
filmmaking as a lethal sport

by lois siegel

When a motorcycle and a camera spell trouble, or when shooting in a depressed area results in tragedy, the art of filmmaking can become a deadly discipline. Lois Siegel reports.



photo: Lois Siegel

Denis Koufoudakis drives while Charles Fisch sits in the window: performing a stunt for Lois Siegel's *A 20th Century Chocolate Cake*

October 17, 1978. Nineteen-year-old Denis Koufoudakis is finishing a few scenes for his Super 8 movie. He is a CEGEP student in Montreal. He wants to be a filmmaker.

That day Denis came close to never making films again.

His near-fatal scene involved a motorcycle and a camera. These elements were only potentially dangerous. A series of oversights made them almost lethal.

Denis was lying on the ground with his Super 8 Nizo. The motorcycle was supposed to pass by him for a dynamic "action" shot. Instead the motorcycle landed on Denis' face.

The damage: Denis broke almost every bone in his face. He fractured his jaw, four bottom teeth fell out and the top front teeth were knocked loose. He smashed his cheekbone. He broke his nose. His right eye was pushed in: the orbit floors were broken. The retina had tears near the eyeball. The pupil was traumatized. The eyelid was badly lacerated. A tracheotomy was made in his neck to allow him to breathe. He suffered a broken arm and stretched ligaments in the wrist.

Denis has already had three operations. The first one lasted 8 hours. "They were putting me back together," Denis explains. But the pupil in his eye doesn't work. It doesn't adjust to light. Sometimes he sees silhouettes. One eye makes things appear smaller than they are. "It's like looking through a gelatin or a dirty windshield." He has double vision in both eyes. Glasses won't correct the damage. Denis has 20-200 vision — only 10 percent remaining in his right eye. He is legally blind in this eye.

But Denis is not a careless person. He is very aware of the dangers involved with machines. "I do stunts all the time. It is a matter of physics — knowing how things happen. But I had too much to do in one day. It was the 2nd to the last shot and I had to go downtown for a class."

Denis was worried about his film and about everything else he had to do.

"I was very careful, but the guy driving the motorcycle was a dirt rider not an experienced road rider. He was on one wheel coming toward me. I was lying on the street looking through the camera. When he finished the wheelie, he lost control of the bike, and then he panicked."

"After the accident I lost a lot of confidence in filmmaking. It is hard to do everything yourself. It brings me down because I'm not sure what I will do next. I was interested in the art of filmmaking. The accident has taken a lot of time — going to the hospital 1-2 times a week. But one thing it has done — it has made other students aware of the dangers of filmmaking. I found out that I should be sure the people I work with know what they are doing. The guy who hit me with the motorcycle was very shocked. I don't think he has driven his bike since.

"Originally I had planned to shoot from a tripod, but I changed my mind to get another angle — that is why I was lying on the ground. I was always worried about the Nizo — especially the eyepiece which juts out. It could always be knocked into your eye. It is a good idea to have a pessimist around as an assistant to watch what is going on when you are shooting and to warn you. The camera creates an illusion —

in telephoto it looked like the guy on the bike was far away, and he couldn't see where I was when driving on one wheel. You are involved in an accident before it happens. You can not control it. The motorcycle driver had never been in that kind of situation — he didn't know how to deal with the unplanned — and he panicked. We didn't realize the danger."

September, 1967. Hugh O'Connor is directing a small crew in Jeremiah, Kentucky. O'Connor is a professional filmmaker. He co-produced the Labyrinth show at Expo. He worked for years at The National Film Board as Head of the Science Film Unit.

O'Connor was hired by Francis Thompson from New York to film some scenes of substandard housing and the people living on the poverty line.

Hugh O'Connor's filmmaking days ended with this assignment.

O'Connor was not careless. He became the victim of circumstances.

Appalachia country is notorious for unpredictable incidents. People fear outsiders and perhaps with good reason. Appalachia is a land where thousands live in poverty — where strip-mining ravaged the countryside, and the exploited former landowners were left to live off welfare in a vast wasteland. The people are mostly illiterate. They group together to protect themselves. It is not uncommon for a man to run a "foreigner" off his property with a gun.

