Rick Prelinger, *Our Secret Century: Archival Films from the Darker Side of the American Dream*  

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A small sticker on the plastic outer wrapper of the box containing a copy of the CD-ROM, *Our Secret Century: Archival Films from the Darker Side of the American Dream,* challenges the user from the outset. “Bring Your Brain,” it exclaims. That’s the motto for the Voyager Company: a company that produces “smart” CD-ROMs. You won’t find shoot-em-up combat games at Voyager; no gags, no gimmicks, no lightweight (for lack of a better word) pulp. Voyager specializes in CD-ROMs that educate. *Beethoven and Beyond, Amnesty Interactive,* and *Poetry in Motion* are just a few titles gleaned from their catalogue. And with titles like that, it’s clear that Voyager plans to deliver on its mission to edify.

*Our Secret Century* is a collection of American films dating from the 1930s to the 1960s. But don’t expect to see any Hollywood classics here (though you might recognize the occasional star). These are “ephemeral” films: educational, industrial, and commercial films from America’s past. They are brought to you by Rick Prelinger, a collector of America’s unsung classics. Fifteen years ago, Prelinger recognized the value of these reels of cellulose: their ability to provide insight into the way people thought about (or were urged to think about) everything from the automobile industry to teenage angst. Today, Prelinger’s collection numbers over 33 000 titles.

In recent years, Prelinger has attempted to present his collection to the public through various media: exhibits, videotapes, and even laser disks. His latest effort appears on CD-ROM. *Our Secret Century,* a proposed twelve-volume series of which six are currently available, showcases selected films from Prelinger’s mammoth collection. The first four volumes of the series are described in this review.

In volume I, *The Rainbow is Yours,* Prelinger packages seven commercial films released during the immediate postwar years. These films were thinly veiled advertisements produced by large corporations like General Motors for the purpose of pitching their wares: from Firebirds to fridges, powered appliances to Plexiglas shower stalls. Audiences viewed these films in cinemas across America (the advertisements accompanied feature films). At times, commercial films were extravagant productions. Some even involved song-and-dance routines like the ones seen in Hollywood musicals, except that, here, dancers caressed housewares and cars rather than each other.

Volume II, *Capitalist Realism,* features three longer format films (each about half an hour in length) made during the 1930s that tell the story of workers and the automotive industry. The documentary *Valley Town* shows the impact of a large manufacturer on the lives of workers and their community. This story is told from the worker’s point of view. In direct contrast to *Valley Town,* the other two films, *Master Hands* and *From Dawn to Sunset,* tell the tale from the perspective of corporate America. Ironically, as Prelinger points out, the captains of industry told their story using the same film techniques (heroic workers, Wagnerian score, labourers united in a common purpose for a common good) used by the Soviets, except that here the goal was to promote capitalism.

The collection of social guidance films in volume III, *The Behavior Offensive,* ranges from tips on dating to pointers on how to make dinnertime with the family a more pleasant affair. The narrator of *A Date with your Family* comments: “These boys greet their Dad as though they were genuinely glad to see him, as though they had really missed being away from him during the day and are anxious to talk to him.” These films, Prelinger argues, exist because family and social relations were strained. Perhaps Prelinger is correct in suggesting that these films provide evidence that the 1950s were more troubled times than we have been led to believe.

Safety films are featured in volume IV: *Menace and Jeopardy.* They include driver training films, reels about personal safety at work and in the home, and crash-test footage. Prelinger notes that because these movies were produced by large corporations like automobile makers, insurance companies, and railroad
than the designers, engineers, or managers of unsafe vehicles, roads, or workplaces.

Each volume in the *Our Secret Century* series shares a similar format, beginning with an introduction, followed by a selection of movies, and concluding with sections entitled ‘‘From the Archives’’ and ‘‘Further Reading.’’ The graphic approach is consistent from volume to volume. It was created by art director Diane Bertolo, who manages to steer clear of the ‘‘camp’’ trap. Retro imagery is cleverly paired with a slick, contemporary graphic treatment. For example, the start-up screen mates a black-and-white photograph seamlessly with sound and moving images. The photo features a small audience gathered in a private screening room. The audience watches as the lead-in counts down to the start of the film. The clicking of a 16-mm projector is heard as the credits role. The result is a hip blend of 1990s technology and 1940s imagery.

But, the look is more than just hip: it sets the tone for the *Secret Century* experience. The designer was mindful of the fact that Prelinger did not want this CD-ROM to merely parade American kitsch. The format, thus, appropriately frames undeniably entertaining films in a purposefully sober and thoughtful manner — and manages to do so without lacking humour entirely.

