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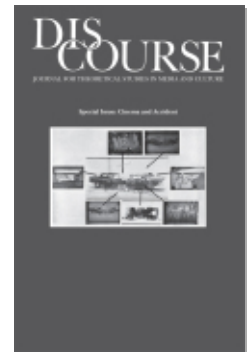
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Introduction: Cinema and Accident

René Thoreau Bruckner,
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and Greg Siegel

You learn about life by the accidents you have, over and over again. . . . Writing, most of the time, for most people, is an accident.

—Kurt Vonnegut,
“The Best Jokes Are Dangerous”¹

Vonnegut’s estimation of writing might be taken to suggest a provocative description of cinema—that is, the technological apparatuses, inscriptive processes, and expressive forms that come under the heading of cinematography: “writing (with) movement.” As a kind of writing that must move, and keep moving at full tilt, in order to “write” at all, cinema would seem to be specially marked by its capacity for high-speed collisions. Its highly sensitive recording medium reduplicates exposure to, and exposures of, contingency and the accidental. The film camera records and interprets not only what the operator wishes it to record and interpret, but also “a riot

of details,”² those profilmic events that “just happen.” In this sense, then, cinematography is a writing, “most of the time,” of accidents. Yet writing, to maintain the metaphor a moment longer, is also a regulative system, a way of imposing order on the unstructured and undifferentiated, of producing sense from non-sense. If this “other” fundamental capacity has tended to guide both cinema’s historical development and its critical study, it has not, for all that, succeeded in abolishing the accidental.

Accidents insinuate themselves “over and over again,” to be sure, but they are neither repetitious nor repeatable in any simple sense. Precariously balanced between a physics of causality and a metaphysics of chance, between necessity and probability, accidents occur all the time, all over the place, but never in the same way twice. The editors of this special issue are interested in how their *repeated unpredictability* crashes into cinema’s ostensibly *predictable repetitions*. The title—“Cinema and Accident”—is meant to emphasize the singularity, as well as the abstractness, of each term: the cinema, cinemas, the cinematic; the accident, accidents, the accidental. We aim to deploy the terms *cinema* and *accident* in a manner sensitive to both the heterogeneity and the historical specificity of the many cinemas and accidents addressed in these essays, without foreclosing the possibilities of productive generalization.

The call to account for the accident has gained increasing attention in media studies, in large part due to the provocations of French theorist Paul Virilio and the critical historiography of media scholar Mary Ann Doane. In *The Accident of Art*, Virilio proposes that “as soon as there is invention, there is accident,” and that the accident “reveals something important that we would not otherwise be able to perceive.”³ Writing of one momentous invention directly linked with perception, Doane identifies cinema’s driving impulse as a “curious merger of contingency and structure,”⁴ suggesting that the moving image participates in the taming of the unpredictable while simultaneously reinforcing its power. These interventions prompt us to wonder what sorts of histories emerge when we treat media technologies as potential time bombs and media texts as veritable train wrecks. How do forces of chance and contingency impact regimes of representation and mediated modes of perception? What political forms do the accidental and the unexpected inspire, imagine, or actualize? What happens when cinematic accidents collide with questions of risk and calculation, security and control, subjectivity and responsibility? Taking these provocations and paradoxes as points of departure, this special issue sets out to exam-

ine the “something important” revealed by accidents, contingency, and the unexpected in relation to cinema.

Scholarship touching upon the myriad relationships between cinema and accident has primarily done so around two interrelated historical-theoretical axes: the first symptomatically reads the broader historical context in which cinema participates; the second raises questions and critiques of the medium (in its analog and digital permutations) in relation to its capacity for the mechanized reproduction of contingent and accidental indexical traces. The fascination with accidents in films is often connected to the anxieties produced by the dramatic and violent accelerations and transformations that characterize the experience of technological modernity of the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century. Inspired by the cultural critiques of Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer, numerous cultural historians of the cinema and its contemporaneous popular cultures read this phenomenon as symptomatic of the turbulence and sense of displacement caused by industrialization and urbanization (hyperstimulation, nervous exhaustion, dangerous street traffic, the perils of the industrial workplace, and so on).

