Charles Acland: I'm Charles Acland of Concordia University. I teach in the Department of Communications Studies. We're here at Concordia University. It's May 3rd of 2018, and the purpose of this recording is to interview Rick Prelinger who is a professor in the Department of Film and Digital Media at the University of California Santa Cruz, and it is my distinct honor to be doing this interview for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies oral history project. Welcome, Rick.

Rick Prelinger: Thank you.

Charles Acland: So, look, to get us going I think that the general purpose of this interview is to survey some of your contributions. Your many contributions. I'm sure we're not going to get through all of them, the work that you've done through the years, and we'll be talking a little bit about its relationship to certain developments in film and media studies as well as some prospects for the future of the discipline.

Now obviously your contributions have moved through all sorts of different areas, so it's quite ambitious of us to think that we're going to be able to cover them all within an hour, and certainly your career is a singular one. It's one that's really been quite generative and informative for so many different people working in so many different areas, whether it has to do with archivists, whether it has to do with copyright, open access, whether it has to do with the way in which people approach the relationship between moving image and public history, and of course scholarship.

So we're going to try to squeeze all of this in as best we can, but just to start maybe you could give us an idea about some of your early formation in the idea that there might be something to contribute or to do in the realm of careers or contributions of the moving image universe. Maybe give us a sense of where that passion for that kind of contribution came from. I'm asking to think a little bit back to the prehistory to your contributions here.

Rick Prelinger: Well, I'll contribute one moment of juvenilia, which is that as a child I was addicted to the television documentaries, historical documentaries like “The Twentieth Century” with Walter Cronkite, and one of the things that struck me as a kid was that I hated the fact that these were edited. I wanted to see the whole archival clip, and I trace my interest in archives to these very strident films which were all about disasters and World War II.

I studied — I went to UC Berkeley as an undergraduate, probably a little bit too early because I didn't know what I wanted to do and so I gravitated to film, and my first course was with Bertrand Augst who has turned out really to be my mentor and a completely influential figure in my life. He was part of this, and actually he was a motivator of this tremendously exciting movement in the early to mid '70s which was to reconcile American pragmatist film studies with what was happening in Europe, and he brought Metz to the attention for example — and Noël Burch — to the attention of Americans, and he set up a class where it was a little bit chaotic.
There were dozens of handouts every week. There was this huge repertoire of films that were playing everywhere that were available for the class. There were readings, and it was like an exciting smorgasbord. Here is the complete heritage of historical and contemporary practice as we understand it, and what's your place? What do you want to do? There were a million opportunities. I found this completely exciting, and I've tried to bring this into a little bit of my own teaching.

One of the most significant takeaways for me from Bertrand's classes was to follow Noël Burch and to some extent Metz, and to think of films not as indivisible wholes but as assemblies of autonomous segments, and in a lot of ways I think there's a relationship between that and doing archival work and doing collage and found footage, and also selling stock footage material, so that very much stayed with me. I was a deep cinephile. Sometimes I watched as many as four or five features a day. We had the Pacific Film Archive and many other resources in Berkeley, and we also had a film theory study group, which was a very interesting group of people and it gave birth to “Camera Obscura,” for example, and to “Discourse,” to important journals. Eco and Derrida came to speak with us, and we dealt with some very, very heady texts and issues. But at a certain point I pulled back and I moved to New York hoping to get work in the industry, because my uncle was a union official. This was unsuccessful, but after some years I began collecting, and that's really a longer story.

Charles Acland: Well, this is great, because I like that you begin by talking about television and I think that when I think of my own formation, the importance of television was absolutely astronomical. It was access; even on television it was still difficult but nonetheless you had access to an audiovisual universe that you would not have access to otherwise. I'm just wondering, is there a moment when you realized that there was a material element associated with this? You described the archival curiosity of what happens in the rest of the clips that they've just edited down, but was there a moment where you realized that that encounter with this other medium — and again not all cinephiles would pinpoint television, right? Or budding cinephiles, right? — was there a moment where you could see that in fact there were these other aspects to this form that in fact there might be something to work on here or something to pursue?

Rick Prelinger: The materiality of film was always very important to me. I projected in elementary school. I remember projecting “The Mouse that Roared”, a Technicolor print, and it broke, and I was able to take six inches home with me, and that was quite exciting. Later I had a few films that I'd collected. I was fascinated with that. I was fascinated with slides and photography and long before I did anything with film editing. I did slideshows for punk rock bands and as part of a sort of performative lecturing practice. I was doing this as a sleepwalker, but I did it and as time went on, I got quite interested in film as a medium that you could touch.
I wrote a play in eighth grade in our drama class called “Acetate”, and it was about a troubled film production and at a certain point the film blows up on stage and somebody says, "The director used nitrate film. He should have used acetate." I don't know what I was thinking or how I'd learned about this because I was just 14, but the sense of materiality goes very far back.

