economic or racial duress, and the landscape that African Americans navigated was not the same territory that white people experienced. Generally this has not happened, though often audiences return to these large questions in the post-film Q&A. I made *No More Road Trips?* to function as participatory cinema, but several dozen screenings have made me realize that it might work as well or even better as contemplative cinema. The corollary realization is that perhaps there is little difference between contemplative and participatory cinemas aside from the particulars of the contract between maker and audience. Could we productively talk our way through films by Chantal Akerman or James Benning (and do we, if we're not in a room full of disapproving cinephiles)? This would be audience transgression at its best, and in fact my *No More Road Trips?* audiences are as influenced by transgressive motives as the wildly verbal *Lost Landscapes* crowds. Sometimes the excitement of making noise in the movies outweighs (or transcends) whatever specific goals the maker might aspire towards: permission is granted the audience, they eagerly accept it and run in whatever direction they choose. So to the extent that we pose the proposition that audience = soundtrack, the results of the experiment are inconclusive.

While *No More Road Trips?* hasn't prompted widespread discussion on the end of automobility, I do view it as an unqualified success in one respect: it successfully demonstrates an idea voiced most cleanly by the eminent (and maverick) cultural geographer John Brinckerhoff Jackson: that "landscape is history made visible." I'd

been wanting for years to make a film that proved this assertion, and *No More Road Trips?* does.



Figure 4 *No More Road Trips?*

It and my *Lost Landscapes* events also invoke, without necessarily resolving, questions of history, its production and reception; the conflict between problematization and celebration; the realms and arenas in which historical consciousness is exchanged; and the flight from conflict. I have previously mentioned "evidence-based populism." While the role of film in presenting relatively pure evidence is usually disparaged or discounted because it rests at least partly on the presumption that there is some shred of unimpeachable truth among the ambiguities and overdeterminations flooding all images, my films aspire to reclaim some sort of authority for the archival image. When most spectators have relatively little training or experience in deep viewing (competency in which is expected of every visitor to a photography gallery or avant-garde/experimental film screening) I consider it essential not simply to encourage viewers to look but to emphatically maintain that there is something specific to be seen through the foggy residues left by power and the corrupted representational toolbox. While we may (and should) interpret evidence in different ways, I believe evidence exist and needs to be admitted as probative.

Home movies are wonderful to invoke as evidence because it is easy to see how subjectivity, ambiguity, error and lack of cinematic competence all introduce noise into the production of meaning. The change of scale to the big screen makes this clear to almost all viewers, who interpret the familiar role of amateur photographer as one who does the best job he/she can without necessarily being conclusive. As with photography, so it is with history. Home movie viewers acknowledge the shooter was present at the scene but don't necessarily accept his or her point of view as definitive or even accurate. We've all seen home moviemakers pan right by what we imagine to be the gist of an event.

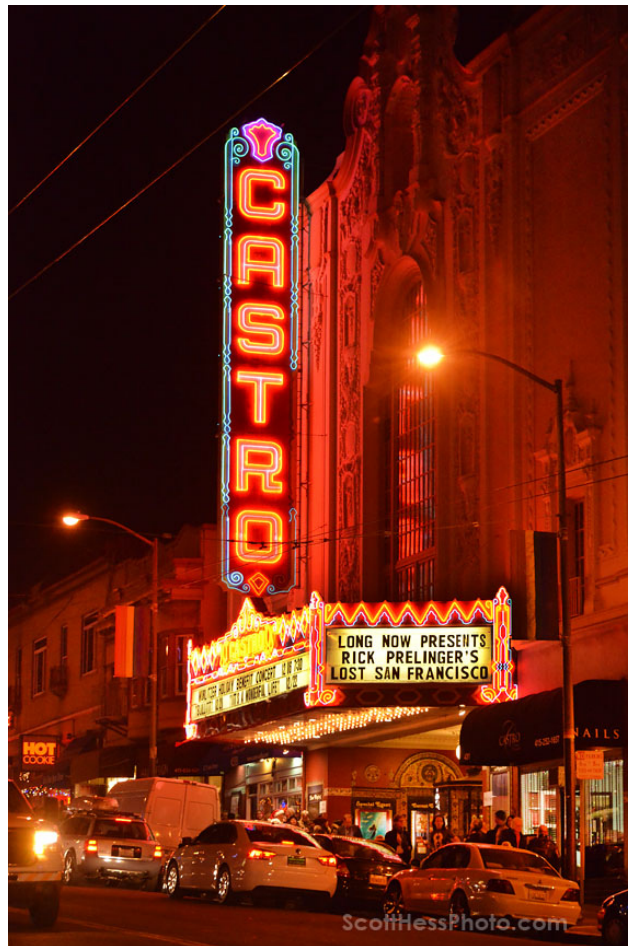


Figure 5 The Castro Theatre hosts *Lost Landscapes of San Francisco* annually

But viewer skepticism doesn't always equal a skeptical attitude toward received historical ideas. Like amateur historians, home movies can be paralyzingly granular,