This line of thinking, particularly prevalent in the literature of early cinema, has been exemplified and considerably furthered by André Gaudreault’s and Tom Gunning’s theses on the cinema of attractions; Jennifer Bean’s essay on danger, risk, and representations of female adventurers in 1910s and 1920s serials; Miriam Bratu Hansen’s *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*; Lynn Kirby’s study of cinema, trains, and hysteria in *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (as well as her engagement with Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s classic study of railways and modernity); and Ben Singer’s work on popular culture’s fascination with the enervating violence of urban life.⁵ Mary Ann Doane’s *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, a touchstone for many of the essays in this special issue, provides one of the most sustained engagements with the question of cinema’s relation to contingency and its corollaries: chance and accident. Doane argues that film, through its “apparent capacity to perfectly *represent* the contingent,” participates in the project of symbolically “taming chance”—an operation informed by the ideological imperatives of capitalist modernity.⁶

With its vigilant mechanical eye and its extraordinary sensitivity as a recording medium, the cinematograph tends to register unintended, unconscious, and otherwise invisible excesses. This peculiar

trait drew the attention of numerous classical film theorists, including the immanent tensions raised by Jean Epstein's conceptions of film as a powerful "metal brain" and "untamed lens," Dziga Vertov's "kinoglaz" (cine-eye), Benjamin's "optical unconscious," and André Bazin's and Siegfried Kracauer's vast meditations on film's ontology and the question of realism (to name but a few).⁷ In the wake of classical film theory, the relations between the medium, the indexical, and the accidental have been examined in Noël Burch's *Theory of Film Practice*; in Dai Vaughan's poetic writing on the accidental and unwilling in early film; in the film archivist Mark-Paul Meyer's Barthes-inspired reflections "Moments of Poignancy: The Aesthetics of the Accidental and the Casual in Early Nonfiction Film"; in Vivian Sobchack's reflections on cinema's engagement with the "empirical uncanny" of coincidence and accident; and in Janet Harbord's "Contingency's Work: Kracauer's *Theory of Film* and the Trope of the Accidental."⁸ Finally, cutting across these approaches in a manner inspired by surrealist games, Robert B. Ray has written imaginatively on the use of accidents as a methodological approach for theorizing film.⁹

The editors of this collection hope to make a modest but important contribution to this inchoate field of study. We propose the need for a sustained attempt to *inspect the unexpected* in cinematic media. We have a feeling, keenly expressed in every essay contained herein, that the topic's significance derives from its tendency to activate contradictory and heavily loaded tensions that enrich historical and theoretical understandings and open unexpected pathways to thought. The accident induces dread and incites desire. It ruptures time and reconfigures space. It marks an ending, closure, or death, but also constitutes a beginning, opening, or birth. It sparks public outcries, official inquiries, and popular imaginings. It reinforces the laws of causality even as it seems to unsettle them. While each of the following essays addresses these tensions—and there is a considerable confluence of interests and approaches—they also assert important differences that hold out the promise for further lines of inquiry.

A Baudelairean-inspired prolegomenon to a history of cinema written through the optic of its many breakdowns, James Leo Cahill's "How It Feels to Be Run Over: Early Film Accidents" approaches accidents of and in film both as a fundamental (if often repressed) historical fact and as a theoretical possibility. Cahill sketches a history of early film technologies as a heterogeneous assemblage "less imbued with the surety of mechanized repetition than haunted by forces of contingency and chance," providing a résumé of film-specific malfunctions, breakdowns, and explosions in which the accident inhab-