Charles Acland: And obviously Quentin Tarantino was in the audience. That's a joke. But this is great because I think it also, as you describe, there's a very early understanding of the performance of ... I mean a word that may be used now is ... the intermedial aspects. In other words, that it's not the pristine, precious object, but these are things to work with, to construct events, to incorporate into other kinds of processes or representational works, which of course is something that you knew then, well, in a way, you're still doing it now. There are versions of that that still inform the practice that you're engaged in.

Rick Prelinger: I've always thought this way. When my housemates in New York in 1982 were finishing “Atomic Café” which is how I got a start because they then asked me to work on their next film, “Heavy Petting”. Pierce Rafferty and Obie Benz. At that point I'd started collecting, just as a by-product of working as research director on this film, and the first film that you collect, there are four stages of this. I've written about this.

The first stage is every film is precious. What can you do with this film? What does the existence and the materiality and the content of this film permit? What projects would this film support? The second stage is a little bit different. It's a fascination with style. The rhetoric of the narration or the text, the stentorian voice of the narrator or the look of Kodachrome, whatever. The third stage is sociocultural. Why was this made? Who paid for it? What's the reason? In what way was this film useful? Then I think the fourth stage is letting the film fall out of history and letting an egg be just an egg. Thinking about historical images as images that can float in time and space and in a sense liberating the historical and archival document from its historicity or its archival-ness. I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit, but I think at the same time then I'm still very concerned with materiality because I work heavily with home movies now. I'm also very interested in what these look like when they're dematerialized.

Charles Acland: Well, those works, you mentioned “Heavy Petting” and “Atomic Cafe,” they certainly weren't the first compilation films, but they were so important. They drew an audience that was relatively substantial, and it's reasonable to think of them as a turning point that opens up the possibility of the things that one can do with these ephemeral works, the way that they can signal historical work, and what I was going to ask is what kind of turning point did it play for you? Or would you describe it that way? How did you end up in those position and then did it launch you in a particular direction through the rest of the 1980s?
Rick Prelinger: There are two films that came out in the '70s before “Atomic Café” that actually changed the way we think about archives and compilation film, and they were “Gizmo!”-

Charles Acland: Oh, of course. Yeah.

Rick Prelinger: By Howard Smith and “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” Neither of these films are particularly distinguished, but both of them use material in what we might call a postmodern manner. They mix the material of documentary and fictional nature. They achieve the sort of archive effect as Jaimie Baron puts it, but they do it in a very, very different way. They're undisciplined films. They're not tied. Neither of them has a narration. They float over history and they develop their own rhetoric in a way. “Atomic Cafe” was influenced by “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” What I got out of this was that any material could be formative. That the old hierarchies of ... You didn't have to use Pare Lorentz to invoke authority and you could play, and that influenced me tremendously. Then also the ephemerality of the material that when you recontextualize something that wasn't meant to be shown to a contemporary audience, a million possibilities opened up.

Charles Acland: So then from your work on those, you were already collecting but when did your collecting really begin to soar? When did that become a major aspect of your practice?

Rick Prelinger: Beginning with the hundred films under the overhang of my platform bed to an office in Chinatown with about 4,000 films in a year. Mostly release prints from media libraries. Moments of media transition are incredible opportunities for collecting because the old media needs to go to make room for the new, and this was film to videotape, and then talking with Bob Summers who had been an archivist at MoMA and John E. Allen, and Bob said, "You know, you should really be collecting preprint as well as release prints," and I took that to heart and realized that since we will never have money to preserve a lot of what I then called ephemeral films, that we should try to collect the preprint material, and then it just went crazy. I think I had 40,000 cans the second year and I was storing film all around the country and I was faced with abundance. And abundance in our society is a problem that in many ways outpaces scarcity. I've never had to deal with loss because there's been such an abundance of material to work with and think about and so many discoveries waiting to be made.

Charles Acland: Give me a sense of the years for this.

Rick Prelinger: I begin collecting at the very beginning of 1983. It steps up considerably in '83 and '84. In '85 I was beginning to collect preprint and we move from, as I said, about 4,000 films to around 10 times as many by the end of 1985, and that really continued. By 2002 when our collection went to Library of Congress it was in the area of 160,000 cans of material representing about 60,000 productions. Something around 45% of that collection was represented as preprint, and the
rest was release prints and there was also a lot of unedited and raw material as well. Ultimately, I think my project to collect industrial advertising and educational films, we don't know how many were made in the States but it's fair to say that we collected about 20% of the total production, which was not bad.

