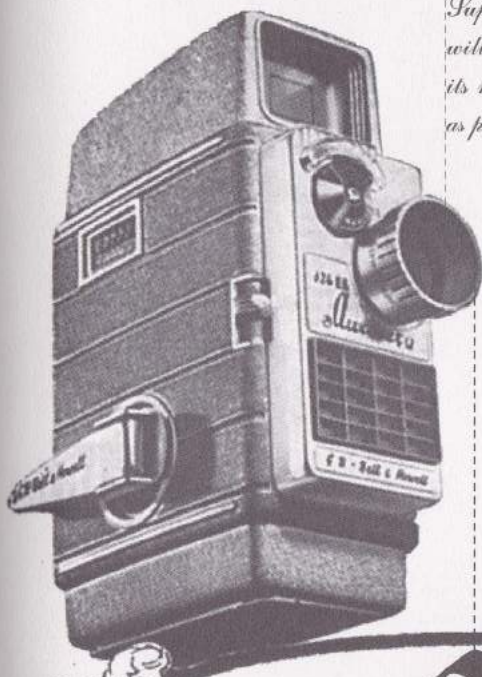


promiscuous

"Jean Cocteau anticipated Super 8 when he said: 'Film will only become an art when its materials are as inexpensive as pencil and paper.'"



8



Laura Hudson

When Louis Lumière declared in 1895 that "the cinematograph is an invention without a future" he was perhaps unable to anticipate what effect wide spread access to moving image media might have when the populace, as a majority rather than a minority, would have at their disposal the means to record, reflect, and analyse the world around them.

A match once struck is consumed but the consumption is not sterile

For the first half of the twentieth century film represented something more than a mechanical invention. "The cinema is an eye wide open on life, an eye more powerful than our own and which sees things we cannot see."² It projected the fundamental myths of the new metropolis; its paradigmatic technological superiority was seen as avant-garde in itself and heralded the fantastical transformation of the world toward a new social order. In the age of simulation, precisely with the advent of mechanical reproducibility, the art work multiplied its aura achieving an unparalleled influence over the 'real': the picture became 'truth' and the 'truth' of the picture had to be participated in.

Introducing the Commodity

The introduction of the 'snapshotters' in 1888 pioneered the development of photographic equipment specifically designed for 'amateur' use. It opened the way for the proliferation and commodification of the means to take part in the cultural and technical



revolution, mediated by the reproducible image. Less than ten years later, moving picture technology became available and was greeted with enthusiasm by those who wished to experiment with the potentials of this new medium. The enthusiasts became the motivators in the development, not only of 'amateur' technology but also of professional film technology, constantly pushing at the boundaries and limitations of equipment, inventing and honing their instruments and methods of production.

Between 1897-1949 invention was prolific, numerous perforation, gauge and technical designs appeared, including 35mm, 8mm, 9.5mm, 7.5mm, 28mm, 17.5mm and 16mm. The earliest substandard gauge was 17.5mm made by slicing 35mm down the middle. In 1923 Kodak Eastman introduced the first safety – as well as reversal – film; 16mm was standardised as the 'amateur' format and companies like Bell and Howell, Victor Animatograph and Eastman Kodak aggressively marketed their designs and cheaper reversal film to the upper classes as consumer toys. Despite the introduction of Double 8mm by Kodak in 1932 as a cheaper amateur format (made by splitting 16mm down the middle), home-movie making remained a largely leisure-class pursuit.

After World War II, the elevation of 16mm to semi-professional status left the home-movie field to 8mm. Automation of factories and

technological developments in streamlining of equipment set the wheels in motion for mass production of film equipment while post war prosperity made feasible the proliferation of narrow gauge cameras as mass-produced consumer items.³