A contents screen helps users navigate through the disk. At any time, the user can return to this screen and start on a different trajectory. A control bar provides the option to enlarge or reduce the size of the motion picture screen, which floats against a backdrop of movie stills. Taking its cue from the home entertainment duo of the TV and VCR, a control bar also gives the user the power to adjust the volume and the ability to fast forward, reverse, and pause the action. While a scrolling time bar provides a vague sense of the length of the film, a countdown timer would have provided more information.

Each volume begins with an introduction. Invariably, this section stars Rick Prelinger. His moving and talking likeness, sporting a casual shirt and jeans, is set against a backdrop of film stills and a motion picture screen. Click on the movie screen and Prelinger begins his take on the films. His talk is more personal than argumentative in tone and content: he brings notes of caution, provides us with a brief history of the subject matter, and reminds us of the prescriptive nature of film. His talk is interrupted only by highlights from selected films.

This section triggers a number of questions about Prelinger’s role. Although our host is credited as having curated, written, performed in, and edited the series, it is difficult to situate his role in the context of more traditional models like the exhibit or the book, simply because the CD-ROM medium samples conventions from each, and more. But to call him a curator or an author — that the script could be compared to a scholarly publication is a stretch — is to overstate his role here. In this CD-ROM collection, the ‘‘media archaeologist’’ (his own words) hosts and provides commentary on his collection. Indeed, his appearance in the introduction underscores the close connection between the collector and his collection. He appears in the ‘‘Program Notes’’ too. A dime-sized image of his head — it looks suspiciously (or appropriately) Andy Warholesque — signals that he has penned the notes himself. The critical value of these notes is, however, questionable. While the tone at times verges on the academic, the practice of citing sources (with the exception of an ad hoc bibliography towards the end of each disk) is absent.

The films themselves are, in some ways, just as tricky to label. They teeter between being primary and secondary sources. Remember, Prelinger has hand-picked a select few from his 33 000 titles for our viewing pleasure. Prelinger’s bias, then, permeates the twelve-volume set. On the other hand, the films are presented in their entirety, unabridged and unedited, so that we may, in a sense, consider them to be primary sources: the ‘‘reel’’ thing. Indeed, the CD-ROMs provide a unique opportunity to see films that would otherwise be very difficult, if not impossible, to view. And while the collection may not fairly represent the breadth needed for an in-depth study, it is nonetheless a good primer for students and scholars keen on expanding their scope of research by introducing alternative sources in their work.

The section devoted to the films comprises a motion picture screen endowed with all of the controls noted above. Each film is presented in its entirety. For users who wish to quickly run through the disk — or for those who desire a deeper level of information — thankfully, a small duotang binder icon at the bottom of each screen opens to provide ‘‘Program Notes’’: a synopsis of each film as well as bibliographic notes that describe the length of the film, the producer, the director, the year of release, and more. These notes are also helpful in providing context for the films. For example, the notes may include behind-the-scenes information and thoughts on the intent of the filmmaker. Occasionally, text, image, or film clip icons
appear in the left-hand margin of the screen. These icons reveal additional, relevant information about the films, the filmmaker, or the general subject area. In American Look (volume I), for example, an icon links to a complete reproduction of the pitch book actually used by the Jam Handy Organization in the presentation of the film concept to the executives at Chevrolet. This added dimension may be valuable to some individuals.

The outer packaging, in contrast to the depth of information provided on the screen, leaves prospective users in the dark by failing to provide a list of the films. And, while a CD-ROM may appear to be a refreshing alternative to the printed word, one great frustration arises: one simply cannot scan the contents of an aluminum disk the way one can thumb through a book in a library or a bookstore. With this shortcoming in mind, a detailed list itemizing the contents of the first four volumes is included at the end of this review (Appendix A).

A section entitled “From the Archives” follows the selection of films. Here, Prelinger packages a variety of words and images for our edification and entertainment. In this section, any given volume may contain transcriptions of selected magazine articles, and a mixed bag of images (like illustrations and advertisements) that appeared in periodicals and in trade literature. Although transcripts are shown in their entirety and each image is well identified and sourced, this section is the weakest section of the CD-ROM. Prelinger's motives and messages are not always clear. We are sometimes left wondering why he has selected some examples over others, and how they relate to one another. Our host's likeness is even notably absent. At times, the selection of images and words featured in the “Archives” looks like the work of an enthusiastic hobbyist.

One other quibble, this time more general in nature, is worth mentioning here. While it is a pleasure to see transcribed articles in their entirety, it is nonetheless a daunting task to read through twenty-five or more screens of text on a computer monitor. Indeed, a problem that plagues computer technology is the way that the monitor renders text tedious to read. Perhaps later editions will enable users to print out the transcripts.

