

## Q+A/

# MEDIA MAPMAKER: Rick Prelinger

Words: Steve Anderson

For over two decades, his name has been synonymous with “Ephemeral Films,” but ever since Rick Prelinger turned over his collection of 50,000 advertising, educational and industrial films to the Library of Congress to be (ironically) preserved as part of our national heritage, he has continued his work as an artist, activist, litigant and librarian at the forefront of the copyright wars. In addition to serving as president of the Internet Archive and co-plaintiff (along with Brewster Kahle) in a pro-public domain lawsuit against the US government, Prelinger completed the all-public domain feature film *Panorama Ephemera*, which has received acclaim at festivals around the world. Most recently, he and his partner Megan Shaw Prelinger have opened an “appropriation-friendly” library in San Francisco that houses some 40,000 volumes. In all of these efforts, Prelinger remains committed to the value of cultural preservation, contemplation and recombination and a thoughtful engagement with the artifacts of the past.

**Q: What is at stake now in the debates over copyright?**

A: Access to culture isn't just about copyright, and the necessity to fight for greater access to culture will outlive the current copyright-based conflicts. What we instead need to think about is culture as a meeting place for ideas, where works and segments of works collide, fuse, bounce off, attract and repel each other. This meeting place is the commons, where no one owns the room and everyone is welcome. Culture is a conversation that needs to include everyone and needs to happen all the time. For real conversation to take place without self-censorship, we need to agree that we have to maintain some kind of cultural commons.

**Q: You have also called for a rethinking of the role of archivists in cultural and artistic production – a shift that is reflected by your own move into filmmaking – why is this important?**

A: Archives are endangered right now. The danger is that if they don't work hard to push their materials out to the public and find new ways for their amazing holdings to enrich contemporary and future cultures,

they'll be deemed irrelevant. It's often said that if it isn't on the Web now, the kids don't know it exists. If archives don't make it easier for their holdings to be seen, heard, quoted and remixed, emerging generations of artists, scholars and media makers will largely look elsewhere, and archives will have greater difficulty justifying their existence to funders.

**Q: How did you select the images in *Panorama Ephemera*?**

A: In looking at footage over the past few years, I began to realize that I'd been looking at styles of representation, rather than what was actually contained in the imagery. Like many people, I was unable to resist the tone of the narration, the look of faded color or brilliant Kodachrome, the artlessness of the acting, etc. I did a 180-degree switch and started looking at the films for what they demonstrated about simple, primary activities, objects and processes. I was really interested in growing food, the migration west, contested landscapes, debates over the nature of democracy in the young United States and relationships between animals and humans and between nature and culture. All of these things are well worth our meditation, and I picked sequences to which I had an intense response and arranged them into a narrative.

**Q: *Panorama Ephemera* seems to map the unconscious of American history; likewise, the Prelinger Library is organized with an associative logic that seems maplike.**

A: Some people say that our cultural and social life rests on the ways we inherit, interpret and live ideas of race, class and gender. I'd also add landscape; the space we inhabit, work and act in as a base-level influence on what we do. It's great to take film (which usually moves on a time base) and map it over to a spatial base, and in that sense *Panorama* is a map. Megan Prelinger, co-founder of the library, organized our collection around subject areas that are shelved so that they blend into one another. And that too is a map – a map of the inside of our brains.

**Q: Should we feel hopeful about the future of remix culture?**

A: We are all remixers, even if we don't admit it. Remixing is a core activity, and it is part of almost all creative work. But I have a hard time breaking out remix culture as an activity unto itself. Remixing isn't inherently political and it doesn't make better or worse art. We should hope that, one of these days, people (especially copyright holders) will stop worrying that it threatens the market for the works people are appropriating and chill. Then maybe remixing will be seen just as another tool rather than a movement and an end in itself.

> [www.prelinger.com](http://www.prelinger.com)