

DEATH OF A FILMAKER

By Richard Taylor

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Frank Cole fixated on death and the desert but in the end, the Sahara was not about to grant him immortality.

"Travel is a vanishing act," Paul Theroux once wrote, "a solitary trip down a pinched line of geography to oblivion."



As filmmaker Frank Cole would tell it, even though it could swallow the United States, there is no exact map of the Sahara Desert. In 1972, when I first met him in a Spanish class at Carleton University, I didn't know we would embark on a deep friendship lasting 28 years, one in which that desert would play a pivotal role - including becoming the site of his murder. Many times over the years Frank said I should write about him if something ever happened. So I kept a file of his cryptic postcards and letters from around the world. There were surfing shots, reviews of his films, interviews, articles, drafts of screenplays, bizarre

photographs of himself and others he met on his travels and unforgettable images of lost temples in Mexico, graveyards in Central America, archaeological ruins in South America - and the vast, enigmatic Sahara.

Just before Halloween, I received a wrenching phone call from Frank's girlfriend Sonja, who had been living in his Riverside Drive apartment while Frank was crossing the Sahara. Frank was dead.

For several decades I had half expected such a call. Once he even joked about getting a T-shirt made that said, 'Frank Cole Is Dead'. But even though his death came as no real surprise, the sudden loss of a close, long time friend, and the manner of his brutal death, shocked me, and left me drained and shaken. Sonja said that she had been receiving regular emails from Frank in Africa, via External Affairs. But in the week before Halloween, Frank's body had been discovered by a shepherd. His two camels had been stolen, along with his camera equipment and clothes. He had been tied up, and murdered 70 km southeast of Timbuktu near the Niger river in Mali.

Frank Cole was obsessed with the desert. He had been talking about returning to the Sahara for years. Just one last trip. Everyone agreed it was a bad idea. I suggested that if he felt compelled to go back to Africa, he should surf the coastline, live it up a little, and forget about crossing that hellish desert. But the Sahara's siren call and his confusion about heroism finally caught up with him.

I went to see Frank the day before he left Canada for the desert. It was to give him a copy of the travel anthology, *Literary Trips* that had just published a story of mine on travel writer Bruce Chatwin, who died of Aids at 48. My piece dealt with his notion about man's restlessness and inability to stay inside a room - something both Frank and I had wrestled with for nearly 30 years.

Before I met with Frank, the editor of *Literary Trips*, Victoria Brooks had gone to visit another man with an affinity for the desert - Paul Bowles, the American expat whose novel, *The Sheltering Sky* had been made into a film. Bowles had left America more than 40 years ago to live as a recluse in North Africa. A literary cult legend, Bowles constantly wrote about westerners going to the Sahara only to be annihilated by their own shortcomings, or murdered by thieves.

As diplomats, Frank's father and mother were once posted in Cape Town, South Africa. It was there Frank was seduced by surfing, and the Dark Continent. He traveled to the Sahara many times and made two films there. In 1989, he was the first North American to cross the Sahara by camel, 7,000 km from Mauritania to the Red Sea, and most of it by himself. What Frank liked about the desert was that it is clean and uncomplicated. And it never dies.

In a book of travel essays about the non-Christian world, Paul Bowles wrote a piece about the Sahara called, *The Baptism of Solitude*. I still have a ragged quote I ripped from the book to share with Frank: "When a man has been there and undergone the baptism of solitude, he can't help himself. Once he has been under the spell of the vast, luminous silent country, no other place is quite strong enough for him, no other surroundings can provide the supremely satisfying sensation of existing in the midst of something that is absolute. He will go back, whatever the cost in comfort and money, for the absolute has no price."

In the early 70's when Frank and I had met at Carleton we were the only surfers in Ottawa. We began to wade around in Existentialism, Nihilism, Despair and The Void. We craved intensity. Jesus without hope. A couple of middle class kids courting life on the edge. "I'm going crazy, you should document it," he once wrote. We saw the heaviest films, read the darkest books. We were determined to become great artists. I wanted to become a writer and Frank decided to become an



Frank Cole and Richard Taylor in happier times.

uncompromising, independent filmmaker. He admired the painter Alex Colville and latched onto his fierce quote: "Art is one of the principal means by which a human being tries to compensate for, or compliment, the restlessness of death and temporality."

