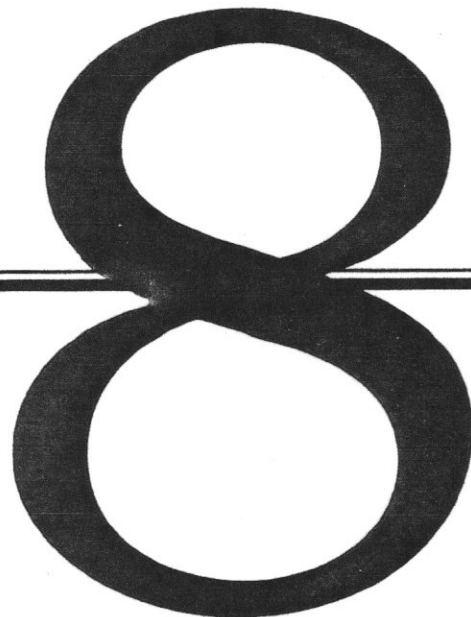


# IS SUPER ♦



by Maureen Ryan

Is Super 8 dead? Is it time to ring the death knell for this little piece of Kodak film history? Will the format survive into the 1990s? "Has video killed the Super 8 film star?"

"Definitely not," according to a recent poll of various filmmakers, transfer facilities and rental companies. "There are certain signs that are very favorable," explains Guy Holt, workshop instructor and film consultant at Super 8 Sound, a rental house for Super 8 film equipment with offices in Cambridge, MA and Burbank, CA. "One indication of a secure future for Super 8 lies in the fact that Kodak has not discontinued any Super 8 film stocks. In fact, they recently discontinued 4-X in 16mm Reversal but *not* in the Super 8 format." Richard Petrosino, also of Super 8 Sound adds, "Kodak cannot discontinue film stocks while a manufacturer is still making cameras for that format. And with the Beaulieu company actively making Super 8 cameras, Kodak would open themselves up to litigation if they pulled the film stock now."

Holt points out that "Kodalux (the only U.S. Kodak processing lab for Super 8) just gave Super 8 Sound an exclusive overnight processing arrangement for our customers. That level of commitment is unprecedented. The processing arm of Kodak is taking a more professional stance towards Super 8."

"We've been asked about the end of Super 8 for years now," quips Toni Treadway and Bob Brodsky, authors of the book *Super 8 in the Video Age* and owners of Brodsky and Treadway, a film-to-tape transfer facility in Somerville, MA. "We look and point at Regular 8 which was 'killed off' when Kodak introduced Super 8. That was twenty five years ago and you can *still* buy Regular 8 stock. We don't know how long Super 8 is going to live. Nobody knows. We think as long as people keep shooting it."

To provide a brief history of the origins of Super 8mm one has to go back to the mid-1930s when Regular 8 was first introduced. It was manufactured by literally splitting 16mm film in half. Then in 1965, Kodak announced the invention of Super 8 which, by moving the sprocket holes and making them smaller, gave greater width to the film. This endowed Super 8 with much more resolution and allowed it to record more visual information.

Another boon to Super 8/Regular 8 was the invention of the color film stock called Kodachrome. With this film, Kodak linked a very fine grain with the ability to capture color that offered an incredible range and vibrancy. As Treadway explains, "it is a black and white film stock - essentially like the Technicolor process - with sandwiched layers of film. When it is shown, it looks like color to the human eye." Because of this process, Kodachrome "holds" its colors for

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a very long time. Film shot on Kodachrome forty years ago often looks much better than Ektachrome (another film stock) shot 20 years later.

The advent of Super 8 began the home movie craze that swept the nation in the 1960s and early 1970s. With the advent of "single system sound" in 1973 (the capacity to record synchronous sound directly onto the film strip), the format became a viable

movie making medium for film students and filmmakers in the U.S. and abroad. Its affordability and visual quality made it a viable alternative to the more expensive (3-5 times as much) 16mm film. It became possible for filmmakers with a small budget to produce film projects. Brodsky and Treadway reminisce about the many documentary commissions they received during the Bicentennial year. "We would be given a budget of \$1000 for a 30 minute film. That's it. It was an invitation to *shoot* and the only format that was accessible was Super 8."