Charles Acland: On that point, this question, it’s not a great question for describing or getting a sense of a passion and an intense interest that one feels compelled to pursue, but did you have a conception of what your mandate was? Was it to collect as many of that particular genre, and if so, why? Was there a sense that there was a growing need to service certain kinds of production? Compilation production? Was it a public history sense? Did you have in your mind a loose mandate, or if you wrote a manifesto at that point, so much the better. I know your later writing in this vein, but how did you understand what you were doing as you were gathering up as much as you could to add to these disperse collections?

Rick Prelinger: There was a year or two of somnambulism when I just did it because I felt that it was interesting and I was fascinated and charmed by this material, and then I began to realize … a lot of this, this was really prompted by my encounter with Voyager Press. Voyager Press was a small new media company started by Bob and Aleen Stein who quickly went into partnership with Janus Films with Jonathan Turell and Bill Becker and so they had access to the Janus library, and what they put out in '85, '86 were these definitive LaserDisc editions of classic films. “Citizen Kane”, “King Kong”, “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

They invented what we now know as the DVD supplement, and I was of course totally taken with their work. LaserDiscs were wonderful. You could slow down, stop, look at things frame by frame. It was precisely the kind of viewing that I loved, and it became clear after I met Bob Stein that we needed to work together, and I did two LaserDisc compilations, the Ephemeral Films “To New Horizons” and “You Can't Get There From Here,” which were released on tape in '86 and on LaserDisc in '87 and CD-ROM in '92 and in '93 in various versions and so on. That was my first of many projects with Voyager.

What Bob helped me understand was that I was practicing history without a diploma. He constantly pushed me. He’s coming out of a radical Marxist-Leninist tradition and so for him history was something to be actionable and useful, and although I don’t come from the same place politically I understood what he said and it forced me to think of what I was doing in a new way. And when I took films on the road to do screenings, I did about 150 by the year 2000. These screenings became both performative events on my part, but also a way of getting audiences to think through complex historical questions. So, you have an audience that's initially predisposed perhaps to be nostalgic, or to laugh at the camp and the kitsch in these films, but by the end of a screening and discussion they're actually talking about quite sophisticated historical insights.

Has something been taken away from us? Why is our landscape configured the way that it is? What does it mean to look at people working in the ‘30s and ‘40s
and compare it to the way that we labor today? It was really wonderful. I loved the way that you could use these films for teaching complex historical insights without resorting to let's say academic jargon.

Charles Acland: I think you are describing the drive to, on the one hand, collect, but then to find modes of circulation, whether that had to do with performances, but to activate the archive in some way and have it encounter audiences. That continues as you begin to move into some of the questions about access and copyright which happens a little bit later. The other thing that it leads to is that there are lots of moments in your career where I see someone who is on the one hand compelled to be invested in the media that's receding and the material that's associated with that, but also innovating and experimenting with new forms and new formats. So in fact I think probably the first time I encountered your work was a CD-ROM of the Ephemeral Films. It might have been part of “The Secret Century”. I can't remember what it was, but so the CD-ROM. You mentioned LaserDisc. I'm just wondering, have you thought a little bit about the role that new technological formats play in the kind of work that you do or have done?

Rick Prelinger: One of the great opportunities of the digital turn has been the opportunity to understand analog much, much better, and I think in some ways I was working that through with my new media projects. It's funny because in those days new media implied a certain kind of privilege. The tools were expensive. Access to that, that was not something that everybody did. Now of course new media is for the masses. Digital is for the masses and artisanal physical objects are for the privileged, so there's been kind of a reversal. But there was a great excitement in finding a way to get these films out to people, as with the idea of putting a small archives on somebody's desktop as we did with "Ephemeral Films" and "Secret Century."

Crucially, the idea of making a documentary out of segments where the sequencing and the selection constituted the narrative was fascinating to me, so "Ephemeral Films," each one of them is a one-hour documentary about trajectories and concerns in American cultural and social history, and there's no narration and there's no music and you simply have to impute the narrative and the ideas from the arrangement and compilation, and I love working that way. It's not so far from the way most people think. If you listen to a rock and roll album or a hip hop album, they work exactly the same way. You are comparing material at the level of the sequence.

I talk about compilation film or a found footage film where some people like Craig Baldwin speak in phonemes. I speak in paragraphs, and the influence for me of course when I look back is Straub–Huillet. If you want to know who the most influential filmmakers and film in my life has been it's Straub–Huillet, especially “Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach”, which every time I do a Lost Landscapes I realize how much my urban history films owe in tempo and in structure and in alternation of near and far and short and long to that film, because it's so beautifully conceived and edited and it's a way of making a lot of
Brechtian theories on narrative actually work. Well, Spike Lee did it too in “Do the Right Thing”.