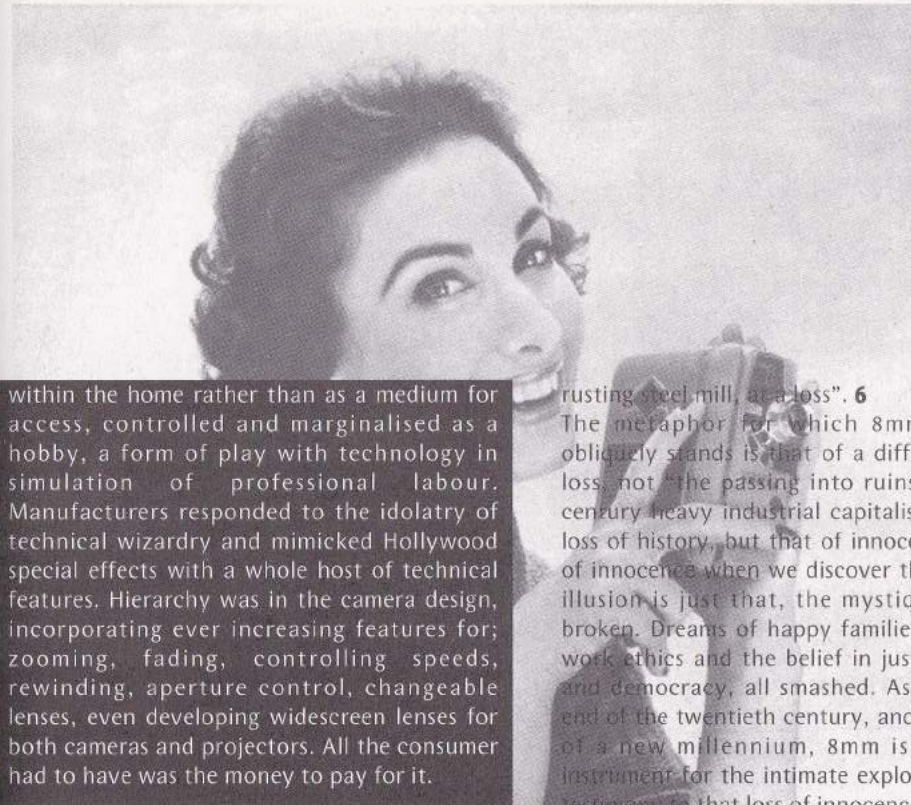
The post war period in the US was one of economic growth; disposable income increased and leisure time expanded. In conjunction, the nuclear family became the central focus in an attempt to cushion the wreckage of war, and to control the emancipation of women, that had begun during the war. It was the 'dawning of a new age' that welcomed any technical novelty reinforcing domestic ideologies and the illusions of democracy. These were the contributing factors towards the growth of home cinema, and the growth of interest in photographic hobbies. The democratisation of media is conditional however, conditional upon the participation in a mythic representation of the status quo, with the incorporated 'family' situated as its central narrative.

"Between 1950 and 1958, the size of the amateur photo market exploded by 112.5 per cent, the use of 8mm cameras swelled by 41 per cent, and shipments of 8mm cameras (mainly more automated Japanese cameras) increased by 201 per cent.....the enormous growth in the post war leisure market provided a powerful marketing incentive and social context that situated amateur film

technology as another manifestation of 'do-it-yourself' domestic ideology"⁴

In the UK the postwar period had relatively limited economic growth and was characterised by a profound feeling of dissatisfaction, rather than 'the dawning of a brave new world'. Britain looked to America, any Americana seemed an enterprising change and an attestation to the expansion of an 'affluent society'. "It is estimated that the UK alone, at one time, had a ciné enthusiast following of some 3 million."⁵

Super 8 first appeared in 1964-65 developed by Kodak, plunging into the already established consumer market for amateur media and into the context of cinema as an industry. Super 8's smaller sprocket holes allowed for a 50% larger frame as well as space for a magnetic stripe, bringing with it the possibility of synch-sound. The new format was designed to simplify the process, thereby reaching a broader market, whilst providing a full range of high-end technical features which simulated the excesses of the film industry. The aesthetics of predominant cinema reflect a political preference for the dominant hierarchy rather than an artistic one, based on the expenditure of vast sums of money which set it apart stylistically to ensure that no individual could rival such aesthetics without major corporate or government backing. Amateur film-making was firmly positioned as a consumer activity



within the home rather than as a medium for access, controlled and marginalised as a hobby, a form of play with technology in simulation of professional labour. Manufacturers responded to the idolatry of technical wizardry and mimicked Hollywood special effects with a whole host of technical features. Hierarchy was in the camera design, incorporating ever increasing features for; zooming, fading, controlling speeds, rewinding, aperture control, changeable lenses, even developing widescreen lenses for both cameras and projectors. All the consumer had to have was the money to pay for it.

