



Aerial view of the Bonanza Creek Ranch (US-NM) after the fatal accident during the shooting of the movie Rust, October 22, 2021 (KOAT-TV).

# *Freak accidents*

On the improbable and  
monstrous accident in cinema

Under the direction of

Alexis Guillier (artist and PhD student in the RADIANT program,  
Normandie University—LASLAR) / Philippe Ortolí (film study professor,  
University of Caen—LASLAR)

In 2008, the journal *Discourse* published an issue devoted to cinema (understood as “the technological apparatuses, inscriptive processes, and expressive forms that come under the heading of cinematography: ‘writing (with) movement’”) through the lens of the concept of accident. Some of the articles focused on the early days of cinema where the accident appeared as a permanent ingredient, either explicitly or more diffusely (in line with Siegfried Kracauer's view of the accident as “the very soul of slapstick”). While the issue also made an inventory of existing contributions, the chosen terms highlighted the fragmented and “in progress” nature of this field of research, associating in particular the indicative terms of “repressed” or “left out” with the relationship between cinema and accident (James Leo Cahill), thus calling for further investigations. In 2014, the Audiovisual Research Laboratory of the University of Toulouse II Le Mirail<sup>2</sup> organized a symposium on “classical Hollywood cinema at the risk of the accident”. It aimed, by investigating its manifestations and consequences, to move beyond a conception of accidents as mere leavings [*scories*] of the classical Hollywood cinema and its control-obsessed production system.

We choose to focus on the particular and specific example of production accidents in film history, from its beginnings to the present day. Through the notion of “freak accident”, we aim to extend this existing research to other approaches to the concept of accident, beyond classical Hollywood cinema. By “on-set accident”, we mean the unforeseen event that occurs during shooting and causes material and physical damage to property and people. The locution “freak accident” qualifies a purportedly improbable and unforeseeable accident, which causes elude us and over which we have no control. Applied to film and its industry, this locution is compelling, for numerous reasons.

In a mimetic way, through their function of narration, on-screen accidents re-enact the stakes of production accidents.

It can be the accident that interrupts the flow of the production or the narration, not necessarily preventing it from resuming. But the breach can remain open, and the accident then becomes a driving force of the plot; or the trigger for an investigation, the indicator of an operative system – of an ensemble of characters in narration, of an industry in production.

We will thus be particularly interested in approaches that make the accidents meet, in-production and on-screen (representation, narrative role).

The forms filming accidents take are numerous and the fate of their pictures uncertain. But when they get incorporated into the film, only an extracinematographic and extratextual knowledge (Vivian Sobchack) can differentiate them, thus modifying their reception. Moreover, the quasi-subliminal quality of the pictures of on-set accidents requires to stop the flow of pictures (“still”) in order to see the signs of the accident (Laura Mulvey); to feel the uncanniness most likely to break the fictional pact (André Habib, Sobchack) and to provoke the irruption of the off-screen (Sobchack): the production and its conditions, the shooting and its history (Jacques Aumont).

Another approach could be a focus on off-screen accidents and their on-screen consequences (a visible injury and its incorporation into the diegesis, the substitution of a protagonist...), thus extending the research on types of contingencies in cinema (Mary Ann Doane, Janet Harbord).

#### On the *improbable* accident in a *responsible* industry

If the accident is “relative and fortuitous”, conversely to the substance which is “absolute and necessary” (Aristotle), it seems essential to invest in depth the allegedly relative and fortuitous nature of the accident in the film industry, considered here as substance.

It would thus be a literal take on the assertion of Paul Virilio, for whom the accident is “hidden in the substance”.

Admitting that the accident is a primordial factor in the early days of cinema, the industrialization of the latter seems to take part in a progressive rationalization of its production and in an increased control over the contingencies, at the heart of the stakes of capitalism and productivism.

When the locution “freak accident” is used in the industry<sup>3</sup> (in particular by production departments, or the studios’ public relations departments), it seems to show a desire to invoke some sort of fatality in order to shut down hypothesis of mistakes, failures or shortcomings that may have characterized the functioning of the industry in the course of its history, and to potentially disclaim responsibility. Because the accident, momentarily breaking the flow of production, reveals the modalities of the latter, its shortcomings and excesses: the risk/reward ratio, the “bodies at work”, class contempt, discrimination, intimidation, invisibilization... This approach could also be extended to Paul Virilio’s idea of the accident as a “modern sacrifice” imposing itself on us.

From the standpoint of representation, the expression “freak accident” can refer to a double movement, between figuration and disfiguration.

Off-screen, the pictures of the actor or actress’s injured body, or of the stuntman or stuntwoman, or of the member of the production team, are nowhere to be seen on the film; but they return (like the “*gueules cassées*” of Abel Gance’s *Jaccuse* (1938)<sup>4</sup>) and spread on other screens and media (news broadcast, websites), often on the initiative of the very people whose bodies were injured in the accident (personal accounts on social networks and content-sharing platforms.).

The diffusion of the pictures of these after-effects [*séquelles*]<sup>5</sup> appears to be a testimony through the body, pushing us to see the monstrous in the place of the accident and of the industry<sup>6</sup>. Working on the accident through sensibility – starting from the very flesh of the picture – reflects the bodies undergoing the action of the accident. For in the sometimes painful transition from a “constructed reality” towards the picture, it is indeed a matter of interactions and tensions in the “flesh of the world” (Sobchack) that is in question.

