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The Saga of Super 8

How the Wheel of Fortune Goes 'Round

BY DONNA CAMERON

SUPER 8 FILM WAS DEVELOPED IN THE 1960S BY the Eastman Kodak Company's research division. Hailed as a superlative communications tool when it was launched in 1965, Super 8 was expected to do for the film industry what the paperback had done for publishing.

Regular 8mm had been introduced in 1932. The brainchild of George Eastman, 8mm was made by splitting 16mm, the home-movie format of the 1930s, in half. By the early 1960s, consumer demands for improvements in sound and picture quality gave rise to the development of the professional grade, more flexible Super 8 format. With perforations smaller and closer to the edge, Super 8 film had 50 percent more frame space, allowing for the placement of a soundtrack.

The economical Super 8 prints were ubiquitous. Where 8mm had been targeted only at nontheatrical filmmakers, Super 8 was promoted for industrial, educational, and home use. Super 8 films were shown on most commercial jet flights. Plus, independent filmmakers got into the act.

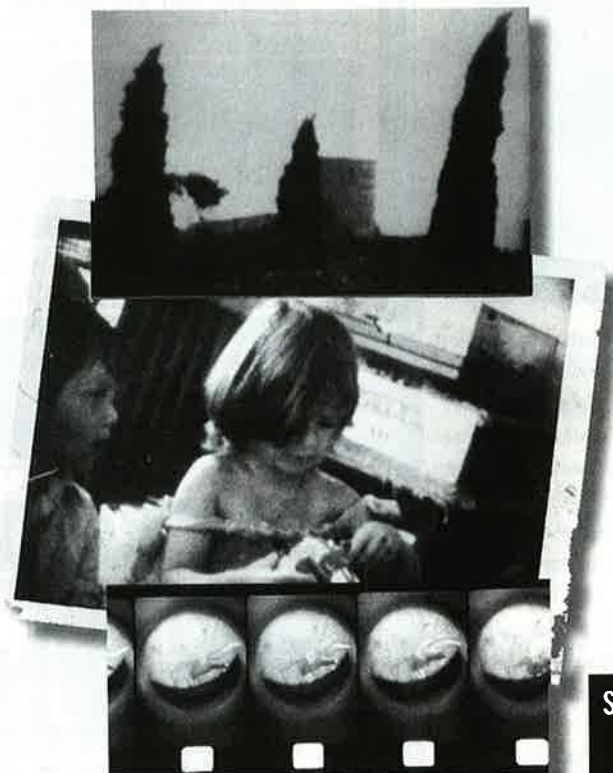
Today, 23 years later, everything from art films to ad campaigns continue to rely on Super 8 film as an image acquisition format. The small gauge has a unique, inimitable palette and texture. Even so, Kodak moved to discontinue production of Super 8 sound cartridges and many print stocks a few years ago. This has put 8mm filmmaking on the endangered species list.

"How can you take this away from people?" says Jytte Jensen, curator of film and video at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Jensen, along with San Francisco Cinematheque director Steve Anker, has curated "Big as Life: An American History of 8mm Films," perhaps the most comprehensive 8mm retrospective to date. It's a sad irony that major arts institutions like MoMA and the Whitney Museum of American Art are recog-

nizing the small-gauge formats like Super 8 just as Kodak is phasing them out.

IN THE 1960S AND 1970S, SUPER 8 PRODUCTION equipment flooded the market. The first Super 8 cameras, like the 8mm cameras before them, were silent, but the technology grew by leaps and bounds. In 1973, one year after the first crystal sync Super 8 system was developed by MIT professor and documentary filmmaker Richard Leacock, Kodak introduced its first line of single-system Super 8 sound cameras: the Kodamatic. Around the same time, the world's first VCR arrived. The VP-1, a compact device for the time, gave video output from a reel-to-reel Super 8 player to a television mon-

itor. VP-1 was used as an educational tool, both in classrooms and in sales demonstrations. As major manufacturers' sales forces shifted over to the Super 8 format, portable Super 8 sound projectors were developed. A compact processing machine, the Kodak Supermatic 8 processor, enabled reporters and others on the road to shoot and access newly processed film in a matter of minutes.



Top to bottom: *Cezannescape #1 & 2* by Gary Adlestein; *Notes After Long Silence* by Saul Levine; and *Mantilla* by Julie Murray — all included in MoMA's two-year exhibition of small-format film. Courtesy MoMA

SUPER 8 WAS EXPECTED TO DO FOR THE FILM INDUSTRY WHAT THE PAPERBACK HAD DONE FOR PUBLISHING

At the time, video equipment was not a viable means of communication: electronic equipment was still bulky in size and clumsy in design.

"Low cost Super 8 sound cameras are so much less expensive and more flexible than portable color video cameras, that it seems likely film will retain a competitive edge over videotape facilities for the indefinite future," wrote Rodger J. Ross, in his article "The Development of Professional Super-8," published in the November 1975 issue of *American Cinematographer*.

