

Production Slate

Super8 On the Big Screen



Right: The current range of professional color negative Super8 films available at Pro8mm. Below: The company's Classic Professional camera fitted with a 2.35:1 anamorphic lens.

by Giles Musitano

In the past few years, the film industry has shown growing interest in the teeniest of currently available film formats, one that has seldom been considered alongside 16mm and 35mm, its well-established kin. Professional Super8mm film has begun to find its way into many of today's high-tech motion pictures, without many viewers even realizing it.

The Super8 format is perhaps most often exploited to recreate the look of archive material or home movies, or to fashion flashbacks and dream sequences. However, the well-known characteristics of 8mm film are also

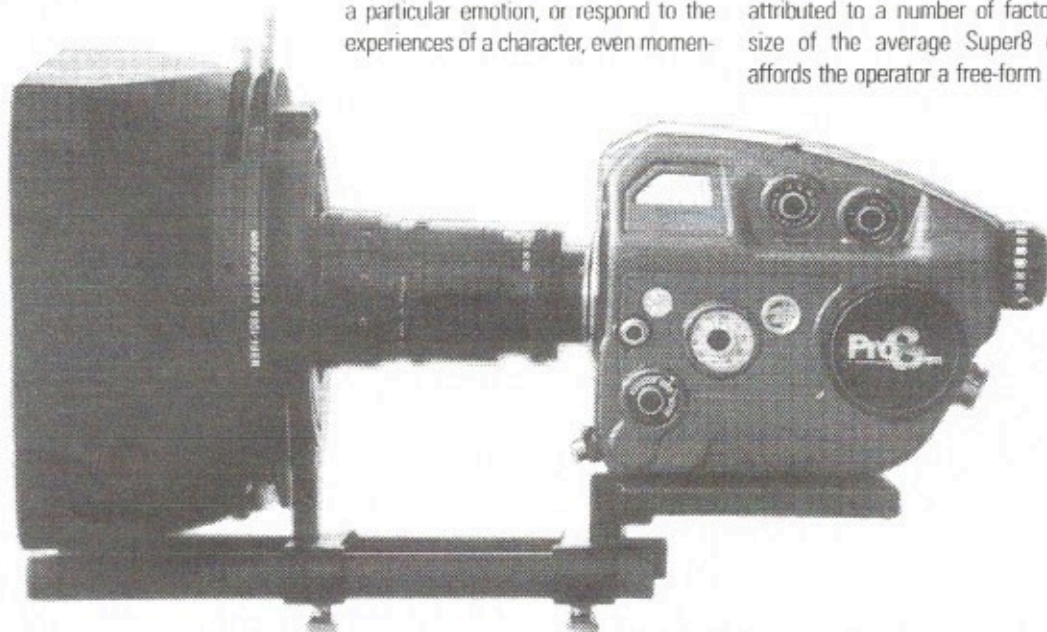
being used more and more frequently to conjure up the feel of a certain time and place, or of a character's state of mind, by presenting an alternative image quality to first-unit 35mm footage.

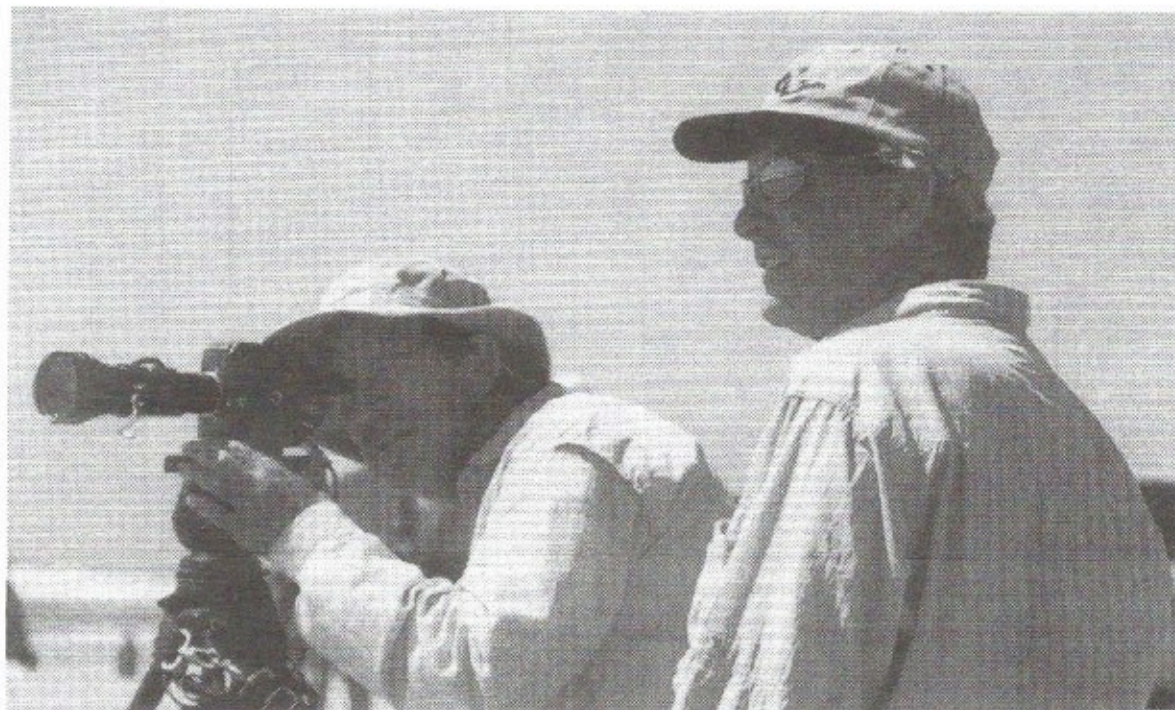
The organic, emotive qualities particular to 8mm material are perhaps the key to its popularity among contemporary directors. Handheld 8mm sequences captured today on professional color-negative emulsions have the ability to evoke a strange feeling of the timeless and personal. When intercut with the smooth, precise moves created via 35mm lock-offs, tracks and Steadicam shots, these contrasting visuals allow the audience to immediately jump into a different world, identify with a particular emotion, or respond to the experiences of a character, even momen-