Hugh O'Connor was driving along a country road in Letcher County (near Harlan County) when he noticed a series of beat up old houses and some black folks. He stopped to talk and to ask permission to film them. Release forms were signed and a \$10 token payment was settled with each individual involved. (\$10 probably equalled one month's rent.) The crew set up its camera and began shooting. Everything went smoothly and at the end of the afternoon, the crew began to pack up.

As they were loading the equipment into their station wagon, a lady appeared and said that the man who owned the property was angry about their presence and was coming to throw them off his land. The crew continued to load the car.

Suddenly an old man drove up yelling "Get off my property," waving a .38 revolver. Hugh O'Connor, carrying a battery over his shoulder, was crossing the highway. The old man fired. One shot went over the camera, one went into the camera, the other hit Hugh O'Connor in the chest. He was killed instantly.

Whether O'Connor was the victim of an accident — a victim of chance remains to be seen. Hobart Ison, the old man, was eventually sentenced to 10 years in jail. The theories concerning the incident are many.

In his book *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*, Harry M. Caudill explains, "... a million Americans in the Southern Appalachians live today in conditions of squalor, ignorance and ill health... the 1960 census disclosed that 19 percent of the adult population can neither read nor write... the mountaineer can present no enigma to a world which is interested enough to look with sympathy into the forces which have made him... the nation... cannot afford to leave huge islands of its own population behind..."

Lois Siegel writes, photographs, teaches and makes experimental films in Montreal. She attended university in Appalachia during the 1960's.

Perhaps the old man thought the filmmakers were really surveyors for strip-mining or perhaps he thought they were a CBS crew. It is possible that other filmmakers had once taken advantage of these same country people.

The motivation for the crime was never clear.

Calvin Trillin, in his article about the incident — "U.S. Journal: Jeremiah, Kentucky - A Stranger with a Camera" writes, "despite an accurate story in the county paper, many of them (mountain people) instinctively believed that the mountaineer who killed Hugh O'Connor was protecting his

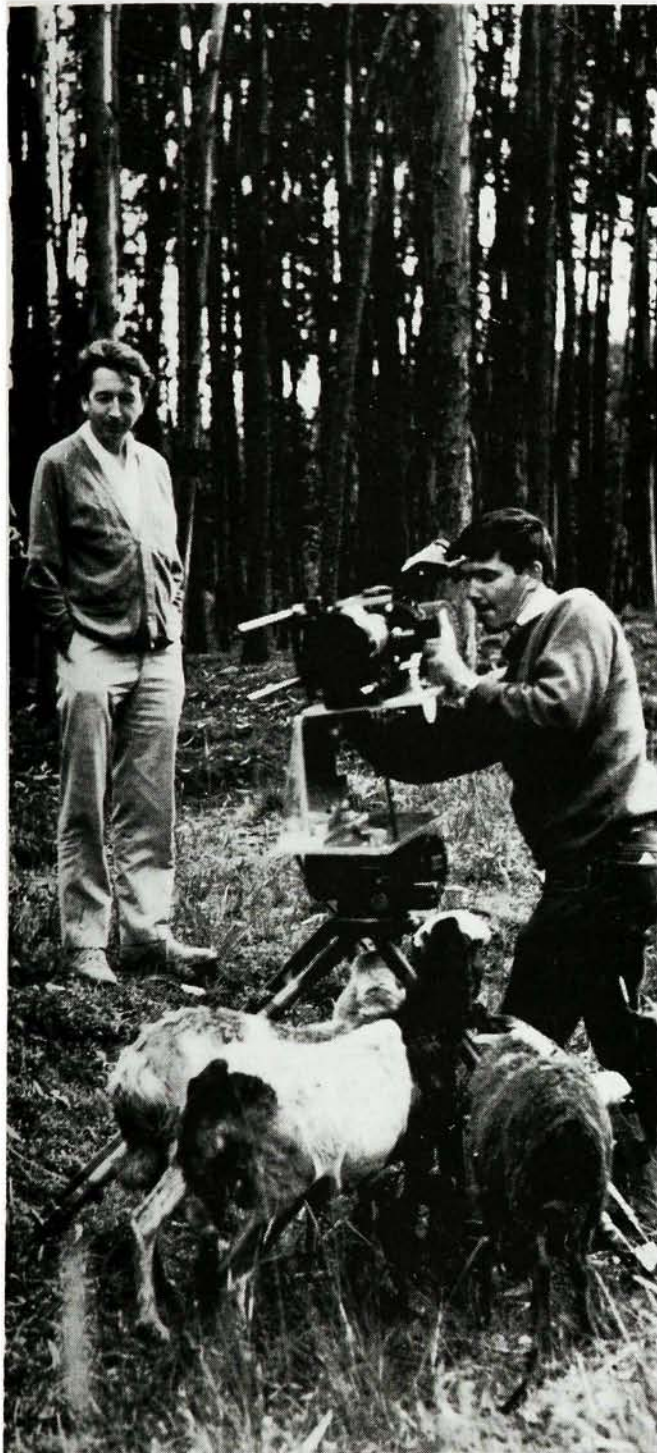
property from smart-aleck outsiders who would not leave when they were told." Because of the local attitude, it was impossible to settle on a jury. A change of venue was agreed upon and Harlan County became the site of the trial. (Note: film entitled **Harlan County U.S.A.** by Barbara Kopple).