Instead of getting into a prestigious film school in Paris to follow Jean Luc Godard and the New Wave French Cinema, Frank ended up at the now defunct film program at Algonquin college where he was the only one of his graduating class to finish his own film. While pursuing his role as 'enfant terrible', he produced A Documentary (1979) - an unsparing film chronicling the cancer death of his grandmother. Many were shocked, but it impressed others at the Venice Film Festival. Frank's grandmother's death left his grandfather so bereft and alone, that Frank decided in his art and his life to challenge the archetypal experience of death itself.

To obtain film funding, Frank became a wizard at self-promotion. He had remarkable drive and self-discipline, and an endearing way of acquiring money from the various arts councils. When you got to know him, he possessed great warmth, and generosity. Over the years he attracted a long line of fine women who were drawn to his thoughtful, impeccable politeness and compact, disarming presence. But he had an intense dark side they either loved, or avoided.

In the early 80's Frank talked me into being assistant director for his first feature film, A Death, later retitled, A life. The film charts a man's survival amid death - in a room and in the desert. Artist Lea Deschamps gave up her rambling artist's studio on Sparks Street above Andrew Newton Photography and we began building a film set to shoot half of the movie. Everyone worked for nothing because some believed they were working on a project that might find its way into Canadian film history. There were many talented people involved: an art director, cameraman, a lighting expert from Crawley Films, a few actors, scorpions, grasshoppers, rats and snakes.

Several people jumpstarted their careers by working on Frank's film. I put in a whole summer helping to shoot the studio sequences, shot by painstaking shot. It took days to set up the decisive moment when a little girl had to run through a sliding glass window. Another window was rigged with the long sharp blade of a guillotine that was ready to drop. There were nude scenes with blood in a bathtub, a gun in a pair of panties, and scenes with a rather large snake that moved across the whole length of the floor and scared everyone off the set except Frank. My job was to choreograph this surreal Noah's Ark of hell and artificial despair.

Frank asked me to accompany him to the Sahara to shoot the second half of the film. We would drive 17,000 km, looking for sight locations. When I declined, I didn't tell Frank that I was afraid I might never return alive.

A Life premiered in 1986. The Canadian Film Institute described its taut, suggestive visual style reminiscent of Antonioni as a "searing psychological and physical excursion into cycles of death, life and redemption... Alternating between an enclosed room and the infinity of the desert, Cole's cinematic confrontation with death is a remarkable accomplishment. " Film critic Geoff Pevere wrote, "A Life is quite unlike anything made in this country before."

The late Jay Scott described Frank as reclusive, enigmatic and brilliant. Cinema Canada magazine said that A Life was a masterpiece and that it seemed destined for some kind of enshrinement in the history of Canadian film as a work of uncompromising risk-taking and always breathtaking genius.

Of course, with reviews such as those, Frank decided to hit the road again and cross the Sahara to make an even more ambitious film he wanted to call, Death's Death. Years later, his producer, Francis Miquet, convinced him to retitl it, Life Without Death. Unfortunately, the film took 14 years to reach the big screen.

To prepare himself for the ordeal of making the film, Frank pumped up by lifting weights. He attended extensive first aid courses, learned about camels, survival, celestial navigation, astronomy, and he read The Koran and T.E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom.

To shoot his film, Frank had to do virtually the impossible - cross the Sahara alone. He went through 8 camels, was arrested, got lost, traveled through war zones, was stalked by thieves, attacked by one of his own camels and, for 11 months, had to deal with exhaustion, fear and loneliness. Each night he slept out in the open under the stars, alone on the sand, listening to the wind.

Not only did Frank cross the desert, he had to film the whole journey himself. Because I had supervised the film crew's time consuming shoots in the relatively pristine conditions of the Sparks Street studio, I

can imagine what photographing himself crossing the desert must have entailed- something only Dante could have interpreted.

I know how scary, uncomfortable, even masochistic it must have been. And it would take its toll.

When he returned from the desert, Frank became a recluse, and worked to complete *Life Without Death*. It was his Sistine Chapel, his mistress and his albatross. He had to drum up more funds and do most of the work himself. He began a merciless Life Extension Diet and pushed literature for the Life Extension Foundation. He signed up with the Cryonics Institute. In between long bouts of film work, he got back into surfing - Baja, California, Peru and Puerto Escondido. Often he camped on open beaches, living on a diet of carrots, lettuce, pasta and rice. He would send me photos of himself surfing vertical walls of three metre bone crushers. At Camp Fortune, where he met Sonja, he became a dedicated ski patroller. Yet unbelievably, during this time he was planning another trip to Africa to cross the Sahara.