tarily, in microscopic detail.

The company at which I serve as general manager Pro8mm, has provided equipment and stock, for a number of major Hollywood films, including *Flatliners* (in which all of the video-camera POV shots were shot on 8mm film), *JFK*, *Natural Born Killers*, *8mm*, *Contact*, *Red Corner*, *For Love of the Game*, *Simpatico*, *Varsity Blues*, *Selena*, *Why Do Fools Fall in Love* and *Armageddon*, as well as the more recent features *Pearl Harbor*, *Rock Star* and *Bones*. In some of these productions, 8mm sequences were used extensively throughout, and in others, just a few short clips were subtly intercut.

The popularity of Super8 can be attributed to a number of factors. The size of the average Super8 camera affords the operator a free-form style to





Pro8mm camera engineer Richard Cline (left) field-tests the Custom Classic camera in Los Angeles, under the supervision of Pro8mm owner Phil Vigeant.

exploit the use of handheld or POV shots. Shot at its native 18fps, the format can make viewers feel as though they're moving in a different time frame. The auto-iris opening and closing as the lighting conditions change (creating late exposure corrections) can give us a sense of something a bit more primitive than a perfectly calculated Panaflex T-stop. Or perhaps the 8mm grain structure downshifts our minds from "action" gear to "emotion" gear. Most likely, it's a combination of these characteristics that gives the format the ability to connect with an audience, making Super8 the movie industry's "instant special effect."

In 1997, director Gregory Nava's *Selena* (see *AC* May '97) became the first feature production to incorporate Pro8/79 film cut from Kodak's Vision 500T 5279 emulsion, and also one of the first movies to blow up the 8mm material to 35mm using a digital rather than optical process. Barbara Martinez-Jitner, visual-effects supervisor and second unit director for both *Selena* and Nava's *Why Do Fools Fall In Love*, spoke recently about the use of Pro8mm film in both features. "In *Selena*, we used Pro8 for some of the performance sequences, which we then graded at the telecine with Andy Warhol-style 'Pop Art' satu-

rated colors to create an 'alternative music video' look. We also shot some other very different sequences on Pro8 to create a kind of heightened reality, but we didn't want to use Kodachrome or Ektachrome because we weren't trying to recreate nostalgic, home-movie-style images; what we needed was an edgy, hard look to contrast with the 35mm. There was no need to use squeeze lenses or step effects, because the Pro8mm was good enough on its own to show a different point of view — an altered state. In some sequences, we desaturated all of the chroma except the red. That might seem to be a very bold thing to do on a major motion picture, but we wanted to take a few risks and maximize the effect of the Pro8mm footage, and audiences responded to it really well.

"In *Why Do Fools Fall In Love*, the main character, Frankie Lymon, was a heroin addict, and we needed a way to show his point of view when he was actually on heroin," she continues. "It didn't make sense to spend days creating a digital effect, because the film is set in the 1950s; we felt that audiences would respond better to a visual effect that didn't seem so out of place for the period. Actually, in a movie theater, 8mm film is

really more of a visual experience than a visual effect, because there's a language to the organic medium of Super8 that people respond to without even being aware of it."