Caudill, a lawyer, was retained by Francis Thompson, Incorporated. Daniel Boon Smith was commonwealth attorney for Harlan County. According to Trillin's article in the *New Yorker* magazine, "Smith got curious about how many people he had prosecuted or defended for murder, and counted up 750." Smith: "We got people in this county today who would kill you as quick as look at you... but most of 'em are the type that don't bother you if you leave them alone."

Caudill summarizes his feelings about the film crew, "They just happened to pick the wrong place."

A camera can be a threat to people who are unfamiliar with such devices. And any filmmaker at some point has to question himself regarding the invasion of privacy.

Colin Low of The National Film Board explains the NFB's policy: "It is the tradition of the Board to get permission before doing something. We try to make people understand the full implications of their involvement and what their appearance will mean in the film. There is an enormous amount of exploitation in film. People become naively involved. They are flattered to be asked to be filmed and they don't understand how they will appear. The more people are exploited, the more wary they are of the camera. There are places in Canada where if you pulled out a camera you would be stoned because CBC was there previously, and the people want nothing more to do with film crews. If you don't



Hugh O'Connor (left) "became a victim of circumstances"

CinéMag

In July, no. 19:

- Juneau and APFQ
- CFDC Separate French Policy
- Tax Implications of Stateside Move
- Brits Explain Eady

Subscribe Today for
Industry News
and Views

Canada's only independent film trade paper

CineMag only (12 issues) \$10 in Canada, \$15 Abroad
CineMag with Cinema Canada, \$15 for individuals
\$20 for companies, \$18 for individuals abroad

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
Country _____
Please bill me My check is enclosed
Mail to CineMag
Box 398,
Outremont Stn.
Montreal

have the time and money to approach people in a responsible way, then you shouldn't do it — for your own well-being and for the well-being of others who are trying to be responsible.

"The event with Hugh confirmed my conviction that community participation is essential to a good documentary. The National Film Board has been very lucky. It has had only one serious accident in 40 years, an aerial mishap involving a glider. Hugh O'Connor was not working for the NFB at the time he was killed," Low stated.

"I've seen cameramen use cameras as if they were some kind of protection from the world. They are under the illusion that once they are looking through a camera that it is not the real world out there."

1971. A Canadian production. A fur coat storage factory. An electrician places some big lights under a sprinkler system. The lights get hot, and the heat from the lamps is too close to the sprinkler system. Reaction: melt down — the electrical syndrome. The sprinklers go off. Damage to the fur coats — about \$80,000. The insurance company pays. No one is very happy.

Apparently the electrician had been cautioned ahead of time, but he had disregarded the warning, thus an accident occurs due to negligence.

1976. A Canadian production. Low budget feature. Someone ties into the electrical system. Every light in the house goes out. Every light within 6 square blocks goes out. No one in the neighborhood is very happy.

J. J. Parent, head of the electrical department of The National Film Board explains, "People who have no notion of electricity shouldn't be playing with it. A film electrician uses a lot of power not normally used in a house. The wiring in old houses is not arranged for heavy use."

A licensed electrician is one who has a certificate from the province. He has attended a technical school and has spent a minimum of 4 years working as an apprentice in the field. He has also passed an exam. Then the electrician who wants to work in cinema has to learn about the film industry — which is completely different from working on construction, for example.

