

the

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# independent FILM & VIDEO monthly

## SPECIAL ISSUE

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Trinh T. Minh-ha

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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.

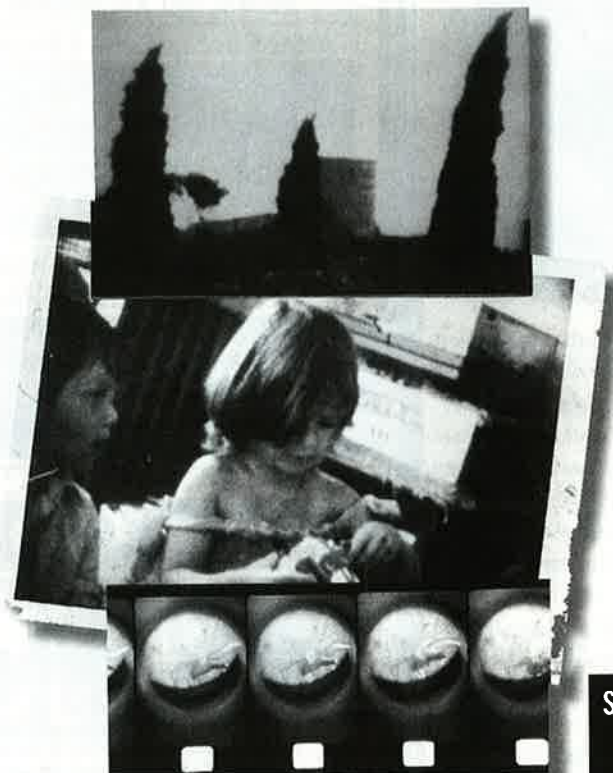
Today, 23 years later, everything from art films to ad campaigns continue to rely on Super 8 film as an image acquisition format. The small gauge has a unique, inimitable palette and texture. Even so, Kodak moved to discontinue production of Super 8 sound cartridges and many print stocks a few years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