But yeah, new media, and it had incredible possibilities which I think we achieved. "Ephemeral Films" and "Secret Century" collectively sold something like twenty or thirty thousand copies. A lot of people saw them, and then later on when we went online with Internet Archive, there's an incalculable number of views and downloads. It's in the hundreds of millions now if you think where these films have gone and propagated, and I honestly can't understand why other archivists have shied away from mass dissemination, even when they hold a great deal of material that's not encumbered by law. This to me is the only way to do it. I'm convinced that archival populism is both productive and exciting. It's changed my life in so many ways, and it begins with that Voyager work.

Charles Acland: What you're describing is very much widespread, I mean I don't think it's too much to describe it as a cultural movement. There's one element of a taste culture that's interested in these kinds of works. Others are curious about the window to the past from the camp side to the historical side. Is there a moment where you began to notice there was an uptick in interest from scholars? And obviously those groups cross over a bit, but is there a moment where you could see that okay, there is actually a contribution here to the formation of how people do their work in whether it's media history or film history? Is there anything in the steps to where you are now that you would point out for us?

Rick Prelinger: It's a fascinating question because the relationship was quite imperfect for a while. We financed the archives by selling stock footage beginning in 1983. We incorporated in 1985 and that became a fairly big business very quickly because we were able to infuse the production community in New York and around the world with a lot of new imagery. It had been very hard to acquire stock footage in color. Most stock footage was official. It was government. It was newsreel. Television news and so on.

We were able to supply everyday life, so we kind of had a boom. It was a very busy business for a while, and what that meant is we had a venue. We were open to scholars and researchers and to independent makers and artists, but the scholars and researchers largely did not come. We had a few. We had Roland Marchand, the historian of advertising come to visit. We had Larry Bird from the Smithsonian who did distinguished work on the New Deal and manufacturing consensus against it by a part of industry. Then we had some interesting ... We had some gender studies people and some geographers, but really, really very few. And pointedly, people from cinema studies and media studies were not focused on what we were doing.

To be charitable, and I think to be realistic, I'd have to say that scholars don't work on materials that they don't feel they're going to get access to, and there's been a culture of lack of access to especially non-traditional cinema. In some
ways it's enforced by archival enclosure. In other ways, it's simply lack of availability, so that's fine but we didn't really see this making its way into cinema and media studies until the 2000s. We did the first class that I know of, the first modern class on sponsored film for example was Dan Streible and Anna McCarthy at NYU in '07, and that's a really important nodal moment in the gentrification of useful cinema, and now it's a lot more established but I think what it points out is that this material is actually about everything, and that it's reductive to think that cinema studies will be the discipline most interested.

Cinema studies is only beginning to come to terms with this material for a number of reasons. It's huge. It's probably twice or three times as prolific a useful cinema area as the feature film area, and there are no roadmaps. The histories are all microhistories. We don't know where to start, and that's happening quite slowly.

**Charles Acland:** What about your own engagement? Because you appear at scholarly conferences, you do a lot of talks, and you are now engaged with helping us understand the historical context for this work and for these kinds of films. When would you say that begins and what kinds of conceptual armature do you tend to rely on when you operate or move into those particular contexts?

**Rick Prelinger:** For a long time I had the privilege of introducing something new to people and I could ride on the horse named Novelty, and at a certain point I couldn't do that anymore and that's really around 2000 because I realized the deficiencies of my own education. I have almost a bachelor's degree but not quite. I haven't been socialized at that point in understanding how serious research and graduate studies work, and I realize that I need to think a little bit harder about what I'm doing and how it can be used, and then I have the sort of lucky conjuncture of moving to California.

Having decided that, there's real succession issues when you own 160,000 cans of film. You know, if you walk in front of a bus, what happens to the archives? And I began speaking with a number of major archives in the US and ultimately discussion evolved to a detailed discussion with the Library of Congress wondering how we would get paid if our collection went somewhere, and starting to look for wealthy people who might be able to help with that and being directed by Danny Hillis and Howard Besser to speak with Brewster Kahle who had started the Internet Archive. It had moved along kind of slowly since '96 but then in '99, he sells his company Alexa to Amazon and becomes a philanthropist. And I called Brewster and he returns the call and says, "I don't know you but how can I be helpful?" And he says, "Well I have a film archive," and he says, "Oh," interrupting me. "Last night we were sitting at dinner talking about where we could find a film archives to put online for free. How would you like to put your archives online for free?"