Although sixties' visionaries had predicted that Super 8 movies would sell like hot LPs and be circulated widely by public libraries,

the infant "paperback film" industry choked on manufacturers' cupidity. Companies here and abroad rushed to make competing—and incompatible—cartridge projection systems. No care was taken to address the not-so-mechanically-inclined public, nor was any effort made to educate them about the interchangability in cartridge projection systems. People were baffled and sales dropped. As a result, the resources and incentive to further develop them also dropped, which crippled the growth of Super 8 as a viable commercial communications medium.

But meanwhile, Super 8 was meeting its more celebrated destiny, becoming a tool for artists, home-movie buffs, and the counterculture. In the sixties and seventies, virtually everyone made Super 8 films. Marcel Duchamp, then living in New York, tried his hand. The late poet Allen Ginsberg kept a Super 8 diary. Steven Spielberg, then in high school, first worked in Super 8. Screenwriter Jeremiah Newton, a major player in the Andy Warhol Factory scene, vividly recalls those times. "Nobody had any money, so of course they had to work with the simple things, [like] 8mm. In those days, every middle-class family had an 8mm camera. It was a kind of status symbol.

"In the 1950s, a gay director named Avery Willard emerged," Newton continues. "His 8mm films had a budget of maybe \$10. A lot of people—usually drag queens with a flair for drama—ended up in them. Mario Montez, who went on to star in Andy Warhol's *Banana*, was in many of them." But "Willard's films probably no longer exist," Newton believes. "He was very paranoid and often, after he screened them for us, they'd wind up in the garbage.

"Andy Warhol did see many of these films. And he bought some of them," he continues. "These 8mm films went on to shape the aesthetic of a generation and paved the way for the likes of Jack Smith, the Kuchar brothers, and Warhol, among others."

Mike Kuchar claims that his initial experience with 8mm filmmaking "disembodied" him. "8mm was home-movie stuff. It was cheap. It was impressionistic. Our mother gave us an 8mm camera for our twelfth birthday. My brother George and I told stories with it," he says.

The Kuchars, who influenced a generation of underground filmmakers, say they related to Hollywood movies of that time and considered it their job to make their own "stars". The

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brothers agree that working in 8mm brought them a special freedom in directing.

"In regular 8 film, the frame is so small that you drop all pre-tensions of pictorial formalities;

you know they won't even be recorded," says Mike Kuchar. "You focus on the action, on your story, and your stars as they move directly through the camera lens, onto the film."

"You are forced to shoot from your guts," adds George Kuchar. Perhaps this is one reason Super 8 has been a presence in introductory film production courses for so many years (in addition to its low cost). But that's all changing. Nick Tanis, associate professor of film and television at New York University, says their Super 8 freshman production course, initiated in 1971, was phased out about 10 years ago. Super 8 cameras, once available for \$150, now cost \$400 and up. "We can't ask students to buy them. And they are too fragile for us to provide and maintain," he explains.

Gary Adlestein, professor of English and film at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania, says he still uses Super 8 in his first- and second-year production courses. But Adlestein, also a filmmaker, is currently trying to make the switch from small-gauge film to small-gauge video. However, "I always go back to film," he admits. "Maybe it's because I can't work with the frame in the same way in video."

IT WAS IN 1996 THAT KODAK FIRST ANNOUNCED its decision to eliminate all 200-foot cartridges and pre-stripped sound stock. In his announcement, however, James MacKay, Kodak's manager of marketing programs in its Professional Motion Imaging Division, added that Kodak did plan to continue production of 50-foot silent cartridges of Kodachrome Type A, B&W Tri-X, and Plus-X—all silent, reversal camera stocks—"as long as there is reasonable market demand."

Fledgling lobbies calling for Kodak to reinstate manufacture of pre-stripped Super 8 sound film are consistently headed off by Kodak officials, maintains Toni Treadway, a Boston-based 8mm film-to-video transfer specialist. "They insist that Kodak no longer has the capability to stripe Super 8 film," she says. "The mystery remains of who made the decision, when, where, why and exactly what happened to the equipment for producing pre-stripped Super 8 film."

Bob Fisher, a writer specializing in film and video technology, has a more sanguine outlook on Kodak's decision. "What everyone wants

**TODAY, NASA
IS PROBABLY KODAK'S
BIGGEST SUPER 8
CUSTOMER.**

film for missile tracking. NASA is probably Kodak's biggest Super 8 customer. When they shoot missiles in the air, they apparently have twenty or thirty cameras on them, and they can read the smoke trails and do other forms of analysis."

In addition, he notes, "Digital video cameras have arrived, and the vast majority of commercial feature films are posted digitally. Today, film of any gauge is a mere acquisition format on one end and presentation vehicle on the other."