For all of its benefits, Super 8 is not without its imperfections. The sound is recorded 18 frames *before* the picture and so makes precise editing of sound and picture together rather difficult. In addition, the film stock is a reversal film and so what you get back from the film lab is what you get *period*. There is no work print available for editing purposes (although it is possible to make a "third generation" print if necessary.) These factors were the primary reasons for Super 8 languishing in the "amateur" film category for so many years.

And with the coming of age of affordable, portable consumer video in the early 1980s, Super 8 began to decline rapidly as the choice for family home movie recording. With video camcorders popping up like paparazzi at the Cannes Film Festival, VHS cameras began to be seen at Disney World, at high school graduations, capturing the one-year old's birthday party and traveling

# DEAD?

abroad with tourists. Super 8 cameras were being offered for sale in the classified sections of local newspapers and being sold at suburban yardsales as people started trading in their old film cameras for the new video technology.

But with this *death* by video there was also a *rebirth* by video. Videotape could now be used as a post-production "savior" for Super 8. By transferring "film to tape," Super 8 could overcome its drawbacks and become a more accepted format in its new reincarnation as video. Not only was the editing process hugely facilitated (cutting Super 8 can be a tricky business) but the visceral quality of the image is vastly superior to that recorded directly onto tape. With the proliferation of film/video festivals, filmmakers who shot in Super 8 and transferred to tape could now be represented and compete for awards.

Broadcast quality transfers enabled Super 8 finally to be shown on television. And the invention of the magnetic fullcoat recorder made it possible to record "double system" Super 8. By using a cable between camera and recorder or running both at crystal sync, audio was recorded separately from the picture much like the relationship between a Nagra and camera in the 16mm and 35mm formats. This enabled the filmmaker to mix several soundtracks and obtain high quality audio in the post-production phase.

But it was the Super 8 explosion that occurred in the advertising world that really gave the medium the shot in the arm it needed. By the late 1980s, companies like Nike, Honda, Canada Dry, McDonalds and Burger King were featuring the "Super 8 film look" in their TV commercials. The grainy, shaky camera technique was "in" and \$2,000-a-day cinematographers were reaching for the tiny Super 8 camera to give them the footage they needed.

Today, audiences are seeing Super 8 cropping up in many different areas. Music

videos use the small film gauge with regularity. Paula Abdul utilized grainy black and white Super 8 for her "Straight Up" video last summer, while Guns 'N Roses chose to shoot the color film stocks for their video of "Sweet Child O' Mine." Calhoun Productions in New York just completed a new Marianne Faithful video featuring Super 8 footage as well.

Recently, Super 8 could be seen in the opening sequence of this fall's box office hit *Black Rain*. As Guy Holt relates, "The filmmaker was going for a 'look.' They wanted to mount the camera on the handlebars of a motorcycle for a live-action sequence with actor Michael Douglas. They could *not* have gotten that shot with a 35mm camera."

That film's director of photography Jan De Bont is now shooting another feature film, a contemporary thriller called *Flatliners*, and will be making extensive use of an anamor-

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phic lens for shooting widescreen Super 8. As Phil Vigeant of Super 8 Sound explains De Bont is using the film for two purposes. The widescreen black and white "is supposed to represent the perspective of a video camera. De Bont has done this before, using video, but it has a certain look when blown up to film that he doesn't like. Super 8 will give him the look that he wants when it goes to the big

screen, because it will probably go to 70mm prints. It's an aesthetic judgement."

"The other use relates to having the camera very close to the subject, filling the film frame with the face. You get a certain depth perception in the shot with Super 8 and it still looks like a 35mm shot in terms of grain - there's virtually no difference in grain with Kodachrome 40 when blown up to 35mm."

Derek Jarman, the British independent filmmaker photographs his films almost exclusively in Super 8. In post-production, he edits on video and then blows the video up to 35mm film for theatrical release. Like De Bont's photography, Jarman's decision to use Super 8 is more for aesthetic than for financial reasons.

But when tight budgets are a major concern, Super 8 can be very useful for filmmakers wanting to make their first feature film. With the average Hollywood film budgeted at the \$10 million mark, getting the big break into feature filmmaking becomes a near impossible challenge for first-time directors. Several individuals are turning to Super 8 as their way of making their own self-financed feature films.