Loss of Innocence

The creation of false hierarchies of technology in the amateur photographic market parallel divisions of class, wealth and social position. Marketing targeted middle and upper class, white, male, heterosexual groups, whose primary concern was the pursuit of a professionalism through which the illusion of inclusion could be granted. Super 8, however, was born into the formidable mass market of consumer electronics' disposable culture and into the mode of built-in obsolescence. "Having occupied the position as the primary metaphor of modernism for nearly its entire life, and having witnessed the passing of that modernism, film stands now, as an historical enterprise, like some dowager empress of a

rusting steel mill, at a loss".⁶

The metaphor for which 8mm film most obliquely stands is that of a different kind of loss, not "the passing into ruins of the 19th century heavy industrial capitalism",⁷ nor the loss of history, but that of innocence. The loss of innocence when we discover that the grand illusion is just that, the mystique has been broken. Dreams of happy families, proletarian work ethics and the belief in justice, freedom and democracy, all smashed. As we near the end of the twentieth century, and the dawning of a new millennium, 8mm is the perfect instrument for the intimate exploration of and testimony to that loss of innocence.

"Are home movies really about home? Or are those movies to home what canned laughter is to mirth? That is, home movies like canned laughter, are indexical signs which draw our attention to the illusive signifiers of shared good times and safe loving homes. Home movies are understood to be benign glimpses into a carefree time when both the children and parents were younger, their relationships unsullied by the complications of adult life. These ghosts of parents and siblings that drift out of projectors and shimmer across movie screens couldn't possibly ridicule, terrorise, beat and abandon. These are Kodak families, and Kodak families just smile, smile, smile."⁸



Treading the Cracks

While mainstream cinema, in the guise of entertainment, is contrived to designate the 'normal' within a culture of hierarchies, much of amateur filmmaking only seeks to replicate it; there exists, on the margins, a kind of cinema which aims to undermine the status quo. In a furious disassemblage of the sensible world nothing is straight.

The coherence of dominant culture is, after all, only an illusion, the veneer upon a seething mass of chaos. When the armour cracks, fissures run in every direction, opening channels and spaces that flourish from underground. The development of amateur media technology and its rapid expansion has provided a mechanism to speak from the margins, to develop an underground that is neither complicit nor reliant upon the mainstream but allows us to address predominant ideologies in as many ways as we need. "There is surely no consensus among narrow gauge film-makers but, no matter how disparate their work or contradictory its ambitions, every one of their homemade productions serves to criticise and oppose the prodigal values of the culture industry."⁹

To control access to the apparatus of image making is to control socio/historical documentation, through which our lives are recorded, fictionalised and fed back to us. "With Super 8, the gap between art and life can be closed a little, thereby making it possible to engage in a



the proof of the pudding
is in the eating —

Trading down the dominant hierarchies

We are sold an idea that the only way to participate in the dialogue of media culture is to operate in emulation of the dominant mode of production using the same codes. Fewer and fewer films seem to be made without funding, filmmakers seem to be crippled by the promise or lack of funding and rarely make work without it. In the UK the funding that is available for independent film is predominantly tied to television, work is created within conditions of compromise whether they be self imposed or regulated by the governing bodies. Television, for its part, has broadened its boundary markers of 'broadcast formats'. 8mm was originally one of a number of sources used for broadcast, primarily to collect outside broadcast news footage in situations too volatile or immediate to allow for the presence of crews and full production kits, despite this fact, amateur gauges have been used, as borders to confine any influx of broad-based

more intense visual dialogue with the world."10 The more power any group on the margins has to create and wield representations, the less each individual is required to be representative of the group to which s/he belongs. "Super 8 could potentially serve as the most realistic outlet for a true diversity of viewpoints to emerge without the requisite selling out and watering down of individual visions because of political or financial restrictions."11

representation. The amateur formats which only ten years ago, at the height of filmmaking activity by those previously marginalised, were deemed unsuitable are now perfectly acceptable again. Quality standards are transient, simply fictions designed to reinforce hierarchies. Television is arguably not interested in broadcasting footage that actually documents an event, but circumvents any notion of truth by repetition or nostalgia. The current open gate policy is perhaps more to do with the decentralisation of television and the economic pressures faced by the growing number of smaller production companies feeding into the larger project of television than to any idea about democratising media. Cheap TV is what it is about.