Even so, 8mm lovers are fighting back. John Schwind of Dixon, California, manufactures his own regular 8mm and double Super 8 film stocks. Allegedly the only source of regular 8mm film in the world, he has advocated that we "not forget our roots in 8mm film." Super 8 Sound Film Lab in L.A. is now taking 35mm stocks and slicing them down into three reels of Super 8 cartridges, so filmmakers now have the option of using black-and-white negative 7248, 7293, 200 ASA, and 100 ASA tungsten film.

What's more, 8mm aficionados can be found in the younger generation. Jeff Tiu and Chris Lytwyn, film undergraduates at NYU, think there are many in their generation who would prefer to work in 8mm rather than video.

"I shot Super 8 film in high school," Tiu says. "At the time it was my only option for film. I felt like it was a level up from video. Super 8 is a link to 16mm for me, and I associate it more with the pleasure of filmmaking and the sheer fun of shooting film."

Chris Lytwyn agrees. "Basically, I shot—and still shoot—Super 8 film by choice. I felt Super 8 was more antiquated and had an ethereal, old-time look. I especially love Kodachrome—the rich, beautiful palette. The grain structure is almost pointillist, very painterly. It's something you couldn't get with video, which has a pixilization of the image rather than a graininess to it. Also, with film you get variations on the emulsion from batch to batch. That's something I love. With video, on the other hand, every cassette looks the same."

There is no doubt that filmmakers like these will make a serious commitment to the survival of 8mm film. Whether that will be enough remains to be seen.

Donna Cameron is a New York-based artist, educator, and writer.

now is fast films," he says. "I think the main reason Kodak continues to offer this is for amateurs and for schools. And the government uses a lot of reversal

Small format film hits



"This is a rich field. It's almost like being an archaeologist. The more we dug, the more information

turned up," observes Jytte Jensen, co-curator of "Big as Life: An American History of 8mm Films." This major exhibition, held at the Museum of Modern Art, will continue for over two years—from February 1998 to December 1999—making it the longest-running exhibition in the museum's history.

In assembling this exhibition, which features the work of more than 110 American experimental filmmakers, the curators intended to investigate the fragile, ephemeral nature of 8mm film, an aesthetic that has intrigued artists for the past four decades. Ken Jacobs, Carolee Schneemann, Stan Brakhage, Joyce Wieland, Willie Varela, Paul Sharits, Mike and George Kuchar, Vito Acconci, Gary Adlestein, Pelle Lowe, and Saul Levine are among the earlier generations represented. Newer work by a younger generation is also being shown, including Owen O'Toole, Luther Price, Tom Rhoads, the Philadelphia collective called silt, Jacalyn White, and Anne Robertson, among others.

Jensen and co-curator Steve Anker spent seven years combing the U.S. for 8mm prints and artifacts. Anker says they narrowed this exhibition down to American films ("although there certainly is a strong 8mm following in Germany, Japan, and England") because the U.S. is where the majority of 8mm films were made.

MoMA has assigned the Warner Brothers Communications

the big time at MoMA

screening room to the event. The room, rarely open to the public, is on the fifth floor of the museum near the MoMA Circulating Film Library and the Film Study Center. It seats 50 people and has the short house measurement necessary to give 8mm film its correct "throw" from projector to screen. Altogether there will be more than 50 programs: some 10 solo shows and 40 group exhibits. 8mm videos will be screened, but only in conjunction with the 8mm films.

"The group shows are thematically designed, but more often the schemes are facilitated by like and dissimilar treatments of the film [emulsion] itself," says Jensen. "There's something about the small format that creates an intimacy, makes the artist work in a more personal way."

Because Kodak has discontinued so many of its 8mm stocks, it is increasingly difficult to find a lab with the machinery and chemistry to make prints. As a result, many of the films in "Big as Life..." are first-generation prints or camera original. "There is a problem preserving these films," says Anker, "and a problem finding enough good equipment for the projection."

The continuing love affair with 8mm is evident in the sold-out weekly screenings, as is the fact that the exhibition catalog is already in its second edition. "The reaction to these films has been one of overwhelming support," says Jensen. "It's been a real event. After the show, audiences are hanging out, discussing the films. And it's a complete mix of generations. But Steven and I are very pleased. It's progressing beyond our wildest dreams."

— DONNA CAMERON



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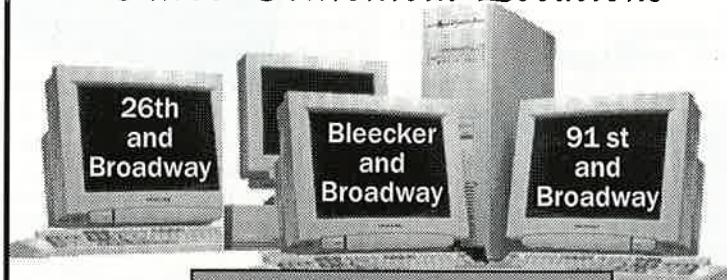
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