and it's tempting to view them in that way: it's easier to identify movie palaces appearing in the background of street scenes than it is to discuss how theater owners practiced racial discrimination. I have noted that some members of the white Detroit diaspora find scenes of Black Detroiters unsettling because they blame Detroit's decline more on those who stayed in the city rather than on those who left. The evidence must be considered in context, and the context (at least in my screenings) depends on who feels freest to speak. I strongly believe that home movies are, or at least can be, effective and vivid means for historicizing public perceptions of the world, but not necessarily by themselves.



Figure 6 *Lost Landscapes of Detroit*

At a minimum, showing old home movies and amateur film to contemporary audiences creates a sense of entitlement regarding their own histories. They realize that their own family images might have value when shown to others, and draw a link between personal records previously deemed of little interest to others and a broader, shared set of histories. I only hope that the look and style of home movies will continue to interest audiences as long as it takes for all of us to understand some of the many ways they can be used and experienced.

SC, BBH & PR: Your *Lost Landscapes* programs have now featured three cities, San Francisco, Detroit, and Oakland, with over thirteen versions. Where do you see this work going in the future? Will you be expanding the scope of the project in any ways?

RP: As of the end of 2015, I will have made and shown nineteen urban history events. I'm currently making one about Los Angeles to screen at the REDCAT Theater in November 2015. My current perspective about these projects is to turn them into community efforts researched by, produced within and screened at the neighborhood as well as the metropolitan level. *Lost Landscapes* depicts a sum of social relations as well as the collision of human design blended with physiography, and it is most productive to think about these events as social encounters rather than simply movie nights. What if local makers scouted out images in their communities, screened them and produced neighborhood-level events that then coalesced into film events about the city or metro area as a whole? What if the screenings were not the end of the process but a means for training people, especially emerging makers, in archival and production skills, and for connecting younger and older people who shared an interest in local and community history?



Figure 7 *Lost Landscapes of Oakland*

I have already spun off the Oakland/East Bay (California) event to Alex Cruse, an Oakland maker who hopes to pursue it along lines like these, and I strongly aspire for the Detroit event to become a project under the full control of Detroiters. The future of

the San Francisco event, which will happen the tenth time in December 2015, is indeterminate, but it is a hard project to stop. I am also slowly working on another urban history film, quite different in form and emphasis, which may or may not involve audience participation.

SC, BBH & PR: All of the films you've made deal with Americana and national mythmaking in some way, but *Panorama Ephemera* (2004) and *No More Road Trips?* (2013) are especially concerned with these themes. Through your filmmaking practice, what have you learned about the potential for ephemeral film to preserve and communicate the American mythological landscape that has surprised you?



Figure 8 *Panorama Ephemera*

RP: American mythologies infect all of us despite the degree to which we might like to resist. It is perfectly possible to view *Panorama Ephemera* or *No More Road Trips?* from a positivist or uncritical perspective. I would however hope that my attempts to interrupt and problematize received mythologies can reach most people who watch the films. Despite what a few people thought, *Panorama Ephemera* is not simply an anthology of ephemeral film segments, and *No More Road Trips?* doesn't celebrate the mythological open road. The tension between the normative messages in ephemeral films and the substance of the images themselves, and the rearticulation of received myths by a

constantly refreshing troupe of non-actors in home movies and amateur films are what make these films interesting, if and when they succeed.

I should say that making films out of preexisting footage is one thing and finding ever-new ways of presenting films another; both are equally valid ways to work with these kinds of material. You can do as much with performative projection, with changing the conditions of spectatorship or with contextualizing objects in novel ways as you can do in a dark editing room with months of effort. There are many possible realms of moving image authorship, and we don't necessarily just have to make films to rock the viewers' worlds.