However, Martinez-Jitner did go the digital-postproduction route on both features, avoiding the traditional path of optical printing from the 8mm direct to 35mm film. "In the telecine suite, you can play with color and grain very precisely to create a specific look for an individual character, time or place. We always transfer the Pro8 to digital video and then bump it up to 2K resolution so the image will hold together for theatrical screening."

If a director or cinematographer is looking for the qualities of 8mm film to intercut into a movie, what exactly are the arguments for shooting 8mm in the first place? Why not just shoot a more "reliable" format such as 16mm or 35mm and then alter the image in the effects suite?

One answer is that if you attempt to recreate an 8mm "look" with a larger format, you'll always end up spending hours in post trying to fake the aforementioned subtleties that make Super8 so unique. For instance, if you want a reel-end flare-out on your image, it might

be much quicker, easier and more realistic to pop out the Super8 cartridge between shots, exposing a few frames of film to the light, than to spend thousands applying a digital flare.

Secondly, one of the most common misconceptions about the Super8 format is that it is inherently unstable and risky to use, with poor registration (resulting in an unsteady image) and lenses that won't focus properly. These two criticisms are, of course, born out of the generations of amateur home-movie makers who were never concerned enough about the steadiness of their images to think about cleaning the camera's gate area, and who often relied on a non-reflex viewfinder image appearing in focus without thinking to focus the actual lens. Regardless of the fact that the Super8 pull-down claw is not a pin-registered mechanism (as in 35mm cameras), a good-quality Super8 camera with a clean gate and a properly collimated lens can produce images of a sufficiently reliable standard for digital transfer to 35mm, with the images retaining all of their 8mm characteristics.

Thirdly, a factor that often prevented the use of 8mm film in feature productions was the necessity of having a 35mm optical internegative made directly from the Super8 original. Because this laborious, hit-and-miss photographic process was constantly fraught with problems of amplified dirt, hairs and scratches, producers often forbade the inclusion of 8mm sequences. With new tape-to-film blow-ups, however, there is the opportunity at the initial stage to precisely control color, exposure, gamma, black level, grain, speed and aspect ratio, just as Martinez-Jitner discovered when working on *Selena*.

In addition, every frame on the time-coded digital edit master can be identified, so that only an exact amount of footage needs to be blown up to film, keeping the costs as low as possible. Ironically, feature films that include sequences shot on video (such as *The Blair Witch Project*) have pushed the technology in tape to film transfers to its present level and made it possible for

alternative media (including 8mm film) to play a more active role in 35mm production. Now that the industry has access to a wide choice of digital tape-to-film transfer facilities, the Super8-to-35mm process has instantly benefitted from an incredible jump in image flexibility.

Furthermore, the industry is by no means confined to the well-known Kodachrome and Ektachrome color reversal Super8 stocks, which have changed little in the last 35 years. Although these Super8 emulsions are still available, they both suffer from the inherent limitations of older low-speed reversal (positive) stocks, which have very little latitude and require good lighting conditions and precise exposures. In fact, many professional 8mm users have now discovered that Kodak's full range of 35mm color-negative motion-picture films, from 5245 EXR 50D to 5289 Vision 800T, are also available in Super8 cartridges, allowing not only the ability to shoot in a great variety of lighting conditions, but also the continuity of matching first- and second-unit film stocks.

This professional version of 8mm film was the brainchild of Phil Vigeant, owner of Pro8mm, which not only manufactures the cartridges but also accommodates many of the other requirements of major feature productions, including crystal-controlled 8mm cameras, in-house processing, and digital transfers at all frame ratios. In the remarkably advanced Hollywood of the 21st century, these innovations have turned the Super8 format into a viable option for contemporary feature films.

In a more general sense, it seems that alternative ways of realizing images are more often being considered at the point of shooting. This climate of renewed enthusiasm for in-camera techniques now offers exciting opportunities to creative cinematographers who want to produce innovative second-unit sequences. The accessibility of color-negative 8mm emulsions is playing an important role in expanding the visual palette of the modern motion picture.

Some time before *Traffic* was released, director Steven Soderbergh

had all of his 8mm home movies transferred at Pro8mm's digital suite. He was later quoted as saying that his inspiration for the look of *Traffic* came from watching his old Super8 films. Ironically, rather than shoot any Super8 material for the movie, Soderbergh relied on the 35mm format and the effects facility to create the look for him.

Traffic demonstrates the lengths to which directors will go to make their images look like 8mm, and the subsequent popularity of the film might well help revolutionize what the general public accepts on multiplex screens. The ongoing proliferation of the 8mm format is likely to be measured by Soderbergh's aesthetic for some time to come.