Mark Pirro made his feature *A Polish Vampire in Burbank* for a mere \$2500 and it has since gone on to gross over \$500,000 in videocassette sales. With the recent sale of his film to the USA Network for \$40,000, Pirro is now making his next Super 8 feature *Curse of the Queerwolf*.

By keeping production budgets down, many filmmakers are now able to make feature length films in Super 8, transfer directly to video, sell 1/2" cassettes to video stores and make a large enough profit to finance their next film. This seems to be a formula that has worked particularly well for films in the horror genre. *Ozone Attack of the Red Neck Mutants*, *Attack of the B-Movie Monsters*, *Gore Met Zombie Chef From Hell*, and

*Desperate Teenage Love Dolls* are just some of the more obscure titles that have joined the growing list of potential cult film classics made this way.

And now with the recent release of Armand Gazarian's *The Game of Survival*, Super 8 has also crossed over into the action/adventure genre. As Vigeant explains "*Game* represented a pretty big milestone. Super 8 keeps integrating its way into all these areas where other people don't believe it belongs."

For independent filmmaker Lisa Monroe, cost and aesthetics have been the reasons for her to shoot most of her projects solely or partially in Super 8. Her latest work, *Of Snakes, Moons and Frogs* is a 30 minute experimental documentary about matriarchal societies, pre-biblical civilizations and the goddess religion. In praising Super 8, Monroe cites two factors in particular. "It's affordable for a film image as opposed to more expensive 16mm. It's portability is a great plus. You can bring it with you anywhere and it is very inconspicuous. That affords you opportunities that you might not otherwise have."

She and her partner in the company Danger Video, Charles Jevremovic, won the Michael Nesmith Award in Music Video at the American Film Institute and produced a video called "Soul Soldier" for the band Throwing Muses. Shooting the piece in Super 8 and video, they created a "tension" that Monroe enjoys. "I like the texture between the two. Video is electronic, film is chemical. Video is really flat, while film is rich and has depth. I think the tension between the two can add another dimension to



Camera operator Mark Scott (r.) wrangles a Super 8 camera on the set of *Flatliners*, alongside Director of Photography Jan DeBont.

a project. I think that's why I go back and forth between the two mediums."

Is Super 8 what you need for your next production? As Treadway counsels, "Bob and I are advocates of using the appropriate media and using the smallest format that will do the job. But one should *only* use the small formats when they are *appropriate*." She cautions against using Super 8 purely as a cost-saving measure when a big production and professional crew and actors are involved. "If you do a true side-by-side budget for Super 8 vs. 16mm, the difference in the line item called film/videotape stock is *so* small overall. You have to wonder if the total savings is really

worth it." In other words, the real cost of movie-making is determined, not by the size of the film gauge, but by the size of the production.

But for many Super 8 is still the *only* way to get their film project made. Whether one is looking to make a feature length film or an independent short, Super 8 is often the sole medium that gives the filmmaker the opportunity to get their project into production and completed. For others, where budget is not a primary concern, the format is chosen for its unique physical and aesthetic qualities. Whatever the reason, it seems that for now, Super 8 is going to have a healthy and secure life in the future. ♦

## SUPER ♦ 8 FILM INFORMATION

### OVERNIGHT PROCESSING FOR SUPER 8

Super 8 Sound-Burbank is now offering overnight processing of Kodachrome 40 and Ektachrome 160 type A. Film delivered to our Burbank office by 1 O'Clock is usually available for pick-up by 1 O'Clock the next business day.

Super 8 Sound-Cambridge is now offering same day service on Black and White Super 8 on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday. Film delivered to Cambridge by 10 O'Clock is usually available for pick-up by 4 O'Clock that day.

Processing is \$7.50 per 50' and \$25.00 per 200'. Return shipping is \$5.00 UPS ground and \$10.00 UPS 2nd day and \$20.00 for overnight UPS.

For more information contact:

Super 8 Sound

2805 W. Magnolia Blvd., Burbank, CA 91505 (818) 848-5522

95 Harvey St., Cambridge, MA 02140 (617) 876-5876

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