SC, BBH & PR: How has digitization changed your archival practices/collecting methodology? You said in an interview with Steven Heller that the Prelinger Library is “designed to enable serendipity and discovery” and, as Gideon Lewis-Kraus has said, it's where “you go to find what you're not looking for.” Do you think this same spirit of accidental discovery holds with online archives? How has digitization altered your own filmmaking process or that of the artists who rely on your archive? Do you now work completely with digital files in your artistic practice?

RP: Digitization became a practical alternative for our archives in 2000, prompted by Internet Archive's offer to help us build an online downloadable film collection. At that time MPEG-2 encoding (the same process then used for satellite TV and building burnable video files for DVD) was a fairly expensive proposition, but we figured out how to do it more cheaply and at scale. It is much easier to produce and move files than to copy and ship videotapes, and moving image material moves faster, further and more freely than it did in the film and video days. The implications for increased access are clear, but not definitive. While digitization implies access in theory, it doesn't enable it in practice without the conscious decision to expose and share digitized materials. TV network news archives (at least their recent material) are all digital, but remain inaccessible to the public. Many moving image archives hold large reservoirs of digital

video that they cannot or will not expose online. Access to archival materials is not simply a function of format.

In this regard it's interesting to compare the differing natures of accidental and serendipitous discovery in libraries and archives. In libraries, accidental and serendipitous discovery is easier in the physical realm, where books are generally shelved by subject and spines serve as metadata in its simplest form; it's much harder with digital catalogs, where the blinking cursor in a search box on the screen of a terminal stares patrons in the face, asking for a query. As we often say at our catalog-free library in San Francisco, query-based librarianship is inherently reductive, tending to limit accidental discovery. And since digital simulacra of library shelves have not yet made it to the Web in all of their complexity, digital searching still organizes itself around choosing targets and posing verbal queries. In archives the situation is reversed. The public is rarely allowed into the storage areas of archives, but if they were, they would find it quite an enigmatic experience, as records are arranged according to the organizational or biographical structure of the entity that created or collected them. Labels on archival containers often reveal little of what they may contain, and serendipitous discovery is attenuated by the high-latency processes of retrieval (one box or folder at a time by request only). When archival materials are digitized, they suffer from the same issues that library catalogs do, but worlds once hidden within boxes expose themselves as text and picture in the browser and often contain hyperlinks to similar counterparts elsewhere.

I wish our online materials were easier to discover by accident or by a different kind of structured search. At present you need to instantiate a playback event by selecting a moving image item and clicking on it, at which point a player takes over and imposes its own interface rules. One day I hope we can escape the tyranny of the on-screen glowing rectangle with its own deeply embedded codifications. And the time-based nature of moving images makes them very hard to graze in the same way we can graze (that's to say "surf") webpages, idly flip through books or look at photos with rapid seriality. The shortcut has quite often been to make textual metadata searchable as a

kind of surrogate for images that are still too complex to search. (Of course, even if purely image-based search techniques were perfected, the cognitive adaptation we'd have to make to use them might be quite difficult for some of us.)

I do think we'll solve the UX [user experience] and technical problems that currently limit our abilities to work with different media types. But this won't resolve what I call "moving image exceptionalism"—the widely held sense that moving image materials are not the same as other cultural materials. In the archival domain, they languish behind higher fences of enclosure than other media types. Their preservation is prohibitively expensive and their reuse carries higher fees. The odds and term of their survival is framed along a spectrum ranging from the indefinite to the unlikely, and their custodians are typically motivated by cinephilia. Their power to move audiences is almost universally cited, but their preservation is funded at a pitifully low level. As the world experiments with presenting video in a host of environments, established film archivists lament what they perceive as the end of the 120-year-long classic cinematic experience.

Digitization often brings a sense of closure or finality—that once a film is digitized it moves into a new realm of accessibility, it becomes part of a novel and more public sphere of which it was not previously a part. This isn't necessarily true. As I have said, so much depends on the regime and degree of enclosure surrounding the files. And I am learning that digitization is not a one-time affair; it will have to be repeated, often many times, as standards of encoding and presentation change.

All of that said, digitization has changed my world. I'm thrilled how films from our collection have propagated and how they are used. A YouTube search of the word "prelinger" yields an unimaginably full bucket of reuses and remixes. Digitization has enabled me to make my lightly-produced works at great speed, and has furthered the circulation of moving images from our archives to users. It's moved objects that resided on the periphery of mainstream culture closer to the center, and tickled historical consciousness in many whom would not otherwise have much occasion to think

historically. It has turned moving images (which once enjoyed the status of unusual objects riding on top of .html and .txt, the backbone of the early Web) into infrastructure on which people build services and, all too rarely, tools.

