

Cold Storage

Interview with
director [Cristoforo Magliozzi](#)
and
author by [Jeffrey Schnapp](#)

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KENNEALLY: In ancient Sumer, more than 4,500 years ago, the first libraries were archives of clay tablets etched with cuneiform script. In our own time, a library may contain not only printed books and journals, but also audio and visual recordings in analog and digital form. Yet the purpose remains little changed over the millennia – to share information from one human being to another and to preserve a body of knowledge from generation to generation.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. The Harvard Depository in rural Massachusetts is a library, too, but on a scale and with a purpose unlike your local public library branch. The just-released documentary Cold Storage takes us inside the HD and offers a chilling glimpse of the future of scholarship. The film's director, Cristoforo Magliozzi, joins me from Cambridge. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Cristoforo.

MAGLIOZZI: Hi, Chris. Thanks for inviting me on.

KENNEALLY: We're delighted to have you join us, and we really enjoyed the film, which we will link to on our website – everybody gets a chance to have a look at it. It's 24 minutes that explores, as I say, the Harvard Depository, and does it in a way – I say chilling not only because it really makes one think in a kind of cold way about what knowledge is and how we mean to preserve it, but also because the building itself is chilled. Tell us exactly about that.

MAGLIOZZI: Yeah, so for several reasons, the building is kept in very tight climate control. One of the purposes of the depository is the preservation of materials, some of which do not circulate as frequently. The facility was originally meant as a dark archive for materials that don't really circulate, and so there's both a general population area, as they term it, that is somewhere around 50 degrees, for most of the materials. Then they also have a film vault which is even colder for keeping those 35-millimeter prints in best shape possible.



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KENNEALLY: You just talked about the general population, and immediately it came to mind that that was a term from prisons and other kinds of institutions that really have sort of unsavory character. You've been inside this Harvard Depository, the HD. What does it feel like in this building? Describe for our listeners what it's made of, how it looks.

MAGLIOZZI: When you enter this general population, there is a certain prison-like quality to it, in that your inmates are the content. They're identified principally by number. And it's not until they've been recalled and gone through several databases and are on their way out that they kind of reestablish themselves by title and author. The sheer scale of it – you have these 192-foot-long aisles, each of them reaching close to 40 feet in height. This goes on over the course of the seven modules that have been built since its opening in 1986, and each one opens with the sense of the watertight doors of the *Titanic*. They have these massive fire doors that just reveal section after section. Comparisons have been made to Raiders of the Lost Ark, the end scene there, are how the workers often identify it.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. Apart from offering us a glimpse into a place that is really meant to be secure for all the obvious reasons – again, secure rather like a prison is – this particular film is part of a larger project. Your work is building on the examination of libraries and the future of libraries, undertaken by Jeffrey Schnapp and Matthew Battles in a book they call *The Library Beyond the Book*. Indeed, apart from that, the film is a project that grew out of a very special way of thinking about the future of storytelling that was undertaken at Harvard recently. Tell us about that.

MAGLIOZZI: Actually, Jeffrey Schnapp has just joined us, so maybe he might better speak to the connections between the film and its early discussion through his work.

KENNEALLY: This is almost like live radio, but we're very happy to have Jeffrey Schnapp with us. Jeffrey, how are you?

SCHNAPP: Hi, how are you? Sorry I have to join you a little bit belatedly.

KENNEALLY: We're very happy to have you join us, and we'll tell our listeners that you are the coauthor of a book called *The Library Beyond the Book*, which you wrote with Matthew Battles. It's both a study of the history of libraries, but it's reflections on the future of libraries and the future of scholarship. Your book, *The Library Beyond the Book*, is one piece of a larger undertaking that includes both the film that we've been chatting about, which is called *Cold Storage*, but also a very special project at Harvard called the metaLAB at Harvard. Very quickly, can you tell our listeners about the metaLAB at Harvard and about your book?



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SCHNAPP: Sure. We like to call ourselves a knowledge design studio. We're part of the Berkman Center for Internet & Society, and we're a group of, we like to say, creative technologists, humanists, people involved in an experimental practice. You could say in a sense our deepest roots lie in fields of humanistic scholarship, but we're very much engaged in experimenting with new forms and new ways of interacting with human records, telling stories, building experiences.

The whole issue of the design of library spaces, of learning spaces more broadly, but library spaces specifically, has been an abiding feature of metaLAB's research. So *The Library Beyond the Book* is a project, a book that came out of a series of design studios that we started running a couple of years ago. As you may have explained already to your listeners, so I apologize if I'm repeating, the last chapter of that book, which is a book essentially that unfolds six historically grounded scenarios for the future of libraries – the last chapter, which serves as a kind of appendix, is a screenplay. It's a visual essay, a kind of photographic essay with a text that accompanies it. That text is, indeed, the screenplay for *Cold Storage*, the film.

One of the ambitions of the documentary and Web documentary project was precisely to experiment with a kind of generative model of publishing, where these various pieces – printed, not printed, performed – captured in a number of different media all intersect one another, but do things that are different, that add value to each of those building blocks that make up a kind of sustained meditation on the nature of human interaction with knowledge.

KENNEALLY: It seems to me that that notion of human knowledge today – at one point, might have been the equivalent of a book, but today, 21st century, it's very much a pastiche, as you point out. It is both digital and physical. It is text as well as visual and all of that. Do you think that that really does characterize what the library is about in our own time, is really not one form or another, but somehow this generalized notion of human knowledge?