This was speed dating. I didn't really know how to respond. I kind of stuttered in a way, but we met, and I loved what he was doing. I wasn't inculcated in West
coast open source culture. I thought information wanted to be expensive, and what Brewster helped me realize is that although there was a risk to just putting everything out there, because I sold stock footage for a business, that the rewards of openness far exceeded the risk of freeing material from enclosure. It's like what they say in psychoanalysis, that it takes more energy to repress something than it does to let it out, and so we began. We built an online archives with 250 items, which instantly broke the Internet Archive servers because there was such interest even though there was very little broadband available at the end of 2000, and it was at that point that I began to try to synthesize some of these issues and think about the political economy of access and how it was intimately related to how you might study and make use of this material.

There were a number of interesting polls. There was this poll of reuse and open access which I've come to realize isn't an unequivocal virtue when you think of the work of people like Kim Christen dealing with traditional culture and traditional knowledge. There's a lot of material that should not be openly available, but there's a lot that should be as well, especially corporate produced films that had a great deal to do with manufacturing and sustaining consensus in American society over time.

And so I began to think a lot more about approach and what needed to be done and what I could do, and I tried to take the question of access and positionality as an archivist a lot more seriously. I was drawn to think critically about how moving image archives worked, about the culture of archival privilege where I could pull anything off the shelf and work with it, but other people couldn't. About archival enclosure, which is still quite systemic. And about the possibilities that opened up when you had material available where people could play, and it wasn't just a sandbox. They could take material and make something that would go out into the world. So I got a lot more serious both as a producer, I made my first film in 2004, and then I began to think a lot more carefully about what I was saying and doing with regard to the material. I won't say that it drew me towards academia. I was drawn to academia by accident, but I realized that it wasn't enough simply to show people something new. That you really had to think about the context.

Charles Acland: And so the beginning of the work with Internet Archive happens before the 2002 acquisition of your collection by Library of Congress.

Rick Prelinger: Yes.

Charles Acland: Is the timing of that, is there a connection at all, or that's just in terms of your changing interests and contributions?

Rick Prelinger: No. When you develop a collection that's of national interest you begin to worry about your own mortality and where it should go and all that, so that was already underway.
Charles Acland: I see.

Rick Prelinger: I fell in love when I moved to San Francisco in '99, and by the end of 2000 we got a primitive website up. We still held a collection at that point. What the Internet Archive did ... and it's crucial that people understand that open access projects are typically subsidized; the commons is subsidized in this society ... what Internet Archive did is they spent about $160,000 to do film to video transfer so that then we could digitize video, because in those days you couldn't really digitize film to bits. There wasn't a mechanism to do that. So it was concurrent. But it was part of thinking about how to mainstream a collection and put it in the public sphere. Still very important for me.

Charles Acland: Were you surprised by the success? It really is one of those corners of the Internet that is crucial and it's familiar to so many people and it's relied upon by so many people. It's one of those "Internet is good" stories, which we don't always have. Were you surprised by the response, by the take up, by the speed, by the attention?

Rick Prelinger: I was deeply surprised by it. I'm still surprised when I walk into a museum and I see our footage playing. I'm surprised when I walk into a club or a restaurant and I see my material. I've been stopped in airports by people who say, "Thank you for the collection." I wish every archivist could get that kind of validation, and I don't know why we don't do more work in that regard. I'd love to know how many derivative works have been made using our online material. I have to say it's in the hundreds of thousands but there's no way to estimate. You can do any one of a number of keyword searches on YouTube and you see hundreds of thousands of films mirrored there and elsewhere, and various instantiations of material that comes from us and you see an incredible number of derivative works. My students are often surprised when I come into class and they say, "Are you the one from the Internet Archive?" It's amazing to be able to infuse the culture with something. It's a rare privilege.

Charles Acland: Few people who do this kind of work and have been toiling in what for years and years was a neglected, degraded area, end up with profiles and stories in Harper's Magazine (2007). Did that story help spur, I guess it was generated out of the interest, but did you find that there was an increased recognizability after that article?

Rick Prelinger: I got a lot of publicity for the archives around the Ephemeral Films discs in the '80s. We had a lot of publicity in the '80s and '90s. My spouse and I started a library in San Francisco for print material in '04 and very early on a man named Gideon Lewis-Kraus decided to embed himself with us and pitch an article for Harper's and so he embedded himself with us at the very beginning of the library project, and it was published two years later. We think we've seen about 1,000 people in the library as a result of that article, including some people who've become valued collaborators and friends, so it's been tremendously important. People still come even though it's been over 10 years because...
they’ve kept it around. An article in Harper's has a certain longevity that your average wire service piece might not.