its an “ontological” position, understood here as a sort of “antiessential essence or *spirit*” of cinema. He argues that such volatility also haunts the aesthetic development of the medium, a relationship made explicit in a series of trick films produced in Great Britain about traffic accidents. Cahill reads Cecil Hepworth’s *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (1900) and other early films as allegorizing film’s essential accidents while also experimenting with techniques for banishing them from the apparatus, a process he describes, drawing upon Noël Burch, Tom Gunning, and other early cinema scholars, as filmic enframing. Conceptualizing these films’ staged accidents as “crash tests” that explore the breakdown of aesthetic, ontological, and epistemological limits of early film, Cahill attends to the way that the process of enframing also reveals an uncanny *extra* dimension, by which forces of the accident transform but persist.

In her essay, “Doing Death Over: Industrial Safety Films, Accidental Motion Studies, and the Involuntary Crash Test Dummy,” Karen Beckman draws on the work of Paul Virilio, Judith Butler, and Avital Ronell to consider the ethical, libidinal, and theoretical intersections between automobile safety, individual and collective responsibility, and the multiple spatialities and temporalities associated with photographically based media. Focusing on the cultural period bracketed by early slapstick cinema’s “aesthetics of auto-destruction,” on one side, and the car crash’s reappropriation in the 1960s by a new generation of artists, filmmakers, and journalists, on the other, Beckman examines industrially sponsored auto-safety films of the 1930s and 1940s with an eye to how they discursively frame and stylistically figure notions of risk and responsibility, freedom and desire, contingency and driver subjectivity. Designed as much to entertain as to educate, these films ultimately complicate their authoritative safety messages by incorporating scenes of playful automobility and by offering intimations of thrilling danger. In the pioneering research of Hugh De Haven and his Crash Injury Research (CIR) project, Beckman finds another rich site for the critical exploration of accident ethics, politics, and aesthetics. Noting that the CIR’s cinematographic motion studies helped to enable “the acceleration of the human body and the construction of a newly expanded frame of safety for American citizens on the move,” Beckman plumbs the complexities of the crash test’s “preenactment” of technological catastrophe. She concludes, provocatively, that the scientific safety test film is a documentary film of a most unusual sort—a “temporally oracular” documentary that registers, not the disaster itself, but “the ideological fictions that, through repeated rehearsal and performance, shape the form of the disasters to come.”

In “The Accident Is Uncontainable/The Accident Must Be Contained: High-Speed Cinematography and the Development of Scientific Crash Testing,” Greg Siegel examines a pivotal moment in the history of automobile-safety discourse and practice: the moment when the car crash, metonym of accelerated modernity out of control, was made amenable to rational experiment and analysis. By the early 1950s, a new breed of auto-safety expert, not content to reduce the problem of accidents to the conduct of “reckless drivers,” was staging full-scale collision experiments—and shooting them with high-speed film cameras—in an attempt to render visible, measurable, and intelligible the complicated assemblage of events constituting automobile catastrophe. Focusing on experiments carried out at UCLA’s Institute of Transportation and Traffic Engineering (ITTE) during the 1950s, Siegel reveals how crash researchers relied on those cameras to discover and disclose the split second of destruction, to isolate and illuminate, so as to symbolically master, that previously opaque sliver of space-time in which seemingly everything that could go wrong did go wrong. Crystallizing a “broader cultural desire to turn the accident . . . into an object of scientific knowledge and institutional control,” the ITTE collision experiments, for all their technical sophistication and clinical rigor, are themselves shown to be haunted through and through by “the specter of accidentality.”