SCHNAPP: I do. But I would add that I think libraries have always been multimedia platforms, going back to the libraries of antiquity, where the notion of reading, of study, of engagement with the written record was always richly woven together with other kinds of engagements – ways of performing, for example, textual knowledge. I think that rich multimedia mix has been part of libraries' history throughout. It's really only in the era of industrialized printing, really in the 19th century and the 20th century, that the library has taken on this distinctive association with bookishness, you might say. We're certainly under the set of pressures, but also the tremendous opportunities of the digital revolution.

I think we have this extraordinary opportunity to really reinvent the library as an institution, building on many of the characteristics that have shaped its prior



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history, but also imagining the richest possible ways that the diversity of media channels that are available to us can interact with the kinds of consolidated traditional channels, and also where they can diverge, where certain kinds of possibilities for reimagining, for example, print artifacts become available to us precisely because they don't bear the same burdens that they bore over the course of the last, let's say, two centuries of cultural history.

KENNEALLY: We are speaking today with Jeffrey Schnapp, who is the coauthor, with Matthew Battle, of *The Library Beyond the Book*, as well as his colleague at Harvard, the director of a film called *Cold Storage*, looking inside the Harvard Depository. Jeffrey, you not only are the coauthor of this book, *The Library Beyond the Book*, but you are the scriptwriter and narrator for the film itself. I quite enjoyed the film, as we were telling Cristoforo earlier. I wonder if you could give us your favorite moment in the film. Is there a particular spot that really, for you, summarizes your experience at the HD?

SCHNAPP: That's a tough question to pose to either Cristoforo or myself, inasmuch as we practically lived at the HD for a good chunk of the production. But what I will say is that in the film itself, one of the portions I'm the most pleased with – it was also, I think, the most challenging portion, and I think certainly Cristoforo can speak to this with greater authority than even I – are the two scenarios with which it closes, neither of which is really a kind of documentary gesture, you might say. They're both imaginative scenarios.

KENNEALLY: Fantasies, I would say. Very briefly, tell us what those two fantasies are. You imagine the library at midnight when it is entirely shut and without any human residents or guests, if you will.

MAGLIOZZI: Exactly. We wanted to close the film – it is a documentary film. It is part of a larger documentation project to try to allow people to experience what one of these great repositories of knowledge that a book depository is, how it lives and breathes. But at the same time, we thought it was important to try to explore and spin out, really – one of the things that we discovered in the course of running a series of design studios focused on the redesign of libraries, when we would bring our students out to the depository, they were always really amazed and fascinated by the space, really transported by it. The strange magic of this really improbably magical environment, with these vertiginously tall and narrow aisles, with close to 10 million books plus many, many kinds of other documentation forms – there is a kind of power to that that we wanted to explore through those two scenarios.

The two scenarios are two fantastic imaginings as to what happens to that world of documents and knowledge that cover centuries and centuries of human record, that encompasses all of the fields of human inquiry, that covers the entire terrain of the globe. What happens there when the humans are gone?



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One of the scenarios has the documents and books secretly talking, like a kind of beehive-like buzz erupting at the moment that the final door of the vault is closed. Another imagines this overwhelming kind of symphonic silence, if you like. They're both scenarios simply meant to evoke this kind of fantastic feature of an environment where there's such an extraordinary proliferation of materials so lovingly collected over the course of, in the case of this particular set of materials, really two centuries, maybe three centuries of active pursuit. These two scenarios that mirror one another, in a sense, seem to us rich ways to evoke something of that power that our students experienced repeatedly when we went back to visit the site. For them, it was always a first visit.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. We can perhaps bring Cristoforo back into this as the director of Cold Storage, but I have to do a little freelance film criticism and tell you that even before you came to those two scenarios at the end, it felt to me a bit as if the documentary was echoing certain science fiction tropes. There's a bit of 2001 in the film, I think, in a very positive way, as well as a bit of Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. There's Arthur C. Clarke and there's Douglas Adams. How do you respond to that?

MAGLIOZZI: I think there are some instances of first-person perspective that percolates the film which definitely takes some notes from Kubrick's cinematographic style. I think a lot of the sci-fi vibes maybe come from the desaturated color palette as well as some of the wrenching machinations of certain pieces. Especially towards the end, as Jeffrey was describing, there's this notion of what happens if the book reshelves itself or the order pickers in the depository kind of move on their own. Someone else likened it to kind of a Blair Witch style, actually. Hitchhiker's Guide wasn't necessarily a direct influence, but I think some of the notions of estrangement that come through science fiction was part of the intention for the look and feel.

KENNEALLY: We enjoyed the film, and we certainly enjoyed chatting with you both. That was Cristoforo Magliozzi, director of Cold Storage, an interactive documentary exploring the Harvard Depository. Cristoforo, thank you for joining us today.

MAGLIOZZI: Pleasure chatting with you.

KENNEALLY: And Jeffrey Schnapp, who is the coauthor of *The Library Beyond the Book*, which is a bit of inspiration and foundation for the film. Jeffrey Schnapp, thank you for joining us as well.

SCHNAPP: Thank you.



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KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center, a global rights-broker for the world's most sought-after materials, including millions of books and e-books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and blogs, as well as images, movies, and television shows. You can follow Beyond the Book on Twitter, find us on Facebook, and subscribe to the free podcast series on iTunes or at our website, beyondthebook.com.

Our engineer and co-producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. My name is Christopher Kenneally. For all of us at Copyright Clearance Center, thanks for listening to Beyond the Book.

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