Graphic: Kelibia 12th International Festival of Non-professional Cinema





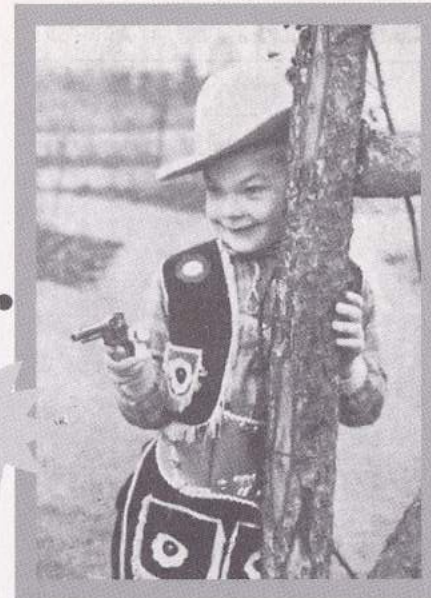
Interpreting 'reality'

Super 8, with the addition of sound, provided the perfect opportunity to develop a cinema which perhaps came closest to the ideas that *cinema verité* wished to address. Richard Leacock, a pioneer of cinema verité, who got his first taste of the possibilities of verité through working with the Scottish documentarist Ruby Grierson in the 1930's, tried to establish Super 8 as a viable alternative documentary practice in the 1960's along with other prominent filmmakers advocating Super 8 like Jean Rouch and Chris Marker but it was never widely adopted. The Chicago based filmmaker, Bill Stamets saw Super 8 as the only means through which to create a 'personal verité'. In Stamets work "the roles of journalist and ethnographer combine with the experimental filmmaker who uses film as a medium for personal expression.... For over a decade Stamets has followed 'the pack' of reporters, T.V. technicians, photographers, PR hacks and others who cover City Hall and endless campaign appearances, press conferences, parades, ethnic banquets, and hype events. Stamets films the events from the edge – literally and figuratively.....While others shoot the official proceedings, Stamets covers the before and after, the unguarded moment, the aside, and the unexpected."12

Louise Crawford, *Party For Winged Victory*, Super 8.



bang



bang

Michael Brynntrup, *Jeans - the Film*, 1986.



Interpreting 'reality' through the camera and editing, the resulting films shape our understanding of contemporary urban rituals. In the hands of Stamets, public ceremonies become culturally revealing events focused on every day people rather than the experts, pundits and spokes-people. This is kind of cinema which should be influencing the work of today, but as with many works in 8mm the lack of serious consideration by curators, theorists,

teachers and audiences and the current difficulties in distributing and exhibiting 8mm exclude it from any place in the media dialogue. Few filmmakers work exclusively in 8mm however. What 8mm has, above all other amateur formats, is its possibility to be incorporated into any other media. It is infused with a promiscuous nature which has the ability to transcend the limitations imposed upon it. The primary strength of the 8mm gauge is in the aspect of recording;





Noski Deville, *Counsel*, 1987.



mark waller, *chemical garden*.

light, portable, economic with simple mechanics that produce an image far superior to anything video is capable of, 8mm / Super 8 is the ideal shooting format and cameras can now be bought for as little as £5.

Margin as site of resistance

"The repression of Super 8 has only to do with politics and economics. Super 8 is far too accessible, far too easy to use and

inexpensive to produce. The media are controlled by a comparatively small number of people, who want to keep it that way. Perhaps it is important for Super 8 to separate from the dominant cinema....You don't break or alter a dominant hierarchy by imitating it; you must offer a compelling alternative. Having said that, I will admit that Super 8 is ironically, one possible way to emulate the forms and styles of the dominant cinema, because of its high quality and low cost. Perhaps the question is why anyone would want to do that."¹³

8mm is an ideal format to express interests which aren't represented by mass media or the film industry, documenting demonstrations, political discussions, documentary reports about political movements and social issues which reflect experiences and ideas marginalised by the predominant culture. To tell personal stories.



Jürgen Rebbe.

Although the status of 8mm fluctuates in the margins it is not necessarily a mode of filmmaking, or cultural engagement, which pushes sub-cultures further into the ghetto of disenfranchisement. It can be a powerful tool imbued with an authenticity that mainstream media can only allude to, a tool capable of conveying undiluted ideas and experiences, that can tap into and extend current resources without compromise and without being suffocated by conventions.