In “Lost Time: Blunt Trauma and Accident-Driven Cinema,” René Thoreau Bruckner examines a trio of high-speed head-injury narratives to propose a thesis on the temporality of crisis. One historically documented accident—the 1860 stagecoach crash that profoundly changed protocinematographer Eadweard Muybridge’s life—is linked with two fictional film odysseys of accident-induced amnesia—*Random Harvest* (dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1942) and *Mulholland Drive* (dir. David Lynch, 2001): “Each of these three narratives strings together the same essential sequence of tropes: a vehicular accident that causes blunt head injury, which induces a break from the past, a period of lost time during which unexpected new possibilities emerge.” The violent instant of impact takes on an ambiguous value; subjectivity undergoes an opening up (through the tropes of altered personality and doubled characters) thanks to the impossible fact of surviving the unimaginable, the incomprehensibility of an *after*. Each of the narratives in question articulates the crisis (the accident’s aftermath) as an experience of being lost, a sustained period of transition, or what Bruckner calls *disituation*: “a nonstate—a displacement, dislocation, or splintering of presence—that comes along suddenly, by surprise” and has the unsettling but liberating

effect of opening a previously closed door. Bruckner sees disituation as a “symptom” of cinema’s fundamental technique of treating time as a discontinuous influx of sudden bursts, or exposures, bridged together by so-called empty intervals—gaps within which precious *lost time* is preserved.

If cinema in general is gifted with the gaps and ruptures opened by the accidental, then individual films must have the potential to take special advantage of contingency’s effects. Todd McGowan argues that Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Babel* (2006) is just such a film. In “The Contingency of Connection: The Path to Politicization in *Babel*,” McGowan analyzes the levels on which *Babel* “provides a form for rendering visible contingency as such” to reveal breaking points in the social structure and its symbolic order. The film’s numerous interwoven plots are connected by unexpected events—points at which things take unexpected and/or incomprehensible turns, communication fails, and social bonds appear impossible. However, McGowan argues, Iñárritu’s film does not use such contingent events merely to install distance between people; nor do they serve to imply that a mysterious or transcendent power, a “real Other,” will intervene to fill in the “blank space within the field of signification.” On the contrary, Iñárritu’s film leaves such gashes wide open in order to point to the possibility of extraordinary forms of connection between people and, at the same time, to gesture toward a politicized subjectivity. “Political engagement is contingent upon our ability to avoid reducing the contingent event to an underlying necessity, which occurs through recourse to God or some real Other,” argues McGowan. *Babel* models an alternative relationship to the unexpected, showing how “we might avow the contingent, believe in it as our unsurpassable limit, and place it at the center of our conceptual universe.”

Carlos Kase’s “‘This Guitar Has Seconds To Live’: *Guitar Drag*’s Archaeology of Indeterminacy and Violence” addresses the forces of the accidental and contingent that inform certain *anti-instrumental* tendencies coursing through the advanced art movements and popular cultures of the second half of the twentieth century. Kase draws out an elaborate matrix of connections from Christian Marclay’s 1999 video installation *Guitar Drag*, an ambiguous and often ambivalent work consisting of audiovisual recordings of a red electric guitar being dragged across the Texas landscape by a pickup truck. The video was made in response to the racist murder of James Byrd Jr. in the same locale. Disinterring an archaeology of aesthetic destruction from Marclay’s appropriation of one of rock and roll’s defining gestures, the smashing of an electric guitar, Kase brings such figures

and movements as Pete Townshend, Gustav Metzger, punk rock, Fluxus, post-Cagean improvisation, experimental film, and body art and hardship art into conversation with performance studies' concern with questions of presence and the documentary tradition's concern for traces of the real. If accidental encounters of a first order play an important role in the production of Marclay's work in the form of the unpredictable sounds made by a dragged electric guitar, Kase also elaborates upon the critical role of the aesthetic and ethical work of accidental encounters of a second order at the site of installation and reception. The distortion and feedback loops produced by the historical and conceptual collisions of "rock-and-roll timbres, the anarchic energy of Fluxus, [and] the terrible history of racism in America" in *Guitar Drag* inform Kase's reading of anti-instrumental approaches to questions of representation and representability, as well as the "limits of the pleasurable" and tensions between "fun and violence."

