

by Frank Cole

*"Take a stone, any stone, like the one Godard filmed in Weekend. That stone is both the most insignificant thing and yet the most singular thing in the world. In its insignificance, the stone resembles no other. It is unique in the world and it is worth nothing. Does it deserve to be filmed?"*

According to French filmmaker and theorist Alain Bergala,<sup>1</sup> the paradox of the stone divides cinema into two: on the one hand, films where the filmmaker allows certain things to emerge, out of noise and chaos, to become remarkable in themselves. On the other hand, films whose production takes place so far from the confusion of things, in such a rarified and sterile atmosphere, that no singularity, let alone a mere stone, could ever appear.

Ottawa filmmaker Frank Cole on a recent shoot in the Algerian Sahara, discovered what one could term the paradox of the grain of sand. In his account what is, on one level, a totally insignificant shoot becomes, on another, a most singular and remarkable description of pure filmmaking.

At a time when more and more Canadian filmmaking aspires to that side of the paradox far from the confusion of things, Cole's account is a reminder, as Bergala puts it, that "nothing is more stubborn or patient than a stone" — and even more so a grain of sand.

*A Death* is my first feature drama; it is about being a man. The film has two locations: a room and a desert. This is a record of a shoot in the Sahara.

In 1981 I drove across the Sahara. I returned to Canada and wrote the screenplay in two years. In 1982 I drove to South America, to location scout for a correct desert and to take still photographs that form one scene. There is no real desert in North America. In late 1983 the room shooting of *A Death* was completed in a set in Ottawa. In March

Ottawa filmmaker Frank Cole is currently doing post-production on *A Death* which he intends to enter at Cannes next year.

1984 I began the desert shooting in the Sahara.

The room shooting finalized, cameramen, equipment, financing, had quit me suddenly before the Sahara. A 22-year-old, Jean-Yves Dion, became single cameraman; the National Film Board in Montreal reversed a decision and became equipment supplier; my grandfather, Fred Howard, donated the balance of the budget for the Sahara shoot. I filmed him, in a coma, the day I left. I felt like dying when I saw him.

We passed security control at Montreal because they didn't know what the scorpion was that Dion carried for me in his pocket. We had to laugh.

In Paris I rented a car, drove to Marseille, ferried to Algeria.

The equipment was confiscated on arrival in Algeria. This was despite introduction letters I had for this situation from NFB, Canada Council, and the Algeria Embassy. In 1981 in Algeria my passport was arbitrarily confiscated; I was escorted 400 km to police headquarters in Tamanrasset. The equipment was released a day later by mistake.

Government authorization is compulsory in order to film in Algeria. The Algeria Embassy in Canada after consulting its government was instructed to issue me with visas. The government authorization itself can be applied for only after arrival in Algeria. There is also no guarantee of authorization. I knew this. I waited three days at the Ministry of Culture in Algiers until the director agreed to see me. Algeria prefers that there be no foreign filming in Algeria. The fact that I did not want to film Algeria (its people, its cities) was my advantage. I was given the authorization paper.

I drove a first circuit of the Sahara to find the locations. A 19-day drive. I drove the circuit a second time for the shooting. I drove 17,000 km.

We lived in the desert during the first circuit. Temperature at night drops 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit from the temperature at midday. I slept cold. Water is generally bad: salted, or magnesium, or sulphured. One is always thirsty; always. Driving in certain regions is by choosing tracks in the correct general direction. The risk is of choosing other tracks and driving until out of gasoline. I did this in

1981 and backtracked out. There is no exact map of the Sahara.

We lived in hotels where possible during the second circuit. This saved more endurance for the shooting alone. Endurance of this heat and kilometres is evidenced by rare excretion; the body uses everything.

I risked the shooting without a 4-wheel-drive vehicle because of financing. This meant being stuck routinely was certain. In 1981 I was stuck on a prohibited and therefore untravelled piste: the car was freed the next day only because of the slight hardening of the sand during the cold night. I drove a Peugeot because of its front-wheel drive and its reputation in the Sahara for endurance. The car's clearance due to the additional load required to produce a feature film was dangerous. The car stuck in sand five times one day. The care endured lost brakes, complete power failures, damaged suspension and alignment.

We had one camera, no back-up. Sand is the foremost risk. There is sand in the air always. Dion made a cape against the sand which he always dressed camera and tripod in. We used an Arriflex ST again for endurance. I use no sync sound in the desert. I recorded with a Sony Walkman Professional silence and wind: the final sound in the desert is flies. I use no life in the desert. Film stock was stored in a plastic cooler which was opened at night as refrigeration.

I financed the shooting by black-market. Illegal but necessary in order to have the Sahara. This increased financing by three times. We forged our currency declarations on exit from the country.

A day: April 27. I get up as always at 5:30. I have dreamt my grandfather has died. I do not know Gramps has truly died; on my 30th birthday. Jean-Yves is ill again. I drive 500 km. At the final town we stop to drink. The town's water supply is turned off. A person takes us to a communal water barrel, magnesium. We drink. Another person takes us someplace there is juice. We drink. It is mid-afternoon. We gather our endurance to shoot today's scene. Out there is where the desert truly is. A lifeless earth. While I drove out there four weeks ago Jean-Yves shut his eyes. I was

also afraid. I stopped the car once and got out to control myself. This is where a person would only come to die, I thought. I live best, here. I understand it here, like my room. It's more home than home itself. A fearful home, however. The desert can make you want to die. That's my only fear left. It's time now.

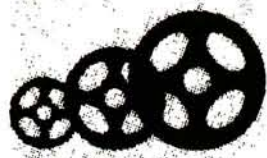
I drink a cooking-pot of warm water and drive out. There are new corpses, more animals that did not endure truck transport. This time I don't get stuck, I've learned the methods. We find a tire, it is so large we must carry it on the roof. We locate the abandoned car. There are 125 more of them consecutively if you continue driving. We place the tire inside, for smoke later. I have difficulty knowing what the shooting structure must be. Jean-Yves knows and completes the correct structure. Two shots. I edit to a release print when I shoot, that's my need. There is little time left. We will have 10 minutes to shoot the scene, completely: the time between after sunset and dark. Where there is an error we will wait tomorrow with our thirst and the flies and each other. We compose the first shot; extremely slowly. Then I do it. The car's underbody is hit many times but nothing breaks. Jean-Yves picks up the gasoline and runs to leave it for me at the abandoned car. He composes the second shot while I pour the 20 litres of gas over the car, a circle around it. I ignite it and step into position. I have told Jean-Yves to prepare himself to immediately leave here if the army investigates the smoke and flames. No distant engines. Silence. Jean-Yves is still ill. He shot 30 percent of the Sahara, ill. This was courage. He eats nothing for dinner. He gets in a sleeping bag and shuts his eyes again. He hates here, he's never hated so much.

Of all the Sahara, here, I am happiest. Jean-Yves is asleep. I must wake him tomorrow while it is still dark. There is something he does not know. The truth is, it was never necessary to shoot here. I drove 700 more kilometres, because I wanted a part of this place. To replace the part the Sahara has killed of me. I pick up a handful of sand and store it in my suitcase.

(1) "Le paradoxe du caillou," in *Dossiers de la cinémathèque*, no. 12, *Le cinéma: théorie et discours*, Cinémathèque québécoise, Montreal, 1984, 5, 8.

● Men, machines and Saharan landscape: cameraman Jean-Yves Dion with Arriflex ST, Frank Cole and the Peugeot.





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*Salutations à tous nos amis  
Festival des Films du Monde  
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