Tool of Defence

"8mm is a tool of defence in this society of mechanised corruption because through 8mm and its puny size we come closer to the dimensions of the atom."¹⁴

Super 8 has facilitated a political intervention against 'the ideological and economic domination of a few industrial nations over other, less advanced nations' around the world.

"In the face of aggressive corporate cinema and television monopolies, we are trying to find in Latin America the best instruments to consolidate our cultural identity and to rescue our popular memory. Whereas the corporations' homogenizing plan overlooks the interests of the people and the communities, we take into account traditional riches, the diversity of people, and ethnic and cultural plurality. We think that Super 8 is the appropriate instrument



Laura Hudson, *Shadows*

for this, and hope that it survives against the fashion of video.”¹⁵

In geographical terms Super 8 has had, and hopefully will continue to have, a major importance as the most internationally accessible medium the world has yet seen. It has provided access to the freedom of expression and the formation of local cinematic languages for countries from South America to Indonesia, proving its worth as a medium of the people. “Super 8 cinema differs from other, official cinemas that now conform to old and sterile rules. I see Super 8 cinema as a cinema of rebirth and research.”¹⁶

The Underground Underground

Avant-garde and serious filmmakers began to use the narrow gauges in earnest during the late Fifties and early Sixties, although filmmakers like Curtis Harrington, Kenneth Anger and Gregory Markopoulos in the US had already been using 8mm since the Forties. Looking back at the history of 8mm, the Eighties stand out as a period of intense activity around the world. In the UK, the early Eighties provided a political and social context that necessitated a break with the structuralist cinema that had constituted British avant-garde film. During the Seventies avant-garde cinema was separated from any other kind by its formal modernist intent, with its focus on the materiality of



Dagie Brundert, *Rechts, j. Schwere in Schnee, 1995.*

film and on a conceptual ideology akin to performance in its relationship to the spectator and the experience of duration and seeing.¹⁷ British Avant-garde cinema of the Seventies became institutionalised. To exchange one dominant ideology for another only serves to perpetuate a hierarchy, opposition was inevitable if a ‘compelling alternative’ was to be achieved. Opposition came in the form of a collision with the women’s movement. Women felt restrained by practices clearly intended to refuse content. Filmmakers like Tina Keane, Susan Stein, Annabel Nicolson, Lis Rhodes, Jayne Parker and Anna Thew introduced work of a more personal nature, developing a film vocabulary more appropriate to the expression of their concerns and with stronger links to a cinema of intervention.



Dagie Brundert, *Rechts, j. Schwere in Schnee, 1995.*

Feminism sought to redefine the language of the cinematic text and the visual representations that encoded mainstream cinema as well as the so called avant-garde. “Some of the things to be gained by Super 8 is that.... first of all you just have it on your own, shoot it yourself, edit it yourself and that’s when you can link it back to pencil and paper and painting... When you go out to film with a Super 8 you are not conscious of

any rules. I think you begin to develop, every body begins to develop their own styles"¹⁸

In the same way that feminism was limited to certain styles of representation, black film makers have been restricted by assumptions of what 'Black film' should look like, to notions of 'reality'. Black independent film presents a counter practice that contests and critiques the predominant forms, motivated to challenge the predominant stereotypes – the 'other' on the margins of British Society and its collective consciousness. However, the potentials for creating alternatives that disrupt fixed expectations and normative assumptions have been limited, "The problem is, we really haven't been allowed the space, for example, to experiment with narrative structures, with fiction, and so on. That space hasn't been created as such, although *Tentacles* sets out to do it in relation to our own practice within Sankofa."¹⁹ Facing misrepresentation entails a dependency on the dominant forces which have the power over representation, until there are a breadth of voices to allow for a broadening of independent film practices, speaking from the margins will be limited to certain modes of discourse defined and colonised by predominant culture. 8mm offers the possibility to develop a diversity of individualistic styles unconstrained by rules. "By just beginning filming with the Super 8 camera and arriving with say, fourteen hours of landscape,



Tina Keane, *Shadow of a Journey*.

you've actually got something to show people."²⁰

To my mind some of the best filmmakers in Britain have developed their styles and methods of creating a visual discourse with the world through working on 8mm as a tool of politicised filmmaking ie. Isaac Julien, Tina Keane and Derek Jarman.