SC, BBH & PR: In April you Tweeted: "May I just say it again: Loss is to be avoided when possible, but it's also formative. New histories arise around loss." Obviously an enormous percentage of moving images have already been lost, and we would imagine an even larger percentage is being lost in the digital age. However, an archivist who embraces loss feels like the ultimate oxymoron. Can you expand upon this idea of loss as a productive force?

RP: My Tweet is provocative but pragmatic. I would never support the intentional destruction of cultural materials, as has happened countless times in the 20th and 21st century and is happening right now in the Middle East. But we need to be real about this. The density and bulk of the current historical record is too great to save, even though some technologists believe we are technically capable of doing so, and the more we save from the present the less bandwidth we have to touch and interact with the record of the past. One of the core functions of archival work is appraisal: not appraisal in the sense of marketplace value, but the determination of whether records have permanent (thus archival) value. The passage of time causes us to see many, perhaps most appraisal decisions in a different light. As the civil servants who junked footage of Levittown in favor of retaining scenes of presidential travel unwittingly taught us, we cannot fully anticipate the future uses of records. Accident, as I will address in the next question, plays a significant role in determining the survival (and use) of the archival record. We can (and should) privilege what we consider important, but we need to understand the contingencies, prejudices and hierarchies that cause us to privilege certain records over others.

Loss is an absence of the record that can speak as loudly and eloquently as the records in place. Like an empty chair at a holiday dinner, missing or absent records testify to memory gaps that demand investigation even if we're unable to fill them. Loss, or its

perception, drives historical investigation. Many of the emergent histories of the last half-century (women's, African American, the Black Atlantic, queer and gender, labor and working people, post-Communism, disability studies, to mention just a very few) have been driven by senses that the record is absent or suppressed.

Should archivists fear loss? I'm not certain. Could we try to avert the possibility of loss without fear? Or is loss unavoidable?

SC, BBH & PR: Recent media scholarship has identified a pressing need to discuss media in terms of ecological impact. Efforts to “green” media studies have focused on discussions around technological waste, the media, carbon impact, and sustainable forms of production, as well as other sustainability issues. How have archival studies and archivists joined this conversation? In your opinion what are the most pressing issues to be discussed if we see archives through the lens of ecocriticism?

RP: This discussion is just beginning, and it will be a difficult one. We have already seen the destruction of archival collections by climate extremes (Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, to mention two), and there will obviously be more, as many collections are located at or near current sea levels. And it is hard, at least for me, to imagine that we will always be able to count on electricity to spin the disk drives upon which archives are increasingly dependent. But I would take an optimistic perspective on this issue and hope that human adaptability extends to human recordkeeping, and that long-term means of storage and preservation emerge. In fact we already have them (engraving microscopic bits or human-readable characters on metal, storing data in DNA, etc.), but they don't yet scale.

Stimulated by the writings of the speculative fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, I'm also fascinated in the basics of permaculture and how attractively its design principles remap not only into archival practice but into media production as well. (See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permaculture> or <http://pickardsmountain.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/permaculture-principles-icons-1.png>) I will leave this exercise

for readers, but I think these principles can pique the archival imagination and influence the redesign of archival workflows.

SC, BBH & PR: You have called for a rethinking of the archive as an open space, rather than just as a repository, and of the archivist as a producer. But how can we rethink archives in relationship to users? What can archives and archivists learn from what we know as today's Internet Participatory Cultures? And how can we reimagine the role of the user beyond those of researcher, filmmaker, or fan-collectors?

RP: While it's tempting to see the archives as a place apart from the world whose records it tries to collect, I find this divide quite unproductive. Are the core archival missions of permanently preserving and providing access to records of permanent value so incompatible with the rhythms and practices of daily life? Why can't we regard the historical record as infrastructure that informs consciousness and behavior in the present? Is it such a stretch to suggest that we already more or less consciously perform the histories within which we have been raised, and that we might take more care to acknowledge, sustain and (most importantly) critique the records that embody these histories? However interesting, these questions fall short of elaborating an action agenda for reuniting archives and users, or archives and the communities they represent, and such an agenda will have to be elaborated through iteration and experiment.