The superposition of physical and crippling after-effects [*séquelles*] with the locution “freak accident” summons the visual history of disability – and its reception, divided between ostracism and fascination – and pushes us to confront those pictures with those of cinema in general (often a cultural and symbolic vector of images of beauty and desire); and those of films affected by production accidents in particular.

They seem to give evidence of the “variability, mutability, and contingency” of bodies (Angela Smith) in production and impels a material and plastic approach to the accident, including when the filmic material undergoes a brutal deterioration, or when a flaw gets recorded in it, giving rise to new signifiers in the picture that can shed a different light on the referent film.

In their joint intervention in Cerisy (1985), André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning saw in “early cinema” a “possible challenge to film history”. Through the implications and methodologies it engages us in, it seems to us that building a thought of accident in film can also constitute a challenge to the writing of its history, which we investigate here through the notion of “freak accident”.

This encourages a transversal approach of the accident in cinema. In accordance with the spirit of the doctoral program of research and creation in art RADIAN (Normandie University – LASLAR), this symposium will intersect perspectives and experiences (communications, programming, screenings) in different places.

1 BRUCKNER, R. T., CAHILL, J. L., SIEGEL, G. (2008). Introduction: Cinema and Accident. *Discourse*, N° 30 (3), 279-28

2 See [https://www.fabula.org/actualites/le-cinema-classique-hollywoodien-au-risque-de-l-accident\\_60639.php](https://www.fabula.org/actualites/le-cinema-classique-hollywoodien-au-risque-de-l-accident_60639.php) and [http://www.esav.fr/IMG/pdf/je\\_jara\\_-\\_accident\\_programme\\_.pdf](http://www.esav.fr/IMG/pdf/je_jara_-_accident_programme_.pdf)

3 See for instance: BLYTH, A. (2017). ‘The Walking Dead’ Creator Robert Kirkman: John Bernecker’s Death Was “A Freak Accident”, Season 8 Themes – TCA’. In *Deadline* [online] [consulted July 19, 2021]. Retrieved from: <https://deadline.com/2017/07/the-walking-dead-robert-kirkman-john-bernecker-tca-1202138808/>. On the use of the locution in American media: SMITH, Katherine C., Deborah C. GIRASEK, Susan P. BAKER, Jennifer A. MANGANELLO, Stephen M. BOWMAN, Alicia SAMUEL, Andrea C. GIELEN (2012). ‘It was a freak accident’: an analysis of the labelling of injury events in the US press”. *Injury prevention: journal of the International Society for Child and Adolescent Injury Prevention*, n° 18 (1), 38–43 [online] [consulted July 19, 2021]. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1136/ip.2011.031609>. Lastly, very recently: PRESS, Alex K. (2021). Halyna Hutchins’s Death on the Set of Rust Was “Not a Freak Accident”, in *Jacobin* [online], October 25, 2021 [consulted November 2, 2021]. Retrieved from: <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/10/halyna-hutchins-shooting-rust-itase-alec-baldwin>

4 “Broken faces”: facially disfigured servicemen during World War I. Sometimes also called “broken gargoyles” in Australia. Furthermore, the 1929-1960 era in the United States has seen, in a global context defined by two world-conflicts and large-scale industrialization, the increase of disabled and mutilated veterans or victims of accidents at work (Alan Gartner and Tom Joe).

5 *Séquelle*: “sequela” in medical English. Very close to “sequel”: consequence, result and the piece of work following a first opus.

6 For stuntmen and stuntwomen, often victims of ostracism because of class and professional category (“below-the-line”), the infirmity caused by production accidents makes them suffer from the historically observed ostracism towards disabled people.

## Submission process

We call for 30 minutes communications, in English or in French.

The communications can focus on the following propositions, without restrictions:

- Accident and contingency in cinema
- Accident and infirmity in cinema
- Use of the locution “freak accident” in cinema
- Crossroads between production accidents and on-screen accidents
- Accident and freeze frame
- On-set accident (or off-set) and consequences/integration in the final cut
- Accidents and hardware deterioration (roll of film, digital files...) and their consequences

The abstracts should not exceed 1500 characters and attached with a short biographical note and a bibliographical record. They are to be sent to the following e-mail addresses:

alexis.guillier@unicaen.fr  
philippe.ortoli@unicaen.fr

Abstracts submission due:

January 24, 2022

Notification of abstracts acceptance:

February 24, 2022.

Scientific committee:

Julie Anselmini  
(University of Caen  
Normandie, LASLAR)  
Myriam Juan  
(University of Caen  
Normandie, LASLAR)  
Penny Starfield  
(University of Caen  
Normandie, ERIBIA)  
Alice Laguarda  
(école supérieure d'arts  
et médias de Caen/Cherbourg)  
Isabelle Prim  
(école supérieure d'arts  
et médias de Caen/Cherbourg)  
Pierre Jailloux  
(University of Grenoble)  
Vincent Souladié  
(University of Toulouse)  
Garance Chabert  
(Haute Ecole d'Art  
et de Design, Geneva)  
Marie Voignier  
(Ecole Nationale Supérieure  
des Beaux-Arts of Lyon)

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