Just for fun, compare *Traffic*'s simulated 8mm look with the opening sequence of *Varsity Blues*, which was actually shot on 8mm. This exercise shows that the *Varsity Blues* filmmakers achieved an intriguing look at a tiny fraction of the cost. If the general public is ready to accept a full-length motion picture that looks like *Traffic*, perhaps we can look forward to the day when a feature is shot entirely on 8mm film. The only question is, which filmmaker will do it first? ■

be much quicker, easier and more realistic to pop out the Super8 cartridge between shots, exposing a few frames of film to the light, than to spend thousands applying a digital flare.

Secondly, one of the most common misconceptions about the Super8 format is that it is inherently unstable and risky to use, with poor registration (resulting in an unsteady image) and lenses that won't focus properly. These two criticisms are, of course, born out of the generations of amateur home-movie makers who were never concerned enough about the steadiness of their images to think about cleaning the camera's gate area, and who often relied on a non-reflex viewfinder image appearing in focus without thinking to focus the actual lens. Regardless of the fact that the Super8 pull-down claw is not a pin-registered mechanism (as in 35mm cameras), a good quality Super8 camera with a clean gate and a properly collimated lens can produce images of a sufficiently reliable standard for digital transfer to 35mm, with the images retaining all of their 8mm characteristics.

Thirdly, a factor that often prevented the use of 8mm film in feature productions was the necessity of having a 35mm optical internegative made directly from the Super8 original. Because this laborious, hit-and-miss photographic process was constantly fraught with problems of amplified dirt, hairs and scratches, producers often forbade the inclusion of 8mm sequences. With new tape-to-film blow-ups, however, there is the opportunity at the initial stage to precisely control color, exposure, gamma, black level, grain, speed and aspect ratio, just as Martinez-Jitner discovered when working on *Selena*.

In addition, every frame on the time-coded digital edit master can be identified, so that only an exact amount of footage needs to be blown up to film, keeping the costs as low as possible. Ironically, feature films that include sequences shot on video (such as *The Blair Witch Project*) have pushed the technology in tape-to-film transfers to its present level and made it possible for

alternative media (including 8mm film) to play a more active role in 35mm production. Now that the industry has access to a wide choice of digital tape-to-film transfer facilities, the Super8-to-35mm process has instantly benefitted from an incredible jump in image flexibility.

Furthermore, the industry is by no means confined to the well-known Kodachrome and Ektachrome color reversal Super8 stocks, which have changed little in the last 35 years. Although these Super8 emulsions are still available, they both suffer from the inherent limitations of older low-speed reversal (positive) stocks, which have very little latitude and require good lighting conditions and precise exposures. In fact, many professional 8mm users have now discovered that Kodak's full range of 35mm color-negative motion-picture films, from 5245 EXR 50D to 5289 Vision 800T, are also available in Super8 cartridges, allowing not only the ability to shoot in a great variety of lighting conditions, but also the continuity of matching first- and second-unit film stocks.

This professional version of 8mm film was the brainchild of Phil Vigeant, owner of Pro8mm, which not only manufactures the cartridges but also accommodates many of the other requirements of major feature productions, including crystal-controlled 8mm cameras, in-house processing, and digital transfers at all frame ratios. In the remarkably advanced Hollywood of the 21st century, these innovations have turned the Super8 format into a viable option for contemporary feature films.

In a more general sense, it seems that alternative ways of realizing images are more often being considered at the point of shooting. This climate of renewed enthusiasm for in-camera techniques now offers exciting opportunities to creative cinematographers who want to produce innovative second-unit sequences. The accessibility of color-negative 8mm emulsions is playing an important role in expanding the visual palette of the modern motion picture.

Some time before *Traffic* was released, director Steven Soderbergh

had all of his 8mm home movies transferred at Pro8mm's digital suite. He was later quoted as saying that his inspiration for the look of *Traffic* came from watching his old Super8 films. Ironically, rather than shoot any Super8 material for the movie, Soderbergh relied on the 35mm format and the effects facility to create the look for him.

Traffic demonstrates the lengths to which directors will go to make their images look like 8mm, and the subsequent popularity of the film might well help revolutionize what the general public accepts on multiplex screens. The ongoing proliferation of the 8mm format is likely to be measured by Soderbergh's aesthetic for some time to come.

Just for fun, compare *Traffic*'s simulated 8mm look with the opening sequence of *Varsity Blues*, which was actually shot on 8mm. This exercise shows that the *Varsity Blues* filmmakers achieved an intriguing look at a tiny fraction of the cost. If the general public is ready to accept a full-length motion picture that looks like *Traffic*, perhaps we can look forward to the day when a feature is shot entirely on 8mm film. The only question is, which filmmaker will do it first? ■