Archives have changed a great deal in the last twenty years or so; they have exposed great quantities of materials to the public, principally online; and many have rejected their historical legacies as accessories to power. The proliferation of community-based archives and archives documenting resistance and change has also helped engender a great deal of re-modeling in the field. My personal bias is to think of the archives as a social arena in which every conceivable kind of interaction might find a place: the archives not only as a commons, but like a city, with inputs and outputs of energy, materials, people and information. To consider models of this sort involves understanding and challenging how power and hierarchies function within collecting and

memory institutions—not simply in terms of what is or is not collected, but how the daily work is done.

SC, BBH & PR: Discussions around copyright disputes, collecting licences, and archival policies have framed many of the conversations around archives and archival materials within the public domain. What is your take on these issues? Is it possible and convenient to move the conversation beyond these controversies? How do these issues affect the civic function and educational potentialities that archival film collections could offer to the public?

RP: For some years I was an active participant in campaigns and legal initiatives to reform copyright law and to strengthen that portion of cultural heritage that is considered public domain. While I still support such initiatives, I no longer spend as much time focusing on the details of law, licenses and access policies. This is fascinating territory for many people and there is no shortage of engagement. My focus, however, has turned towards issues that quite likely will outlast current controversies, which are largely kindled by conflicts between monopolistic corporate rights holders/distributors and advocates of free expression as mediated through emerging technologies. I believe that questions of respect—for creators as well as for potential audiences—are longer lasting and much more difficult to resolve than contemporary legal questions. As the scholar Mary Murrell has suggested, it is also possible that efforts to protect traditional and nonpublic cultural expression which began with Indigenous and Aboriginal peoples may spread to other communities in time, and the resonances of these efforts may far outweigh the influence of today's "copyright wars."

I do not wish to minimize the importance of resisting current efforts to monetize every cultural trace and utterance, nor do I disrespect the many experiments in progress to rethink and monkey wrench the distribution of culture. Rethinking the cultural economy can (though not inevitably) affect and defamiliarize received ideas about the distribution of resources and property. But I am personally more concerned with the long view.

A final note on the distinction between “archives” and “the archive”

RP: May I conclude by raising a question of vocabulary? You may have noticed I've been using the term "archives" rather than "the archive." I don't think those terms are interchangeable.

I'm fascinated by the imprecision that exists between "archives," which most archivists define as formally recognized and/or "outsider" places of collecting, preservation, access and archival labor, and "the archive," which I consider an umbrella for conceptual, philosophical, artistic, literary, even psychoanalytical constructs centered around archives and/or archival process.

Most writers and artists use the terms interchangeably without interrogating the difference between them, but the imprecision surrounding "the archives" and "the archive" vexes archivists. An unstable amalgam of the unconscious and quotidian, the "archive" is an undemanding construct. It serves the critical disciplines as they interact with history and memory without necessarily requiring deep engagement. For artists, writers and theorists, "the archive" is *terra nullius*, open for unchallenged occupation.

"The archive" invites flirtation; the "archives," on the other hand, could not be more demanding. Though their workplaces may seem quiet and their workflows may pretend to appear apolitical, "archives" overflow with contention. To collect is to commit to the survival of certain records over others; to arrange and describe is often to enclose; to preserve is to resist power, violence and constraint; to proffer access is to invite misunderstanding and aggression. And yet "archives" yearn for praxis; even the quietest archival labor is practice in search of theory.

I hope you'll excuse my rather polarized treatment of these terms, because I hope we can move towards reuniting these terms and the practices to which they refer. Could we try to draw connections between artistic, academic and archival labor? And could we try to link the conceptual umbrella we call "the archive" with the more quotidian work of "the

archives"? This might mean listening harder to the people who perform archival labor—thinking of it as cultural work or research rather than simply wage labor—and incorporating a more materialist sense of the meaning and importance of archival work based on the work itself, not simply the externalities that influence most decisions archives make. For some time we have considered access to information to be a prime metric for assessing degrees of power and agency. But what kind of social and power relations are embedded in archival workflow? How do our often unexamined assumptions about how archives should be administered and worked affect the position of the archives in society? I would hope that this question echoes back on some of the questions discussed throughout this interview.

Thank you for the opportunity to answer these great questions.

Sophie Cook, Beatriz Bartolomé Herrera and Papagena Robbins are doctoral students in the Film and Moving Image Studies Program at Concordia University.