So that's been great, but again it's this bifurcation because the work in the library, although it's similar in intention to what's happened with the archives, it is actually different, and we have a tremendous branding problem. People think that I invented the Internet Archive. People think that I wrote my spouse's history of technology books. People think that my spouse started the film archives. It's a terrible, terrible problem and we don't seem to be able to fix that.

Charles Acland: On the one hand it's a good problem to have insomuch as there's all of these accomplishments that require some sorting out but work for a future historian I suppose.

Rick Prelinger: Yeah. People can straighten that out if our website exists somewhere.

Charles Acland: Listen, let's talk a little bit about your relationship to the archival community and archival practice. I think that some of the most powerful writing that you've done has been writing about archives and access and the argumentation that you advance there, and I know I use it a lot and I know other people use it a lot in classes and it's very effective argumentation, but at what point did you see that there was a contribution to make here, an intervention in archival practice, what the standards are and what some of the goals are?

Generally speaking, your argumentation has been very effective in suggesting that storage and preservation might only be part of the issue. That in fact circulation and access is something that needs to be given a privileged place. It's not as though archivists didn't have a sense of this, but you certainly have helped put that on the agenda and asked people to pay more attention and to use this as a guide to their operations. When did you see that contribution as necessary, and what do you think some of the impact has been as a result of that writing and the kind of work that you do in conversation and consultation?

Rick Prelinger: In the 2000s I had the great privilege of working with the Internet Archive and the great privilege of being able to give things away. It's expensive to give things away. You need infrastructure to do that. You need storage and bandwidth and so on, so I consider that a great privilege and it changed my feeling about archives when I realized that digitization was inexpensive. When I realized that you don't necessarily need to dot every I and cross every T. You don't need to build fancy websites. You don't need to do ultimate deep contextualizing webpages. It's wonderful if you do, but you don't need it to preserve something.

Get it digitized and get it up and let the public help determine its future, because as you know in archival work there's the document itself and there's the various instantiations that exist, but that's just the first phase. The document expands. It gains resonance as it's reused, as it gains traction in the...
culture. It becomes something much deeper and often more problematic. Let's get this process going. I just couldn't. I felt so lonely for a few years that hardly anybody else was doing it. People would digitize with a watermark or they would digitize with a proprietary player. Many of my dear friends work at institutions where they've done a great deal of digitization but it's within a walled garden. You cannot see it. You cannot download it. You cannot work with it.

I got very frustrated. I stopped going to AMIA for a few years because I got angry. All this great preservation work was being done and people were starting to digitize, even though they were mostly technophobic. But the public couldn't touch it and that seemed to me just unconscionable, and I began to write about that. I continued to feel lonely and in '07, '08, '09 I really began writing about this for the first time and I've done a lot of public speaking about it. What has now happened is actually really wonderful because that writing almost osmotically has percolated through the field and there is a lot more access, and crucially there's a whole new generation of emerging archivists that even though the training programs fill your head with nonsense about copyright and they still teach enclosure. They may say that they don't, but I'm afraid that people are still being taught enclosure.

The world has changed. There's much more openness and the idea that something should be put online and made available is pretty much default thinking, which is great and what I'm now seeing is that the discussion has advanced way beyond me. It's being led by archivists of color, by queer archivists especially. By community archivists and in the last few years a lot of this was catalyzed by Black Lives Matter. There's this ferment in the archival field. I hope it's not temporary. Some incredibly interesting and important writing has emerged that looks at archival workflow politically that begins to think about how archives could actually have a much more active relationship and the archival work as social practice that is often actionable, and you know, I don't have as much to say anymore because people in the field are taking it into very interesting places.

There's a couple things that are not happening right now. Institutions are trying to colonize. You know, a lot of people are offered jobs at institutions that in a sense colonize their thought and maybe give them important work to do, but that sort of insurgent impulse is being lost and you know, people grow and change so we'll see what happens. There's a few questions that haven't been answered and they're really, really key questions. Number one is this question: do physical cultural objects have a right to exist? With videotape this has been decided pretty much in the negative and it's starting to happen with film.

Film is being discarded and thrown away and it's going to be an increasingly difficult issue over time. We need to resolve that. The other issue that really piques my interest is that when the classic FIAF archives were beginning to establish their legitimacy in the '30s there was a great deal of conversation. Why
do we collect moving images? They needed to justify themselves to governments, to studios, to cultural ministries and so on. Since then I see almost no evidence that this question has been considered or even asked.

Why do we collect moving images, aside from legal and juridical reasons? You know, the record of a copyright, or business reasons. You know, a studio keeps its product. This question isn’t asked in the archival community. Why do we do what we do? And we need to address this question. It's expensive to collect moving images. It's increasingly technologically determined, and we have to do deal with a lot of very knotty and expensive issues and there's a great deal of indifference about archives right now and if we're going to fight that we need to explain why we do what we do, and I think most of us don't care because cinephilia has edged out reason and I'd love to understand why we should collect moving images.