Meanwhile, for me, between teaching, writing, a strangling mortgage, a wife and growing family - all of the things Frank had managed to avoid - my life had never been busier. We spoke on the phone occasionally, but I should have spent more time with him. When I wrote to him from Australia telling him I was surfing the reefs with sharks and on waves the size of drive-in movie screens, he wrote back, "Rick, if things get any more cranked up, you'll be coming home in a body bag."

During the summer I got my last letter from Frank from Nouakchott in Mauritania: "Rick, Thanks both for your book and your visit. I left Cap Blanc, Mauritania on April 21. Now, after two months and 1000 km., I've been forced back to the beginning again - the Atlantic. Frank."

On November 4, about a week after the news of Frank's death, his film, *Life Without Death* opened at the Canadian Film Institute. Described as a disturbing meditation on mortality's ever ticking clock, all the sad ironies were too enormous. Only a handful of us at the opening knew that Frank was dead. The rest of the audience were told some romantic bullshit about Frank riding a camel, somewhere on the Sahara near Timbuktu.

Over the next few weeks, I spoke with Sonja, Frank's father and his brother Peter. Because my sister had died a few years earlier and my parents had to fly back home to deal with it, I could empathize with the Coles. Finally, after more than a month of red tape, the body was flown from Bamako, the capitol of Mali, to Brussels and then to the Cryonics Institute in Detroit. The dental records and a DNA sample proved that the small skeleton was, in fact, the earthly remains of Frank Cole.

There are a few wild theories floating around about his murder. Probably no one will ever find out who killed Frank, or why. Just as no one will ever really know why Frank had to go back - like the mystics - and cross the desert again and again. I've surfed and swam in waters known to be frequented by sharks, and Frank knew about the unreasonable risks involved in crossing the Sahara alone. Timbuktu is one of those places whose name is linked to the romance of desert exploration, the slave trade - a place so distant in time and space that it must be fabulous. But in reality, it's not. For more than 30 years, travelers have been warned about the dangers of travelling across Mali. In a country with so much political unrest, poverty and hunger, a privileged westerner traveling alone on a camel must create a kind of sacrilegious mirage, not to mention a great temptation for thwarted revenge. Africa has had a long tradition as an unfathomable place that swallows unwary non-Africans. Apparently, the Dark Continent can still become the white man's grave.

In his heart, I'm sure Frank realized that the desert was not the best place to endure solitude. Like many though, Frank still hadn't found what he was looking for. Perhaps he wanted to take that one last trip to begin a new life with people. He once said, "My art is a blueprint for my life. I work best against bad odds." He wanted immortality, not celebrity. He wasn't willing to accept the inevitability of death. On an earlier trip across the Sahara, Frank thought he saw the devil. This time, he met him.

A friend of mine I had introduced to Frank more than 10 years ago, landscape painter Joan Sutherland, received one of Frank's last letters on October 11, a week before he was murdered: "Joanie - Even in Timbuktu, you are not forgotten. I took 6 months and 3,000 km riding to get across the first country, Mauritania. Five countries still to go. Sahara feels endless. I long for life to be so endless too."

Epilogue:

A couple of years after my 2,000 word *Death of a Filmmaker* was published in the Ottawa Citizen I was approached by Montreal filmmaker Korbett Matthews to make a documentary about Frank and his murder on the Sahara. Matthews used a lot of my extensive 'Frank' archive and the narrative of my *Death of a Filmmaker* to help shape a powerful film about Frank. I ended up narrating quite a bit of Matthew's documentary, *The Man Who Crossed the Sahara*. It was screened at film festivals around the world, and from time to time appears on television. On the strength of Matthew's film, the director of the Canadian Film Institute and Carleton Film Studies instructor, Tom McSorley, and film writer, editor Mike Hoolboom asked me to expand my 2,000 word *Death of a Filmmaker* into a 13,000 word *Saltwater Road to the Sahara*, and together with my photo archive and many postcards Frank had sent me from around the world, we published a book written by various artists, filmmakers, writers, friends, family and film critics called *Life Without Death: The Cinema of Frank Cole*. And so Frank's legend lives on. There has even been talk about doing a feature film about his brave, obsessive, mysterious life.

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