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[View The Prospectus](#)

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[General Ads](#)

[Market Display Ads](#)

[Market Line Ads](#)

[Adlinks](#)

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[Wired News](#)

[Webmonkey](#)

[RGB Gallery](#)

[Animation Express](#)

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Americana Noir

By Marc Spiegler

Release: January

James Dean and Cadillac convertibles, Marilyn Monroe and Levittowns. These are the prepackaged images of the '50s that pop culture hands down. Media archeologist Rick Prelinger sees it differently. Our Secret Century, a 12-part Voyager CD-ROM series, presents a darker, more complex picture.

Prelinger draws on footage from industrial and educational shorts to show what he labels "our secret history" - not stats about the era, but America's image, as it is defined and disseminated through media and advertising.

These snippets paint a bizarre kaleidoscopic portrait. Teeming with now-surreal imagery, couples dance around Frigidaires in celebration of the modern appliance, and living rooms burst with shiny new Plexiglas walls, shelving, and hat racks.

Prelinger doesn't just curate quirky clips. He gives context, showing how paranoid McCarthyism and other Cold War rumblings unsettled Americans and drove them to take refuge in a dizzying consumer cult that passed for society.

Our Secret Century: Archival Films From the Dark Side of the American Dream: US\$34.95. The Voyager Company: +1 (212) 431 5199.

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