The section entitled “Further Reading” may be a valuable resource to some students or researchers. In some volumes, a bibliography of secondary sources appears; in others, the section presents an annotated bibliography and filmography that includes both primary and secondary sources. But the amount and usefulness of information varies from volume to volume, so the listings are not always comprehensive.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that the Voyager Company has come to understand its specialized audience by including a level of detail that rarely exists in “pulpiest” productions — even Prelinger and Voyager's previous collaboration, Ephemeral Films, did not include bibliographies, and failed to show films in their entirety. That being said, scholars should expect the introduction and the program notes to be helpful, but not thoroughly researched; the commentary personal rather than scholarly; the selection of films biased rather than broad; the selection of text and images haphazard rather than thorough; and the bibliographies inconsistent from volume to volume.

Strictly speaking, the contents of Our Secret Century is of a coarser grain than the stuff of academic publications. To be fair, however, it was not the intent of Voyager or Prelinger that the CD-ROM perform at that rarefied level. Indeed Prelinger's films, not his commentary, are the meat of the collection.

Regardless of whether or not Prelinger's commentary is the highlight of the disk, it deserves examination. As noted, Prelinger hosts the introductory section: he speaks about the contents of each volume, provides background information on the films, and brings notes of caution. It is here, and in the program notes, that he explains the value of commercial, educational, and industrial films. But his views on the impact and usefulness of the films are at times puzzling.

For example, Prelinger suggests that commercial films can provide historians with a unique glimpse into the world of the consumer of housewares by providing examples of the ways in which these objects were intended to be used. But Prelinger will not concede that the objects themselves can tell us something about their users. Furthermore, in the volume dedicated to social guidance films, Prelinger explains that he is apprehensive of the mannered portrayals of 1950s teens on the screen, but, in the same breath, buys into gender stereotypes like “women's pre-ordained role in the home,” without question. Does he or does he not believe the hype?

Even if Prelinger isn't always convinced (or convincing), the films themselves speak volumes. They have the ability to provide researchers, students and scholars with countless levels of what Prelinger calls “secret” information. Admittedly, film carries the agenda of its maker and as such should be viewed with a measure
of reserve. We can be sure of some things, however. These persuasive films can tell us about the ways in which corporations and institutions wanted everyday Americans to think about consumer goods, the workplace, their own behavior, and the behavior of others. Whether or not these films had a persuasive effect on the viewers is a matter of further investigation, but that these films reached audiences in theatres and classrooms around America tells researchers that perhaps people may have given some thought to what the films were preaching.

Our Secret Century is a welcome resource for students, researchers, and scholars wanting to expand their use of sources in their work. In particular, these ephemeral films made in America between the 1930s and 1960s will be of interest to individuals focussing on subject matter in the following areas: film studies, gender studies, labour studies, history of the built environment, history of domestic technology, history of education, history of medicine, history of transportation, and more. The trick is to pick the volume that's right for you (the list at the end of the review should help).

And finally, Our Secret Century is proof that the Voyager Company can live up to its cheeky motto. A note of warning, though: while Voyager invites you to "Bring Your Brain," don’t forget that you’ll also need to bring cash. The entire twelve-volume collection doesn’t come cheap for those accustomed to paperback prices. At $29.99 per two-volume set, that amounts to around $180 for the entire collection, taxes not included. And, in a digital world that sees technologies grow obsolete over the course of a few years, some individuals might be weary of buying into the medium. The shiny metal disks may contain lots of information, but will they stand the test of time the way the printed word has? Indeed, the great irony of Our Secret Century is that it showcases ephemeral films from America’s past on a format that is, perhaps, itself fleeting and temporary: a format that will likely be eclipsed by another medium well before the end of the next century.

NOTES

APPENDIX A

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

For Mac OS: requires a colour-capable Mac OS computer with a 68030 (25 MHz) or higher processor; at least 8 Mbytes of ram; a 13-inch or larger colour monitor set to 256 colours; a double speed cd-rom drive; and system 7. For Windows: PC-compatible computer with a 486sx-33 or higher processor; 8 Mbytes of installed ram; 13-inch, 256-colour display; mpc2-compatible cd-rom drive (double speed); mpc2-compatible sound card with speakers or headphones; Microsoft Windows version 3.1, 3.11, or Windows 95; ms-dos operating system version 5.0 or later; and ms-dos cd-rom extensions (mscdex) version 2.2 or later.

THE CONTENTS

Our Secret Century is a twelve-volume set, sold in pairs. Volumes I through X are currently available for purchase. Two more volumes are to follow but the release date was unknown at the time of publication. The contents of volumes I through X are listed below in the order that they appear on the cd-roms.

Volume I: The Rainbow is Yours


Design For Dreaming. 16 mm, 10 min. Director unknown. New York: MPO Production for General Motors, 1956. Anscocolor.