dying embers ignite

Despite the development of video technology for home use and the new frameworks for digital communication, 8mm continues to hold a position as a counter cultural form that exists both on the margins and within the dominant. Ideological breaks and major historical changes open up gaps in which 8mm is used to make real changes, precisely because it is in the hands of so many. As a format, however, 8mm refuses to be read as a particular aesthetic, it remains "a permanently enigmatic format, yet unspoiled by commercial ventures, is a personal cinema

without intervention, the closest metaphor for freedom in film and the democratic medium for the right of expression."²¹

That 8mm continues to exist today and is even experiencing a resurgence, despite the current situation of shrinking availability of 8mm facilities and stocks, is evidence of the changing cultural and political climate. There has been a steady growth of Super 8 usage since 1992, according to film labs and film manufacturers in the UK, who predict that the trends in the market reflect a slowly "declining residual number of keen amateur users, balancing a slowly rising demand from pop music promotions". This is also due to increasing use of 8mm as a learning tool for students and independent filmmakers and as a component of a broad variety of art practices. Ultimately the narrow gauge film evades institutionalisation, its commercial exhaustion coincides with a renewed activity of interests so widespread as to render it impossible to impose conditions upon it "Its ambivalent position in the consumer/art world allows it to traverse genres, theories, trends, and territories untethered"²² 8mm is now essentially more promiscuous and infinitely less subject to the demands of economic stratification and cultural conventions than any other media format. It is perhaps only now that cinema can find its place as an art form, in accordance with Cocteau, when the raw materials are as cheap as pencil and paper.

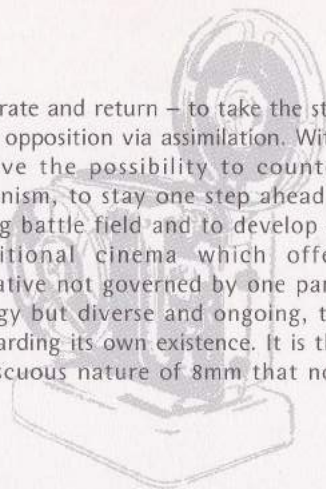


With the trading down of amateur technology and the mass massive expansion of video as the home movie format there is a huge market in second hand ciné equipment. The 8mm cameras built in the thirties, are to this day, more robust than any of the amateur technologies that followed, built with precision and with fewer unnecessary extras that can go wrong. The dominant has always been able to

recuperate and return – to take the sting out of any opposition via assimilation. With 8mm we have the possibility to counter this mechanism, to stay one step ahead of the shifting battle field and to develop a truly oppositional cinema which offers an alternative not governed by one particular ideology but diverse and ongoing, thereby safeguarding its own existence. It is the very promiscuous nature of 8mm that not only

facilitates a mode for challenging a shifting dominant but more crucially bridges the gaps thereby allowing us to plug into anything from the margins to the centre.

Advocating the use of Super 8 and Double 8 is not to suggest that it should replace any other practices, but that it offers possibilities to broaden what currently exists as a British Film Culture. It should be used freely as an advocate of change and for the right to speak.



some extra information ...

Notes

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- 2 Germaine Dulac, 'The Essence of Cinema: The Visual Idea' in *The Avant-Garde Film – A Reader of Theory and Criticism* ed. P. Adams Sitney Anthology Film Archives Series: 3: New York University Press, 1978. trans. Robert Lambert from *Les Cahiers du Mois* 1925.
- 3 Patricia Zimmermann, 'Trading Down: Amateur Film Technology in Fifties America' *Screen* V29 (Spring 1988) pp40-51
- 4 *ibid* pp40-51
- 5 Amateur Ciné Enthusiast Magazine
- 6 Keith Sandborn, 'Super 8 and the Postmodern' *International Forum of Super 8 catalogue* Exit Art, 1988. p 6
- 7 *ibid*.
- 8 Marnie Parrell, 'Repression or How to Make Good Movies' in *Cineaction* (vol.30 1992) p 22
- 9 J. Hoberman, 'Home Made Movies: Towards a Natural History of Narrow Gauge, Avantgarde Film-making in America' in *Home Made Movies: 20 years of American 8mm and Super 8 Films* p.5
- 10 Willie Varela, 'For a Cinema of Possibility' *Foreign Correspondence – The International Super 8 Phenomenon* The International Centre for 8mm Film & Video, Inc. 1986. p13
- 11 *ibid*. p.13
- 12 Chuck Kleinhans, 'Documentary on the Margins: Bill Stamets' *Super 8mm Ethnography' Cinematograph* Vol.4 Film/Video 1991. p164
- 13 James Irwin, 'Low-Cost Art in a High-Cost Medium' *Foreign Correspondence...* p16
- 14 George Kuchar, from a manifesto delivered at a symposium, *8mm: Avant-Garde of the Future!*? (USA:1964)
- 15 Alfonso G. Dagron, 'Super 8 in Latin America' *Foreign Correspondence...* pp20-22
- 16 Ahmed Zir, 'Thoughts on Super 8 from Algeria' *Foreign Correspondence...* p23
- 17 Michael O'Pray, 'From Asceticism to Aestheticism' *The Elusive Sign British Avant-Garde Film & Video 1977-1987* Ed., David Curtis Arts Council of Great Britain p8
- 18 From a transcript of an interview with Tina Keane, London Filmmakers Co-op August 14th 1995.
- 19 Jim Pines, 'Interview with Isaac Julien' *Framework* 26/27 1985
- 20 Roy Grundmann, 'History and the Gay Viewfinder: A interview with Derek Jarman' *Cineaste* (vol. XVIII No. 4) pp 24-27.
- 21 J. Ingberman, & P. Colo, 'Super 8 and the Poetic Right of the Possible' *International Forum of Super 8* p2
- 22 Alan Sondheim & Steve Gallagher, 'Super 8' *International Forum of Super 8* p14

