

KINO *CULT*

HELL'S HIGHWAY

The True Story Of Highway Safety Films



United States | 2003 | 92 minutes | Not Rated

Press Contact:

Kate Patterson – kpatterson@kinolorber.com

Juan Medina – jmedina@kinolorber.com

Booking Contact:

George Schmalz – gschmalz@kinolorber.com

LOGLINE

This morbidly curious exploration of the near-mythical driver education films shown to American schoolchildren in the 1960s and '70s documents an obscure chapter of cinema history where high school kids were force-fed color footage of careless driving's dark consequences: blood-stained wreckage, injured bodies, and fresh corpses.

CRITICAL RESPONSE TO 2003 RELEASE

"Like the movies it samples, *Hell's Highway* is viscerally unsettling."

J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*

"Evokes a pre-seatbelt era of highway carnage and celluloid tough love."

Maitland McDonagh, *TV Guide*

"I was upset for days...When is the benefit of instilling caution worth the price of the nightmare?"

David Edelstein, NPR's *Fresh Air*

"Unnerving and much fun."

A.O. Scott, *The New York Times*

"A Lynchian view of the nightmarish underbelly of middle America."

Travis Crawford, *Filmmaker Magazine*

"Genuinely gripping slices of middle-Americana, plus the occasional unforgettable sight."

Jami Bernard, *New York Daily News*

SYNOPSIS

Hell's Highway: The True Story of Highway Safety Films is a morbidly curious exploration of the near mythical driver education films shown to American schoolchildren in the 1960s and '70s. Produced between 1959 and 1979 in Mansfield, Ohio, films such as *Signal 30* (1959), *Wheels of Tragedy* (1963) and *Mechanized Death* (1961) encouraged safe driving by force-feeding high school kids color footage of careless driving's dark consequences: blood-stained wreckage, injured bodies, fresh corpses.

These traumatic films disappeared from the American classroom and assumed an almost mythical status in the minds of those who had seen them (or only heard of them). Eager to investigate this obscure chapter of cinema history, filmmaker and restorationist Bret Wood compiled these vanishing artifacts of grim Americana into a feature, and interviewed those responsible for this misguided educational movement.

Wood carefully interweaves clips from Highway Safety Films' productions (as well as adjacent educational films) so that the viewer is given an unflinching look not just at the bloody horror of the roadside carnage, but also the stark drama of police and rescue workers responding to fatal accidents, and captures the unexpected beauty of the twisted wreckage of massive midcentury automobiles, surrounded by grieving families and curious onlookers.

Hell's Highway features interviews with surviving filmmakers of the Highway Safety Foundation (all of whom are now deceased), to better understand how (and why) they made these films, and what brought about the eventual collapse of the organization. It also features historians such as archivist Richard Prelinger and cult movie guru Mike Vraney (Something Weird), who help situate the gruesome classroom films into the fabric of 20th-century pop culture.

But ***Hell's Highway*** is not merely a nostalgic trip down a corpse-strewn memory lane, it explores the psychology of self-appointed educators whose reckless idea it was to teach children by exposing them to trauma. Perhaps more shocking than the graphic accident films are those that employed the same "tough love" tactics on other topics. Emboldened by the success of the driver education film, the Highway Safety Foundation confronted society's darkest fears and taboos, as

in the 1964 film *The Child Molester*. In the most shocking twist of ***Hell's Highway***, the Foundation used their cameras to aid the police in identifying homosexuals in an elaborate sting operation conducted in a public restroom in downtown Mansfield, Ohio.

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Hell's Highway: The True Story of Highway Safety Films was originally filmed in a combination of 16mm and standard definition video. In the 20+ years since its release, Wood has been gaining access to better elements of the original classroom films, in the hopes of creating a version optimized for theatrical and HD presentation. In cooperation with the Library of Congress, Wood has performed full 2K and 4K restorations of many films, working from first-generation 16mm film elements.

This new "Second Edition" of ***Hell's Highway*** has undergone extensive audio restoration, includes footage and images not seen in the original release, and has an original musical score by Rob Gal.

FILMS FEATURED IN ***HELL'S HIGHWAY***

Films produced by the Highway Safety Foundation

Carrier or Killer (1965)
The Child Molester (1964)
Drive and Survive (1977)
Go, Sober and Safe (1966)
A Great and Honorable Duty (1965)
Highways of Agony (1969)
Mechanized Death (1961)
Options to Live (1979)
The Paperhangers (1966)
The Shoplifter (1965)
Signal 30 (1959)
There's a Message in Every Bottle (1977)

The Third Killer (1966)
Wheels of Tragedy (1963)

Films produced by other companies

And Then There Were Four (1950)
The David Hall Story (1963)
Death on the Highway (1965)
Is This Love? (1957)
The Joker (1960)
Last Date (1950)
The Last Prom (1954)
The Last Prom (1980)
Manners in School (1958)
Marijuana (1968)
Noontime Nonsense (1950)
Safety Belt for Susie (1962)
The Snob (1958)
Teenicide (1950)
We Drivers (1936)

...and more

FILMMAKER BIO

After completing his first film, ***Hell's Highway***, in 2003, Wood wrote and directed several narrative features, including *Psychopathia Sexualis* (2006), *The Unwanted* (2014), and *Those Who Deserve to Die* (2019). He also wrote and directed two podcast dramas for iHeart Media: *The Control Group* (2018, 2024) and *The Seventh Daughter* (2020).

Wood's interest in ephemeral and controversial cinema has led him to produce the 20-volume Blu-ray collection *Forbidden Fruit: The Golden Age of the Exploitation Film*. He has also restored such outré films as *Bunny Yeager's Nude Camera*, Irving Klaw's *Teaserama* and *Varietease* (starring Bettie Page), and the fantastic films of Mario Bava, Jess Franco, Jean Rollin, and Pete Walker.

A champion of underrepresented filmmakers, Wood has produced the releases of *The Complete Oscar Micheaux*, *The Jewish Soul: Classics of Yiddish Cinema*, *Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers*, *Pioneers of African American Cinema*, and such noteworthy LGBTQ+ films as Pat Rocco's *Drifter*, *The Queen*, and *Kamikaze Hearts*.