Bill Albertini's "Contagion and the Necessary Accident" analyzes the role of the spectacular accident in *outbreak narratives*, a term denoting the formulaic constellation of settings, characters, and plotlines routinely invoked to explain the rapid, alarm-inducing spread of a contagious disease, as well as the epidemiological strategies mobilized to subdue it. Human bodies, in these narratives, no matter how many high-tech measures have been taken to render them (and the spaces they inhabit) prophylactically secure, are revealed to be dangerously porous, inherently susceptible to hostile infiltration, unavoidably exposed to accidents of infectious transmission. Such accidents, Albertini contends, are charged, narratively and affectively, with an ambivalent power: on the one hand, they propel the plot forward, stoking the manifest desire to bring the disease under epidemiological control; on the other hand, they momentarily arrest the story action, suggesting a latent desire to revel, not only in their spectacle, but also in their suspension of the logic of containment, their resistance to the telos of closure. Moreover, both "as an eruption of the unexpected and as the inevitable arrival of that which has been desired," the outbreak-narrative accident is deeply implicated in contemporary fears and fantasies of globalization, dramatizing "ongoing tensions between two contradictory models of space: one envisioning a public sphere separated from the private sphere, with both enclosed within national borders; and another much more suspicious of such distinctions, organized by a more generalized distrust and dis-ease about constantly mobile, ever-shifting space."

If writing is an accident, as Vonnegut has it, then this collection of essays aspires, above all, to provide an instructive tour through a curious pile of wreckage, a constructive drive down a fascinating path of destruction. This is no mere exercise in intellectual rubber-necking, no disaster fetishism. Instead, the authors, each in his or her own distinct idiom, attempt to read and write the accident—and write *through* the accident—in order to expand our perception of cinema's historical and theoretical horizons.

Notes

¹ Kurt Vonnegut, "The Best Jokes Are Dangerous," interview by J. Rentilly, *McSweeney's*, September 2002, <http://mcsweeneys.net/>.

² Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne, 3rd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1995), 1–41, quotation on 16.

³ Sylvère Lotringer and Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art*, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext[e], 2005), 87, 63.

⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 141.

⁵ André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, "Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History," trans. Joyce Goggin and Wanda Strauven, in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (1989; repr., Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 365–80; Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, nos. 3–4 (1986): 63–70; Jennifer M. Bean, "Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body," in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 404–43; Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Lynn Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Ben Singer, "Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 17–99; and Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). See also Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (New York: Urizen, 1979).

⁶ Doane, *Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 22 (original emphasis). Equally significant is Doane's work on television in "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), 222–39.

⁷ Jean Epstein, "The Senses I (b)" (1921), trans. Tom Milne, in *French Film Theory and Criticism, 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 1:241–46; Epstein interviewed by Gaston Thierry, "Le film absolu et le cinéma relatif," *Comédia* 20, no. 4813 (1926): 3; Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1984); Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1931), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith; trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2001), 507–30; Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version" (1939), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 251–82, esp. 281 n. 42; André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* vols. 1 and 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–71); and Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, intro. Miriam Bratu Hansen (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁸ Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (1969; repr., New York: Praeger, 1973); Dai Vaughan, "Let There Be Lumière," in *For Documentary: Twelve Essays* (1981; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 1–8; Mark-Paul Meyer, "Moments of Poignancy: The Aesthetics of the Accidental and the Casual in Early Nonfiction Film," trans. ALTA-vertalingen (ALTA translation service)/Veronique Verkaik-Drew, in *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film*, ed. Daan Hertogs and Nico de Klerk (Amsterdam: Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1997), 54–60; Vivian Sobchack, "The Expanded Gaze in Contracted Space: Happenstance, Hazard, and the Flesh of the World," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 85–108; and Janet Harbord, "Contingency's Work: Kracauer's *Theory of Film* and the Trope of the Accidental," *New Formations* 61 (2007): 90–103.

⁹ Robert B. Ray, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).