Practicalities

Sound – striping average cost £5 per 50ft

Cresta Mono & Stereo Striping Services 8mm & super 8. 52, Watling St, Radlett, Herts, UK WD7 7NN Tel: 01923 855342

EVT Manetics Magnetic Film Striping, laminated or liquid. Also sound transfers for Single 8. super 8. Standard 8. 9.5mm and 16mm. Havenhurst, Ticehurst, East Sussex. TN5 7HE Tel: 01589 200528

Derann Film Services Ltd 99, High Street, Dudley, West Midlands, DY1 1QP. Tel: 01384 233191

Laboratories & Services

Bucks Motion Pictures Laboratories 18 months ago Bucks modified their existing equipment (the US built Film Line, non-sprocketed multi gauge processor) to process Super 8 b/w film. 714, Banbury Ave. Slough. Berks SL1 4LH Tel: 01753 576611 Fax: 01753 691762. West End pick-up: 162-170 Wardour St.

Hendersons Film Laboratory (still in recovery from the devastating fire in 1993) will be up and running their super 8 b/w processing in late 1995 or early 1996. 18-20 St. Dunstan's Road, South Norwood, London SE25 6EU Tel: 0181 653 2255 Fax: 0181 653 9773

Studio één a non-profit making collective staffed by Karel Doing. Production facilities and laboratory processing, printing and developing optical techniques for super 8 and 16mm film. Tomboer Straat 9, Postbus 31082 3003 HB Rotterdam. Netherlands Tel/Fax: 00 31 10 21 31 749

Colour-Technique 8mm, 9.5mm & Super 8 wet-gate and stretch printing to 16mm and Super 16 negative (b/w or colour). Finch Cottage, Finch Lane, Knotty Green, Beaconsfield, Bucks HP9 2TL Tel: 01 494 672757

The Widescreen Centre offers a comprehensive retail service for all amateur movie equipment and stocks. 48 Dorset Street, London W1H 3FH Tel: 0171 935 2580 Fax: 0171 486 1272

Production

London Filmmakers Co-op Full range of super 8 production and post-production facilities for hire. The LFMC also has a range of super 8 projectors and regularly screens super 8 work in the 80 seat cinema. 42, Gloucester Ave. Camden NW1 8JD Tel: 0171 722 1728 Fax: 0171 483 0068

Four Corners Film Workshop a range of super 8 production and post-production facilities for hire and courses in production and theory. 113 Roman Road, London E2 0HU Tel: 0181 9816111 Fax: 0181 983 4441

Glasgow Film & Video Workshop Super 8 & 16mm production, advice and support. 34 Albion Street, Merchant City, Glasgow Tel: 0141 946 3008

Distribution

Canyon Cinema Cooperative 2325 Third Street, Suite 338, San Francisco, CA 94107E

New York Filmmakers Cooperative 175 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016

LFMC 42, Gloucester Ave. Camden NW1 8JD Tel: 0171 722 1728 Fax: 0171 483 0068