Charles Acland: Well let me ask you on that point, you know, as you describe there has been a wave of interest and commitment to I guess what you could call various forms of smaller scale archival practices, and you sort of describe it might be compelled out of particular counter-historical positions, efforts to occupy a space in the historical narrative and provide those materials that might not otherwise be available so that things can be said that otherwise might not get said. The hazard though of course is that at some point these practices, these collection practices, are themselves precarious and there’s a potential ephemerality as well. The work that you’ve done through the years, as you describe, has built an archival infrastructure. Is this a concern for the future of other such initiatives? How do we think about the transition from some of that really fabulous archival energy into something that's going to assure the continuation of that practice beyond the immediacy of the single interest?

Rick Prelinger: I mean, there's a few ways to sort of challenge that statement that I think are formative. One of them is that everything is precarious. I mean national libraries. Nations bomb one another's or burn one another's national libraries. With some of these uncertainties that we’re seeing in the so-called Anthropocene, all collecting is probably precarious at this point. Laurie Anderson lost most of her archives in Hurricane Sandy because they were stored in a basement on the West Side. Why did she do that? Don't know. It's given her material to incorporate into her performances as she deals with the question of loss. The other question is loss. While I would never advocate the intentional destruction of material, I think we have to look at loss historically and realize that it has been formative oftentimes when it occurs.

It's a crime akin to genocide to destroy a nation or a group's or a community's heritage, but, on the other hand, many of the new histories that have emerged in the last 30 or 40 years are driven precisely by loss. The history of working people. The history of women and the domestic sphere. African American history. In every case there's been a sense that the history's been lost, that it's been actively suppressed, that it's been destroyed, and that just drives people
to dig deeper and to remediate those conditions, and you know, if we start to
get mathematical and we try to create a proof as to why we should save
everything and we go nonmathematical and we think of the work that's been
done at Microsoft with DNA storage where it's hypothesized that the entire
memory of humanity can be preserved in six wine bottles of DNA. But infinite
memory enables infinite forgetting because once you've collected everything
you can't really easily locate stuff within there, and we have the same problem
with moving image history right now.

The Internet Archive has collected somewhere in the neighborhood of four or
five million hours of television since 2001 and I defy even the smartest AIs to
make sense out of that. I just don't buy the importance of saving everything
anymore. I have real problems when material is destroyed, but I think we're
going to have to learn to deal with loss. A bunch of archivists now who are
talking a lot about the Anthropocene are arguing that we really shouldn't collect
anymore. That collecting almost anything is unsustainable and immoral because
of the resources that it consumes, and I won't go that far but we need to engage
that question.

Charles Acland: That's great. Very interesting. Listen, is there ... I'm trying to think of a transition
to the phase of contribution that you're in now with a university position
 teaching in a department. How has that been for you for the last couple of years
and what are some of the things that you now understand in terms of your own
contribution to whether archival practice and/or scholarly practice?

Rick Prelinger: So as of this date I've almost completed five years working at UC Santa Cruz. It's
a dream job. There are a number of reasons why it's a dream job. I had no idea
what I was getting into. I was told about a position available and on five days'
notice I decided to apply and got some letters together and I was called back,
and rest just happened as it happens. I initially thought that what would be
interesting about it would be the opportunity to do a little bit less but to do it in
a deeper way at a research university. The research university is a tremendous
platform because it rightly or wrongly adds a certain amount of legitimacy and
gravitas to what you're doing. I'm taking advantage of that privilege, although I
think it's not necessarily a good thing.

Teaching has been extremely important for me. UC system represents the new
California. We're about 40% first generation students, people who are the first
generation in their family to attend college. We are about two thirds students of
color at our campus. We represent the future of California in many, many ways.
I come from a very ... My father is Viennese. Walter Benjamin stayed at his
house, you know, when my father was ten. I ask him if he remembered a funny
man with glasses and a mustache and he says no, but it is documented that that
happened. I come from, you know, I had a good education at Berkeley. I come
from a very conventional tradition, and yet the work to bridge where I come
from with where my current students are coming from is highly important. I
have students who pick strawberries in the morning with their parents and then
they come to school to work, and I find it both invigorating and it's really become my political work, teaching.

Charles Acland: In terms of the kinds of organization of the curriculum areas, emerging fields, or emerging research domains, is there anything in particular that you can see that you would note as an inspiration or as something that's important for us to think about as we move forward? And I guess I'm thinking quite broadly now of not so much departmentally but in terms of the things that we pay attention to as film and media scholars.