DISCOGRAPHY


Volume II: Capitalist Realism
Master Hands. 35 mm, 32 min. Director unknown. Jam Handy Organization for Chevrolet Motor Company, 1936.
From Dawn to Sunset. 35 mm, 26 min. Director unknown. Jam Handy Organization for Chevrolet Division, General Motors Corporation, 1958. Technicolor.

Volume III: The Behavior Offensive
You and Your Friends. 16 mm, 8 min. George Blake. B. K. Blake Incorporated for Association Films (Motion Picture Bureau, National Council, YMCAs) and editors of Look magazine, 1946.
Towards Emotional Maturity. 16 mm, 10 min. Director unknown. New York: Knickerbocker Productions, 1954.

Volume IV: Menace and Jeopardy
Safety Belt for Susie. 16 mm, 10 min. Pat Shields. Charles Cavil and Associates in association with the Institute of Transportation and Traffic Engineering at the University of California, Los Angeles, 1962. Eastmancolor.
More Dangerous Than Dynamite. 16 mm, 8 min. Director unknown. Hollywood: Chester N. Hess and Guy D. Haselton, Panorama Pictures, 1941.
We Drivers. 35 mm, 10 min. Director unknown. Jam Handy Organization for General Motors Corporation, 1936. Technicolor.

Volume V: Teenage Transgression
Name Unknown. 16 mm, 10 min. Director unknown. Los Angeles: Sid Davis Productions, 1951. Kodachrome.
The Terrible Truth. 16 mm, 10 min. Director unknown. Los Angeles: Sid Davis Productions, 1951. Kodachrome.
The Dropout. 16 mm, 10:30 min. Director unknown. Los Angeles: Sid Davis Productions, ca 1962. B&w.
Boy in Court. 16 mm, 10:25 min. David H. Lion. N.p.: Willard Pictures for the National Probation Association, 1940. B&w.

Volume VI: The Uncharted Landscape
The Nation at Your Fingertips. 16 mm, 10:51 min. Director unknown. N.p.: Audio Productions for the Bell System, 1951. B&w.
In the Suburbs. 16 mm, 19:30 min. Tracy Ward. N.p.: On Film, Inc. for Redbook magazine, 1957. Kodachrome and b&w.
Ivan Besse's Britton. 16 mm, 7:05 min. Director unknown. Photographed by Ivan Besse in and around Britton, South Dakota, 1938–39. B&w.

Volume VII: Gender Role Call
Cindy Goes to a Party. 16 mm, 11 min. Director unknown. N.p.: Centron Productions for Young America Films, 1955. B&w.
Volume VIII: Tireless Marketers

Down the Gasoline Trail. 35mm animation, 8 min. Director unknown. N.p.: Jam Handy Organization for Chevrolet Division, General Motors Corporation, 1935. B&w.


Max Cigarettes. 16 mm, 4 min. Director unknown. N.p.: Jam Handy Organization for Max Cigarettes, 1948. B&w.

Futuramic Oldsmobile. 16mm, 1:40 min. Director unknown. N.p.: Jam Handy Organization for Oldsmobile Division, General Motors, 1946. B&w.


The Mullinaires. 16mm (originally produced on 35mm), 3-min excerpt of a 9-min concert. Director unknown. N.p.: Jam Handy Organization for Mullins Manufacturing Corporation, 1953. B&w.

Volume IX: Busy Bodies

As Boys Grow...16mm, 16 min. George Watson. San Francisco: D. M. Hatfield, Ph.D. / Medical Arts Productions, 1957. B&w.


Boys Beware. 16mm, 10 min. Director unknown. N.p.: Sid Davis Productions, 1961. Originally shot in Kodachrome; transferred from a b&w print.

Girls Beware. 16mm, 10 min. Director unknown. N.p.: Sid Davis Productions, 1961. Originally shot in Kodachrome; transferred from a b&w print.


Volume X: Make Mine Freedom

Make Mine Freedom. 16mm, 10 min. Director unknown. Searcy, Arkansas: John Sutherland Productions (Hollywood) for Harding College, 1948. Technicolor.

Conquer by the Clock. 16mm (originally produced in 35mm), 11 min. Slavko Vorkapich. N.p.: Frederic Ullman Jr / RKO Path, 1942. B&w.

My Japan. 16mm (originally produced in 35mm), 16 min. Director unknown. N.p.: United States Treasury Department, War Finance Division, 1945. B&w.


Despotism. 16mm (originally produced in 35mm), 10 min. Director unknown. N.p.: Encyclopaedia Britannica Films, Inc., 1946. B&w.


A Day of Thanksgiving. 16mm, 14 min. Produced and directed by Russell Messer and Art Wolf. N.p.: Centron Productions for Young America Films, 1951.


NOTE:
Volumes XI and XII are not yet released.