A film electrician will spend a year just learning lighting. Someone can go out and buy a light meter and tell you they are qualified to light a set, but when you try them on location, you may have problems," J. J. warns.

Fire is a definite consideration. "It's important to know if you have enough power to work with — without damaging the location or burning the house down." Today there are new lights "HMI" — high intensity which save on power and give a better quality of light. But not all accidents occur from misjudgment. Some are purely mechanical — something breaks down while in use.

"No schools will teach you experience. You will learn more by working with the equipment itself. One needs a practical school of cinema."

Since filming often requires considerable power an electrician needs to tie-into the electrical system to provide electricity for the lights. Tying-in can be very dangerous if,

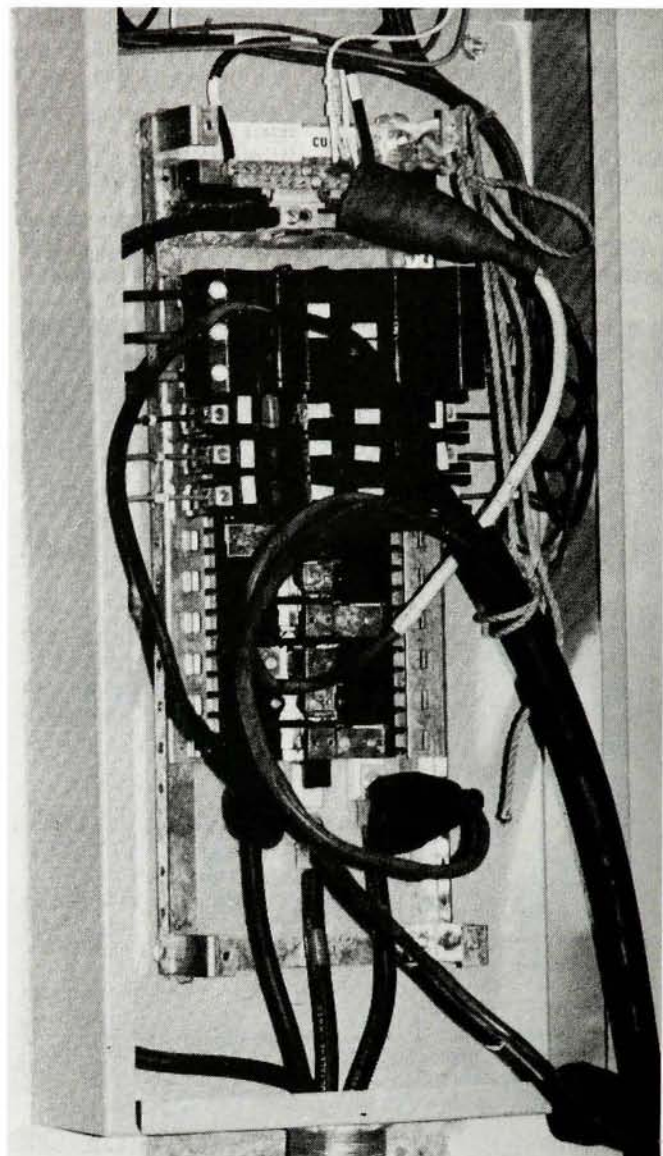


photo: Lois Stegel

For the inexperienced, "tying-in can be very dangerous"

for example, an inexperienced person tries his hand at it.

Concordia University's Cinema Program at Sir George Williams Campus hires unionized electricians to tie-in on student productions. Other schools that do not maintain this same policy might be wise to do the same.

Filmmakers often slip into the delusion that they are somehow protected by some intangible force.

The Hollywood glow of "lights, camera, action" may stimulate the feeling of omnipotence, but man is not infallible nor is his equipment.

In filmmaking, as in other activities, nothing is guaranteed. Inattention, poor communication, excessive worries, unpredictable circumstances and carelessness all constitute inherent danger. Hubris befell Sisyphus. One can never be too careful. Whether a professional filmmaker or an amateur, the rules are the same, if you make the wrong connection — something is going to explode.

One wonders about the bullfighter who risks his life for glory. One should consider that filmmaking can also be a very lethal sport. □