Rick Prelinger: One of the things I think we need to do in film and media is to probably become a little more object oriented. In other words, rather than teaching European cinema 1960 to the present, what we need to do is teach in smaller modules that are common to different periods, different regions, different kinds of cinema. I think that cinema/media convergence is super important. I still don't understand how cinema studies got the legs that it did. I think we're still in some sort of mid '60s romantic phase or something. I don't get it.

But I think there's ways that a deeper encounter of cinema and media in the broader sense is really important. I find that when I teach television it helps us understand the Internet and the birth of the Internet and in the same way that studying the early Internet helps us understand television. The telephone, for example helps us understand, there's an interrelationship between different media forms, platforms and periods that I'd like to see more of, and I'd also love to see an integration of archives into cinema and media studies in a much more fundamental way.

Archives are not a special interest. Archives are a universal interest. You may not believe that YouTube is an archive, and I don't, but it's part of the archival-ness that we all encounter. I'd love for example to teach undergraduates a lot more about archives and prepare them for possibly moving into that career if that's an interest they have. And I'd love for multicultural issues to be much more integrated into curriculum and research. I mean, you know, there's much that I don't know and there's much that I've never encountered but the idea that we have a day to look at Mexican cinema and a week to look at Native or First Nations work - that these things are off in their own little enclosed areas I think is unconscionable.

Charles Acland: You know, one of the other things that I want to mention is, and it's connected to what you've just described, in a way part of what you have done quite successfully is to take these ideas that you're describing and to put them on the road. You sort of roadshowed for the last three decades at least a lot of the work that you've been doing, which means that it requires a conceptualization of public performance, an understanding of drawing together but also encountering diverse audience members and diverse situations geographically as well as ethnographically. And I think that you've really been... This has been an energetic part of your mode of operation just looking at the number of
events that you speak at and participate in and/or curate and organize collections.

It really is extraordinary and I just wonder if maybe you could say a few words about that aspect of your métier, that aspect of the publicness of your work where you encounter some of the things that you were just describing, if it is only at the level of the uncertainty of how something is going to be received given the variety of different contexts in which an audience is going to be coming from.

Rick Prelinger: I did screenings with material from the archives for many years and then I kind of pulled back from that to screen my own work after I started making films in '04 but I'm now doing archival screenings again to a smaller degree. I come out of being shy and it was very liberating for me to be able to do public performances. I love being on stage and in recent years really since about, I'd say, 2005 I've focused a great deal on doing illustrated talks. Some people write hundreds of academic papers. I've done hundreds of ... Well not hundreds, but I've done 100 perhaps talks with word and pictures where I tried, and also sometimes sound and moving images, where I tried to mint material together so that it's provocative but so that it's also intellectually formative, and a keynote is my camera.

I love that format of doing talks. I think it's a wonderful way to get ideas across. It's a wonderful way to try out ideas. Oftentimes talks then become memorialized or fixed in writing. A lot of my writing does come out of talks that I've done. And since 2006 I've been doing these urban history programs, first in San Francisco and then subsequently in Detroit and Los Angeles, Oakland, New York where I present feature length programs of archival footage of these cities, cut usually in a topographical arrangement, initially kind of underproduced and now increasingly meticulously edited and produced and I've done San Francisco for 12 years and the attempt is to mobilize historical images to invest people's current thinking with some thoughts about how an understanding of history can contribute to us figuring out what kind of a city we want to live in, and these are wild. San Francisco is now two nights and presented to about 2,700 people over two nights and I'm touring a New York film right now, but you don't have to be a New Yorker to ... And that's been the kind of filmmaking that I've been working on.

Crucially, the audience talks throughout the film. It's fully participatory. I prompt them and I'll say some things, but what the audience does is completely up to them so they're indeterminate in that sense. I love that kind of work. I think there's limits to what you can do with it, but I'm quite surprised that people who are now doing participatory and interactive media are focusing almost exclusively on work that's mediated through technology, through screens, browsers, and apps, and they're not taking advantage of public assembly. I privilege assembly over algorithm. If you get people in a room, that is such a
powerful ... It's filled with possibilities and it's only recently that the idea of being quiet in the theater has emerged.

Charles Acland: Listen Rick, thank you very much for you participation in this. I think that the range of material that you've covered, it is phenomenal; and there are many aspects here that I hope that people will glom onto and be interested in. There is a way that the interaction between the analog and the digital is an active and lively one and it's one that's not yet been predetermined by any stretch and it's something that you show us we need to continue to engage with and work on. Hopefully others will see that as well, so thank you very much.

Rick Prelinger: Well I'm grateful for the privilege of being able to speak with you. Thank you.